

Enigma of Life

Unravelling an Enigma

The Mystery Unmasked

The Final Chapter

THE COMPLETE COLLECTION

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ENIGMA: THE COMPLETE  
COLLECTION



SHANDI BOYES

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*I hope you enjoy Isaac's story.*

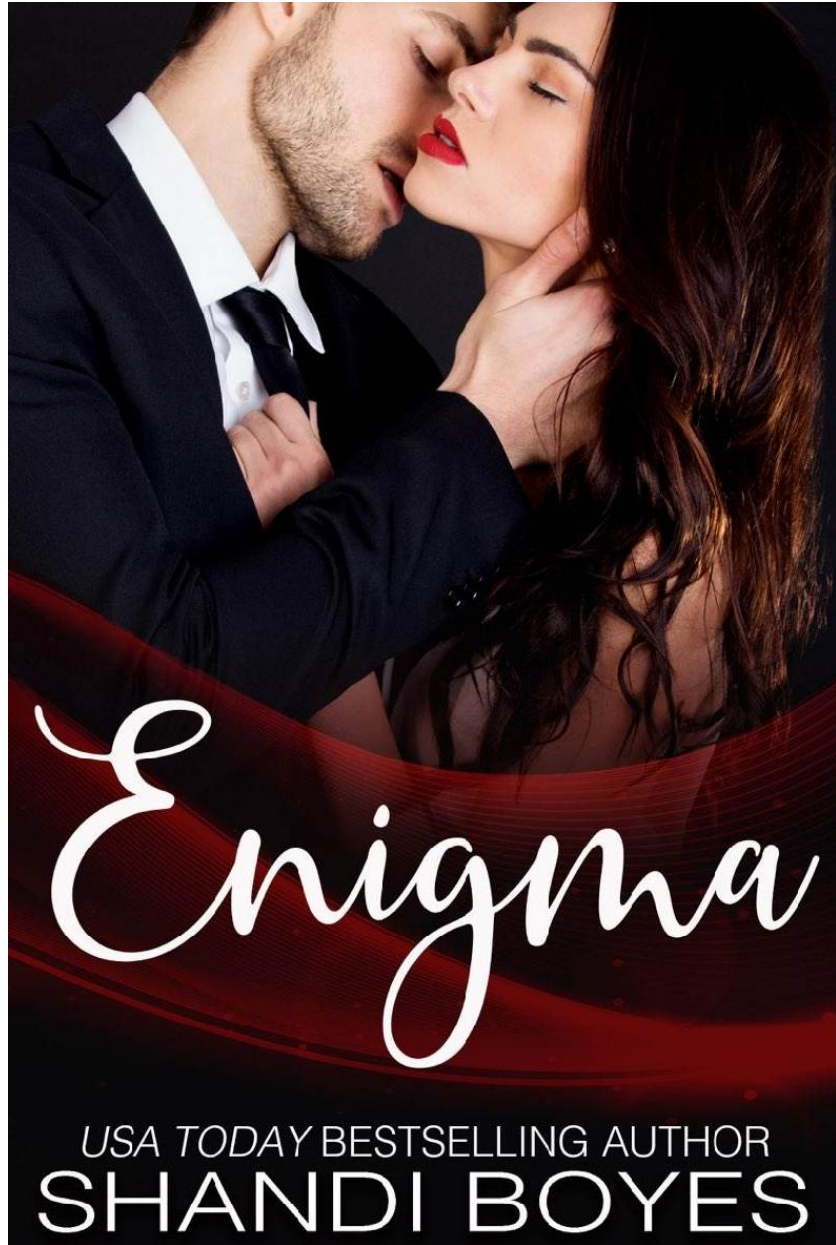
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*Shandi xx*



# ENIGMA





# Enigma

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**SHANDI BOYES**

*My dedicated fans who inspire me to continue writing.*

*I hope you enjoy Isaac's story.*

*Our enigma.*

## CHAPTER 1



A frigid breeze causes the hairs on my arms to bristle and goosebumps to form on my nape. It isn't just the plummeting evening temperatures causing this reaction to my body. It's fear.

When I press my hands against the railing, I relish the coolness of the stainless steel on my sweat-drenched palms.

Snapping my eyes shut, I take in a lung-filling gulp of air. "You can do this, Isabelle," I chant to myself.

*Millions of people do it every day.*

I've spent the majority of my time today at airports. To say I'm fearful of flying would be an understatement. I'm petrified. My flight this morning was on a Boeing 777 from San Francisco to New York. I gripped the armchair so tight for the entire eight-hour trip, my French-tipped nail nearly snapped off.

There's no logical reason for my fear of flying. I've never been on a plane that plunged from the sky or lost loved ones during a disastrous flight. My fear is just something embedded deep inside me. I want to say I'm generally fearless, an adventurous person who regularly takes calculated risks, but when it comes to flying, I'm a quivering bundle of nerves.

Gritting my teeth, I push off the railing before I lose my nerve and collide straight into a wall of hardness that sends me sprawling onto my ass. I wince in pain when my right wrist jars hard on the rigid gray marble-tiled floor.

“I’m used to people falling at my feet, but not quite as undignified as that,” says a deep, thick voice from above. Although his tone is stern, it also has a hint of amusement behind it.

Mortified, I raise my eyes, drinking in black polished dress shoes, a well-filled, impeccably tailored three-piece suit, and one pair of the most exquisite eyes I’ve ever seen in my life. The pain zinging my wrist no longer exists as my eyes roam over the magnificent creature in front of me.

More features come into focus—plump lips, powerful jawline, thick, luxurious hair long enough to run your fingers through, but not too long to be unkempt, and an ideally placed dimple in a chiseled chin. The very definition of a man is standing in front of me, and the visual is riveting.

Shifting his head to the side, he arches a brow. He assesses me as vigorously as I perused him. His penetrating glare has my heart rate quickening. Now I wished I had taken my roommate’s advice and dressed more professionally instead of for comfort, but when your backside is going to be planted in a seat for a minimum of sixteen hours, you want it encased in comfort, and there’s nothing more comfortable than my black Juicy Couture sweatsuit.

No, I didn’t pay two hundred dollars for a pair of sweatpants. I found these beauties at the thrift shop in San Francisco nearly two years ago. They have faded a little, now more a charcoal gray than their original black, but they still get the job done. I’ve removed my jacket and am wearing a white,

fitted cotton shirt that has risen to my stomach during my tumble.

After yanking down my shirt to a more respectable level, I return my eyes to the mysterious stranger. Once he has finished his perusal of my body, his mouth etches into a firm line, and his eyes narrow.

Clearly, he's a man who prefers class over comfort. His apparel does scream wealth and superiority, not to mention his composure, which exudes importance and authority. Grimacing with embarrassment, I scamper from the floor. My heart leaps when he grips my elbow to assist me with steadying my footing.

“Thank you.”

I glance down at the contents of my satchel strewn on the floor from our collision. My bag is full of the necessities a girl needs for traveling—lip gloss, a Snickers chocolate bar, loose change for snacks, a Kindle loaded with my favorite books, and tampons. *Oh God.*

In a scurry to grab my possessions, I bob, he dips, and we headbutt.

“Fuck,” he curses.

I manage to keep my curse word inside my head, even though it feels like I've suffered a grueling left swing from Oscar De La Hoya to my right eye.

My hand shoots up to rub the sting as I move toward the hard, plastic chairs lining the hallway of the airport. My vision blurs, and my footing becomes unsteady as the first signs of a headache form.

Plopping down on the chair, my eyes lift to discover the suit-clad gentleman gathering my satchel contents from the

floor. Tampons included. *Great!*

Once he has collected my items, he places my bag on the chair next to me. His masculine scent engulfs the air when he crouches down in front of me. Seeing him displayed directly in front of me has the depths of his eyes hitting me full force. It's not just their unique gray coloring that has my brows scrunching, it's their intensity.

"Are you okay?" The rasp of his voice sends an exciting thrill through my body and causes butterflies to flutter in my stomach.

Unable to establish words through my dry, gaped mouth, I nod. He removes my hand covering my eye to run his index finger along the area pulsing with pain. Now, instead of feeling the sting of pain, I'm feeling the zap of his touch.

He raises two fingers in the air. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Two."

A mouth-watering smirk forms on his face. "What's your name?"

I smile. "Isabelle."

His handsome face is contorted with strictness, but his remorseful eyes give away his genuine concern. "I don't think you have a concussion, but you need to ice it as a bump is already forming." His minty breath fans my hungry mouth.

I lick my dry lips before replying, "I'm fine, really." *Totally embarrassed, but fine, nonetheless.*

A gold cufflink becomes exposed on the crisp white sleeve of his business shirt when he stands, then holds out his hand. His brow cocks, wordlessly requesting me to accept his

gesture. I swallow a lump in my throat before accepting his well-manicured, yet manly hand.

After curling his hand around mine, his other snatches my satchel from the chair. He grips my hand firm enough to indicate his superiority, but not tight enough to cause pain to my wrist still throbbing from my tumble.

When he arrives at the frosted door of the first-class business lounge, I dig my heels into the carpet, lessening his quick pace. When he stops and turns, the air sucks from my lungs from the sheer closeness of his striking face. Most people would feel threatened by his complex gaze, but my body heightens with anticipation.

He tilts his head, his brow cocking again. If I hadn't heard him talk earlier, I'd assume he's a mute.

I gesture my free hand to the luxurious business lounge. "I can't go in there."

My voice sounds so weak, and I almost roll my eyes at my naïveté. Yes, this guy standing before me is entrancing, but I've had plenty of eye-catching men in my life, and my composure is usually more composed. However, this mysterious stranger has me flabbergasted like a teenage girl meeting a member of One Direction.

"I'm underdressed."

My eyes dart down to my Juicy Couture-covered thighs. This time, I sound how I usually do—friendly, but not a total pushover.

I suck in my stomach when he scans my body. When his eyes return to my face, he smirks. "You look perfectly fine."

Unsure of a reply, I return his smile. His eyes snap to my lips for the quickest second before he again quickly strides to



the business class lounge.

“Mr. Holt,” the doorman greets him without so much of a sideways glance in my direction.

My mysterious companion’s surname is Holt. I like it. It’s direct and stern but edgy—*just like its owner*.

When we arrive at a countertop bar that’s so well polished I can see my reflection in it, Mr. Holt lifts me to sit on a high-backed barstool. His effortless lift makes it seem as if I’m as light as a feather. After snagging a midnight-black napkin from the countertop, he leans over the bar. His suit strains against his back, allowing me a glimpse of a spectacularly firm backside.

Flipping open a cooler flap nestled in the bar, he removes a handful of ice. My eyes shoot to the bartender, who isn’t batting an eyelid at Mr. Holt assisting himself to their supplies. He wraps the cubes of ice in the napkin, then raises it to my throbbing eye. “Hold that.”

Arching back over the counter, he snags two crystal glasses from a wired rack before signaling for the bartender. He must be a regular at this establishment because the bartender doesn’t ask what drink he’d like. He just grabs a bottle of whiskey from the glass shelves behind the bar and sets it in front of him without a word escaping his lips.

Mr. Holt dips his chin in thanks before pouring two generous nips of whiskey into the glasses. He then hands one to me. “It will help with your headache,” he explains to my shocked expression.

When he downs the shot without a shred of hesitation, my mouth becomes parched from the sensual way he swallows the flaming liquid so effortlessly. Desire surges through my body

when his tongue darts out to remove the remnants of liquor from his lips. Needing something to soothe the dryness in my mouth, I grab my glass off the countertop to drink the generous helping in one hit.

I grimace, hating the burn that sets my throat on fire. I slam the glass onto the countertop as my watering eyes lift to Mr. Holt.

“Another?”

Not giving me the chance of a reply, he fills my glass again before sliding it across the ebony counter. Due to the overgenerous serving, whiskey splashes over the rim to puddle the glistening countertop.

I lift my eyes to his, which are glaring into mine, but his expression is neutral, even with his lips curved. “Are you trying to get me drunk, Mr. Holt?”

“Would it make it easier to get into your panties?”

The veins in my neck strum as my pulse quickens.

He winks, cockiness oozing out of him. “I’m joking.”

I sigh a disappointed sigh. Hearing my shameless response, Mr. Holt’s eyes lock with mine. His gaze is primal, commanding, and strong. It freezes me in place and heats my face. My brazenness surprises even me. I’m not usually so bold, but with his self-assuredness and grace, I have no doubt he’d be extraordinary in bed—sheet-clenching, multi-orgasms, can’t-walk-straight-for-days sex.

My hand holding the ice trembles as I turn my gaze to anything but Mr. Holt’s sinfully handsome face. Even without looking at him, my pulse still quickens. I can feel him studying my profile.

We sit in silence for several minutes, but my awareness of his closeness is still paramount.

Once the ice has melted, I dump the napkin onto the countertop, then drag my hand down my thigh to remove the inky stains smeared on my fingers. I gulp when, in the corner of my eye, I spot Mr. Holt's tongue delving out to lick his thumb. I stop breathing when he lifts the same spit-covered thumb to my right eye.

Suddenly, he stiffens as his nostrils flare. His eyes are darker now, even more demanding. It appears as if he's unearthed my body's response to his briefest touch. I'm about to assure him everything isn't as it seems when the shrill of a cell phone saves me from making a fool out of myself for the third time this evening.

With his eyes darting between mine, Mr. Holt slides a sleek phone out of his trousers pocket. "Yes."

His tone alludes to his authority, but I'm too busy taking in the time on his Rolex to work out who he's bossing around. I only have twenty minutes before the check-in for my flight closes.

"Thank you for your assistance, but I must go, or I'll miss my flight."

I snag my satchel off the countertop, then push off my barstool. Mr. Holt seizes my wrist before I can dash for the exit. He advises his caller to wait before he lowers his phone from his ear.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, thank you," I reply graciously.

With reluctance, he relinquishes me from his grip. After exhaling a long, tedious breath, I hot-foot it to the exit doors of

the business class lounge, not once glancing back at the mysteriously captivating Mr. Holt.

## CHAPTER 2



As I splash water on my face to calm the heat spread across my cheeks, I take in my disheveled appearance. My eyes are wide and bright, my dilated pupils making them appear darker than usual. Sunbathing for hours has given my beige skin a vivid glow, meaning the hue of my cheeks is less illuminating, and my lips are plump from the sting of whiskey.

I want to say my rouged appearance isn't entirely based on the enthralling Mr. Holt, but that would be a lie. At least my clumsy display in front of the most self-assured man I've ever met warranted a moment of reprieve from my panicked state. I've barely thought about my fear of flying the past thirty minutes.

After exhaling a big breath, I hook my satchel over my shoulder, then pull open the heavily-weighted door of the ladies' restroom. I rush toward my departure gate, hustling to avoid being late since my run-in with Mr. Holt has left my time stretched thin. I swerve, dart, and weave between thousands of commuters who appear just as frantic as me.

By the time I make it to my departure gate, my neck is drenched with sweat, and my cheeks are blemished. I blow an unruly hair out of my face before handing my ticket to the

immaculately dressed airport staff member behind the counter. Her top lip snarls as her eyes roam my flustered appearance.

“It’s not as it seems.”

A *tsk* escapes her lips as her slitted gaze lowers to the computer monitor on her desk. With my bright-eyed expression and flushed cheeks, my appearance could be mistaken for someone who just tumbled out of bed after a night of rigorous activities. I wouldn’t mind being reprimanded if that were the cause of my late arrival. After all, it’s been a while since I’ve seen my sexually satisfied face in the vanity mirror, but that’s not the reason I’m arriving at the departure gate without a minute to spare. It was my disastrous run-in with the most strikingly handsome man I’ve ever met that has me scampering.

Once my ticket is thrust back into my hand, I head down the gangway. My knocking knees become more apparent with every step I take. I focus my attention on the male flight attendant standing at the end of the corridor, hoping his light blue eyes that pop right off his face will distract me enough to board without incident.

They do—*somewhat*.

My hand tremors when I give him my ticket. “Good afternoon, Ms. Brahn.”

I fleetingly smile. I’ve lost the ability to speak now that fear has once again emerged from deep within.

“Today you’re seated in 1A. Upon entering, take a left at the second corridor.” He hands me back half of my ticket.

Nodding, I take a hesitant step forward. Loud pounding rings in my ears with every shaky step I take. After walking

through the galley, I turn toward the coach section of the plane.

A flight attendant clipping back a pair of dark blue curtains moves to stand next to me. “Can I help you?”

“Umm, I’m looking for seat 1A.”

She glances down at my ticket before returning her eyes to my face. “Seat 1A is this way, Ms. Brahn.”

Gesturing behind me, she skirts by before walking through another set of curtains. I apprehensively shadow her. After ruffling through the thick curtain, I discover her standing near the front of the plane. My brows furl as my eyes bounce around the elegant-looking space—luxurious, well-spaced black leather reclining chairs, elegantly dressed men and women sipping on glass flutes of champagne, and the piquant aroma of wealth filtering through the air.

There must be a mistake. I don’t belong in business class.

I scamper down the wide corridor, not missing the numerous gasps of disdain when my rhinestone-embedded Juicy backside sashays by. “There must be a mistake,” I inform the flight attendant.

Her manicured brow shoots into her auburn hair before her eyes turn down to my ticket. “1A.” She points her French-tipped nail to the 1A marked on my ticket. “1A.” She extends her long, skinny finger to the 1A displayed on the overhead compartment two seats down from where I’m standing.

After rubbing my arm soothingly, she saunters back down the aisle, snubbing my shocked expression. I stand mute, frozen in both fear and shock until the ‘Fasten Seat Belt’ sign illuminates a few seconds later.

I shove my jacket and satchel into an overhead compartment, then skedaddle to my assigned seat. I may be scared, but I'm not flying without a seat belt. When I move my eyes from the fluorescent lights lining the aisle, I'm confronted by an intense gaze that has me clumsily tripping over my feet.

*You've got to be kidding me!*

"A beautiful woman falling at my feet twice in one day. This has to be a new record," Mr. Holt banters when I crash into his thigh.

I greet him with a grin before scampering past him to take my seat, which is next to his. When I plop into my chair, my hands lurch out for my seat belt. My nerves have me jittering so much, I have trouble fastening the silver clips together.

Sensing my struggle, Mr. Holt stills my shaking hands before he clasps my belt. He tugs on the light gray strap, securing my belt firmly around my waist.

"Thank you."

He smirks before dropping his gaze to my white-knuckled hold of the armrests. "Scared of flying?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"You do know recent studies have shown—"

"Traveling in a car or a truck is one hundred times deadlier than flying. Yes, I'm aware of that. It still doesn't help."

"Actually, I was going to say recent studies have shown the endorphins released during sexual activities can overtake cortisol and other fear-induced chemicals." He glances at me with entrancing, wicked eyes. "You should consider testing the theory out."



My pulse quickens. *Is he propositioning me?*

Before I can form a response, our intense stare-down is interrupted by a radiant voice above. “Can I help you with anything, Mr. Holt?” When I raise my eyes, I’m met with a beautiful blonde flight attendant who is appreciatively glancing at Mr. Holt. “Perhaps I can take your jacket?”

Mr. Holt’s gaze remains on mine as he stands to remove his suit jacket. I lick my dry lips when his suit-covered crotch that’s straining to hold in the enormity of his, umm, manhood is shoved into my peripheral vision.

When my perverted gaze returns to his face, the situation becomes ten times more heated. He has a mouth-watering smirk formed on his sculptured lips, revealing he spotted my ogling glance. Mortified at being busted staring at his crotch, I divert my eyes, catching the mad glare of the flight attendant in the process. She plays the part of a scorned woman well.

“Would you care for a drink, Mr. Holt?” Although her eyes are narrowed into slits, her tone doesn’t allude to her anger. Her performance is remarkable—a genuine ten out of ten.

Mr. Holt hands her his suit jacket. “Teeling 30-Year-Old Single Malt Irish Whiskey.”

“Excellent selection, Mr. Holt.”

When Mr. Holt retakes his seat, the flight attendant walks away. She barely gets two feet away before Mr. Holt’s hand shoots out to snatch her wrist. “Are you going to ask Isabelle if she’d like something to drink?”

I’m unable to see his face, but if the flight attendant’s pupils are anything to go by, he’s infuriatingly angry.

The flight attendant’s feared eyes drift to me. “W-would you like something to drink?”

I shake my head. “No, thank you.”

With the somersaults my stomach is doing, I can't trust it to hold down anything.

“Are you sure?” Mr. Holt cranks his neck to face me. His intense eyes have me swallowing harshly, but unlike the flight attendant, I'm not scared by his angry glare. I'm turned on.

Unable to speak through the lump in my throat, I nod. Spotting my agreeing gesture, Mr. Holt relinquishes the flight attendant's wrist. She scurries down the aisle, her steps as wobbly as my heart rate.

After offering Mr. Holt a grateful smile, I lean my head on the leather headrest. When I take a breath to settle my nerves, a strong aroma overwhelms my senses. Expensive cologne, body wash, and a smell I can't quite identify make an enticing, mouth-watering scent I'd happily spend hours smelling.

My eyes snap shut when the plane jerks toward the runway. *Here it comes, the one part of flying I fear the most.* After tightening my grip on the armrests, my teeth gnaw on my bottom lip.

The closer the plane gets to the end of the runway, the more my heart palpitates. I'm on the verge of a debilitating panic attack.

My heart jumps out of my chest when a jolting buzz electrifies my clenched hand. Glancing down, I spot a long, elegant finger tracing the veins protruding in my hand. My breathing lengthens as my eyes lift to Mr. Holt. He's staring at me, his gaze penetrating and utterly consuming.

“How about we test the theory?”

Too terrified to form words, I fleetingly nod.

The hairs on my body bristle when his finger leisurely runs up my arm until it stops at the throb in my neck. When his big, manly hand grips my throat, my pupils widen. His hold isn't tight enough to cause discomfort. It's a domineering clutch that has me releasing a husky moan.

After loosening his grip on my neck, he saves my bottom lip from my menacing teeth. "I'm going to bite that lip." His words are more a confirmation than a suggestion.

When his thumb slides over my lips, wetness pools between my legs. Brazenly, I nibble on the tip. I've never been bold, but his demanding eyes are making me reckless.

My body temperature turns excruciating when his hand curls around the nape of my neck. The sting of his fingers adds to the tingling in my core, and they turn my breathing ragged. His eyes skim my face before darting down to my famished mouth. He stares at me for several long seconds, his head tilting like he's preparing to kiss me.

I snap my eyes shut and lick my lips, preparing to taste his perfectly structured mouth.

When a whoosh of air hits my cheeks, my eyes pop back again. Mr. Holt isn't advancing toward me. He's retreating. Once he's again sitting on his side of the plush leather seat, he takes a hefty gulp of whiskey. Even being disappointed, my core can't help but spasm when his Adam's apple bobs up and down. When his glass is void of liquid, he places it down before shifting his eyes to me. His heavy-lidded gaze still shows his hunger, but something in them has altered.

Slanting his head, he gestures to the window behind me. I gasp when I follow the direction of his gaze. Nothing but puffy white clouds in a brilliant blue sky reflect back at me.

“I’d say the theory has been proven,” Mr. Holt mutters aloofly.

Although he distracted me long enough I survived the take-off without a meltdown, a ping of disappointment hits my chest. The touching, the rush of excitement, the desire, it was all a game? A ploy to lessen my panic?

## CHAPTER 3



*I* press my palms on the black marble vanity of the business class bathroom. Although this washroom is larger than the economy bathrooms I've become accustomed to, I still can't extend my arms without hitting a partition wall.

After taking a big breath, I lift my eyes to the gold-encrusted vanity mirror. My face is flushed, my lips are swollen and red from Mr. Holt's thumb rubbing along them, and the unbridled look of lust is in my eyes. That's what reflects back at me—a look that doesn't belong on my face. This isn't me. That woman nibbling on a stranger's thumb isn't me. I have rules. I have morals—morals I'd forgo just for one taste of his sinfully delicious-looking mouth.

*What? Jesus, Isabelle, get a grip!*

I've been hiding in the washroom for the past twenty minutes, trying in vain to reel back the dignity that eluded me when I sucked on Mr. Holt's thumb. Thankfully, the flight has another hour and twenty-three minutes until we land.

*Yes, I'm counting.*

Unfortunately, that means I still have an hour and twenty-three minutes of being seated next to a man who makes me disregard all my ethics. I swear I'm not generally like this. At the very least, I expect to be wined and dined before allowing

any man to get close to my panties, but one look from Mr. Holt's piercing gray eyes makes me want to tear off my panties and hand them to him on a shiny silver platter.

An urgent knock on the door startles me. "Just a minute."

I shouldn't be surprised by the interruption. I've been hogging the only bathroom in business class since the 'Fasten Seat Belt' sign was switched off.

I exhale the nerves fluttering in my stomach before swinging open the door. My breath hitches when I discover who's knocking. Mr. Holt's six-foot-plus, well-formed physique fills the doorway. As his eyes roam my body, he boldly steps into the washroom. My thighs touch when his enticing scent permeates the air, ridding the space of its offensive sanitizer smell.

His gaze is unyielding like a man who knows what he wants and has no intention of backing down until he gets it. And from his gaze alone, I can tell he wants me. Pleased by my inner monologue, a pleading moan vibrates my lips. Don't judge. I may be in a washroom thirty thousand feet in the air, but I haven't had sexual contact with a man in months, let alone with one as devastatingly gorgeous as Mr. Holt.

"Why are you hiding in the bathroom?"

"I'm not hiding." My tone hints at my deceit.

Seconds feel like minutes when we stand across from each other in an intense gray-eyes-versus- brown-eyes, lust-driven stare-down. We're close enough for the hum of intimacy to be felt, but far enough apart I still hold a shred of composure.

A victorious smile tugs my lips when he turns his gaze away first. Scrubbing one hand over his head, he shoves his other into his pocket. "I don't have time for relationships."

Brazenly, I reply, “That’s okay, neither do I.”

In my industry, I can’t have a pet much less a relationship.

His eyes lock with mine, shocked by my blasé response. “If we do this, you need to be aware it’s a one-time-only deal. There won’t be any calls in the morning, no dates next week. One time only.”

I nod. Even with my shrewdness blinded by lust, I can appreciate his frankness. I hate the false promises men give to get in your panties. Don’t get me wrong, I’m an old romantic at heart, and one day, I hope to have my fairy-tale ending, but for now, I’ll happily unleash my inner vixen to participate in what I’m sure will be mind-blowing sex with another consenting adult.

Mr. Holt smirks at my agreeing gesture before stepping closer to me. His movements are effortless, yet still demand my attention. My brows furrow when he places a business card for a nightclub called The Dungeon into my palm. “Meet me here Saturday night at ten o’clock.” A moan spills from my parched lips when he adds on, “Make sure you wear a dress. Panties are optional.”

I gasp in frustration when he pivots on his heels to make his way back to the door. Upon hearing my groan, he spins back around. His heavy-lidded gaze is ruthless, pinning me in place with desire.

“Believe me, there’s nothing more I’d like to do right now than find out what you look like under *all* those clothes, but if I start, I won’t stop.”

*Who said I wanted you to stop?*

Mr. Holt arches his brow, making me realize I said my last statement out loud instead of in my head.

“Are you on your period, Isabelle?”

“What?”

Although his disrespectful question has credit, I’m too embarrassed to articulate a better response. His captivating allure has entranced me so much, I forgot I’m smack-bang in the middle of red week.

Seeing the forlorn look on my face, Mr. Holt mutters, “That’s what I thought. There’s no way I’ll only be able to sample half of you, Isabelle. I want to taste *all* of you.”

*Oh God.*

My pulse intensifies when his eyes rigorously assess my body. Once his appraisal is finished, he makes his way out of the restroom even hastier than he arrived.

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After gathering the minute smidge of dignity I have left, I exit the bathroom and head back to my seat. The flight attendant’s eyes narrow as I walk by. I don’t refute her accusation. My flushed face alone warrants her allegation.

Mr. Holt’s gaze strays from his crystal glass when he notices me approaching. His gorgeous lips curve into a seductive smirk that has my insides purring like a kitten.

“Isabelle.” His one word is a ravishing roar.

“Mr. Holt.”

I hurry past him to take my seat where I strive to keep my focus on the brilliant blue sky outside my window, but my quintessential need to know everything gnaws at my insides



until I eventually blurt out, “How did you know I was on my period?”

His lips brace the rim of his whiskey glass before his eyes turn to mine. “Other than the fact your Kindle was open on a sappy Mills and Boons romance book and the two empty chocolate wrappers in your satchel, the tampons were the biggest indication.”

I smile at his unease from saying ‘tampons’ out loud.

“They could have been my emergency stash.”

He shakes his head. “Like guys who carry condoms in their wallet?”

When I nod, he alters his position to lean closer to me. “Any guy who tells you he’s carrying a condom in his wallet in case of an emergency is full of shit. We only put a condom in our wallet with the full intention of using it the night we put it in there.”

“So, let me guess, the first thing you do when you wake up is place a condom in your wallet?”

He chuckles an intensely scrumptious laugh that awakens my core. “Not every morning.” He saucily winks. “Just every second morning.”

Ignoring the bitter taste in my throat, I continue my interrogation. “Did you put a condom in your wallet this morning?”

Before he can answer me, a cough sounds from above. Raising my gaze, I’m confronted with the slitted eyes of the flight attendant.

Ignoring her, Mr. Holt’s entrancing eyes never once leave mine. “No, I didn’t. Why do you think it took me so long to

join you in the bathroom?” His reply is loud enough for the flight attendant to hear.

Once she finishes serving him his glass of whiskey, I whisper, “So even if I weren’t on my period, we wouldn’t have done anything?”

Excitement melds through me when he leans in close to my side. His whiskey-laced breath flutters my lips when he motions his head to an overweight gentleman seated in 3A. The formally dressed man has a white napkin tucked in the front of his ivory business shirt. Oblivious to Mr. Holt’s and my intense appraisal, he continues munching on a marinated chicken drumstick.

“He’ll need to replenish his wallet before he goes on the prowl tonight.”

My jaw drops as my blemished cheeks darken. “You didn’t... you wouldn’t... you can’t ask someone to borrow a condom, can you?”

I’m rambling, but I’d never have the audacity to ask someone to borrow a condom. Although Mr. Holt doesn’t lack confidence, I’m still astounded he was bold enough to do that.

“I’m joking, Isabelle,” he admits a short time later.

My breathing shallows when he leans in intimately close to my neck. “You would have just had to ride me bareback.”

*Oh God, I think I just had a mini-orgasm.*

He snickers at my reaction before turning his attention back to the glass of whiskey in his hand. I set my focus on the blue sky outside of my window, hoping to calm the heat in my veins. Even after inhaling numerous lung-filling gulps of air, an intense pulse of desire still rages through my body.

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For the rest of my life, I'll be eternally grateful to Mr. Holt. He once again used his irrefutable sex appeal to divert my panic that usually surfaces during landing, proving sexual endorphins can overrule fear-induced chemicals. If every flight ends up like this one, my fear of flying will soon be nonexistent.

Mr. Holt remains quiet as we walk down the gangway side by side, but I feel him glancing my way on numerous occasions. When we reach the end of the departure gate, I pivot to face him. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Holt."

I thrust my hand toward him in greeting. He clasps my hand in his, but instead of shaking it, he presses a kiss on the side of my palm. "Until Saturday, Isabelle."

Seriously, his voice alone is sufficient to bring my climax to fruition.

Brazenly, I nod while struggling not to scream in excitement. With a smile, I remove my hand from his grasp and head for the departure lounge. Every step I take amplifies the pang in my chest. That notion alone is terrifying, considering only four hours ago he was a stranger.

Stranger or not, I feel a bizarre kinship flourishing for the charismatic Mr. Holt.

I freeze just outside the double frosted glass door of the departure lounge. "Don't turn around, Isabelle, just keep walking," I chant to myself, not wanting to be disappointed if he isn't standing at the gangway watching me.

After rolling my shoulders, I lift them high before walking through the double doors, only glancing back for the tiniest glimpse. A broad grin spreads across my face when my eyes lock with Mr. Holt, who's still lingering at the end of the gangway, tracking my every move.

*Yes!*

I wave before dashing into the seating area, not missing his flirtatious wink on the way.

## CHAPTER 4



*M*y sluggish eyes scan the crowd at Ravenshoe Airport in an attempt to locate Regina. After an intense two-hour flight, I'm beyond exhausted, both physically and mentally. After inhaling a breath of fresh air, I jerk her photo out of my satchel and run my eyes over her profile, wanting to ensure I'm seeking the right person. While holding the faded Polaroid picture out in front of me, I walk through a jubilant gathering of people greeting each other, happy their loved ones have returned home or have arrived for a visit.

Several minutes later, my eyes flick between the photo clutched in my hand and the lady standing in front of me. Scrutinizing every detail of her face, I compare it to the picture. I'm reasonably sure the person standing before me is a match for the woman in the photo. She has the same black afro hair, high, illustrious cheekbones, freckles along her nose, big brown eyes, and a broad smile. Although I'm now wondering how many decades have passed since this photo was taken?

When the lady I'm appraising notices my curious glance, she cautiously strolls toward me. She's shorter than I'd expected and a little rounder, but she has a magnetizing aura.

Her dark brown eyes peer inquisitively into mine. “Isabelle Brahn?”

“Regina?”

When she nods, I squeal and curl my arms around her neck. Regina is a very dear friend of my Uncle Tobias. By dear friend, I mean *close* friend, although Uncle Tobias would have never admitted that in public.

Regina is uneasy by my friendliness. I don’t mean to startle her, but I don’t often get the opportunity to meet any friends of my Uncle Tobias. I’m also known for being a little over-friendly. When she pulls away from my embrace, her eyes drift around our surroundings, making sure no one witnessed our exchange.

Satisfied no one is watching, her eyes lift to scan my features. “I don’t see the family resemblance.”

Smiling, I slap her forearm. Grinning as if she’s pleased with herself, she scoops down to collect my suitcase from the ground before making a beeline for the exit. I promptly shadow her. I smile when I spot her car parked in a tow-away section at the front of the departure gate doors, the red and blue lights beaming out of the rear window ensuring it would never be towed.

“There have to be some perks to the job.” She shoves my overstuffed suitcase into the back of her unmarked police car before gesturing for me to enter.

By the time we’re two miles away from the airport, I’m grateful I didn’t forgo my seat belt because Regina drives like she’s in pursuit. When the afternoon commuter traffic becomes dense, she turns on her lights and sirens, making the backed-up traffic part like the red sea.

Once we emerge from the densely populated roads, she rummages through a bag of donuts sitting in the console. I giggle over the cliché that a well-decorated and respected police officer appreciates a good donut.

“Don’t laugh, once you try these bad boys, you won’t be able to stop.”

After digging her hand back into the greasy paper bag, she thrusts a gigantic cinnamon donut toward me. My stomach grumbles when its pleasant aroma invades my nasal cavities, and my mouth salivates just from looking at its deliciously rounded perfection, but I hesitantly shake my head. I’d have to run ten miles just to work that baby off.

Regina huffs before taking a big bite out of the donut she was offering me. A growl erupts from her lips as she attacks the donut with unbridled fury. Her pleasurable moans echo through the interior of her car, forcing my bottom lip to droop. Once she has devoured every last smidgen of the donut, she teasingly pops her thumb into her mouth, ensuring not one speck of cinnamon remains on her finger.

“Can you grab me a napkin?”

Prying my hungry eyes away from the donut-filled bag, I open the worn and battered glove compartment she’s pointing to. Numerous manila folders and a handful of napkins plummet into my lap when the old hinges crank open.

I grab a handful of napkins for Regina before collecting the folders so I can return them to the glove compartment. “Keep the gray one out,” Regina instructs. “I color-coordinated that one just for him.”

After shoving the non-required folders back into the overflowing glove compartment, I flick open the gray folder to

eagerly scan the extensively noted documents inside.

“Page two.” Eagerness is clear in Regina’s voice.

My heart lurches in my throat when I turn the page. Piercing gray eyes, high and defined cheekbones, soft and plump lips, and a dimple in his chin, the very definition of a man is displayed in front of me.

*Oh God.*

“Can anyone say gorgeous?” Regina squeals, scaring the living daylights out of me.

She pulls on the steering wheel to correct her car from veering off the road since her eyes were too busy inspecting the photo in my hand. Confident we won’t have a fender bender, she says, “That unbelievably handsome man is Isaac Holt, a twenty-seven-year-old businessman who is unmarried, has no kids, has lived in Ravenshoe the past six years, and has one sibling named Nicholas Holt. He owns a handful of highly successful nightclubs within the state. His current estimated worth is forty-three million dollars.” Her brows waggle when she mentions his wealth.

My stomach rolls when I peer at the man who had me mesmerized mere minutes ago. There has to be a mistake. That incredibly captivating man can’t be the same person Regina is investigating.

“Why is law enforcement interested in him?”

“He’s twenty-seven years old and already a multi-millionaire. That alone warrants an investigation,” she replies coolly.

My eyes dart back down to the documents in front of me. The more I read about the elusive Mr. Isaac Holt, the more my



interest is piqued. Although today he wasn't evasive, he indisputably exudes mystery and intrigue.

“He made his first million before his twentieth birthday and before he even left college.”

Regina glances at me before nodding. “We had nothing on him the past four years, but an undercover agent has spotted him numerous times this past year entering an illegal underground fight ring. Normally, those types of functions don't gain the attention of law enforcement, but this particular fight ring has some very notorious members.”

I continue to peruse the documents. Isaac is in several photos with two extremely large gentlemen. One looks like he's been recruited from the military. His hair still has the same military-issued crew cut. He's ruggedly handsome but lacks the mysteriousness that makes Isaac so intriguing. The other guy has blond hair clipped close at the sides but longer on the top. His eyes are ocean blue, and he's smiling in nearly every photo. He's also handsome but in a humble, boy-next-door way.

“The brunette remains anonymous, but the blond is Jacob Walters,” Regina informs me when she notices the photos in my hand. “We believe the brunette is either an associate of Isaac's or his bodyguard. Jacob is his fighter. Isaac owns him.”

My eyes rocket to Regina's. When she frowns and nods, my stomach churns. *How can you own someone in the twenty-first century? I thought slavery ended years ago?*

In silence, I flick through the extensive collection of Polaroid photos displayed in the gray manila folder.

“Col Petretti and Vladimir—”

“Popov,” I interrupt.

“You’ve done your research.” Regina seems impressed by my extensive knowledge.

Vladimir Popov and Col Petretti are two names frequently exploited during FBI training. My superiors used their names during numerous exercises and case studies while I was in training.

“What does Isaac Holt have to do with the mob?”

My heart erratically pounds my ribs as I wait for Regina to answer. She doesn’t keep me waiting long. “He’s one of them.”

“Who am I here for?”

My eyes return to the profile picture of Isaac, silently praying she doesn’t say his name. My prayers are left unanswered when she says, “The Bureau’s primary focus is Isaac. If we get anyone else, it’s a bonus.”

Nerves tap dance in my stomach. Who would’ve known the very first case thrust into my hands upon leaving FBI Headquarters would be to hunt down some of the country’s most notorious mob bosses, let alone a man who can ignite my senses with the simplest touch of his fingertip?

I was barely swimming above water during my training at FBI Headquarters. Now, I have no doubt I’m in way over my head.

*A rookie FBI agent versus the mob—I don’t see how this will end well.*

## CHAPTER 5



“*Y*ou do realize that during surveillance you’re supposed to be incognito with the rest of the population?”

When Regina cocks a brow, I glance down at my black linen pants, white short-sleeve shirt, and black cropped boots. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

Regina’s eyes dart to the top of my head. Shooting my hand up, a smile forms on my face when I discover I’ve instinctively put on my black FBI cap. It’s become a habit the past two years to brush my thick brown hair into a low ponytail and place my FBI cap over the top. The pants are the standard government-issue black trousers, and my shirt is now plain instead of having ‘Trainee’ emblazoned on the front in thick black ink.

“Much better.” She nods when I remove the cap and put it on the mantelpiece. “Your Uncle Tobias would’ve been very proud of you, Isabelle.”

Her words compel tears to well in my eyes. My Uncle Tobias raised me from a small child. He passed away six months before I sent in my application to join the FBI. He had initially been a police officer, and that was how he met Regina. He took her under his wing and taught her everything he knew

about the local beat, even though he was ten years her senior. A few years later, he became a detective, and then he was recruited by the FBI.

My Uncle Tobias is the sole reason I decided to join the Bureau. I want to make him proud, and I want to help people the way he helped me. I can still accomplish that, even if I have to go against a man who can make my heart beat faster with only a sideways glance.

I aim to keep my focus on the task at hand and not on the man who has invaded my dreams every night this week. “Have you ever worked with Alex Rogers before?”

Alex is my superior officer. He’s four years older than me and was the talk of the town at FBI Academy. He was the golden boy, the beloved son of the trainers. He started his illustrious career like the rest of us rookies do—at the bottom of the rankings—but he soon climbed his way to a very lucrative position. He’s now the head of his department and has a handful of staff underneath him. It’s inspiring considering he’s only twenty-eight years old.

“No, but he’s a pretty little thing.”

My lips tug higher on my face. I saw a photo of Alex on the wall at FBI Headquarters in San Francisco. My first thought was also that he is a pretty boy. He looks like he would spend more time in front of the mirror than I do each morning. I’m not saying he isn’t good looking—he most certainly is—but he has that plastic Ken-doll type of look.

The flash of a camera blinds me. “Smile.”

Once the bright light clears from my vision, I spot the source of my sudden blindness. Regina is holding an ancient-looking Polaroid camera. She smiles a full-tooth grin while

placing my half-exposed picture alongside two similar-looking photos on her refrigerator. The only difference between the images is that I'm in plain clothes, and she and Uncle Tobias are wearing police officer uniforms.

“It's tradition.”

After wiping under her eyes to ensure her tears haven't fallen, Regina flurries around her eat-in kitchen, gathering her purse and keys. The year before my Uncle Tobias died, he shared many stories about Regina and him. He loved Regina, but their work kept them apart. Their interracial relationship already raised eyebrows, but a rookie officer dating her superior was also frowned upon.

He thought once he became a detective, he'd no longer have to hide his relationship with Regina, but he did. Not because it was frowned upon anymore, but because he had gone undercover. He had to keep his whole life a secret, not just his relationship status.

“How come you never married and had your own family?”

Regina freezes with her coffee mug halfway to her mouth. Her dark eyes shift to the Polaroid picture of Tobias on her refrigerator before they stray to face me. She doesn't need to say anything. Everything is relayed in her pained eyes. They reflect not only pain but love as well. Just like Tobias, there was nobody else for her, either. I often asked Tobias the same question, and he merely replied, “Why do I need anyone else but you, kiddo?” But I could see his heartache in his blue eyes. He was a good man who sacrificed his own happiness for the sake of others. He passed that trait on to both Regina and me.

“Are you ready?”

After exhaling my nerves with a big breath, I nod.

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“Excuse me,” I interrupt.

I’ve just walked into an office on the third floor of a brick and mortar building located across the street from Isaac’s eighteen-plus dance club, The Dungeon. Considering there’s only a handful of people, the atmosphere is surprisingly bustling.

The middle-aged lady I addressed walks right by me, rudely ignoring my introduction. “Hello,” I greet again, this time to a young blond gentleman sitting at a desk urgently ruffling through a stack of papers.

His eyes leisurely glide over my body before they settle on my face. Just as he’s about to speak, we’re interrupted by a profound voice across the room. “I need that document now, Brandon.”

Brandon smiles a lopsided grin before his eyes shoot down to the documents he was tousling through before I disturbed him. Enthusiasm beams out of him when he locates the item he’s searching for. My eyes track him as he bolts to the other side of the room where I spot a face I recognize. It’s Ken from the Bureau wall. *Oh, shit, I meant to say Alex.* At least I didn’t call him Ken to his face. Imagine how embarrassing that would’ve been?

The room plunges into silence, amplifying my quiet giggles. I mask my laughter with an impromptu cough. My gesture doesn’t fool Alex. His eyes narrow, and his lips set in a hard line.

*Great first impression, Isabelle,* I chastise myself while making my way to the man glaring at me in disdain.

Alex studies my body just like Brandon did, except when his eyes return to my face, he fails to smile, making me falter in my step. He's just as pretty in person as his photo shows. His blond hair has every strand faultlessly placed, though it does look like he drags his fingers through it several times a day, giving it that sexed-up look. His eyes are light blue, his nose flawlessly straight. His cheeks are well-defined, and his jawline is razor-sharp. He's preppy and pretty at the same time. I might have even said he was deliriously handsome if his eyes weren't narrowed into thin slits and planted on me. An angry scowl never looks good, no matter how gorgeous your face might be.

"Hi, I'm Isabelle Brahn, your new agent."

"Michelle," he screeches, making me jump in fright. "I thought I ordered a blonde?"

My bewildered eyes bounce between Alex and a middle-aged lady who has just joined our group. Apprehensively, I pull my hand away since my gesture of a handshake wasn't acknowledged. Michelle is also pretty, mid-forties, and has sandy blonde hair cut to sit just above her shoulders. She's wearing a pleated black pencil skirt and a pastel pink blouse.

"Does she look brunette to you?"

When Alex's blue eyes snap to mine, I square my shoulders, remembering what my Uncle Tobias would always quote, "Don't let them scare you. Never show your fear."

"Umm, yes, she does appear to be a brunette."

"In the past two months, have you ever seen him with a brunette?" Alex seeks Michelle's gaze, which has darted down to the floor.

"What does my hair color have to do with my placement?"

Alex's slitted gaze rockets to mine. "Isaac Holt fucks blondes, and you're a brunette."

"Excuse me," I hiss, my tone harsh.

Although I have unequivocal knowledge what he's saying is untrue, irritation outweighs my desire to dispute his allegation.

"I wasn't brought here to sleep with Isaac Holt. I was brought here to help with your investigation."

"You were brought here as eye candy," Alex interjects rudely.

The room no longer bustles with activity. Instead, they keenly watch the altercation between Alex and me. I'm so astonished at his disrespect, I can't form any words to express my outrage. I didn't train at the academy for months to become a piece of eye candy. I trained to become an agent, a good agent, just like my Uncle Tobias.

"We could bleach her hair," suggests Brandon.

"Not happening," I disrupt sternly.

When I cross my arms in front of my chest, Brandon and Alex's eyes dart down to my breasts. A snarl forms on my top lip. Alex's scowl remains stagnant as he once again appraises my body. This time, when his eyes lift, I don't miss the flicker of lust he fails to conceal with his gaze.

"Once you're in a dress and a pair of stilettos, Isaac won't care you're a brunette," he utters, snarling.

"Once you have a personality transplant and a plastic groin inserted, nobody will care you're a Ken doll."

When chuckles erupt around the room, it dawns on me that I said my last statement louder than I'd initially planned.



Alex's lowered gaze darts around the space, forcing the diminutive office to once again bustle with activity. Once everyone's focus is no longer on us, Alex walks over to me. He's a few inches taller than my five-foot-seven-inch height and looks down on me since my boots have no heels.

"I know who your uncle was. I know his reputation, but you need to learn your place. You were only brought here as a distraction for Isaac. He never lets anyone in, and you're supposed to be our way in."

I swallow harshly but maintain a strong stance, not once backing down or showing my fear. I plan to make my Uncle Tobias proud, but I can't do that and lose my morals at the same time.

"I'm an agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I'm not a prostitute."

## CHAPTER 6



**One month later...**

“**S**tupid, arrogant, pompous prick. He probably already has a plastic groin, and that’s why he’s always so cranky. You can’t have sex if you don’t have a dick.”

The gentleman at the front of the line pivots around to eye me curiously. *I really need to learn to mumble more quietly.* I smile at him before returning my eyes to scrutinize the menu boards above his head. I’m once again doing the team’s early morning coffee run. It’s been the primary focus of my position the past month—that and filing.

The instant I refused to put on a skimpy dress and sashay myself in front of Isaac, Alex put me on desk duty. I spend my days twiddling my thumbs, filing useless reports, and doing coffee runs. Who would have thought months of grueling training would land me a job as a glorified coffee girl?

I place my order with the coffee barista before collecting the mountain load of sugar packets the agents requested.

“Do you have any Splenda?” I ask a staff member named Harlow, who’s been preparing my coffee order every morning

this past month.

Harlow is a ball of mischief bundled into a bakery uniform. Her humor is a little crude and dry, but she has kept me on my toes with her wittiness.

Harlow hands me a handful of Splenda. “Sugar wouldn’t kill you.”

I try to think of a sharp comeback, but I’m left a little speechless. I have a slender build, but I wouldn’t say I’m skinny. I have a runner’s body, although I have more boobs than Olympic athletes have. I work hard to maintain my body shape. By skipping the sugar in my coffee, I won’t feel guilty devouring the blueberry and chocolate chip muffin I ordered with it. It’s all about getting the balance right.

Instead of giving an appropriate comeback to Harlow’s taunt, I stick my tongue out.

“Earlier this morning, I licked the muffins.”

She sticks out her tongue before moving away from the coffee machine to hand some customers their orders. I tug open the white paper bag holding my muffin to inspect it for lick marks. It doesn’t appear to have been licked, and with how hungry I am, I’d still eat it even if she did lick it.

Harlow’s rowdy chuckle echoes around the bakery when she notices me inspecting my muffin. “I was joking about licking the muffins.” She hands me the two crates of coffee I ordered. “Same time tomorrow?”

Rolling my eyes, I nod. Although I have no doubt I’ll be revisiting this bakery this afternoon.

Upon exiting the bakery, a black Mercedes-Benz town car halts my hasty departure. I don’t need to see the occupant to

know who's inside. The license plate is all the indication I need. *Isaac.*

Stepping back into the nook, I stalk the car that has come to a stop at the corner of First Avenue and Welsh Boulevard. My chest thrusts up and down when Isaac glides out of the back passenger door of his shiny black car. Just the authoritative way he walks adds an exciting visual to my nightly routine. It's been over a month since our flight, yet he still invades my dreams every night.

My eyes dart up and down the street, anticipating to see the blue surveillance van that tails Isaac's every move. I'm surprised when I fail to locate it in the street.

*This is it—the opportunity I've been waiting for to prove my worth to Alex.*

Dumping the coffees into a waste bin, I creep closer to Isaac. My years of training activate in an instant. I maintain a safe distance and stay on the opposite side of the road to ensure my pursuit goes unnoticed.

Today, Isaac is wearing a tailored, fitted dark blue business suit with a light blue dress shirt underneath. He's minus the tie he usually wears in most surveillance photos. His black dress shoes are so polished, they gleam in the sunlight, and his gray eyes are covered with a pair of expensive-looking aviator sunglasses.

When he enters a flamboyant-looking restaurant, I cross the street. As I dart between a steady line of cars, my eyes once again scan my surroundings. There's still no blue surveillance van in sight.

I stroll up to the restaurant expecting the doorman to welcome me with open arms. He doesn't. He snubs me, and

the door remains closed. I eye him peculiarly, wordlessly demanding an explanation for his rudeness. With quirked lips, his eyes roam my trousers, fitted ribbed shirt, and black ballet flats. Grinning, he nudges his head to the patrons seated inside the restaurant. They're dressed more elegantly than me.

"There's a public restroom one block over," he announces, his tone snobbish.

Masking the urge to stick my tongue out at the pretentious man, I smile sweetly before heading to the far corner of the restaurant. *Peering through the paned glass windows won't cost me a cent.*

I spot Isaac in the restaurant, kissing the cheek of a lady with shiny black hair. He removes his suit jacket and hooks it on the back of the chair before sitting across from her. She smiles an evil grin when he hands her a sealed white envelope.

*Come on, where the hell are you?* I silently question when my third scan of the street still fails to locate the surveillance team that's been tailing Isaac for months.

More times than not, Isaac's meetings are with reputable business associates or his fighter, Jacob. This morning, they're missing a prime opportunity. This lady has never popped up in the numerous surveillance photos I've scanned into the FBI database every day since I have been here.

Realizing I need to match brains with brawn, I yank my cell out of my pocket. My hands grow clammy when I snap a sneaky picture of Isaac's companion while the doorman is distracted by clientele entering the premises.

Hiding behind a potted hedge, I drop my eyes to the screen of my cell. A grunted sigh puffs from my nostrils when the

early morning sun reflecting on the window covers half of Isaac's companion's face.

Scarcely breathing, I snap another pic. It turns out just as bad as the first.

“Think, Isabelle, think.”

*I know, I'll call Alex.*

It takes me scanning my short list of contacts twice before I realize Alex never gave me his cell phone number. *He'd hate to make me feel like I'm a part of his team.*

After taking a few seconds to settle the nerves fluttering in my stomach, I dial a number known by heart.

“Federal Bureau of Investigation, how may I direct your call?” questions the switchboard operator.

“My name is Isabelle Brahn. I'm a Federal Agent. My number is 5586718. I need you to patch me through to Alex Rogers, head of the Ravenshoe Division,” I inform her as my eyes flick between the doorman and Isaac.

“Patching you through now.”

Alex's phone rings several times, making me worried he won't answer. Just as I'm about to disconnect the call and try again, he finally answers.

“Alex Rogers,” he snaps down the line.

“Alex, it's Isabelle—”

“Did you mess up my coffee order again? Black with two sugars. It isn't that hard, Isabelle.”

Anger lines my face. “No, I didn't mess up your order.”

Although his coffee is now sitting at the bottom of the garbage bin. If he keeps speaking to me so rudely, I may fish it

out and serve it to him from the trash.

“Why isn’t the surveillance team following Isaac?” I question gruffly, trying my hardest to simmer my anger.

Alex grunts. “He’s still in bed.”

My brows furrow as my gaze drifts to Isaac sitting in the overpriced restaurant sipping on a cup of coffee. Even without seeing his distinctive eyes, I can’t mistake him. He is too attractive not to notice.

“He’s not in bed, he’s right in front of me having breakfast with a lady at a restaurant on the corner of Welsh and First Avenue.”

While Alex summarizes a reply, I glance back into the restaurant. Time stands still when Isaac’s head suddenly lifts to the window. He appears to be staring straight at me.

With my heart in my throat, I dash around the corner, praying he didn’t spot me spying on him.

“Are you sure it’s him, Isabelle?”

“Yes,” I assure, my pitch as high as my heart rate. “I’m one hundred percent certain it’s him.”

Alex barks orders at everyone surrounding him, sending the flurry of activity I’ve witnessed every day the past month barreling down the phone.

“We’ll be there in five minutes,” he informs me before disconnecting our call.

I lean against the outer wall of the restaurant to take in some big breaths. I’m clutching my phone so tight, my knuckles are white. I never knew surveillance was so thrilling. I always envisioned it as spending hours eating donuts and

busting to use the bathroom, but it's much more exciting than that.

Or maybe it isn't surveillance that has my heart palpitating so fast it feels like it's going to escape my chest cavity. Perhaps it's seeing Isaac again?

"Bring the car back around," says a ruggedly handsome voice I immediately recognize.

Plastering my back to the brick wall, I peer around the corner. A sizable potted hedge aids in keeping me concealed. Standing just mere feet from me is Isaac. Even from this distance, his commanding aura is highly notable.

As if he has spotted my gawk, he yanks his cell phone away from his ear so his narrowed gaze can scan the street. He stops seeking me when the lady he greeted in the restaurant stands beside him. When she lifts a cigarette to her mouth, Isaac lights it for her with a gold lighter.

Isaac's date is attractive, mid-thirties, with shiny black hair cut into a fierce bob. Her body is fit, well-groomed, and covered in a feminine, black designer pantsuit. Ignoring the pang of jealousy forming in my chest, I raise my phone to snap a picture of her. This may be the FBI's only opportunity of capturing her face.

In the silence of the morning, my camera click is easily audible.

*Shit!*

I splay my back on the wall, the roughness of the brickwork scratching my delicate skin. Softly, I curse over my stupidity. *How could I have forgotten to turn the sound off on my phone during surveillance?* My heart flips as my panic surges, confident they heard the clicking noise.



After many calming breaths—and a few more expletives—I peer back around the corner. Isaac's black Mercedes-Benz is parked in front of the restaurant. His acquaintance is already seated in the back passenger-side seat. Isaac places one foot into the car before turning his eyes in my direction. I'm confident he has spotted me spying on him through the green hedge, but I can't tear my gaze away. I'm trapped, captivated by his entrancing eyes.

Several tension-riddled seconds pass before he shakes his head and slides into the back of his car. The instant his shiny black vehicle glides down the street, I crumble onto the concrete sidewalk, knowing without a doubt that I'm in way over my head.

That wasn't just thrilling, it was highly addictive.

## CHAPTER 7



A loud gasp parts my lips as I dive for the computer mouse. I click anywhere and everywhere on the monitor, praying my manic clicks will stop my personal photos being uploaded to the FBI database. Realizing my excessive clicking isn't alleviating the situation, I use my hands to cover the flurry of images flicking across the monitor, meaning only tiny portions of my bare skin are on display for the world to see.

"I'm so sorry!" I apologize, mortified.

Except for a rare grin tugging his full lips high, Alex's expression remains neutral. Brandon's response isn't as reserved. I kick him in his shins when he attempts to pry my fingers away from the screen, hoping for a more in-depth preview of my raunchy vacation snaps.

"I had a two-week vacation at Del Mar before I arrived here," I inform them, giving them any excuse I can as to why there are several photos of me in a very skimpy bikini being uploaded into the FBI's database.

Darn selfie sticks have made it too easy to get full body-shots when vacationing alone. Although, I do love that bikini. I shouldn't, though. It took months of grueling workouts for me to feel confident enough to wear a bikini like that.

After a few margaritas and a stern lecture on body image, I slipped into the scraps of material society classes as a bikini. Knowing I'd probably never wear it again, I got a little excited about taking several photos from multiple, and what I was hoping at the time, appealing angles.

"It was hot in Del Mar," I murmur when neither Brandon nor Alex reply to my admission.

A genuine smile morphs onto Alex's face. Although I despise him and call him several crude and entirely accurate names under my breath multiple times a day, my heart still skips a beat when he smiles.

"That wasn't the only *hot* thing there." Brandon playfully tugs on the collar of his shirt.

I try to hide my gratitude at his compliment. Only the smallest smile creeps on my face, but it's enough of a reaction for Brandon to notice.

"No," I inform him delicately, stealing his chance to ask me on a date for the tenth time the past two weeks.

"Who said I was going to ask you out?"

Arching my brow, I glare into his hazel eyes that are a little greener today than usual. His composure remains calm for all of two seconds before the biggest smile stretches across his face.

"One date won't kill you." He once again tries to pry my fingers from the computer monitor.

Brandon is cute, but our personalities are too similar for us to become a couple. I don't agree with the whole opposites-attract notion, but I do believe your partner should bring qualities to a relationship you don't already have. If you like sweet foods, they should like sour. If you're a live-your-life-

on-the-edge-of-your-pants type of person, they should be more reserved and prefer taking their time to consider their options. That way, over time, you eventually get a perfectly balanced relationship.

Well, that has been my logic. I could be wrong since my theory has yet to be proven, considering I'm single and living with an old flame of my uncle and her two cats. *Oh God. I'm going to become one of those crazy, dressing-gown-wearing, chain-smoking, hair-a-ratted-mess cat ladies.*

"Our next weekend off, we should go out," I suggest to Brandon.

Brandon's glowing eyes dart to mine.

"Only as friends, though. And just drinks... no dinner or movies, just drinks."

When he nods, a stern cough demands the attention of my eyes. Alex has his brows furrowed, and his lips have thinned. His whole stance is projecting uncontrolled anger, and I could be mistaken, but a smidge of jealousy.

"If you have time to organize dates, I need to increase your workload." His blue eyes shoot daggers at Brandon.

*Yep, he is definitely jealous.* His unexpected jealousy makes me wonder if he is a treat-them-mean- to-keep-them-keen type of guy.

"Sorry," Brandon mumbles under his breath.

Hesitantly, I remove my hands from the computer monitor. Relief washes over me when I notice my bikini photos are no longer flicking across the screen. Barely breathing, I scroll down to the photo of Isaac's companion I captured this morning. An impressive groan vibrates Alex's lips at the same time a pang of remorse stabs my chest.

“Run facial recognition,” requests Alex, slapping Brandon on the shoulder three times.

Brandon nudges me with his elbow. When I move away from my desk, he pulls a black swivel chair in close and runs his fingers over the keyboard. I turn my reluctant gaze to Alex, hoping some commendation will lessen the guilt I’m feeling for spying on Isaac.

Alex’s eyes scan my face, but not a word seeps from his lips. My shoulders slump and a sigh spills from my mouth.

*You’re just doing your job, Isabelle,* I silently justify, hoping to ease my remorse.

Dropping my gaze back to the computer monitor, I watch as the facial recognition software scans potential matches for Isaac’s companion. Alex shifts in close to me. He’s so near I can smell what he had for breakfast. I never picked Alex as a blueberry-pancake-with-maple-syrup type of guy, but there’s no denying that aroma—sweet and sickly at the same time.

My stomach grumbles. Unfortunately, not only did I dump the coffees into the bin this morning, my blueberry muffin went right along with them.

“I bet you wish you didn’t ditch your muffin in the bin now,” Alex whispers into my ear.

My confused eyes dart up to his. I’m confident I kept my mumblings to a bare minimum this time. When he notices my perplexed expression, he smiles—not a genuine, heart-fluttering smile, but a sly grin that makes me wonder what he’s concealing underneath his pretty-boy exterior. It’s dangerous and conniving.

“Bingo,” shouts Brandon, interrupting the uncomfortable stare-down between Alex and me. “Facial recognition has a

match.”

I scan the information displayed on the monitor in front of me. Delilah Anne Winterbottom, thirty-six years old, publicist and divorcee, spouse of Henry Theodore Gottle, III, before their divorce settlement was finalized eight months ago. She lives in New York City, has no siblings, no children, and no criminal history.

“Looks like another dead end.”

I thought I was discreet until Alex’s firm eyes lift to mine. “A dead end?” His eyes bore into mine as if he’s a parent reprimanding a child for failing an exam.

“She’s a publicist...” I attempt to reply before catching a glimpse of Brandon shaking his head.

With a pivot, he points to something on the screen. The overhead lighting reflects on the monitor, making me unable to see what he is referencing.

“Please continue, Isabelle.” Alex spits out my name as if it’s venom. “I’d love to hear your reasoning as to why this is a dead end.”

My eyes shoot to Brandon. When Alex follows the direction of my gaze, anger reddens his face. Recognizing that our ruse has been busted, Brandon’s finger slips off the computer monitor as he swallows several times in a row.

“Henry Theodore Gottle, III,” Alex informs sternly. “Son of Henry Gottle, suspected mob boss of New York City.”

“Just because he’s the son of a mob boss doesn’t automatically make him part of the mob.”

Alex laughs, seemingly amused by my reply. His chuckle doesn’t match his charmingly handsome looks. It’s a scary,

witch-like laugh that has everyone in the room stopping what they're doing to glance at him peculiarly.

It takes several long and tedious minutes for his laughter to die down. When it does, he says, "You surely can't be that stupid, Isabelle."

When I fail to respond to his taunt, he stops grinning and steps toward me.

"And here I was thinking you made it through the academy solely by using your brain. I guess today proves what I'd originally suspected." He keeps his voice loud enough that the agents watching his charade can hear him. "You weren't brought here for your academic abilities."

My arms fold in front of my chest when Alex's squinted gaze leisurely assesses my body.

"Since you're so determined to utilize your brain instead of your other more *desirable* assets..." his eyes drop to my breasts, "... be a good girl and fetch my coffee you failed to produce this morning."

With a flick of his wrist, I'm dismissed from the room, once again degraded from a respectable FBI field agent to a glorified coffee girl.

## CHAPTER 8



**Two weeks later...**

“*Y*ou have a stalker.” Harlow’s face is animated. “A total drool-in-the-corner of-your-mouth tall drink of water, but a stalker nonetheless.”

When my baffled gaze floats from the floor, she gestures her head to the corner of the room. I bleakly swallow when I catch the intense gaze of Isaac Holt peering at me from behind the morning newspaper. *Shit!*

When he realizes he has captured my attention, he smirks while folding his newspaper in half to place it on the table. His eyes never once detour from mine. Although my initial reaction is to run, it would look mighty suspicious if I fled now.

For the past two months, I successfully avoided any impromptu run-ins with him. The establishments he dines at are a lot fancier than this humble bakery, but I knew this run-in would eventually happen. Ravenshoe is large, but it isn’t large enough to get permanently lost in the crowd.

“He’s been here over half an hour, and he’s never paid anyone any attention, until now.” Harlow hands me the whole



grain and rye toasted cheese sandwich I ordered for lunch.

Once I have a mug of coffee in my hand, Isaac motions for me to join him. My eyes dash around the bakery, seeking a spare table. A throaty groan escapes my lips when I discover there are no empty tables in the entire shop.

My panicked eyes shoot back to Harlow, who mouths, “Go on, he’s hot.”

Rolling my eyes, I gingerly pace to Isaac. Harlow can look at him for his irrefutable sex appeal, whereas I must look at him through the eyes of an agent. Ruthless, cunning, heartless, and unlawful are the first thoughts that pop into my head when I read his FBI file, but when I look into his gray eyes, they disclose an entirely different story.

The closer I get to Isaac, the more my eyes absorb every impressive feature of his face—sculpted cheekbones, plump and full lips on a mouth that could have me toppling into ecstasy just from hearing him speak, and one pair of the most exquisite eyes I’ve ever seen.

No photo will ever do his eyes justice because they’ll never fully capture how alluring and intense they are in person.

“Hello, Isabelle.” Even with his angry tone, my name still rolls off his tongue seductively.

“Hi,” I reply as my heart violently flips.

A smile sneaks onto my face when he pulls out a chair for me, then air snags in my throat when he sits next to me instead of the chair opposite me. Trying my hardest to ignore his masculine scent, I dump my satchel on the ground under our table, then pull my toasted sandwich out of the white paper

bag. He remains quiet, but his entrancing eyes track me. The air is suffocating, riddled by the thick stench of awkwardness.

Snubbing the nervous tension between us, I take a sizable bite of my sandwich since I'm famished from not eating since breakfast. An appreciative moan rumbles up my throat as the gooey, cheesy goodness infiltrates my taste buds. When a string of cheese snaps off my sandwich and lands on my chin, my tongue instinctively darts out to lick the residue off my face.

Isaac groans a low and menacing growl that forces my eyes to his. My cheeks heat when I'm confronted by his intense gaze staring ravishingly at my lips. I dart my eyes away before I become trapped by their allure.

My nervous eyes shift to the window at the front of the bakery. If anyone in the surveillance team witnesses our exchange, Alex will force me into a skimpy dress and parade me in front of Isaac by this evening. I refuse to be treated as a commodity. I'd rather spend my years in the Bureau gathering coffees for narcissistic, self-centered assholes than be forced into prostitution.

"I have to go." I shove my half-eaten sandwich back into its paper bag, then snatch my satchel from the ground. My coffee is in a ceramic mug, so much to my dismay, it will remain untouched. "I forgot an important deadline."

I dart for the entrance of the bakery as quick as my shaking legs can take me. Harlow's anxious eyes follow my hasty retreat. "Do you want me to pour your coffee into a takeaway cup?"

I shake my head and continue for the door. Cold air blasts my face when I emerge through the single glass door. After a few brisk strides, someone clutches my elbow, and I'm

dragged to the corner of First Avenue. My angry eyes lift and are met with the stern profile of Isaac. His lips have thinned, and his jaw is twitching. My panicked eyes dart up and down the street. I sigh when I discover the blue surveillance van is nowhere in sight.

He pulls me into the dark alcove of a run-down old pub that looks like it hasn't opened its doors in the past century. After releasing his tight grip on my elbow, he takes a step closer to me. I back away, intimidated by his stern, livid eyes. With a smirk, he moves closer, trapping me between him and the black door of the pub. My pussy tingles from his closeness. *Stupid, traitorous body.* He's the enemy, yet, my body still gets excited from his attention.

"I assumed you must have left town when you failed to arrive for our date, but lo and behold, here you are, months later."

I remain silent as his eyes—full of turmoil and uncertainty—dart between mine.

"Are you going to at least attempt a pathetic excuse?"

Remorse claws at my chest as I shake my head. Trying to fool a man who has eyes that can see through to my soul would be stupid and ineffective.

Teeth grinding together fills the eerie silence between us when Isaac clenches his jaw tight.

"That person you met on the plane isn't me. I'm not usually like that," I reply, deciding honesty is the best policy. "I don't do random hookups with strangers."

"And you think I do?"

"Yes," I answer without a smidge of hesitation.

His eyes snap to mine before the most wicked grin creeps onto his face. I try not to return his smile, but I'm defenseless. Someone as gorgeous as Isaac would have an extensive list of women vying for his attention, so I'm somewhat surprised—and a little excited—that my failure to arrive for our date ruffled his feathers.

The air shifts from tense to teasing, the crackling of attraction heightening my senses. His commanding eyes glance at my lips when he mutters, "I still want to bite that lip."

My pupils widen when he caresses my cheek. I should be pulling away from his embrace, but I can't. I'm frozen with desire.

My knees meet when he runs his thumb along my top lip before his head tilts closer to mine. Just before his lips brush mine, a deep voice interrupts, "Sorry, boss, but we've gotta go."

I sigh when Isaac steps back from our embrace, leaving only the linger of expensive cologne in his wake. Upon hearing my pathetic response, his lips furl as his lust-filled eyes rake the street. Following his gaze, I spot a gentleman I've seen in numerous surveillance photos sitting in the driver's seat of his town car. Just a few blocks down from Isaac's black Mercedes is the blue surveillance van that tails his every move.

*Shit!*

When Isaac's eyes return to mine, I gulp. If I thought his eyes were intimidating before, now they're downright dangerous.

“Meet me at the bakery tomorrow,” he requests, his tone stern.

I shake my head. “I can’t.”

Seeing the surveillance van is the only reminder I need that I can’t associate with him, no matter how loud my inner vixen is screaming at me to ignore my rational-thinking head.

“It wasn’t a request, Isabelle.”

He runs his index finger over the cupid’s bow of my lip before striding to his awaiting town car. Just as he is about to step into his car, his head swivels back to me.

“Tomorrow,” he instructs before he glides into the back of his car.

The instant his car dashes down Welsh Boulevard, the surveillance van pulls away from the curb and commences its pursuit. I lean into the darkness of the alcove to ensure the surveillance team doesn’t detect me as they zoom by.

While leaning on the peeled-paint door, I calm the erratic beat of my heart. I can’t believe I was so senseless. I nearly kissed Isaac Holt. *Isaac Holt!* A man currently under investigation by the FBI. A man who has half of the county following his every movement. A man so deliriously handsome and good-smelling, I want to run my cheek along his jaw just to capture his scent.

*What? Jesus, Isabelle!*

After reprimanding my lack of judgment, I emerge from the niche of the pub and walk back to my workplace.

Approximately halfway there, my phone dings with a text message. When I yank it out of my dark denim jeans, I notice

it's a message from an unknown number. My excitement intensifies, wondering who the message could be from.

It vanishes when I read the message.

**Alex:** *You're late.*

Sighing, I jog down the bustling street, weaving in and out of the heavy foot traffic. My quick strides halt when another message dings on my phone.

**Alex:** *Pick up coffee on your way back.*

*Dammit!* I don't think I could ever despise someone as much as I do Alex Rogers.

## CHAPTER 9



“*Y*ou can stop hiding, you know,” jests Harlow. “He hasn’t returned here since he left you that card on Monday.”

I’ve been eating lunch at a local burger place every day this week just to avoid any more run-ins with Isaac. I can’t trust myself to be in the same room with him. Just one look at his deliriously handsome face, and my inhibitions fly out the window. When I returned to the bakery bright and early Tuesday morning for the agents’ morning coffee fix, Harlow handed me Isaac’s business card. On the back of the card, he simply wrote, ‘When you stop denying what your body wants,’ with his cell phone number at the bottom.

I crumpled the card up and tossed it to the ground, but no matter how hard I acted as if it weren’t there, I couldn’t tear my gaze away from it. By the time Harlow finished preparing my order, I’d gathered the business card off the ground and shoved it into my jeans pocket where it has remained the past four days.

Harlow hands me two crates of coffee. “Do you work seven days a week?”

I freeze as I struggle to think of a legitimate reason why my cover as a secretary would be collecting so many coffees

on a Saturday morning. “Umm, no. It was a big night for a few friends and me last night. I was the designated driver, which also means I’m responsible for the morning caffeine fix.”

I cringe at my pathetic excuse, but when Harlow smiles, I realize she’s accepting my explanation.

“Do you work seven days a week?” I ask since I’ve just realized she’s here every morning right alongside me.

“It’s a requirement when you’re the owner,” she answers, staring into space. “I miss late nights and long sleep-ins.”

I gawk at her in surprise. Harlow seems around my age, which is young to own a business already.

Noticing my expression, she smiles. “I’ve always loved to bake. This was a dream of mine since I was a young girl.” She gestures her hand around the bakery. “But I’m slowly realizing dreams don’t always turn out how you envision them.”

I nod. I was so excited when I was accepted into the FBI Academy. I thought I would live a life of suspense and intrigue, but I’m learning what I visualized as an FBI agent varies a great deal from what I do every day. I have nine months, two weeks, and one day left on my contract to work with Alex’s department, then hopefully, I’ll be reassigned to a better unit, and the dreams I envisioned might transpire.

I offer Harlow a sincere smile before I head for the exit. Just as I’m about to walk out into the street, she calls my name. “If you have any more exciting nights planned, can you throw a dog a bone?”

Smiling, I once again nod.

It’s only when I’m in the alcove do I remember I’m going out with Brandon tonight. I invited Brandon out with me under the strict understanding it’s a friends-going-out-for-drinks-



night-only invitation. No assumptions, no false promises, just friends. He readily agreed.

When I dart back inside the bakery, Harlow's head lifts from the cash register.

“Do you have any plans tonight?”

She smiles and shakes her head, excitement is beaming out of her.

“It isn't a raging party, just a friend and me having some drinks. You're more than welcome to tag along,” I inform her, smiling.

Since I don't have a car, Harlow offers to pick me up from Regina's house at nine tonight. By the time I walk back into the office building located across from Isaac's nightclub, the coffees I purchased are stone cold.

Alex grumbles under his breath as he reheats his coffee in the microwave in the galley kitchen, but his angry mood can't sour my excitement. I haven't been out dancing in months, but even more thrilling than that's the fact I've made a friend.

I miss having the close connection of a girlfriend. As much as I love Regina, she mothers me too much for me to consider her a confidante. I need a female companion to discuss the conflicting emotions I'm currently feeling for Isaac Holt.

*Hold on, what?*

I'm an FBI agent. Any feelings I'm considering need to be squashed. I can't consider befriending someone like Isaac Holt, let alone develop feelings for him. I need to crush the idea of any relationship and treat him like the blood-sucking leech his FBI file leads me to believe he is.

But, my Uncle Tobias always said you should never judge anyone by other people's opinions. He'd often quote, "Until you have a legitimate reason not to like someone, you should treat them how you wish to be treated." Isaac certainly hasn't done anything to me that warrants me disliking him.

He may be crude and cocky, but I'd be lying if I said his vulgarity didn't turn me on. I haven't stopped thinking about the way he smelled when he cornered me in the run-down pub's alcove, let alone the scenes from the plane playing on repeat in my dreams every night.

When a hand slams down on my desk, I jump in fright. I'm so startled, I spill my now iced coffee down the front of my shirt. After grabbing a handful of tissues out of my desk drawer, my furious eyes lift to the unamused face of Alex staring down at me.

"I've been calling your name the past five minutes," he rudely informs me. "What has you so intrigued you can't follow a simple command?"

"Umm, I was just thinking..." I scan the photos on my desk, trying to think of a legitimate reason why I failed to respond without mentioning I was once again fantasizing about Isaac. "... that I don't believe this gentleman is an associate of Isaac's." I lift a photo of the man I saw driving Isaac's car earlier this week. "I think he's his bodyguard."

Alex removes the photo from my hand to appraise it more thoroughly.

"What makes you think he's a bodyguard and not an associate?" For the first time in the past two months, his tone sounds neutral.

“Anytime he’s been photographed with Isaac, he’s either driving his car, or he completes surveillance of the area.” I rise from my desk to gather several other images of Isaac’s bodyguard I have printed the past few days. “An associate wouldn’t drive the car while Isaac sat in the backseat, he’d sit in the back right along with him,” I continue, impressing myself with my ability to think on the spot.

An impromptu grunt rolls up Alex’s chest as he flicks through the photos. “So, I guess we can cross him off our list and focus our attention solely back onto Isaac.”

“No,” I shout, probably a little too loud as Michelle lets out a squeal. “There’s something about this guy that has me intrigued.” I snatch the photos out of Alex’s grasp to find the picture I was researching yesterday. “I can’t for the life of me work out why he hasn’t come up in any of the facial recognition searches I’ve completed on him the past two days.”

Alex’s brows squeeze, apparently unimpressed I’ve been undertaking searches without seeking his permission.

“He has worked in a government department before, which means he should be in our database,” I advise, pacifying the angry scowl on Alex’s face. “This tattoo is a symbol of an Air Force squadron. That squad only returned from Afghanistan two years ago. Only squad members can get that tattoo.” I hand Alex two photos. One is the original picture of Isaac and his bodyguard jogging, and the other is zoomed in on the tattoo I’m referring to.

My fingers run over the keyboard on my desk to bring up the information I found on the tattoo yesterday afternoon. I enlarge the squadron member tattoo on the screen and turn my monitor toward Alex. He holds the photo against the computer

screen mere seconds before a heart-fluttering smile tugs his lips high.

“Brandon, I need you to get me someone high in the U.S. Air Force, now!” Alex strides toward Brandon. His hasty retreat stops before he turns around to face me. “You did a good job, Isabelle.”

A mammoth smile spreads across my face.

“See if you can find any other members of his squadron. Maybe they can help us identify him.”

Eagerly nodding, I sit at my desk. My heart is galloping with excitement at being assigned my first official task as an FBI field agent.

## CHAPTER 10



When Harlow picks me up at nine, excitement is beaming from me. I've spent the majority of my day searching for ex-squadron members. I secured a reliable source that may assist me in discovering the identity of the man who works with Isaac. I scanned his photo to my contact earlier tonight. He's going to show it to a tattoo parlor owner who has tattooed the squadron symbol previously. He may be able to assist me in tracking down an ex-squadron member who's willing to talk to me. Most hang up the instant I advise them I'm from the FBI. Obviously, there's no comradery amongst colleagues.

"Wow, you scrub up nice," praises Harlow when I slip into the passenger seat of her car.

Smiling, I roam my eyes over her tight black dress. "As do you." A wolf whistle sounds from my lips.

Other than her big, beaming smile, she looks completely different out of her work clothes. Her hair is no longer pulled back in a low ponytail, instead, hanging loosely down her back. This is the first time I've realized her auburn brown hair is curly. Her lips are glossed with bright red lipstick, and her eyes are done in a dramatic Cleopatra way. She's gorgeous,

and she will give all the young girls on the dance floor a run for their money tonight.

“Here.” Harlow offers me a tube of lipstick as she pulls her car away from the curb. “It will match the color of your dress perfectly.”

Yanking down the visor in her car, I put on the bold red lipstick she handed me. The color does pair well with my tight, strapless red dress. I hand her lipstick back and pucker my lips. The three cocktails I’d downed getting ready are already enhancing my playful mood.

“Wow, we won’t buy a drink all night,” she predicts.

She wasn’t joking. The instant we enter the nightclub, we’re inundated with requests to buy us drinks. We wrangle our way through a mass of sweat-drenched, heated bodies to locate Brandon in a private booth at the side of the dance floor.

Brandon must have arrived super early to secure such a prime spot in the bustling nightclub. The brown button-pressed leather booth has a sense of intimacy with thick, luxurious red velvet curtains hanging off black metal A-frames. The stream of purple LED strip lights running along the roof reflect on the sheer curtain draping down each booth, giving the illusion of privacy.

Leaning over, I press a quick peck on Brandon’s cheek before introducing him to Harlow. The bustling nightclub is packed to the brim. Most of its patrons appear to be of college age. The interior is lavish but outdated. It isn’t usually the type of club I’d hang out at, but it was the closest nightclub in our area that didn’t have an association with Isaac Holt.

I spend the next two hours sampling a range of fruity cocktails and accepting invitations to dance. After one dance partner gets a little handsy, I saunter to the bar for a bottle of water. I've been downing cocktails like they're soda water, and they are rushing to my head in quick succession, making me woozy and my footing unsteady.

Brandon curls his arm around my waist to lessen my stumbles. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I slightly slur. "I've just had too many cocktails too quickly."

He chuckles before requesting a double scotch on the rocks from the bartender. "Lucky for us, we have the day off tomorrow." He winks cheekily.

Alex is a slave driver, and tomorrow is my first day off in two months. It's probably been even longer for poor Brandon. Grabbing the bottle of water off the countertop, I spin around to face the dance floor, slipping out of Brandon's grip in the process. I smile when I spot Harlow sitting in our booth. She also has a bottle of water in her hands. I giggle to myself. I haven't even been out for two hours, and I already want to go home. *Can anyone say grandma?*

Brandon snatches the bottle of water from my hand to replace it with a colossal size cocktail glass full of a frothy pink liquid. "Who knows when we might get another day off?"

He downs his double scotch on the rocks in one hit, his face scrunching up as he slams the now empty glass onto the countertop. He looks like he's about to puke at any moment.

I giggle when he groans, "I forgot how much that burns."

"Oh, do you think you can do better?" His loud voice gains us the attention of a handful of college students gathered

around us. “Chug, chug, chug.”

The college kids surrounding us soon catch on to Brandon’s chant. Never one to back down from a challenge, I scrunch up my nose before chugging down the pink concoction as dared. Luckily for me, the drink is deliciously fruity, so it goes smoothly into my empty stomach.

The crowd erupts into a roaring chant when I consume every drop of liquid in the large cocktail glass. I attempt a curtsy but end up stumbling and bumping into Brandon when I trip over my own feet.

Brandon waggles his brows. “Another?”

Cringing, I shake my head. I’m already stumbling, so once my latest drink makes its way into my bloodstream, I’ll be well over an acceptable limit to be drinking in public. It’s time for me to call it a night.

When Brandon turns back to the bar, I head toward the private booth to check if Harlow is ready to go home. Halfway there, my elbow is seized in a tight grip. I don’t need to look up to know who is grasping my arm. The jolt bolting up my arm the instant he touches me is all the indication I need.

Isaac drags me into a paint-peeling hallway that houses the outdated bathrooms. His slitted eyes dart up and down the bustling hall before he walks us toward the manager’s office located at the end. I should be pulling away from his hold, but with the alcohol in my system and my pulse tripling from his closeness, my inhibitions evaporated the instant he touched me.

A middle-aged gentleman wearing a cheap knock-off Ralph polo shirt with greasy, slicked black hair lifts his head the instant we enter his office.



“Get out.” Isaac’s tone is threatening.

The manager’s bewildered eyes bounce between Isaac and me before he scurries out of the office as Isaac demanded. Once he leaves the room, Isaac releases his firm grip on my arm and turns to lock the door. When he pivots back around to face me, I stiffen, and my pulse intensifies. Even though his eyes are furious, it’s what he’s trying to mask with his unyielding gaze that has me pinned in place. His eyes expose his pure, unbridled jealousy and lust.

“Did you get my card?” he questions in his sexy-as-hell voice.

Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I strengthen my stance, striving to portray that my body has no desire for him. “I’m not sleeping with you—”

“I never said you would get any sleep.” Butterflies flutter in my stomach when he steps close to me. “Well, not for at least a few days.”

My eyes bounce between his as my throat works hard to swallow. I attempt a rebuttal, but I’m rendered speechless, my mouth only capable of gaping open before closing.

“Still trying to deny what your body wants?”

When he takes another step closer, my senses are engulfed by his intoxicating scent. Remaining quiet, he brushes his thumb over my top lip. A croaky moan vibrates in my chest when he dips his thumb into my moist and hungry mouth.

Brazenly, I suck off the smears of pink cocktail from his thumb like I haven’t been fed in months. When his eyes darken from my frisky tease, I sway toward him, craving his body closer to me. When I lose my footing in the process, his

carved brows stitch. “How many drinks have you had tonight, Isabelle?”

Chomping on my bottom lip, I shrug. *I stopped counting over an hour ago.*

“How many drinks have you had?” he questions again, his voice sterner this time.

“A few,” I huff. “Who are you, my dad?”

“Are you drunk?”

My eyes shoot back to his as my lips curve into a playful grin. “Maybe a little.”

A husky groan tears from his throat when I hold my thumb and index finger an inch apart, indicating how drunk I think I am. I’ll be honest, an angry Isaac is as sexy as fuck.

He ignores my playful taunt. “How are you getting home?”

“I wasn’t planning on going home alone.” My intoxication is making me more daring than normal. “But you just ruined my chances of finding a suitable companion for the night.”

I’m lying. I have a minimum three-date rule to get into my panties. Well, I usually do. My strict rules are just null and void when it comes to Isaac Holt.

“I don’t play games, Isabelle, so if you’re attempting to make me jealous, you’re wasting your time.”

*Ouch!* That was a harsh sting to my ego.

I huff and skirt past him, eager to return to my friends so I can continue enjoying my weekend off. I chose this nightclub because I knew Isaac didn’t own it, but here I am, having my confidence slapped by the very man I was trying to avoid.

As I dart toward the door, a rush of dizziness causes me to lose my footing in my pretentiously high stiletto heels. Isaac grabs my arms and steadies me before I stumble to the floor in my drunken state.

Shamelessly, I lean into his firm body to take in a deep whiff of his manly scent.

“You smell so good,” I slur. Obviously, the cocktail is hitting my bloodstream a lot quicker than I’d anticipated.

When he leans in close to my ear, the hairs on my neck prickle to attention. *Oh God, I hope he’s finally going to kiss me.*

“Go tell your friends you’re leaving. I’ll wait for you out front.”

My eyes snap to his, triggering a rush of queasiness to form in my stomach. “I can’t leave with you.”

I may be extremely tipsy, maybe very close to drunk, but I still know I can’t risk my career by leaving the club with him.

“It wasn’t a suggestion, Isabelle. Go and tell your friends you’re leaving and meet me out front.”

Frozen in place, I watch him move toward the office door, his strides long and effortless. He unlocks it before turning around to face me. His beautiful features are constricted with anger. “If you aren’t outside in five minutes, I’ll come and find you,” he advises me before strolling out into the hallway, not once glancing back in my direction.

## CHAPTER 11



*A*n appreciative groan erupts from my throat as I snuggle into a smooth and soft texture. I don't know what thread count these sheets are, but they're the softest I've ever laid on. I'll have to thank Regina for replacing my bedding as these sheets make me feel as if I'm sleeping on a cloud.

After pulling my arms out of the quilt, I have a long and leisurely stretch. My muscles feel exerted, but that's expected when you spend hours dancing in four-inch heels. When I sluggishly open my eyes, I come face to face with my disheveled reflection.

*Oh, shit, where the hell am I?*

I quickly sit up, causing a rush of dizziness to cluster in my head. My hands dart up to rub my temples, easing the furious pounding that makes it feel like my brain is escaping my skull. Once the urge to vomit passes, I glance around the starkly decorated bedroom. The space is vast, but it's cold and sterile. I'm on the right side of a king-size four-poster bed. Other than the bed and two mahogany nightstands, the room is empty. There are no photos or knick-knacks on the bedside tables that would indicate whose bedroom I'm in, and no paintings adorn

the walls. Other than the mirror on the ceiling, the room is as basic as they come.

When I peel the dark sheets away from my body, I discover I'm wearing nothing but a small, white V-neck cotton shirt. I don't need to run my hands down my body to know I'm braless. Not just because I can feel the heaviness of my breasts, but because I didn't have a strapless bra to wear with my strapless dress last night, but even more concerning than the fact I don't have a bra on, is the fact I'm also not wearing any panties.

*Oh God, Isabelle, what did you do?*

I dive out of bed and yank open the top drawer on the bedside table, hoping it may give me some indication as to whose bedroom I am in. Other than a large, open box of condoms and a bottle of lubricant, the drawer is empty. I pull on the hem of my shirt, vainly trying to cover my buttocks as I rush to the other drawer. Inside this drawer is an extensive collection of ladies' panties. On close inspection, I realize they don't look recently washed.

Bile rises from my stomach to my throat as I slam the drawer shut. The chance of me being sick doubles when a door creaking open echoes through the room. I jump back into the bed to cover my naked derriere with the super-soft comforter and sheets.

My heart pounds louder than my head when Isaac strolls into the room wearing nothing but a small white towel. My eyes open wide as memories of last night come filtering back in. Him pulling me into the manager's office. Me sucking on his thumb like it was my last meal. My eyes pleading with him to take me on the very desk we were standing next to. Just one

look into his entrancing gray eyes had me throwing caution to the wind.

I remember Brandon's disappointment when I said I had to go. I made a pathetic excuse about being sick in the bathroom stall and that I was too embarrassed to stay. Harlow offered to drive me home, but she had been drinking just as much as me, so I asked Brandon to call her a taxi.

My stomach swirled as I walked toward the exit of the club, but it wasn't from nerves—it was in excitement. Isaac was standing at the entrance door. His lips crimped when he spotted me sauntering toward him. It was raining, so his bodyguard sheltered us with an umbrella as we hopped into the back of a waiting BMW 4WD.

“Hugo.”

That was what Isaac called his driver when he instructed him to lose the tail. *Lose the tail. Does Isaac know we are following him? Oh shit, did the surveillance team capture me with him last night?*

My panicked eyes dart to Isaac, who is watching me curiously. I try to keep my eyes secured on his, but the urge to run them over his body is too strong. In nearly every photo I've scanned of him in the FBI database, he's wearing a suit. Although there's been the occasional photo of him in gym shorts and a shirt from when he goes jogging, I've never seen him like this, so up close and personal. His body is perfect.

When my eyes return to his face, I realize I'm not the only one assessing desirable assets. Isaac's heavy-hooded gaze has lowered to my chest, his gaze so molten it activates every one of my hot buttons. Spurred on by confusion, I yank up the comforter to cover my thrusting chest. Amused by my attempt at modesty, Isaac chuckles a deep, throaty laugh.

“Don’t you think it’s a little late to be shy, Isabelle?”

He paces to the corner of the room. Although I’m petrified I’ve thrown my career down the toilet from sleeping with this man, my body still shudders from my name rolling off his tongue. Once he reaches the side of the room, he presses his palm on the white wall. My interest piques when a secret door pops out two seconds later. I’m so intrigued. If I weren’t half-naked, I’d love to discover what’s hiding in that secret room.

Plastic ruffling filters into the room when Isaac walks out with a dry-cleaning bag in one hand and a pair of polished black shoes in the other. I sigh. I was anticipating something more extravagant than a hidden wardrobe.

An improper gasp escapes my lips when he commences dressing in front of me. Against the screamed demands on my inner vixen, I dart my eyes away, only glancing back for the occasional peek.

*Holy fuck.*

I don’t usually swear, but there are no other words to describe Isaac’s, umm, *well-endowed* package. When he catches me staring at his junk, he winks. Slapping my hand over my mortified face, I turn my eyes to the wall, embarrassed he busted me ogling him like a virgin who’s never seen a penis before. I’ve seen them before—plenty of them.

Well, not plenty, but I’m definitely not a virgin. I just haven’t seen any penises quite as handsome as his.

*Can you call a penis handsome?*

“No, you can’t,” Isaac says with a hint of amusement in his tone.

My mortified eyes dart back to his. I really need to learn to stop babbling out loud. He finalizes doing up the last button on his light blue business shirt before he strides over and sits on the bed near me.

“I have a meeting I must attend this morning. Your dress was sent to the dry cleaners, but there are spare clothes your size in the wardrobe.” He gestures his hand to the hidden robe.

I cringe. *I hope the clothes are cleaner than the panties I found in the drawer earlier.*

“They’ve never been worn. Catherine purchased them specifically for you this morning.”

I freeze. *Can he read my thoughts?*

When he tilts closer to me, my sex tingles. I really wish I hadn’t drunk so much yesterday. Not just so I could remember what happened, but so I could recall what his kisses taste like. Then I wouldn’t need to spend hours every day fantasizing about them.

“Stop looking so worried, Isabelle.” His minty breath settles the swirling in my stomach. “You wouldn’t have any doubts if I’d fucked you, no matter how many drinks you had.”

My eyebrows scrunch as my eyes bounce between his. “We didn’t have...” My words trail off, unable to articulate the word ‘sex.’

“No, we didn’t.”

“Why?”

*Does he not find me attractive? Am I not his type?* My eyes turn up to the mirror above the bed. Even though my hair



is a mess, and I have mascara smeared under my eyes, I'm still half-presentable. I'm not a complete wreck.

"I like my women... not comatose," he responds with a growl.

I gulp when he licks the tip of his thumb before he rubs it under my eyes, removing the smears of mascara plastered there. Once the mess is cleared away, his gray eyes lift to mine. "You passed out within ten minutes of sitting in the back of my car." He seems angry at my lack of control while drinking.

"I generally handle my liquor a lot better than I did last night, but I was drinking on an empty stomach."

I grimace. Most people would happily use that as a reason for their inebriated state, but it's a weak excuse.

"And what would have happened if I didn't arrive at that club when I did, Isabelle? What if it were another man who carried you into his apartment and undressed you?" His livid eyes wander over my face. "Do you think he'd have slept next to you all night long, smelling your sexually enticing scent without touching an inch of your seductive curves and skin?"

The pulse in my neck strums when he leans in close to me and inhales an unashamed whiff. The fine hairs on my body prickle with attention as slickness forms between my legs. "I could smell you all night long, but I couldn't do a darn thing about it. A lesser man wouldn't have resisted."

A moan vibrates in my chest just thinking about him sleeping in the same bed as me. When he pulls away from my neck, my eyes dart up to his. My breathing shallows as my body tingles.

*Two years of training, Isabelle. Are you willing to throw everything away for one night in bed with this man?*

Even though I should be screaming ‘no,’ the word ‘yes’ is the first thing that pops into my brain.

“Ruthless, cunning, lawless,” I chant over and over again in my head, willing myself out of a seriously dangerous situation.

Isaac removes himself from the bed to gather his suit jacket. “Hugo will return after dropping me off. He will take you home.” His voice is gruff, making me wonder if I said my silent chant out loud.

“I can take myself home.”

*After all, I’m a grown woman, although I may have acted like a child last night.*

He nods before striding toward the double white wooden doors. Upon exiting, his head turns to face me. His eyes study my covered body before returning to my face.

“If you go out drinking with your friends again, only go to my clubs.”

With my shrewdness blinded by rampant horniness, I nod. His lips curl, seemingly pleased by my agreeing gesture before he exits the room. Groaning in frustration, I flop down onto the bed. I swear I’m not usually this senseless. There’s just something about Isaac that makes me throw my levelheadedness out the window, and it’s more than just my sexual attraction to him. I’ve known plenty of eye-catching men, but none of them have made my body react the way it does when he’s near, which is scary considering he hasn’t even touched me sexually yet.

*Imagine how explosive it will be once he does?*

Oh God, I need to get out of here before I make any more stupid decisions. Quickly diving out of bed, I scamper toward the hidden door. My mouth drops open when I walk into the massive room. There are several dozen dry-cleaning bags housing expensive suits lining one whole wall. At least two dozen dress shoes line the floor underneath them, and an extensive collection of ties are hanging on a display rack.

I run my hand across the dry-cleaning bags as I head to the far corner of the room which houses a selection of women's clothing. A smile breaks across my face when I notice a pair of white running shoes sitting next to my black pumps I was wearing last night. I've never seen the sense in wearing high heels during the day. I've always preferred comfort over appearance. I grab the sneakers and yank down a pair of jeans and a short-sleeve shirt before walking back into the room.

My eyes dart to the bedside table that contains the women's underwear. *Did Isaac place the underwear I was wearing last night in there?* Although the temptation is healthy, I can't stomach the idea of having my panties collected like some sort of trophy, so I put the jeans on without any undergarments. I'd rather go without panties than open that drawer again.

After pulling the short-sleeve shirt over my head, I pull my unruly hair out of the neckline and run my fingers through it to get the frazzled pieces under control. Once the laces on the white Converse sneakers are tied, I exit the room. The living area is just as sparse as the bedroom. There are two white leather sofas and a coffee table in the middle of the room. The white marble kitchen sparkles with cleanliness, and the appliances look like they have never been used.

Pulling open the stainless-steel fridge, I help myself to a bottle of cold water. I need something in my stomach to absorb the alcohol sloshing around in there. As I mosey to the front door, I spot my cell phone and purse sitting on the entry table. My phone is sitting on top of several open envelopes. From this distance, they look like personal correspondence as the addresses are handwritten. My pulse increases as I scan the envelopes that could hold something invaluable in them for our investigation. Even something that seems so minute in detail can be important in an investigation like ours on Isaac, but I can't break his trust, can I?

Isaac hasn't done anything that would justify me snooping into his private life. I'm here at my own choice. I didn't go home with him last night because of my job. I left with him because I wanted to. Looking past the details in his criminal file, Isaac has me intrigued, intrigued enough I risked my job by leaving with him last night. So, no matter how hard I try to justify that I should snoop in his personal life, I can't bring myself to do it.

Snatching my purse and phone off the table, I exit the apartment. The first thing I spot when leaving the foyer of the apartment building is Isaac's Mercedes-Benz town car parked across the street. The back window is rolled down, and his stern gray eyes are staring at me. I hesitantly wave. He doesn't wave back.

Rejection overwhelms me when the black-tinted window glides back into place before his car pulls into the Sunday morning traffic.

## CHAPTER 12



“*I* thought I gave you the day off,” Alex remarks from the corner of the room.

He’s lurking near the window looking down on The Dungeon nightclub. From the padded box seat, there’s an uninterrupted view of the entire nightclub and the parking lot below. Alex sluggishly turns to face me. His unshaven face appears guarded, and dark circles are plaguing his eyes. *Does he ever leave this office?*

“You did, but I have a lead I can follow, so I thought I should get a head start on that.”

I shuffle to my desk. After dropping my satchel into my bottom desk drawer, I fire up my computer. My mood is dreary and clouded with confusion. To be honest, my ego is scarred by Isaac’s dismissal this morning. Half of me is here to pursue answers as to why he’s so mysterious. He’s an enigma. He only allows people to know what he wants them to know. I don’t believe anyone truly knows the real Isaac Holt, not even those privileged to be included in his close-knit team.

“What’s your lead?” Alex listlessly strolls to my spotless, well-organized desk.

I’m tempted to tell him I’ve unearthed Hugo’s first name, but my intuition strongly advises me to keep that snippet of

information to myself, at least until I get more concrete evidence on who Hugo is. For all I know, he could be using an alias. Furthermore, how could I justify stumbling upon his name without disclosing I went home with Isaac last night?

“The tattoo parlor owner emailed me back this morning. He said he might have a squadron member willing to talk to me,” I reply, half-deceitful. I do have a contact, but they haven’t agreed to talk to me yet.

Alex’s reticent eyes gaze into mine for several awkward seconds before he nods.

“Did you have any luck with the Defense Department?” I question, prying him for any information that may contribute to my investigation of Isaac.

He groans in frustration before vigorously shaking his head. “I’m filing them under a dead end.”

My lips curve higher. This is the first time we’ve had a normal conversation in the past two months.

“I’m impressed with your dedication, Isabelle,” he commends me. “Keep this up, and you may get off coffee duty sometime within the next year.”

His boisterous chuckle echoes in the desolate space as he strides to his private office. I clutch my wireless mouse, trying my hardest to keep it planted on my desk and not pegged at the back of his arrogant head.

After squandering the last four hours at my desk, I’m no closer to finding out if Hugo is indeed his real name. Although Hugo was part of the American Hornets Squadron, there are no pictures of him in any of the squad photos, and no records of him exist in the Air Force database. The only information

I've located on any Hugo in the county is a death certificate for a Hugo Marshall who died two years ago.

Frustrated with my lack of progress, I scan Hugo's surveillance photo into the facial recognition database and expand my search to include every possible angle, including social media sites. If his face is on something, I'll ultimately find it. Well, I will in a few hours as the expanded searches take hours to run through the FBI database.

When my stomach grumbles declaring its hunger, I decide to go and grab something to eat instead of glaring at my computer monitor, yearning for it to come up with some resourceful information.

"I'm going to grab a bite to eat," I notify Alex.

His gaze doesn't falter from the photos he's scrutinizing, but he does nod his head, acknowledging he heard me.

"Did you want anything?"

When he grins a full-tooth smile and arches his manicured brow, I sigh and roll my eyes.

"I'll bring you back a coffee," I grumble before snatching my satchel out of my bottom desk drawer and rushing out of the building.

A giggle vibrates my lips when I spot a rumped Harlow leaning against the counter at the bakery. Hearing my laughter, she shakes her head and groans. "This is all your fault," she whispers like her voice is too piercing for her hungover head.

"Same time next week?"

Her bloodshot eyes dart up to mine. When she notices my smile, a cheeky grin sneaks onto her pale face.

“I guess that will depend on whether you’re going to ditch me again.”

“Sorry,” I apologize.

When I move to the bakery counter she’s leaning on, my stomach grumbles furiously. The smell of scrumptious fresh-baked goodies filters through my nose. Harlow’s eyes roam my face before her mouth breaks into her famous mischievous grin.

“That’s okay, I would’ve ditched you, too, if I were going home with who you left with.”

*Oh shit. She saw me leaving with Isaac last night? Does that mean Brandon also saw me leaving with him?*

“Please don’t tell me he was bad in bed,” she probes when she spots the forlorn expression on my face. “He can’t have devilishly handsome looks and an aura like his and not deliver the goods. It’s a disgrace to mankind.”

A grin stretches across my face. This is the reason I need a girlfriend who lives close by. I need someone to help me wade through the confusion muddling my head.

“I couldn’t tell you what his sexual prowess is like.”

“Huh,” huffs Harlow, appearing noticeably confused. “I saw the way he was looking at you, Izzy. He was more than ready to take you to his bed.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t sleep in his bed, I just didn’t sleep with him last night.”

She remains quiet as a mask of shock slips over her face. “Go and sit, I’ll make us a strong brew of coffee, then you can give me all the juicy details.”



Once she joins me at one of the tables in the half-empty bakery, I occupy the next twenty minutes of her time giving her a rundown of everything that happened with Isaac this morning. I also extend my story to include the first time we met.

By the time I've finished relaying every lucid detail, my confusion has intensified.

“First, I must say I knew he'd be hung like a donkey.”

A giggle escapes my lips when she uses her hands to fan her overheated, flushed cheeks.

“Second, I can understand him not sleeping with you last night. Having sex with someone who's intoxicated is too rapey in my eyes, but having sex with someone who is hungover is a different story altogether. There's no reason you shouldn't have been screaming his name at the top of your lungs this morning.”

I have to agree with her. No self-respecting person would sleep with someone who's intoxicated since they can't give consent, but the fact Isaac didn't attempt *anything* with me this morning when I was capable of making rational decisions, makes me feel rejected.

“Maybe he did have a meeting he had to attend, and he knew he wouldn't have enough time to thoroughly knock your socks off?” she suggests, running her hand down my arm in a supportive manner.

“Yeah, maybe,” I reply, although my gut is telling me that isn't the case.

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After talking to Harlow for another thirty minutes, drinking enough coffee to keep me awake for a week, and eating a club sandwich, I walk back into my workplace with my mind less jumbled than before. Upon entering, I spot Alex sitting at my desk. His dour eyes lift to mine as I apprehensively stroll toward him.

“What are you doing?”

He gestures his head to the computer monitor on my desk. “You found Isaac’s mysterious companion.”

Once Alex accepts the black coffee I brought back for him, my eyes dart to the computer screen. My extensive search has located a match for Hugo. It’s a Facebook profile opened seven years ago, but it has been inactive for the past two years.

I skim the information in front of me. Hugo Marshall would now be twenty-eight years old. At the time his account was opened, he was unmarried and had three siblings—Helen, Chase, and Marjorie. He lived in Rochdale, New York, and his employment status shows he was working in security.

“It appears he’s just a bodyguard,” he exclaims, rising from my chair and moving around my desk. “I don’t think we need to focus our investigation on Hugo any further. It’s time to return our attention to our original target.”

I nod in understanding, even though my instincts are telling me not to drop this. The death certificate I found earlier was for a Hugo Marshall who died two years ago. At the time of his death, he was twenty-six years old. That’s too much of a coincidence for me to disregard.

Now I’m no longer planning just to unearth the mystery of Isaac Holt, but I’m also planning on finding out every sordid bit of information I can on the elusive Hugo Marshall.

## CHAPTER 13



**Six weeks later...**

“*J*sabelle.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I babble under my breath.

My eyes shift down as I suck in air. My heart clenches when I’m met with the piercing gray eyes of Isaac Holt.

*Shit!*

This wasn’t the plan when Harlow and I decided to go out and celebrate. I had no inkling Isaac would be here. We merely chose this restaurant from the rave reviews it received on Yelp. We were unaware this type of establishment books up months in advance. When a handsome blond gentleman eavesdropped on our conversation with the restaurant hostess, he graciously offered for us to be seated with him.

Harlow’s excitement shone out of her when she accepted his invitation with no pause for consideration. To say I was surprised when I followed him to his booth and heard my name roll off Isaac’s tongue would be a major understatement.

“Hi,” I greet him anxiously.

My eyes leisurely glance over Isaac's dark gray dress shirt and black dress pants. Tonight, unlike every other time I've seen him, he's minus his suit jacket and tie. He sports a dark gray business shirt rolled up at the sleeves. The top two buttons are undone, revealing inches of his smooth, muscular chest. He looks ravishingly drool-worthy.

He gives me a casual smirk as he stands from the booth to offer me his hand to shake. "Hi."

When I accept his gesture, he doesn't shake my hand—he places a kiss on the edge of my palm. Air sucks from my lungs when his electrifying touch scorches my skin. I yank my hand out of his grasp, skittish from my body's reaction to his humblest touch.

He smiles at my wary reaction before accepting Harlow's greeting. He gawks at Harlow peculiarly, seemingly dumbfounded. His lips purse as his eyes wander over Harlow's body. A rush of nausea churns in my stomach, riddled with panic that they may already be familiar with one another.

"I'm from the bakery," Harlow informs him when she notices the confused expression on his striking face. Her statement doesn't ease Isaac's uncertainty. "The bakery you left your card at for Izzy."

"Ah. The card that has yet to be utilized."

When Isaac shakes Harlow's hand, I exhale, grateful they only know each other in passing.

"Please join us," the handsome blond gentleman offers, motioning his hand to the booth.

Harlow slides into the spare space next to him, meaning I have no choice but to sit next to Isaac. The instant I slip into the booth, he leans in to take a sizable whiff of my scent.

“Fuck, you smell good.”

His voice is ruggedly smooth, sending a thrill through my body from the strands of my hair to the tips of my toes. I try to conceal my smile at his compliment, but my lips curve upward, giving away my true feelings. This is the first time I’ve seen Isaac since the morning I left his apartment six weeks ago. *Oh, well, that’s a blatant lie.* I haven’t seen him in person since that day would be a more accurate response. He’s still under investigation by the FBI, and I’m still required to scan all the tedious, meaningless tasks he gets photographed doing every day into the Bureau’s database. I just haven’t seen him personally.

I probably shouldn’t say ‘tedious, meaningless tasks’ as I’m sure some people would see multimillion-dollar business takeovers as a riveting experience, but it doesn’t match the impression of what one would expect a suspected mob boss to do every day.

I’ve tried relentlessly to eradicate Isaac from my thoughts the past six weeks. I’ve read every file the FBI has on him to taint my interest in him, but nothing has worked. As unavoidable as the plague, everywhere I go, Isaac is right there in front of me.

Dangling Isaac in front of me is like taking a kid to a candy store and telling her she must buy a piece of fruit. Even though you know the candy will give you cavities and make your hips wider, you still want the candy. Isaac isn’t good for me. I should stay away from him, but when he is dangled in front of me, my inhibitions evaporate.

Isaac runs his index finger along my forearm, causing the hairs on my body to bristle. “How do you know Cormack?”

“Who?” My one word is wheezy from his close proximity.

He points to the blond gentleman seated across from us. “Cormack.”

“I don’t know him. He just offered for us to be seated with him when we couldn’t get a table.”

Scooting across the bench, I try to increase the space between our bodies since we’re sitting intimately close to each other. My body’s awareness of Isaac’s proximity is wreaking havoc with my shrewdness.

His lips crimp at my action before shifting closer to me, leaving less room between us than there was previously. Rolling my shoulders, I firm my stance. I try to keep my focus planted on Cormack and Harlow gabbing across from us, but my eyes incessantly sneak glances at Isaac, whose eyes remain planted on me.

“How do you know Cormack?” I ask, endeavoring to keep our conversation in friendly territory.

“We met in college. He was my roommate slash manager.”

“Manager?” My curiosity is piqued as to why someone like Isaac would require a manager.

He smirks vainly. “Not that type of manager. No one is the boss of me, baby.”

I try not to sway toward him, but this is the first time he has referred to me by a nickname. Call me crazy. Call me a freak, but I liked hearing it.

“I fought my way through college. Literally.”

“You didn’t fight, you just showed up,” Cormack interrupts, his tone cheeky.

“Don’t believe anything this guy tells you,” Cormack banter, gesturing his head to Isaac. “He acts all innocent, then

bam, you'll be on your ass before you know it.”

“Who are you to talk? You're the one who created the ruse,” Isaac jests, his lips tugged into a broad grin.

“It worked, though, didn't it?” Cormack arches his brow into his blond hairline.

Isaac doesn't respond. He merely laughs a thick, vociferous chuckle that makes my pussy pulsate with desire.

“Come on, out with it,” Harlow requests a short time later, her eyes bouncing between Cormack and Isaac. “This is more suspenseful than the *Game of Thrones* cliffhanger. You can't share tidbits of information, then leave us hanging. We need details. Very informative details.”

“All right.” Cormack leans over the table to build the suspense. “Imagine Isaac all decked out in corduroy trousers, a pair of leather-strapped sandals, a button-up, short-sleeve shirt two sizes too small, and a pair of suspenders.”

“I didn't wear fucking suspenders,” Isaac interrupts. Although his voice sounds stern, his eyes glimmer with mischief.

“It was a few years ago. Maybe my memory isn't as good as it was, but I swear at least once I got you into a pair of suspenders.”

Both Harlow's and my chuckles break the silence surrounding us.

My gleeful eyes turn to Isaac. Even decked out in the most hideous, unsightly clothes you could find, he would still be the most strikingly handsome man I've ever seen. It is, after all, what's under the clothing that's the most appealing.

When he notices my eyes wandering over his body, Isaac runs his index finger down my arm.

“Anyway, we have him all decked out like a choirboy about to go to church on Sunday. Isaac arrives on the scene of an underground fight ring acting all innocent like it’s the first time he’s been to an event like that. Only once an impressive purse was negotiated for a fight, did Isaac reveal his true self. By then, it was too late for his opponent to back out. An easy five G’s for ten minutes of work,” Cormack informs.

Cormack leans back into the booth and takes a sizable gulp of the brown liquid from the crystal glass in his hand.

“Wow.”

Now part of Isaac’s FBI file makes sense, like where he got the money he invested in stocks while he was still in college. His file leads us to believe it was from him illegally distributing and manufacturing drugs. And although underground fighting is illegal, it doesn’t hold the same repercussions as drug manufacturing and dealing does.

“How many years did you fight?”

My interrogation is exclusively based on personal motives. I find Isaac intriguing. The more time I spend with him, the more personal information I want to unearth about him.

“Just under two years,” he replies, his brows lowering.

“Why did you stop fighting?”

His jaw muscle tremors before his eyes flick to Cormack. When he shakes his head, Cormack’s brows furrow before he nods. My eyes shoot to Harlow. She shrugs, feeling the tension as well. The longer the silence continues, the more the air surrounding our group permeates with the thick stench of awkwardness.



The uncomfortable silence is only interrupted when the restaurant hostess saunters her way to the booth and notifies our group our table is ready. Cormack gestures for Harlow to follow the hostess.

My anxious eyes dart to Isaac, wordlessly questioning if he still wants us to join his table. His eyes roam my face while he contemplates a response. When he motions for me to follow the hostess, I hesitantly slide out of the booth.

Cormack and Isaac follow closely behind us. I can hear them talking, but with the hum of activity inside the restaurant, I'm unable to understand any of their words.

The instant we're seated, Isaac signals for the waiter to bring him a glass of whiskey. "Bring back the whole bottle." His tone is surly and rough.

For the next hour, Isaac spends the majority of our meal silently brooding and consuming whiskey as if it's coffee. Although I try to keep my focus on Cormack and Harlow, my eyes persistently shift to Isaac. Cormack has been a faultless gentleman the entire meal, and Harlow hangs off his every word, but my attention remains on what caused the sudden shift in Isaac's personality. Why did such a simple question spark such an adverse reaction? He went from flirty, friendly banter to cold and distant in a matter of seconds.

When the waiter removes Isaac's untouched plate of food, I place my hand on his thigh and give it a gentle squeeze. His eyes lift from his glass of whiskey to me. He assesses all the features of my face in silence. His gaze still causes a shiver to run through my body, but this time, it's more from his icy glare than excitement.

"Don't take his lack of interest personally, Isabelle." I stray my concerned eyes to Cormack. "For as long as I've known

Isaac, he has never been interested in dating brunettes.”

“Oh.” My eyes turn back to Isaac as my throat works hard to swallow. “Is there any particular reason?”

I stare into Isaac’s despondent eyes, begging for him to deny Cormack’s statement, to acknowledge the confusing, flirtatious connection we have. Even though Isaac appears to be staring straight at me, he isn’t seeing me—he’s looking straight through me.

“It’s a personal preference,” he replies coldly. “No brunette I’ve ever *fucked* has maintained my interests once we leave the bedroom.”

My heart plunges into my stomach. I try to mask my hurt with a smile, but my deception is revealed when my hand rattles as I reach for my wine glass.

Isaac stands from the table, looking prepared to excuse himself for the night. His hasty getaway is foiled when a group of waiters moves toward our table singing a rendition of ‘Happy Birthday.’

My cheeks enflame as my embarrassed eyes flick up to Harlow. She’s smiling radiantly and waggling her eyebrows. When a giant chocolate cake covered in candles is placed down in front of me, Isaac curses under his breath and flops back into his chair.

Ignoring the obvious tension plaguing our group, Harlow excitedly instructs, “Make a wish.”

My focus flashes between the three sets of eyes complacently staring at me. My gaze loiters on Isaac’s a touch longer than the other two. His beautiful eyes quell my anxiety. I close my eyes before blowing out the candles in one swift motion.

Clapping and laughter dispel when I brush my lips against  
Isaac's soft, plump lips.

## CHAPTER 14



The brush of my tongue against Isaac's lips is met with a mouth that's hard and stern. My heart pounds so profusely, it's nearly deafening. Tears burn my eyes as my nose runs. I've always been an ugly crier. Tonight will be no different.

I kissed him with the hope of proving him wrong. I kissed him wanting to force him to recount the lie he just told. I kissed him because I couldn't wait any longer to feel his lips on mine. Now, I feel like a fool. I can't even coerce the guy who has gotten under my skin to give me a pitiful birthday kiss. *I am pathetic.*

Slowly pulling away from his snapped-shut mouth, I pray his desire for me overwhelms him so much, he refuses to relinquish my mouth from his.

With every millimeter I gain between our lips, my heart sinks further into my stomach. The wrath of rejection has never hit so hard.

After sucking in a big breath, I open my eyes. Isaac's gray eyes are staring into mine, but they don't give any indication to his feelings about my failed attempt at seducing him.

Biting my bottom lip, I turn my tear-filled eyes to Harlow and Cormack. Cormack's brows are knitted together, and he

looks utterly confused. Harlow's mouth is ajar, and she has tears in her eyes.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," I inform them.

Leaping from my chair, I snatch my black silk clutch from the tabletop. I need to leave before my foolishness becomes more exposed.

When I attempt to dash away from the table, Isaac's hand jerks out and seizes my wrist, causing the cutlery on the table to clang together. *Never show your fear, Isabelle.* Raising my shoulders, I gather my composure before turning my gaze down to him, endeavoring to show him I'm not affected by his rejection.

"I'll drive you home," he offers, his voice rough.

I shake my head. His eyes narrow, forcing me to swallow a lump formed in my throat. Not releasing my hand, he stands from his seat and aggressively throws his unused napkin down onto the table. When he digs into his back pocket, Cormack gestures his hands in front of his body, indicating he will pay the bill.

"Can you take Harlow home?" Isaac's voice is deeper than I've ever heard it.

"Yeah," Cormack replies, nodding. "If Harlow is okay with that?" His gaze seeks Harlow's.

Harlow's anxious eyes lift to mine, seeking permission. I nod. Just one look into Isaac's stern eyes is all I need to know he's going to drive me home whether I agree or not.

Harlow leans over the table to give me a brief, friendly hug. "I'll call you later."

Nodding, I return her hug the best I can with the one arm I have free since Isaac is still clutching my other hand.

Cormack and Isaac must say a silent goodbye as neither utter a sound before Isaac walks toward the exit of the restaurant. I have to jog in my heels to keep up with his quick strides.

Halfway there, he yanks his phone out of his pocket, lifts it to his ear, and commands Hugo to bring his car around. By the time we make it outside, my arm feels like it's been tugged out of its socket from his harsh pulls. I attempt to remove my arm from his rough grip, but instead of releasing me, his grip tightens, and my wrist spasms with pain.

“Let go of my arm.” I pull away from his grasp.

He releases me from his tight grip before dragging his hand through his hair. I've never seen someone so furious over a little kiss before. I wouldn't have kissed him if I knew it would get this reaction.

He's acting like, like, *oh my God*.

“I'm sorry if I embarrassed you.” Irritation is heard in my voice. “It was just a harmless kiss. It didn't mean anything.”

“Then why did you do it?” His stern eyes turn from the blackened night to me. “If it didn't mean anything, why did you kiss me?”

“Because I wanted to,” I reply honestly. “And I wanted you to admit you lied.”

“I didn't lie,” he snaps, his tone unwavering. “I said no brunette I have *fucked* has maintained my interest outside of the bedroom.”

*So, he's admitting I have gained his interest?* He takes a step closer to me, forcing me to take a step back. His eyes are unnerving. They're the darkest I've ever seen them.

"If you want to prove your point, Isabelle..." even though his voice is gruff, my name still rolls off his tongue seductively, "... I'll have to fuck you first."

I should be offended by his crudeness, by his lack of respect, but I'm not. For months I've been torturing myself over this man. He's in my thoughts day and night. He is under my skin. He even invades my dreams. The intriguing Isaac Holt I read about every day on paper has nothing on the suspense and intrigue I feel when I'm with him in person. His aura makes it seem as if he's two different people.

He steps closer to me. He's so close there isn't enough space between our bodies for my lungs to fully expand. His tormented eyes filter over my face before he cradles my cheek. His thumb glides over my dry top lip. It's dry from my inability to produce saliva—my mouth is parched from his intense gaze.

"Is that what you want, Isabelle?"

At first, I'm confused by his question. I've become so immersed in staring into his entrancing eyes, I've completely forgotten about his earlier comment.

"Because your body is saying one thing, and your eyes relay another."

His intense eyes convey his absolute confusion. He isn't the only one confused. My brain knows our bizarre kinship is unethical. It may even be illegal, but my heart and body don't want to hear the logical thoughts of my mind. All they want is Isaac. They have craved him ever since the day I collided with

him at the airport, but can I do this? Can I sacrifice everything for a man I hardly know?

Before any words can seep from my lips, a dark, sleek sports car pulls in next to us. Isaac removes his hand from my cheek and shoves it into his trouser pocket.

“Get in the car, Isabelle.”

Shocked and frozen in place, I watch Isaac stride toward the driver’s side door Hugo is stepping out of. Isaac and Hugo talk in hushed whispers. Hugo nods before his blue eyes lift to mine. He offers me a wary smile before moving around the vehicle and opening the passenger side door.

Isaac’s eyes lift to mine. He gestures for me to enter the car before he slides into the driver’s seat, not bothering to wait for my response. Although this is a prime opportunity for me to make a calculated getaway, I can’t force myself to walk away from him. Reluctantly, I head to the sleek black car.

“Are you okay?” Hugo’s concerned eyes roam my face.

I nod, before accepting his assistance into the car.

“Thank you,” I whisper graciously.

Because of how low the car sits, I have to slide into the leather seat. My black pencil skirt glides up high on my thigh, exposing a significant portion of my bare skin. I pull down on the hem, hoping to stretch it to a respectful length, but there’s no give in the sturdy material.

The instant Hugo closes the passenger door, Isaac pulls his car away from the curb. His engine roars to life with the heavy compression of the accelerator, his tires squealing as we whiz away from the restaurant.



He weaves his car in and out of the heavy commuter traffic, the veins in his arms flexing when he changes gears. Although his attention never veers from the road, I catch his gaze occasionally peering at me from the corner of his eye.

If he's trying to scare me, he's failing miserably. With his assertiveness and astute business mind, he'd never take an uncalculated risk. He just wants to flaunt his superiority because I embarrassed him.

His next shift of the gears is so rough, I'm surprised the gearshift didn't snap off. His hand curls around the steering wheel so tight, his knuckles are white.

*All this anger over a simple kiss.*

"I'm sorry I kissed you," I apologize. "I shouldn't have done it."

His eyes snap to mine. Even in his angry mood, his sultry gaze still wanders over my body, lingering on my bare thighs longer than what could be classed as an acceptable glance.

He glowers into my eyes as he sneers, "I won't be strong-armed, Isabelle."

I nod, accepting that a man as dominant as Isaac would never willingly relinquish his power. His jaw muscle slackens when he notices my agreeing gesture.

He returns his gaze to the road. "That has only happened once. It won't happen again."

I study his profile in silence, striving to work out what he meant by his statement. I don't believe a sane man would strongarm a man with a reputation like Isaac's. They would have to be a certified lunatic if they did. So, I'm going to assume his statement isn't about a man. It has to be a woman he's referring to.

Ignoring the pang of jealousy hitting my chest, my gaze shifts to the blackened sky to ponder in silence. I've been over Isaac's entire FBI file with a fine-toothed comb. There's nothing in there indicating any romantic interests, past or present, so it must be something that happened before he attracted the attention of the law enforcement office—something that can only be discovered by unearthing the real Isaac Holt. Something that will remain buried as I don't believe anyone will ever fully unravel the mystery of Mr. Holt.

When Isaac pulls into the driveway of Regina's house, I return my gaze to his, which is focused straight ahead.

"Thanks for everything," I whisper. "It was the most *interesting* birthday I've had in years."

I unbuckle my seat belt before leaning over to press a peck on his cheek. When he abruptly turns his head, my kiss lands on his stern mouth instead. I freeze, panicked at what his reaction will be from me kissing him a second time without permission.

He growls a low and menacing snarl that forces me to exhale a shaky breath. Before any apologies can spill from my lips, he seals his mouth over mine.

My insecurities vanish the instant his tongue plunges into my shocked mouth. A throaty groan erupts from my lips when he fists my hair and yanks it back to deepen our kiss. My excited moan urges him on. Our kiss is intense, desperate, and needy. He kisses me as I've never been kissed before, a stimulating blur of nibbles, sucks, and licks. It's a kiss so potent my thighs shudder. A kiss every girl fantasizes about.

I respond with the same amount of intensity as if it might be the last time I'll experience his awe-inspiring kisses because it most likely will be.

I'm aroused and emotionally moved by his kiss at the same time. I don't know whether to burst into tears or combust into ecstasy.

By the time he pulls back from our embrace, my mind is a blurred mess of confusion. "Happy birthd—"

He stops talking mid-sentence, his eyes darting between mine. His thumb dabs my right eye, gathering the dampness I didn't realize had pooled there. When he observes the moisture on his thumb, he expels a ragged breath. Although he doesn't utter a sound, his eyes relay the words he wants to say. *I'm sorry.*

"Thank you," I reply, acknowledging both his silent apology and his birthday wishes.

I stammer a quick goodbye before yanking open the passenger door and rushing into Regina's house, not once risking a glance back. When I close the front door, I glide down to sit on the floor and cradle my knees in my arms.

*When did my life become so complicated?*

When I'm immersed in Isaac's world, I completely forget he's under investigation. When I'm with him, I only see him, a man who makes my hairs bristle to attention with a single touch. Then I turn up to work, and my head clutters with confusion. It's like he's two different people because that incredibly appealing man I can't force myself to forget can't be the same Isaac Holt his FBI file leads me to believe he is.

He can't be.

## CHAPTER 15



“*Y*ou have to cancel the cake orders before my ass explodes.”

Isaac’s gorgeous face is puzzled until he realizes who is accosting him in the street. When I saw his sleek black town car in front of the restaurant I’d initially spotted him at several months ago, I decided to approach him regarding his extravagant but heartfelt gift.

The day after my birthday when I arrived at Harlow’s bakery to place my morning coffee order, Harlow presented me with a giant decorative cupcake. It was red velvet, and it was the most scrumptious cake I’d ever eaten.

The second day, I was presented with another cupcake. That time, the enticing flavor was chocolate mint. By the third day, my curiosity intensified.

After wrangling Harlow for nearly thirty minutes, she finally enlightened me. Because Isaac and I had left the restaurant before I sampled my birthday cake, Isaac requested for Harlow to supply me with one originally flavored cupcake per day for an entire year. *A YEAR!*

“It was very sweet of you, but after only five days, the struggle to squeeze into my jeans is already real.”

Isaac's lips curve into an authentic smile, making my heart palpitate faster. When his eyes dart down to my jeans, I stand straighter and suck in my bottom. I may not yet have a Kim Kardashian butt, but if I keep eating the cupcakes Harlow is supplying me with, I don't think it will be too far off.

“That just means there will be more Isabelle to explore.”

He can say that, I've seen him naked. I swear there isn't an ounce of fat on his entire body. Well, except for that one area where thickness is a necessary and wanted requirement. However, someone with my lagging metabolism will have to run a minimum of three miles a day just to ensure those cupcakes don't make it onto my already curvy backside and squidgy belly.

Before I can derive a witty comeback to his remark, a lady joins our conversation. She looks to be a similar age to me, but she has an aura of grace and dignity that makes her appear more mature.

“Isaac, honey, are you going to introduce me to your friend?”

Her tone is friendly, and her interest in me appears genuine, but my irritation still irks from her calling Isaac 'honey.'

“Isabelle, this is Clara. Clara, this is Isabelle Brahn.”

My brows meet my hairline, surprised Isaac knows my last name, but considering I've slept in his bed half-naked, kissed him on the lips without permission, and am spying on him every day as a career, I brush off any concerns over the fact he knows my last name.

Clara inhales as her blue eyes drift between Isaac and me. After a beat, she extends her manicured hand to accept the

greeting I'm offering.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Isabelle."

After the awkward introduction, our gathering plummets toward uncomfortable. Isaac, as always, is impeccably dressed in a tailored black suit. Clara is wearing a gorgeous pale blue slip dress, so I stand out like a sore thumb in a pair of jeans I squeezed into, a short-sleeve blouse, and a pair of black ballet flats. I couldn't feel any more out of place if I tried.

"Well, I better get going." My eyes nervously shift to Isaac. "I just wanted to thank you for the gift, although it was completely unnecessary."

His lips tug high as he dips his chin.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Clara," I inform her before spinning on my heels and head toward the bakery.

"Oh, don't go. Can't you join us?" Clara requests.

I hesitate, then turn back around. Isaac's eyes are staring into mine, but they don't give me any indication if he objects to Clara's invitation.

"Umm, thank you for the offer, but I'm slightly underdressed." I motion to my jeans.

The last time I attempted to enter this restaurant dressed as I am, I was advised there's a public restroom located one block over.

Isaac's eyes wander over my body before returning to my face. "You look perfectly fine."

I try to hide my smile, but my lips furl at his compliment, especially considering the fact it was the exact words he said to me months ago outside of the business class lounge.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “But I have to return to work.”

After all, I was only walking down this street to get the team’s early morning coffee.

Isaac curtly nods but remains quiet. Clara clasps her hands together as if she’s considering a plea. I awkwardly wave, spin on my heels, and cringe at my lack of elegance.

I don’t turn around, but I can feel Isaac’s heated gaze tracking me until I enter the bakery. Upon entering, I spot Harlow standing near a noticeboard in her bakery. Her head turns toward the door when she hears the bell chime.

“Are you still looking for an apartment?” She yanks down a flyer from the noticeboard.

Nodding, I bridge the gap between us. I’ve been seeking an apartment since I arrived in Ravenshoe. I just haven’t secured one yet. Most apartments in the area are either out of my price range or the moderately-priced ones have hundreds of applications, and mine is always denied.

“This place sounds ideal.” She thrusts a piece of paper into my hand—two bedrooms, two bathrooms, an underground garage, and a balcony all for twelve hundred dollars a month.

“What’s the catch?”

I’ve always believed if something is too good to be true, it is. This apartment seems too good to be true.

“Is it located in Ravenshoe’s equivalent of the Bronx?”

Harlow laughs boisterously and slaps my forearm. “There’s no Bronx area of Ravenshoe. Call and make an appointment,” she suggests. “Then crumple up the advertisement and throw it in the bin. That will stop anyone else applying.”

The advertisement does look newly printed, and none of the slips at the bottom have been torn off yet. Maybe if I'm quick enough, I could beat the other applicants.

I yank my cell phone out of my pocket and dial the number displayed.

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“Because this apartment has just become available, the owner wishes to keep it on a month-to-month periodic lease,” the real estate agent advises, moving toward the glass double door that opens onto a beautiful balcony.

“Okay, that's fine.”

A month-to-month basis suits my requirements perfectly. In my line of work, I can't commit to anything permanently, not even a relationship. *Well, that's a somber thought.*

“All appliances are supplied with the apartment, and you'll have access to a laundry downstairs.”

I nod, acknowledging I've heard her as I wander around the apartment. The living area is large and would comfortably fit two double sofas. The kitchen is compact but is adeptly equipped with a range of high-end stainless-steel appliances.

All the rooms have ample natural light, and the master suite has a walk-in closet, but the one thing that stops me in my tracks and makes my heart flutter is the clawfoot bathtub in the main bathroom. I could imagine spending hours soaking in there after a long day at work or dancing.

“Will you require an application package?” the real estate agent queries.



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“And that’s the very last box.” Harlow plops onto my red suede sofa while blowing her hair out of her eyes.

We’ve spent the majority of our morning moving into my new apartment. Because I was miraculously the sole applicant, my application was approved the next day. After paying a deposit and one month rent in advance, I picked up the keys the following morning, but with Alex’s stringent work regime, I’ve only moved in now, three weeks later.

“Can you smell that?” Harlow eyes me curiously while taking in a large whiff through her nose. “That’s the smell of freedom!”

I giggle at her comment, even though she’s accurate. I love Regina. She’s like the mother I never had, but no self-respecting twenty-five-year-old likes living with their mother. Although I rarely have the opportunity to go out on dates, it’s nice to know I can invite private companions to my residence if I want to. *Why was Isaac’s face the first one to pop into my head during that thought?*

Harlow returns my head from the clouds. “Speaking of freedom, did you get your hard-ass boss to give you the long weekend off?”

“Yes.”

It was as painful as pulling teeth, but after groveling, begging, and pleading, Alex let me have the long weekend off on the condition I work the next four weekends in a row.

“Where are we going again?”

Harlow has nagged me the past three weeks to get the weekend off, but whenever I ask her where we're going, she only responds with, "It's a secret."

Harlow's eyes dart to mine. If looks could kill, I'd be dead right now. When I stick my tongue out, her face morphs into her adorable smile. Harlow rises from the sofa and saunters to a box of mismatched kitchen accessories.

"What are you looking for?" I question, just as she pulls two coffee mugs out of the box.

"We need something to wash down this overpriced bottle of champagne with." She raises the bottle of champagne that was sitting on my doorstep this morning.

When I saw the bottle, my heart leaped. Although it still raced when I read the card, it wasn't as fast as when I discovered the bottle. It was lovely of Cormack to send me a housewarming gift, but when I spotted the bottle sitting on my doorstep, I presumed it was from Isaac.

"Do you think we should drink it?"

I don't know much about champagne, but considering this one has Dom Perignon written on the label, I'd say it's expensive.

Harlow doesn't grace me with a reply. She merely pops open the bottle of champagne and pours us both a generous helping into a pair of dirty old mugs.

"To freedom and expensive bottles of champagne," she says showily, handing me a chipped mug.

"To freedom." I take a mouthful of the delicious aromatic champagne.

And to finally being able to entertain special guests.

## CHAPTER 16



**Four weeks later...**

“*B*randon.” My greeting is drenched with sugary, sappy sweetness.

Prancing my way over to Brandon, I prop myself onto his wooden desk covered with files and blacked-out documents. When his apprehensive hazel eyes lift to mine, I flutter my lashes and purse my lips. To add even more allure to my intricate ruse, I undo the top button of my blouse, daringly exposing a portion of my cleavage scarcely contained in my white lace bra.

I fan my flushed cheeks. “It’s so hot today,” I sigh, fighting the urge to cringe.

I’ve never been good at flirting, and this is by far my worst attempt at seducing somebody.

Brandon gulps as his gleaming eyes rake my body, stopping at my undone button for an appreciative glance before reaching my eyes. His mischievous eyes glimmer with skepticism.

“What do you want, Izzy?” His mouth curves into a vast grin.

I huff. “What gave it away?”

“The greeting was okay. It gained my attention, but you lost me on unbuttoning your shirt and saying it was hot today,” he critiques me. His eyes lower to my undone button before they return to my face. “You do realize summer is over, don’t you, Isabelle?”

“Ha ha.”

Brandon light-heartedly growls when I button my blouse back to a more respectable level, soothing the sting my ego took from my botched attempt at seducing him.

“So, what brought you strutting over to my desk?”

Air whizzes between my teeth. “I wasn’t strutting.”

“You were strutting. The hips were swinging, and you had an extra spring in your step. Total strut,” he teases me.

My lips tug higher on my face. Obviously, my ruse wasn’t that ineffective.

“I’m glad you took such detailed notes of my performance.”

When I close my fist and punch Brandon in the bicep, he chuckles before rubbing his arm. Brandon isn’t as built as some of the other male agents, but I have no doubt he can hold his own. People are less suspicious of the smaller guy, unaware they’re usually the ones who pack the hardest punch.

My anxious eyes dart around the room before returning to Brandon’s. “I need a favor.”

“Anything,” he replies without a moment of reluctance.

“I need access to a sealed file from the DA’s office in New York.”

His eyes meet mine. His brows are furrowed, and his gaze is troubled.

“I can’t, Izzy.”

“Please, Brandon, you know I wouldn’t have asked you if it weren’t important.”

From the personal stories Brandon has shared with me about his life, I can comprehend his hesitation, but I need access to this file for my ongoing private investigation on Hugo. Because the Bureau is focusing their investigation solely on Isaac, they’re missing several essential elements that warrant Hugo receiving his own investigation.

The only shred of evidence I’ve gathered on any Hugo Marshall in the country is a sealed court file for his sister, Marjorie. It’s sealed so tightly shut, not even an FBI agent can access it.

“I haven’t had any contact with her in years, Izzy. She’ll probably hang up the instant she realizes who is calling.”

My eyes plead with Brandon’s. Without this file, I’ll have nothing on Hugo, and my investigation will become stagnant. I can’t let this go as my intuition is telling me I need to follow this lead.

Brandon scrubs his hand down his face. When his eyes return to mine, they’re no longer brimming with mischievous. They’re tentative and apprehensive.

“I’ll try, but I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to get the file for you.”

Childishly squealing, I sling my arms around his shoulders. “Thank you, Brandon, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

When I pull away from our embrace, which has gained us the attention of our fellow officers, I notice Brandon’s cheeks have turned pink.

“It will cost you, though.”

I eagerly nod. I’ll accept any meaningless task to get my hot little hands on that file.

“I need you to do a search on this lady.” I snatch the record he’s holding out for me while nodding. “And you have to go on a date with me.”

My wide eyes shoot to his. Confusion clusters in my mind on why guilt is the first thing clouding my judgment. In the past four months, I’ve only seen Isaac a handful of times, but he’s always in the forefront of my mind. I’m also shocked. Brandon hasn’t asked me out on a date in months. I assumed he either got the hint or another lady caught his eye.

“One date, Izzy, that’s all I’m asking.”

Ignoring the ridiculous notion there’s any type of relationship between Isaac Holt and me, I murmur, “Okay, but it will have to be after I return. I’m going away with Harlow this weekend.”

He nods as a grin stretches across his handsome face, easing my uncertainty. He’s a wonderful guy, and he’s been nothing but kind to me since I arrived, so I ought to be thankful someone like him is interested in me, not apprehensive.

“Why don’t you come to my apartment, and I’ll cook dinner?”

Brandon smiles a full-toothed grin. “Sounds great.”

Returning his smile, I open the manila folder he supplied me with. There are numerous surveillance photos of a lady with shoulder-length brown hair. She’s of medium build, and I’d guess her age to be mid-twenties. She’s attractive, but there’s something about her that makes me want to cringe.

“Who’s this lady?”

Brandon shrugs. “We don’t know. We’ve noticed her a few times hanging around the nightclub the past several weeks. We believe she may be a companion of Isaac’s.”

My stomach recoils from the way he says ‘companion.’ No wonder I got a peculiar feeling when I glanced at her photos.

“I haven’t seen Isaac with a girlfriend the entire time he has been under surveillance, but this lady has been in the picture a lot more regularly than his standard dates, so she may be someone significant in his life.”

“All right, I’ll see what I can find out about her,” I reply, ignoring the harsh bitterness rising to my throat.

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It wasn’t difficult to track down Isaac’s mysterious companion. She was photographed several times sitting in a yellow vehicle in the parking lot of his club. Just entering her license plate into the FBI database gave me access to her driver’s license details.

Megan Patricia Shroud is twenty-six years old and lives in a country town four hundred miles from Ravenshoe. She’s

unmarried and has no next of kin reported on her driver's license.

I expand my search on Megan, more out of curiosity than necessity. When my eyes glance down at my cell phone vibrating on my desk, a grin furls my lips when I discover a text from Harlow.

**Harlow:** *Champagne is chilled, wine glasses are ready, and my bag is packed. I just seem to be missing one essential element???*

After jumping up from my seat, I snare my jacket from the back of the chair. I snatch the print-out of Megan's license, then make a beeline to Alex's office, passing by Brandon's desk on the way to hand him Megan's details.

"Thanks, and have fun," he shouts as I bolt by.

Alex's eyes lift from the documents he's scrutinizing when I tap on his office door.

"I just wanted to let you know I'm heading out for the weekend." I apprehensively step into his office. "I also wanted to say thanks for letting me have this time off."

Even though I had to grovel, he did have a legitimate reason to refuse my request. I've only been a part of his team for a little under five months, and I've already put in a request for vacation, so I'm grateful he accepted my pleas.

"It's fine, Isabelle." The sternness of his tone doesn't match his words.

"Bye," I murmur when his eyes resume perusing the documents in his hand.

Just as I'm about to exit his office, Alex calls my name. Cautiously, I pivot back around to face him.



“Make sure you keep your phone on you. If we need you, you’ll have to return from your trip early.”

Smiling, I nod and walk out of his office. “Like filing and scanning can’t wait until I return.”

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket to return Harlow’s message.

**Me:** *Pop that cork. I’m on my way!*

## CHAPTER 17



“*I*’m not taking it.”

I remove my microscopic bikini from my suitcase for the third time in the past thirty minutes. Every time I turn my back, Harlow places the minuscule scraps of material back in against my wishes.

“Trust me, you’ll want that bikini.” She over accentuates the words ‘trust me.’

She cocks her sculptured brow as she holds my tiny black string bikini out in front of her, pleading for me to take it. I’ve already packed a swimsuit, but it covers a lot more skin than my scant bikini does. Harlow extends her arm, placing the bikini to within an inch of my hands, and executes her best puppy- dog eyes.

She smiles and murmurs, “Yes,” under her breath when I confiscate the thin scraps of material from her hand and shove it into the side pocket of my suitcase.

I enter my walk-in closet in pursuit of a slip I can wear over my bikini. Harlow rolls her eyes when she notices me packing a Hawaiian print cover-up into my overstuffed suitcase.

Once I've finished packing my bag, I wheel it into the entryway in preparation for our departure.

A short time later, my intercom screeches through my apartment.

"Hi, come on up," I greet into the intercom.

Leaning over, I push the button to unlock the security door in the lobby. A massive buzz shrieks through my eardrums when the door latch is released. Dropping down to my knees, I refasten the zipper that just busted. My head clusters with giddiness from my sudden movements. I probably shouldn't have mixed Xanax with champagne, but when Harlow said we were flying, I knew I needed something to take the edge off my fear.

"I'll get the door, shall I?" Harlow suggests when she notices me wrangling with the stubborn zipper on my bag.

I nearly choke on my spit when she swings the door open, revealing the awe-inspiring visual of Isaac Holt.

*Oh God. Please tell me he's just popping in for a random visit. I can barely survive being in the same room with him for ten minutes, so I stand no chance in hell of being in his vicinity an entire long weekend.*

My eyes rocket to Harlow, who's greeting Cormack more intimately than a regular friend would.

*So that's where she has been vanishing to the past several weekends?*

Isaac gazes down at me before smirking. If the lust in his eyes is anything to go by, he appreciates the visual of me kneeling in front of him. The yearning to crawl toward him overwhelms me. I'm a strong and independent woman, but the

idea of kneeling for a man as powerful and authoritative as Isaac makes my core clench.

“Isabelle.”

The way it rolls off his tongue makes me wonder how it would sound in ecstasy. Would it be as deep as it sounds now or more breathless and ragged?

When he stops in front of me, I raise my eyes to his, admiring his muscular physique on the way. Although he’s no longer smirking, the expression on his face makes my heart race.

He pinches the material covering his thighs before crouching down next to me. Air sucks from my lungs when his deliriously handsome face comes to rest in front of me. “If we were alone, you wouldn’t be moving from that position.”

I throw my dignity out the window by pleading for him to make true on his threat with nothing but my eyes. His eyes dance between mine before he stands and extends his hand, offering to assist me off the ground.

After whining, I accept his gesture. Electricity shoots up my arm when he curls his masculine hand around mine. The rush of dizziness I was experiencing earlier returns full pelt, but it’s not the Xanax causing my light-headed wooziness. It’s the incredibly attractive Mr. Isaac Holt.

“Are you ready?”

Cormack’s eyes dart down to Isaac’s hand clasped around mine. Upon noticing the direction of Cormack’s gaze, Isaac drops my hand quicker than a cake would disappear at a Weight Watcher’s convention. When he gathers my suitcase off the ground and strides into the corridor, I stray my eyes to Harlow, who’s gawking at me with waggling brows.

“You have no idea what you’ve done,” I whisper, wanting to ensure Isaac doesn’t overhear my statement.

“You’re welcome.” She curls her arm around my waist to drag me into the corridor.

---

I squirm in my seat the entire drive to the airport. Not just because Isaac’s intense gaze hasn’t stopped since I sat across from him or the fact I’m petrified of flying, but because I’m terrified of spending the entire long weekend with the man seated across from me. Terrified is a strong word, but the way my body reacts to Isaac and how all rational thinking ceases to exist when he’s in the same room as me is genuinely terrifying.

No one should have that type of control over another, let alone a man I barely know. He doesn’t need to touch me, and my body teeters close to ecstasy. My heart skips a beat every time his eyes assess my body, and just hearing the profound rasp of his voice makes my sex throb. *Imagine how much harder the battle will be once he gets close to me?*

I take a calming breath before stepping out of the stretch limousine. The instant my feet hit the blacktop and my head rises, my first thought is to run.

My hasty getaway is foiled when I crash into a rock-hard chest. “The plane is that way.” Isaac points behind me.

I swivel my head, gulp, then resume my quick exit. Isaac chuckles at my reaction. Even though it’s a chuckle I’ve only heard escape his mouth a handful of times, it doesn’t warrant enough interest to stop me from fleeing. That plane he’s pointing at is *NOT* a plane, it’s a sardine can. I barely survive

getting on a commercial-size aircraft, so there's no chance I'll board a plane that looks like it came from a child's toy box.

I already have one foot back in the limo when Isaac seizes my wrist, halting my quick exit. Inhaling a lung-filling gulp of air, I raise my fretful eyes to his.

"I can't get in that plane," I contest.

My eyes convey to him this isn't a ploy to gain his attention. I'm seriously terrified.

The longer I gaze into his eyes, the more my irrational panic pacifies. He runs his spare hand down my heated cheek. When his thumb brushes across my parched, gaped lips, a shallow moan escapes my mouth.

When he takes a step backward, I take a step forward, not wanting the intangible string between us to be snapped. He runs his thumb over my hand, gripping his so tightly, my nails dig into his flawless skin, then he takes another step backward. Before I know it, we're standing at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the galley of the toy plane.

Isaac stands behind me. He's so close, his impressive manhood braces my curvy backside.

"Are you coming, Isabelle?" he whispers in my ear, his words laced with a sexual undertone.

I gulp even louder than I did when I saw the plane. Clenching my hands at my side, I climb the stairs into the private jet. My knees knock together with every step I take, but it isn't from fear—it's to calm the rampant tingling sensation coursing through my body.

I plop into the first plush white leather two-seater sofa I stumble upon in the galley. Ignoring the elegantly decorated surroundings, I search in vain for my seat belt. My panic

surges when my hands come up empty. *Oh my God, where's the belt?*

Isaac stoops down in front of me and lurches his hands into the back of the leather chair. My pulse quickens when his hands brush past portions of the bare skin on my thighs. He produces the belt and fastens it around my waist. Flashbacks of him doing the same thing months ago rush into my brain, along with the forbidden scenes of our hot and explicit kiss in his car weeks ago. My cheeks flame as undeniable lust overwhelms me.

Raising my lust-filled eyes, I'm confronted with Isaac's pussy-clenching gaze. His mouth curves into a sensuous smirk, and he winks before turning his attention to Cormack. They utter something to each other before Isaac takes the seat next to me. I raggedly pant when the plane jerks forward.

"If you need me to carry you into the bedroom, just let me know."

My eyes snap to Isaac's. "There's a bedroom?"

Smiling, he gestures his head to a polished door located at the back of the plane.

"I'll give you a private inspection later." He winks seductively.

Gulping, I swallow the lump sitting in my throat.

When Isaac places his palm on my thigh, I nearly vault out of my chair. Smiling at my skittish response, his index finger traces a figure-eight design on my bare skin. His meekest touch keeps my mind absent of any thoughts not associated with him.

Although my body is screaming for him to shift his finger a few inches higher, never once does his touch switch to being

disrespectful.

He doesn't need to move his fingers, though. My imagination is wondrous. Images of his fingers running along my naked body, gripping, probing, and exploring me makes my daydream vividly graphic. It also proves without a doubt that sexual endorphins can overrule fear-inducing chemicals.

"You're getting better with flying. You didn't require nearly as much stimulation this time around," Isaac says once the plane is no longer ascending.

Biting my bottom lip, I try to hide my smile. Forever diligent, Isaac notices the curve of my lips. His captivating eyes don't falter from mine as he releases my bottom lip from my menacing teeth.

Tilting his head, he leans in intimately close to my neck. "Everything you just imagined, I'm going to do to your body tonight."

My core tightens when he licks my earlobe.

*Holy crap!*

I need to reel back in my shrewdness. I can't sleep with Isaac Holt. It's not just my reputation I'm putting on the line by conversing with him, it's also the impeccable reputation of my uncle, an impressive reputation that took him years to earn. My name is associated with his, and I can't shroud it in controversy.

"I have a boyfriend," I lie.

Isaac's eyes missile to mine. His lips are thin, his gaze furious and unyielding. He scrapes his hand across his unshaven jaw as his eyes scan my face, studying me in silence.



“I can tell by your eyes you’re hiding something, Isabelle,” he snaps, his tone stern and clipped. “But it isn’t a boyfriend.”

I should have known he’d see through my deceit. Isaac has eyes that can see straight through to my soul.

That, in itself, is a terrifying notion.

## CHAPTER 18



Lurching, I sit up, causing a rush of giddiness to cluster in my stomach. My disoriented eyes dart around the lavishly decorated room I've awoken in. *I really need to stop waking up in strange bedrooms.*

When my eyes shoot down, I sigh when I discover I'm wearing not only a short-sleeve shirt but also my bra and panties. My panicked gaze rockets to the side of the room when I hear a toilet flushing.

My heart stops beating as I freeze in fear. The hinges on the white panel door creak while opening. Groaning, I slump back onto the soft down pillow when Harlow prances into the room.

“Sleeping beauty finally wakes.”

I grunt and throw my arm over my eyes to shelter them from the bright sunlight streaming through the thick, pleated curtains.

The king-size bed dips when Harlow sits on the edge. “Here, take these. They will help with your head,” she suggests.

Her voice makes me wince when it screeches through my eardrums before clustering in my thumping head. Peering out

of my left eye only, I spot her holding a full bottle of pain medication in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. She has a broad grin stretched across her adorable face.

I scoot up the bed until I'm leaning on the plush black leather button-pressed headboard. Unscrewing the cap of the water, I swig down half the bottle with three headache tablets.

"Are you sure it was champagne in that bottle? My head is telling me a different story."

I feel more hungover now than I did when I downed cocktails like soda water three months ago.

"Yes, it was only champagne." She giggles. "But if you had mentioned you took Xanax, I'd have limited the number of glasses I allowed you to consume."

"Oh." *Now my pounding headache makes sense.*

"Yeah, oh. That's the best blackout concoction I know of." She grins and shakes her head.

"But oh... my... God, girl, you should've seen Isaac. He was all frantic and possessive when you wouldn't wake up. He wouldn't let anyone go near you, let alone touch you. It was h-o-t HOT. He only settled down when Cormack discovered the bottle of Xanax in your purse, and I explained we were drinking champagne before we left."

"Cormack went through my purse?" My mind frantically strives to remember if I placed my FBI identification in there.

"Yeah." Her mischievous eyes stare into mine.

"Harlow?" My tone is low, demanding further explanation.

"They also found your strip of condoms."

"I don't have condoms in my..."

*Oh shit. Yes, I do.*

“They’re an old stash. I haven’t used them in months. I packed them when I went on vacation. They were an emergency stash. Everyone has an emergency stash. Just in case... in case—”

“You need to have sex in a bathroom thirty thousand feet in the air?” Harlow waggles her brows.

I slap her arm. Her giggles erupt into a fit of boisterous muscle-clenching, cheek-tightening laughter. Her legs and arms fling out as she flops onto the bed dramatically.

Once her infectious laughter calms down, her eyes, glistening with tears, lift to mine.

“What was Isaac’s reaction to the condoms?” Curiosity echoes in my tone.

Harlow leans over and clenches my hand in hers. Her eyes bore into mine. It’s the most serious I’ve ever seen her.

“He growled. Not a dainty pussycat roar. He full-on growled a sexy-as-sin growl. Then he scooped you into his arms, and that’s where you stayed until he laid you on this bed.” Her eyes gloss over with excitement.

Upset I missed hearing Isaac’s sexy-as-sin growl, a ping of disappointment twists in my chest.

“He only left thirty minutes ago because he had some business calls to attend to. He made me promise I wouldn’t leave your side until he returned.”

“What time is it?”

Harlow rises from the bed and paces toward the floor-to-ceiling windows on each side of the headboard. Grasping the burgundy and gold pleated curtains, she dramatically opens

them to reveal a blinding stream of sunlight that makes my eyes wince in pain from the brightness.

“I slept all afternoon and night?” I ask, my mind a jumbled mess of confusion.

The plane was scheduled to land at three o’clock in the afternoon, but there’s no doubt it’s morning sunlight streaming through the window.

“Yep.” The ‘p’ pops from her mouth.

She moves back to the bed, her face morphing from playful to taut with concern.

“Please don’t leave me alone with them for that long again.”

I initially giggle at her comment until I realize she’s serious. Tilting my head, I arch my brow, requesting further information.

“Cormack and I have been on a couple of dates.”

“I figured that part out when you rammed your tongue down his throat yesterday,” I interrupt, my tone cheeky.

Harlow grins before continuing. “He’s great, I like him, but I didn’t realize he was... *this*.”

Her hand gestures around our elegant surroundings. The room I’ve awoken in is massive, easily the size of a studio apartment. It’s elegantly decorated with antique furniture and abstract paintings, giving it the distinct aura of wealth and superiority.

“First a stretch limousine, then a private jet, and now...” She stops midsentence, her brows scrunching. “I don’t think calling this residence a mansion would be a justified response. I’ve already gotten lost three times this morning.”

This time when I chuckle, she joins me.

“You won’t be laughing when you get lost, and no one finds you for days.”

“I don’t understand the problem, Harlow. If you like him, and he likes you, why does it matter if he’s rich?”

“He isn’t just rich, Izzy. He’s filthy rich, never-needs-to-work-a-day-in-his-life rich, and I own a bakery with books that spend more in the red than in the black,” she responds forlornly. “I don’t belong here.”

“Harlow.” I seek her gaze. “I saw you with Cormack yesterday before the limo and the private jet. You like him, so don’t judge him on his wealth. Judge him on the man he is, the same man you greeted with jubilation yesterday.”

“I do like him.”

“Then that’s all that matters. Ignore everything else because it doesn’t matter. It’s just static noise in the background,” I encourage her. “If you like someone, throw everything else aside and worry about it later.”

She nods as her lips tug high. I return her smile, happy I eased her uncertainty. She thrusts her hand in front of my body, startling me. I eye her curiously before accepting her offer of a handshake.

“Hi, Pot, I’m Kettle. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she introduces herself, her tone cheeky.

Her loud, boisterous laugh booms around the room when I dive at her and knock her onto the bed to relentlessly tickle her ribs until she begs for me to stop. Our immature banter halts when the main entrance door opens with a creak. The pulse in my neck thrums when Isaac strolls into the room looking ravishing in two parts of a three-piece suit.

His eyes rigorously study my face before wandering over my exposed body since my shirt has risen while I was tackling Harlow. Pulling my shirt down to a more respectable level, I scoot up the bed to lean against the headboard. I'm so entranced by Isaac, I don't notice Harlow sneaking out of the room until Isaac takes her place on the bed.

"How are you feeling?"

I smile. "I'm good."

"Did you take the tablets I left on the bedside table?"

He smirks when I nod. We sit across from each other in silence for several minutes. It's not awkward, it just feels right. He runs his hand over his head before his concerned eyes lock with mine.

"Do I need to be concerned that you have a problem with drinking?"

I smile, pleased he cares enough about me to be worried about my well-being.

"No, I don't have a problem with drinking. That champagne was the first drink I've had since the last time you took me home," I reply. "I knew we were flying, and I accidentally mixed medication with alcohol. My thumping head alone will ensure it will never happen again."

Trying to lessen the concerned scowl marring his handsome face, I ask, "Do I need to be concerned that you have a problem with taking inebriated women into your room and undressing them?"

He chuckles a scrumptious laugh that rumbles through to my core. I smile, loving that I can witness a side of him his FBI file fails to show.

“At least this time you let me keep my panties,” I quip.

His chuckles stop as his eyes lift to mine. My pulse races when his tongue darts out to moisten his lips. Our kiss was weeks ago, but I can still recall how delectably sinful he tasted.

“I didn’t take your panties last time, Isabelle,” he corrects me.

Just my name rolling off his tongue has me chasing climax.

“You gave them to me.”

That secures my fall into orgasmic bliss and places it safely back onto the ledge.

My confused eyes dart between his. “No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did,” he interrupts. “When you found my... *trophies* other women had left behind, you removed your panties before shoving them into the drawer with the explicit remark it would be the only way I’d add your panties to my collection.”

“Oh.”

That does sound like something I’d do in a moment of drunken anger. *So, my panties were in that drawer all along? Yuck!*

“No, Isabelle, your panties aren’t in that drawer.”

*I really need to stop mumbling out loud.*

Brazenly, I question, “Where are they then?”

Mortified by my bold question, my eyes seek anything that isn’t Isaac’s amused face. Sheets ruffling fills the awkward



silence when he adjusts his position. The fine hairs on my body prickle when his warm breath flutters against my neck.

“They’re in my *very exclusive* private collection.”

A grin tugs my lips higher, pleased my panties are valuable enough to be added to Isaac’s private collection.

“And unless you want to add another set of your panties to my collection, I suggest you have a shower, get dressed, then join the rest of us for breakfast.”

Harshly gulping, my eyes flick to his. I stare at him in silence, contemplating his request. My eyes absorb every attractive feature of his striking face before I climb out of bed and walk toward the bathroom Harlow exited earlier. Isaac groans in frustration. That groan alone will warrant an icy cold shower.

## CHAPTER 19



*I* just broke the world record for the quickest shower. Not just because I failed to put any heat into the water to lessen the excitement coursing through my body, but because I'm interested in finding out what had Harlow so rattled earlier. Once I throw on a pair of denim shorts and a short-sleeve shirt, I exit the elegant guest bedroom.

*Holy crap!*

If the hallway is this elegant, what's the rest of the house like? Leisurely strolling down the hall, I stop to appraise a range of beautiful oil paintings adorning the corridor. One painting captures my attention for a little longer than the rest. It's a beautiful self-portrait of Frida Kahlo. If it's an original—and I have no doubt it is—its estimated worth would be in the millions.

“She isn't my type,” says a raspy voice in the distance. “The whole one eyebrow thing just doesn't cut it.”

Turning my gaze to the voice, I'm met with a pair of light blue eyes brimming with mischief. His eyes offset a very handsome, preppy face. His blond hair is long enough the tips curl upward. He's wearing long, black board-shorts and a light blue tee that matches his eyes perfectly. A smile stretches across my face when I notice he's also barefoot.

Once his eyes finish studying me as eagerly as I pursued him, he winks.

“You, on the other hand, are very much my type.” He struts toward me. “Colby McGregor.” He offers me his hand to shake. “If I’d known you were out in the hall waiting for me, I would’ve awakened earlier.”

A broad grin creeps onto my face from his playful banter. “Isabelle Brahn.” I accept his handshake. “Is it an original?” I nudge my head to the painting.

“Uh-huh,” he answers, not the slightest bit impressed he has a painting worth millions of dollars hanging on the wall in his corridor. “When my mom found out Madonna brought some of Frida’s self-portraits, she had to get one, too.” He shrugs. “If you think this one is impressive, wait until you see my favorite painting.”

Placing his arm around my shoulders, he directs me down the impressively long hallway. When we reach the very end, he swivels me to face an oil painting displayed in an ebony frame.

A giggle erupts from my mouth when my eyes roam over the hideous painting in front of me. Seeing an unimpressed frown forming on Colby’s face, I quiet my laughter and appraise the picture with more diligence. When I squint my eyes and tilt my head to the left, I can see the outline of a face.

“Is that you?” I try my hardest not to laugh.

“Yep. I figured if Freda could make millions selling self-portraits, I may as well give it a go.”

“I hope you didn’t quit your day job.” I bite hard on my bottom lip to stop inappropriate chuckles escaping my lips.

The portrait is beyond revolting. It looks like someone painted a picture then threw a glass of water over it, but it's endearing his family framed his painting and displayed it just as proudly as the masterpieces worth millions of dollars.

"Maybe self-portraits aren't my thing. Maybe I need something more inspirational to paint," he remarks. His gaze turns from the painting to me, so he can run his glistening eyes over my body. "Maybe nudes are more my thing?" He gives me a cheeky wink.

"Jeez, Colby, could you lay it on any thicker?" interrupts a perky female voice. "Did you check if she was here with someone, or are you going to whip it out and pee on her leg before any other guy sniffs her?"

"I'm going to whip it—"

Before Colby can get his entire sentence out, his chest is slapped so hard it winds him, which stops his playful taunt midsentence.

"Hello, I'm Cate McGregor. Cate with a C. This douchebag's little sister," introduces a cute, petite blonde.

Cate is so short she'd be lucky to be five-feet tall. She appears several years younger than me. If I had to guess her age, I'd say late teens. She has platinum blonde hair cut in a daringly bold pixie design. Her small-framed body is dressed in a pair of tiny, fringed denim shorts and a pink bikini top. Cate has the aura that makes me want to befriend her.

"Hi, I'm Isabelle," I give her a friendly reply.

"Oh shit." Cate's inquisitive eyes dart between Colby and me. "Don't go there, Colby," she warns, staring into Colby's mischief-filled eyes.

Colby doesn't grace Cate with a reply, he merely chuckles a boisterous laugh that bellows down the hall. Hearing his laughter, Cate narrows her eyes before securing my hand in hers. She guides me through various hallways, doors, and impressively large rooms. Harlow wasn't joking. This place is massive. I'm pretty sure I'll get lost trying to find my way back to my room.

The smell of freshly-baked bread and bacon becomes more prominent the farther we walk. When we enter a massive kitchen that looks like it belongs in a fancy restaurant, Cate relinquishes my hand and approaches an elderly Spanish-looking lady placing muffins into a woven basket sitting on the island bench.

The muffins aren't the only scrumptious-looking treats on display. Croissants, Danish pastries, donuts, bacon, eggs, fresh-cut fruit, and every possible thing you could think of is laid out. My stomach is rumbling, my hunger more rampant since I failed to eat dinner last night.

"Help yourself to anything you want," offers Cate, handing me a porcelain plate. "Once you're done, come join us outside."

She gives me a nudge with her hip before sauntering her way out a set of French doors at the side of the kitchen. I cram my plate with a range of scrumptious goodies before walking out to the patio.

I feel Isaac's smoldering gaze before I see him. He's seated at a table alongside an impressive grotto pool. He glances my way, and our eyes lock before his wander over my body. Once he has finished his robust inspection, he gestures for me to join him.

Smiling, I walk toward him, my body trembling with every step I take. My pulse strums faster when my eyes connect with his. His gaze is powerful and solely focused on me. My smile enlarges to a full grin when he pulls a chair out for me to sit.

“Thank you,” I whisper graciously.

He eyes my plate with a roguish sparkle in his eyes. “Hungry?”

“Starving.” My cheeks heat with embarrassment at my lack of dignity.

When he raises his coffee mug to his mouth, his Adam’s apple bobs up and down in a sensual way. My hunger is no longer associated with food. I can’t stop staring at the handsome features of his face.

When my stomach grumbles, Isaac commands, “Eat, Isabelle.”

Turning my gaze away from him, so I can focus on something other than his captivating eyes, I’m surprised to notice Clara sauntering toward us. *What’s she doing here? Is she here with Isaac?* She’s wearing a black pleated pencil skirt and a ruffled, red silk sleeveless blouse. She looks extremely elegant compared to the way I’ve seen everyone else casually dressed this morning, everyone but Isaac.

“Isabelle, what a pleasure to see you again,” Clara greets me in a friendly manner before leaning down to press a kiss to Isaac’s cheek.

“Hi, Clara.” I pull off a chunk of the chocolate croissant and pop it into my mouth.

Even though the croissant is delicious and my mouth salivated when graced with its presence, trying to swallow it is like eating cardboard. Clara has all but crawled onto Isaac’s

lap. She has her arm draped around his shoulders and has perched herself on his suit-covered thigh.

Clara sneers as she lifts Isaac's coffee mug to her mouth. Her red-painted lips press against the rim where Isaac's lips were mere moments ago. It's the smallest gesture, but it has the most significant impact on my already faltering ego. *If they're this intimate in public, what are they like behind closed doors?*

Clara is beautiful, and with her aura of grace, she'd be an ideal partner for Isaac. I can't stop the wave of jealousy crashing through me, even though I have no right to be jealous. I have no reason to be jealous over a man I have no claim to, but I can't help the uncontrollable connection I feel when he's near.

No longer hungry, I leap from my chair. "Excuse me."

Isaac's hand shoots out to seize my wrist, then forcefully pulls me back into the wrought iron chair with a thud.

His darkened eyes lift to mine. "Eat."

His narrowed eyes don't leave mine until I take a large bite out of a bagel slathered with cream cheese. Clara tumbles to the ground when Isaac stands from his seat. She graciously regains her footing and runs her hand down her black skirt to smooth it back into place before moving in close to Isaac's side. Her glare is furious and solely focused on me.

"I'll be back in a minute."

When I nod, Isaac grasps Clara's hand and strolls to the French doors. I try to keep my focus on anything but Isaac and Clara, but like you can't tear your eyes away from a train wreck, my eyes continue to shift to them.

Isaac's arms cross in front of his well-defined chest, but his composure remains calm. Clara waves her arms frantically in front of her body, and she motions to me several times. Her face constricts with tautness, and her eyes well with tears.

I don't know how I missed it before, but now it's as evident as the sun shining in the sky. Clara has the same blonde hair, light blue eyes, and flawless beige skin, just like the rest of the McGregors I've met so far this weekend. Mr. and Mrs. McGregor must have a fascination with the letter 'C,' considering all their children were given names beginning with 'C.'

Clara's loud, exasperated huff echoes in the silence of the morning before she disappears through the French doors. I turn my attention back to my overflowing plate, pretending I wasn't spying on their private discussion.

When Isaac returns to our table, his sultry gaze locks with me, but he remains quiet. I try to ignore the massive elephant sitting in the room, but my quintessential need to know everything gnaws at my insides until I blurt out, "Have you slept with Clara?"

Isaac freezes with his coffee mug halfway between the table and his lips, his eyes drifting to me. His gaze is unyielding, and it would make most people quake in fear, but my thighs tremor in excitement.

His lips curve into a sly smirk. "Are you jealous, Isabelle?"

"No," I reply in exasperation.

His smirk turns into a genuine smile as his eyes study my face. "You have absolutely nothing to be jealous about."



“Stop skirting and answer the question,” I retort, ignoring my inward scream that’s delighted by his compliment.

He shakes his head. “No, Isabelle, I have not slept with Clara.”

I try to hide my smile, but my inner vixen is hollering too loud to conceal it.

“So, what was that about then?” I pop a piece of bagel into my mouth since my hunger has returned full force. “Because she was acting very much like she was your girlfriend.”

“Do I need to call a lawyer?” Isaac’s brow arches high. “Because this sounds a bit like an interrogation.”

“Only people who have something to hide need to call a lawyer.”

“I have nothing to hide.” He cockily shrugs. “Because I always ensure my hands are thoroughly clean.”

“Just because your hands are clean now doesn’t mean they weren’t stained previously.”

“Just because your hands are clean now doesn’t mean they won’t become stained,” he interrupts. “You don’t know what the future holds, Isabelle. Nobody does. So, until the day your body is laid into its final resting place, you can’t guarantee your hands will remain clean.”

“Yes, I can. Morally and ethically—”

“What about for someone you love? You wouldn’t get your hands a little bit dirty for someone you love?” he interrupts, his tone clipped and stern.

My brows scrunch as my eyes dart between his. Just being here this weekend abundantly proves what he’s saying is true. I’ve only associated with Isaac a handful of times, and I’m

already willing to risk my career just to be near him. So, imagine what I'd be prepared to do for someone I love.

“Not everything is black and white. There's a whole heap of gray no one pays any attention to,” he utters before standing from his chair and striding back into the house, not once glancing back at me.

## CHAPTER 20



I sense Isaac's presence before I see him. An aura like his permeates the air, and you can't help but be drawn to him. My eyes lift to his when he sits on the smidgen of the daybed that doesn't have my body sprawled on it. I've been lazing in the mid-morning sun reading.

After dropping my Kindle on my face numerous times, I flipped onto my stomach and have been kicking my legs wildly into the air. I've been reading nonstop for the past two hours. Harlow and Cormack did invite me to go out to lunch with them, but I've never enjoyed being the third wheel on dates.

Isaac places his hand on my lower back and leans over my shoulder to peruse the book I'm reading. His touch could be classified as friendly, but my body reacts as if it's a sexual one. I haven't seen him since breakfast. I assumed he must have been agitated from our conversation this morning and was avoiding me, but the fact he's sitting so close to me, I'd say my assumption was wrong.

"Phew, I was getting worried it was another Mills and Boons book."

Smiling at his huff, I roll over to face him. Because he doesn't move his hand splayed on my lower back, it brushes

past my hip bone and lands on the bottom half of my stomach when I roll.

The veins in my neck thrum as my pulse surges just from the sheer closeness of his god-gifted body. He's more casually dressed than he was previously, his muscular physique well-displayed in a tight-fitting white shirt and a pair of black running shorts.

When I spot a trail of sweat running down his cheek and detect the slight aroma of his delicious manly scent, I assume he must have just returned from a run.

"What are you reading?" His tempting purr makes my insides warm.

"*Thoughtless* by S. C. Stephens." I'm breathless from his close proximity. "It's about two people who shouldn't be together but are destined to be together. I've read the entire series three times already."

His brow arches high as his mouth etches into a firm line.

"You just don't understand the wondrous entrapment you feel when you read about a character like Kellan Kyle," I reply cheekily. "He's my number one book boyfriend."

His lips twist. "It's guys like him who make it hopeless for a man to date these days. All girls are expecting a guy like Kell—"

"Kellan Kyle."

"Yeah, and instead, they get a guy who comes home stinking of B.O. after working ten-hour-plus days. He drinks beer that smells like it was fermented in old college socks, and snores louder than the freight trains running through Philly."

My cheekbones lift as the grin spreads across my face. Even a rowdy giggle manages to escape my lips. I can't help but laugh. A man like Isaac Holt would never have to worry about being compared to a book boyfriend. A real-life man would have a hard enough time competing against him, let alone a fictional character.

Air snares in my throat from the intense look radiating from his exquisite eyes. My giggles halt as my body stiffens. When he remains quiet, I tilt my head and cock my brow in silent questioning.

His eyes appraise my face before he says, "That's the first time I've heard you laugh."

My cheeks inflame, and another grin furls my lips high. Our intimate gathering plummets into silence, but it isn't uncomfortable or awkward. It's electrifying. The intimacy bouncing between us is so sharp it feels as if we're being invisibly bound.

I sigh when he stands from the chair. I'm disappointed by his hasty retreat. My disappointment doesn't linger for long when Isaac thrusts his hand out in offering.

He pulls me up from the daybed. We stand across from each other with only the merest portion of air between us.

His enthralling eyes study my face before skimming my body. Once they return to my face, he smirks. "Did you pack a swimsuit?"

Unable to form a reply through my dry, gaped mouth, I nod.

"Go and get changed."

"Okay."

I reluctantly walk away from him.

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I clench my fists at my side before begrudgingly turning around to face the full-length mirror in my room. I've spent the last ten minutes debating on whether I should wear the semi-indecent string bikini or the full one-piece suit I packed. Stupidly, I listened to my lust-fueled heart and put on the tiny bikini.

“Okay, it's not too bad.”

No nipples are showing, and most of my breasts are covered. Turning around, I frown. There's more of my backside exposed than I'd have liked. My apprehensive eyes dart over to my hideous Hawaiian print cover-up and my more conservative suit.

Before my rational thinking head overrules my naughty inner vixen, a knock sounds at my door. Panicked, I yank my denim shorts up my legs before advising my caller they can enter. Time slows to a snail pace when Isaac walks into the room wearing nothing but a pair of swim trunks.

*Holy shit!*

His body is just as good, if not better than I'd remembered. I gulp harshly, aiming to soothe my dry, scorched throat as my eyes absorb every spectacular muscle, dip, and plane of his perfect body. His eyes assess my body just as thoroughly, and my insides cheer when a broad smile etches on his face.

No words escape either of our lips as he encases my hand within his and walks us toward the expansive beach that

stretches each way for miles. Although it's Fall, the weather is beautiful, and my shoulders happily absorb the warm sun.

Once we reach a wooden shed attached to a jetty, Isaac releases my hand to gather a short-sleeved wetsuit and a life jacket from inside.

When he returns, he clutches my hand in his and guides us down to the end of the wooden jetty. Excitement rushes through my body when I notice two Wave Runners tied to the end of the pier. I've always wanted to ride a jet ski.

He dumps the life jacket on a wooden bench before demanding, "Strip."

I eye him curiously, unsure of what he means. I'm barely clothed as it is. His brazen gaze darts down to my denim shorts. Cringing, I slide my shorts down my quivering thighs, which are shuddering from Isaac's intense gaze as he watches me. Once my shorts are removed, he crouches down in front of me to assist me into the wetsuit. Images of me kneeling in front of him yesterday morning come flashing back into my mind. Even though it was less than twenty-four hours, it seems like it was a lifetime ago. I shake my head to clear my thoughts before placing my feet into the tight openings of the wetsuit.

It takes several pulls and yanks to get the rigid material of the wetsuit up my thighs and over my stomach. During the process, his hands brush across my inner thighs and stomach. Every fine hair on my body bristles as my sex pulsates with desire. Isaac inhales loudly before his eyes lift to mine. My breathing shallows from his commanding gaze. He winks before continuing to pull the wetsuit up and over my shoulders. By the time he has the wetsuit zipped, my rampant

horniness is teetering on the edge, threatening to fall at any moment.

“Do you want to wear a lifejacket?”

Unable to form words, I shake my head.

When Isaac straddles the Wave Runner, the muscles in his arms flex, and an unexpected, bold moan spills from my lips. Hearing my shameless response, his lips tug high before he offers me his hand. The muscles in his stomach clench when I band my arms around his waist. I let out an excited squeal when our Wave Runner darts away from the jetty.

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The past forty-five minutes have been pure torture. Every jolt the Wave Runner does makes my sex convulse. My barely-covered chest is squashed against Isaac's naked back, and my erect nipples scrape his smooth skin as they bounce along with the movements of the Wave Runner. My bikini is so thin it feels like I'm naked under my wetsuit, so my vivid imagination is getting carried away.

A sense of reprieve washes over me when the visual of the jetty comes over the foreshore. Having Isaac so close and fighting not to touch him is the worse form of cruelty. I adjust my position to lessen the immense tingling sensation running rampant through my body. My thighs tighten around his hips when he yanks me back in close to him until my chest is once again plastered to his back, and my pussy is rubbing his backside. We're so close, not an ounce of space remains between our bodies. Not even air exists between us.

Excitement sparks through my body when every feeble movement I make causes his muscles to contract. Something



in the air shifts when I stop fighting the Wave Runner's actions to allow my hands to slither the ripples of his stomach. My pulse thrums in my fingertips when I run them along his six-pack. My lengthened breaths indicate I'm treading into dangerous territory, but I can't stop myself. My body's needs, desires, and cravings are outweighing my shrewdness.

A raspy groan escapes Isaac's lips when my index finger glides over the fine hairs on his perfect V muscle. His gruff moan spurs on my pursuit as my impending climax overrules rational thinking. My breaths rebound off his shoulder before the lash of my tongue cools his salty, sun-scorched skin.

His grip on the handlebars tightens when my hand glides into the rim of his shorts. My thighs quake when my fingertips graze his swollen cock that's struggling to be contained in his black shorts.

The Wave Runner stops surging forward when I curl my hand around his shaft. Although I'm being spurred on by a massive surge of brazenness, I freeze, hesitant from my boldness. I want to touch him more than my lungs crave air, but should I be doing this?

Sensing my hesitation, Isaac curls his hand over mine to guide it up and down his impressively large shaft. His rhythm is fast enough to be pleasurable but slow enough, he won't come anytime soon.

"Just like that, baby," he breathes out, his words thick and raspy.

When he releases my hand from his grasp, I slide it up and down his veined cock in the rhythm he demonstrated. He groans when my thumb runs over his knob to gather a bead of pre-cum formed there. I use it as lubrication to quicken my

strokes. My seamless pumps have his body coiling tight, racing toward release at a record-setting pace.

Slithering my spare hand into his shorts, I cup his balls, squeezing and kneading them. When his breath catches in his throat a short time later, I know he's close to climax.

“Fuck, Isabelle.”

The sexy roughness of his voice has my climax hovering toward the edge. It usually takes a lot more stimulation to make me come, but hearing his gruff moans have my orgasm teetering on the brink. Once he topples into ecstasy, I'll be right alongside him.

My eyes pop open when Isaac's hand suddenly stills mine. I groan as my insides scream, demanding their release.

Lifting my gaze, I discover what caused his swift reaction. Colby is on a Wave Runner heading toward us, his speed unchecked. When I attempt to pull my hands out of Isaac's shorts, he seizes my wrist and holds it in place. I squeeze his cock hard, trying to force him to relinquish my hand. My sex gets wetter when his cock twitches in response to my painful squeeze.

Colby pulls his Wave Runner close to ours. “Are you guys okay? Are you out of fuel?”

“We're a little busy.” Isaac's tone is arrogant.

Cocking a brow, Colby assesses my face. I'm sure my flushed expression and wide eyes will clue him in on why we're busy, but instead of being angry at what he's just stumbled upon, he grins and winks.

My brows scrunch as a mask of confusion slips over my face. *How is he not as embarrassed as me?*

Colby throws a rope to Isaac. “Here, let me tow you back.”

“We don’t need a fucking tow.” Isaac clutches the rope and throws it back to Colby.

Since Isaac has relinquished my wrist from his hold, I remove my hand from his shorts.

“Come on, Isaac, everyone needs a hand every now and again,” Colby remarks with sarcasm.

Overcome with embarrassment, my gaze drifts to anything but Colby’s cheeky face. He chuckles at my response, his laughter echoing in the uncomfortable silence now plaguing our group.

“I’m just joshing with you, Isaac. Don’t be so riled up all the time,” Colby quips.

Instead of replying, Isaac tightens his jaw.

“I just came out to tell you Henry Gottle is here to see you,” Colby informs him.

Isaac curses under his breath. “I forgot about an important meeting with him.”

Assuming he’s talking to himself, I don’t bother replying.

“Thanks, Colby, tell him I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

With a final flirty wink, Colby’s Wave Runner whizzes back to the jetty. Once he’s out of eyesight, Isaac pivots around to face me. My cheeks flush with heat when he places a kiss on my palm.

“We’ll finish this later.”

Since it’s more a statement than a question, I don’t grace him with a reply.

The ride back to the jetty is made in complete silence. My orgasm that was racing toward the brink has been secured and locked away. My excitement vanished the instant Colby mentioned Henry Gottle was here to see Isaac. I was tempted to ask Colby if he meant Henry Gottle, III, or his father, the suspected mob boss of New York City. Luckily, my levelheadedness resurfaced before that question seeped from my lips.

Even knowing he has a guest waiting for his arrival, Isaac assists me out of my wetsuit. Once it's dumped on the wooden jetty, he clasps my hand in his before striding toward the main house. When we round the corner of the vast verandah, we're greeted by a gentleman in his early thirties with inky black hair. I'm somewhat surprised at how attractive he is. Anytime I think of the mob, my thoughts stray to wrinkled, overweight men with moles on their faces.

"Henry, sorry I forgot about our meeting." Isaac's tone exudes authority and reveals he's the alpha male in the room.

"That's fine, Isaac." Henry's eyes turn to face me. "I can understand your forgetfulness."

Isaac's gaze narrows when he notices Henry's eager judgment of my body. When Henry spots Isaac's stern glare, he diverts his amused gaze back to Isaac.

"Isabelle, this is Henry Gottle, a business associate of mine," Isaac introduces.

"I would have said long-time friend, but I guess business associate will have to do," Henry replies coolly.

Accepting the handshake Henry offers, my eyes bounce between Isaac and Henry. It's hard to tell if they're friends or business associates. Isaac is more reserved around Henry than

he is with Cormack, but he seems more laid back than he appeared in surveillance photos with his real business associates.

“I may have said friend if I weren’t left handling the repercussions of your wretched wife,” Isaac interjects. Although his tone is serious, it still has an edge of wittiness to it.

“Try living with her,” Henry grumbles. “Three years I had to put up with that.”

Isaac and Henry shudder at the same time before they chuckle full-heartedly.

I take it neither of them are fans of Henry’s ex-wife, Delilah Winterbottom?

“Well, I got her out of your hair, and now I’m calling in those chips,” Isaac advises.

Henry’s eyes shoot to mine. His uneasy gaze reveals his concern about me being present during their private conversation.

“I’ll go and grab some lunch.”

I smile when Isaac says, “If you want to stay, Isabelle, you can stay.”

“It’s fine, I’m famished anyway.”

I also don’t want to run the risk of unearthing anything I may be forced to disclose to the FBI. I’d never intentionally spy on Isaac in private, but I did swear an oath to uphold the law, and if I stumbled upon something significantly illegal, it would be my moral obligation to inform the authorities. *Wouldn’t it?*

My worry settles when I overhear a portion of Isaac's statement as I'm exiting the room.

"I need you to find a loophole in the UFC, so my fighter, Jacob, can fight a current UFC contender."

## CHAPTER 21



For the past half an hour, Cormack, Harlow, and I have been seated at an elegant Italian steak restaurant. The restaurant is a hive of bustling activity, but with the hum of conversations, laughing, and cutlery scraping against plates, it's difficult for me to participate in any discussions being held across the table. The conversation between Harlow and Cormack is engaging, but it doesn't seem appropriate for three unless you're into that type of thing.

"Thank you," I say in appreciation when the waiter hands me a black and gold embossed menu, grateful for the distraction. *I should have listened to my intuition. I've always known being the third wheel on dates isn't fun.*

When I scan the prices on the elegant menu, I nearly fall off my chair. Every entrée listed costs more than I make in an entire day. Gnawing on my bottom lip, I ignore the pang of hunger rumbling in my stomach and order the most inexpensive item I can find on the menu—a side serving of salad.

"*E per il vostro corso principale?*" the waitress questions.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Italian," I reply, praying she can understand English.

“She’s asking what you would like to order for your main course,” advises a ruggedly sexy voice.

Isaac’s scrumptious aroma engulfs my senses the instant he slides into the seat next to me. My breath hitches when he leans over and places a brief peck on my cheek.

“Sorry I’m late,” he whispers into my ear. “I had some business I had to take care of.”

This is the first time I’ve seen Isaac since our ride on the Wave Runner earlier today. I’m not sure if his meeting with Henry was for the entire afternoon or if he had other business matters to attend to. I tried to keep myself immersed in the world of Kellan Kyle, but my mind kept drifting to Isaac. My views on him have significantly swayed the past twenty-four hours. More so since I’ve yet to stumble on a shred of evidence that matches Isaac to the person his FBI file shows him to be.

“Do you know what you want?” he queries, interrupting me from my thoughts.

My hairs bristle when he runs his index finger down my arm.

“Umm... a side salad is fine.” My voice trembles from his close proximity.

“She will have the 16-ounce steak with a baked potato and a side salad.” Isaac hands her back my menu. “I’ll have the same.”

“I’m still full from lunch. That’s why I ordered a salad.”

He arches his perfect brow. “The half a club sandwich and few slices of pear you ate at lunch weren’t adequate enough to skip dinner.”



My heart rate doubles. *I may not have seen him all day, but he's clearly been watching me.*

“I can't afford two hundred dollars for a piece of steak.” My cheeks heat in embarrassment.

His lips form into his panty-clenching smirk before he leans in intimately close to my neck. My thighs shake when his breath flutters along my neckline.

“How fast can you run in those heels?”

When my confused eyes dart to his, he winks before continuing, “We either run before the bill arrives or wash dishes with Roberto for the next week.”

He gestures his head to a gentleman sauntering his way back into the restaurant from a side alley. Roberto's white waiter's apron barely covers his vast waistline and is covered with food and red wine stains.

“I'll be sure to kick off these bad boys before our dessert arrives.” I click my black pump heels together. “Hold on, how do you know his name is Roberto?”

He drapes his arm behind the back of my chair. “This is pretty. Did you do something different?” He tugs on the strands of hair cascading down my back, completely ignoring my question.

I smile while nodding. “Harlow curled the ends.”

My grin enlarges over the fact he noticed the humblest change in my hairstyle. Isaac's eyes rake over my fitted, white wrap dress before lifting to my face. His gaze is hungry. It isn't a hunger for food.

“You look beautiful.”

His voice causes a shiver to run through my body.

“Thank you,” I reply breathlessly.

For the next two hours, I enjoy splendid food, wine, and even better company. Isaac has been the frankest I’ve ever seen him. From the stories he shared, I can easily perceive his fondness for his younger brother, Nick, and his excitement about becoming an uncle for the first time is also paramount. I feel privileged I’ve experienced a side of him not many people witness, and I’ve quickly become trapped in his incredible allure.

Isaac chuckles when I lean down and unbuckle the latch on my shoes when the waiter hands us the dessert menu. My heart leaps when he orders both of our dessert selections in fluent Italian. I’m impressed with his impeccable pronunciation and how effortlessly the words roll off his tongue.

“My nonna was Italian. She taught me to speak Italian fluently by the time I was eight,” he responds to my curious glance.

“Are you close to your nonna?” I reach for my freshly filled wine glass.

“No, she passed away five years ago.” He removes the wine glass from my hand and places it back on the table.

“I’m sorry,” I sympathize as my gaze darts back to my full glass of red wine.

“You’ve already had three glasses.”

“Yes, and I told you I don’t have a problem with my drinking.”

“You don’t have a problem, but I do.”

I cock my brow, requesting further information.

“I don’t converse with drunk women.”

He swivels his body, leaning in more intimately. I remain quiet, baffled by his statement.

“I don’t converse *sexually* with drunk women,” he clarifies, his unyielding eyes relaying his intentions.

*Oh. My. God.*

My pupils widen as a strong urge of desire runs through my body. The sexual charge between us is so strong, it crackles in the air.

My hand trembles when I accept the plate of tiramisu from the waitress, shamelessly exposing my arousal to Isaac’s statement. Sensing my excitement, Isaac places his open palm on my bare thigh. His touch sends a jolt of pleasure to my throbbing sex. Now tiramisu is the last thing on my mind.

“Are you not hungry?” Isaac questions a short time later, eyeing my untouched dessert.

Brazenly, I reply, “I’m hungry, just not for food.”

In a two-minute lusty haze, I’ve gone from being seated in the restaurant to sitting in the passenger seat of Isaac’s car. I think I murmured a goodbye to Cormack and Harlow, but my body is coiled so tight, I’ve lost the ability to focus on anything but the incredibly alluring man seated next to me.

It has been over a year since I’ve had sexual contact with a man. It’s been so long because my last bed partner squelched most of my desire. His ruggedly handsome face didn’t quite match the rest of his body—his body hair was vast, thick, and stunk like a wet dog. Our two-minute tumble in his bed didn’t create half of the spark I get from one glance of Isaac’s entrancing eyes.

I’d only just finished unlatching my bra when the whole event was over. He murmured it was the greatest sex he’d ever

had, rolled onto his side, then spent the five minutes it took for me to gather my clothing off the floor and dart out of his house snoring. From that day, I've been apprehensive about dating until I met Isaac.

Isaac curses under his breath when a cell phone shrills through the silence of his car. The monitor on his dashboard announces he has an incoming call from Hugo.

"What?" Isaac greets, his annoyance for the interruption heard in his tone.

"Sorry for the intrusion, boss, but we have a problem with 57." Hugo's tone conveys his genuine regret for the interruption.

"Send Patrick," Isaac snaps.

"I can't. He's away with his kids this weekend."

Isaac's eyes turn from the road to me. "What kind of problem?"

"The manager was vague, but he said he has some issues with a staff member issuing free drinks to his friends."

"Why the fuck can't the manager handle this type of situation?" Isaac interrupts, his tone stern.

His grip on the steering wheel tightens as the conversation continues. Hugo remains quiet. His ragged breaths shrilling down the line is the only reason I know he hasn't hung up.

"It's okay," I assure when I see the indecisiveness in Isaac's gaze.

"Oh, hey, Isabelle," Hugo greets, his tone cheeky.

My lips curve into a smile over the fact Hugo can recognize my voice from only hearing me speak two simple

words.

“Hi.” I bite my bottom lip.

“I’ll take care of it,” Isaac informs him before disconnecting the call without giving Hugo a chance to reply.

He leans over and frees my lip from my teeth. “Five minutes tops, and I’ll be biting that lip.”

Unable to speak through my parched mouth, I nod.

*I’ve been waiting over five months, so what’s another five minutes?*

## CHAPTER 22



Isaac's nightclub is located a few blocks over from the Italian restaurant where we were having dinner. It's a stylish looking club that screams sex and sensuality. That saying really does work—sex does sell, and Isaac is using it to his full advantage in his nightclubs. The club is packed with patrons, and the line to get in goes all the way down the block and around the corner. Upon entering the manager's office of his nightclub named 57, Isaac's eyes assess the room.

There are four people seated in the impressively large manager's office. Two male faces appear petrified, one male is smirking broadly, while the only other female in the room is glaring at Isaac's hand wrapped around mine.

"You're both fired," Isaac informs them, pointing to the gentleman with shoulder-length blond hair whose name-tag says 'manager,' and to a twenty-something-year-old male staff member.

The manager attempts a remark, but the instant Isaac's livid eyes land on his, his mouth etches into a thin, straight line.

"If you can't handle a situation like this in-house, then you're not management material for my clubs," Isaac snaps.

“You.” Isaac glares into the eyes of the employee caught stealing from him, “Will pay for any drinks you gave to your friends before you leave here tonight.”

The employee’s throat works hard to swallow as he nods.

“And if you ever step foot in any of my clubs again—”

“I won’t,” interrupts the employee, his short reply incapable of hiding his fear.

Isaac turns to face a brute of a man with a shaved head who is standing at the side of the room. He is massive. His bicep alone would be bigger than my head.

“Make sure he pays his bill before he leaves and be sure to add a *very* generous tip on his account for the bar staff.”

The bouncer smiles while nodding. He heads for the employee, yanking him out of the chair he’s sitting in by the scruff of his collar before dragging him out the door. Isaac relinquishes my hand and heads for the mahogany desk. His strides are effortless, yet commanding, making my pussy pulse with every step he takes. Watching Isaac in his element is a riveting experience. He’s bossy, demanding, and sexy as sin.

When he reaches the desk, he yanks open the top drawer and removes a checkbook from inside.

“This will cover your severance.” Isaac thrusts a torn-out check toward the manager.

Just as the manager is about to take the check, Isaac yanks it out of his grasp.

“Or perhaps the fact you’re leaving here unscathed should be reward enough,” he growls viciously.

Isaac crumples the check in his clenched fist before dropping it onto the desk.

His head shakes like a bobblehead toy. “Y-y-yes, thank you, boss.”

He scampers out of the office, leaving the crumpled check untouched. The veins in my neck throb when Isaac’s eyes run over my body before lifting to my face. Although most people would mistake his gaze as infuriating, I only see unbridled lust reflecting back at me.

“Come here, Isabelle,” he commands.

His lips thin into a harsh line when I shake my head, denying his request. My eyes shift to the corner of the room where the female staff member remains, watching our exchange with her mouth ajar.

“Get out.” My excitement intensifies when Isaac’s gaze never once leaves mine as he orders her out of the room.

“Boss, while you’re here, I wanted to ask...”

“Get out!” Isaac growls.

She nods before scurrying out of the room even faster than the manager did.

“Come here, Isabelle,” Isaac demands again.

His tone is clipped, but it doesn’t stop the tremor coursing through my body from my name rolling off his tongue. Although the sheer sight of him instigates wetness to pool between my legs, his gaze is unnerving. It has me pinned, unable to move.

Isaac mutters something under his breath before he moves away from the desk. He glides instead of walking as a mere man would. That’s not surprising. Nothing about him could ever be seen as mere.



His strides don't slacken until I'm pinned between him and the heavy wooden door of the manager's office. The lash of his tongue on my gaped mouth causes my knees to weaken. His kisses convey his personality perfectly—powerful, alluring, sexy, and knee-buckling hot.

He cups my thigh with one hand to steady my swaying movements, while his other hand slithers over my dress until stopping at my neck to pull my mouth closer to his. His kiss is sumptuous and toe-curling good. It once again goes above and beyond my highest expectations.

I snake my fingers over the ridges of his muscular back before raking them through his hair. He groans a rattled moan. The sound alone almost causes me to combust.

His talented tongue soothes the sting of his bite before it glides along mine, stroking and absorbing my taste.

When he pulls away from our embrace, a whim escapes my mouth. I draw in a long and shaky breath when I open my eyes. His eyes are reflecting his torment, his internal battle.

I throw my dignity out the window. "Please."

Just the sensation of his fingertips probing the pressure points on the back of my neck and the skillfulness of his tongue and gifted mouth has me close to orgasmic bliss.

No longer capable of restraining myself, I thrust my pelvis upward. A rough moan erupts from my throat when my oversensitive pussy connects with Isaac's thick and lengthened cock. One expert roll of his hips has me throwing my head back and my eyes snapping shut.

He bites, nibbles, and caresses my exposed neck. His slow, purposeful movements lead him toward the region of my erratically panting chest. He jerks on the material holding my

dress together, rendering it open, exposing my barely covered breasts. His eyes rocket to mine. They no longer show his torment and indecisiveness—they show his unbridled desire.

A smirk tugs on his lips when his index finger glides along the thin, white lace material of my bra. His finger feels rough and smooth at the same time. My mouth becomes parched when he releases my breast from its restrictive restraints and traps my erect nipple in his warm, inviting mouth.

After lavishing my breasts with his skilled tongue, he diverts his attention to underneath my breasts and across my stomach. He bites, sucks, and nibbles on my skin, making every hair bristle with attention.

His name rumbles from my throat in a ragged groan when the tip of his nose grazes my panty-covered clit. He chuckles a pussy-clenching laugh at the wail escaping my lips from him veering away from the one part of my body screaming for his attention.

Raking my fingers through his hair that's damp at the tips from the stifling heat in the office, I guide his head back to my weeping sex, which is begging for his attention.

“Patience, Isabelle.” Isaac’s gaze lifts to mine to wordlessly command my focus.

Unable to tear my gaze away, I watch him bite and suck on my right inner thigh. The sting of his teeth and the roughness of his five o’clock shadow brings a rush of excitement to my sex.

Usually, it takes dedicated attention to bring me to climax, but I’m so close to the brink right now, just the slight brush of his fingertip on my clit will have me free-falling.

Crouching down in front of me, Isaac guides my left leg onto his shoulder. My body is so lax, my movements are sluggish and slow. My toes curl when his nose runs along the seam of my panties. He inhales a vast, undignified whiff, not the slightest bit ashamed.

“You smell so fucking good.”

I scream as an orgasm rips through my body so hard and fast, stars form in front of my eyes when he sucks my clit into his mouth through my lace panties. Although we’re in public—and there’s a possibility we could be exposed at any moment—I can’t stop the moans erupting from my throat when Isaac slips my panties to the side to devour my drenching sex. The ability to control my body has been relinquished to the man who just caused it to implode with one heart-stopping suck.

Isaac’s name spills from my mouth on repeat as the lashes of his tongue slowly guide me down from the most intense orgasm I’ve ever experienced. He consumes my pussy with dedicated sweeps and playful bites, not the least bit confronted I combusted within seconds of our exchange commencing.

Just as I rein in the uncontrollable shudders racking through my body, Isaac clenches my panties in his hand and shreds them off my body—their feeble material no match to his strength. He devours me without pause, his eagerness adding to the giddiness hazing my mind. The throaty moans he releases vibrate on my clit, intensifying the wetness between my legs.

“*Oh...*” I moan, stunned at how rapidly my second orgasm is building.

I lose the ability to hold up my weight when another toe-curling climax rockets through my body. The only reason I

don't tumble to the floor is that Isaac has my thighs pinned to the door, stopping my concern. The ease of his hold makes it appear as if I'm as light as a feather.

After every shudder in my body has been exhausted, Isaac stands from his crouched position. My arousal glistens on his face as he narrows in to kiss me hard on my mouth. I can taste myself on his mouth when his tongue slides along my lips. He groans a sexy-as-sin growl that has my knees buckling when my tongue laps up my climax from his sinful mouth. He kisses me until I'm close to combusting a third time in under ten minutes.

When Isaac drags his mouth from my neck to my breasts, I throw my head back and call out. Spotting a blinking red contraption in the corner of the room, I snap my eyes shut, trying in vain to ignore that our every move is being monitored and possibly recorded.

It's an impossible task.

Forever diligent, Isaac senses my hesitance. After pulling away from our embrace, his confused, lust-filled eyes dart between mine.

"I want this," I assure without hesitation when I notice the forlorn look on his face. "I just don't want it recorded," I nudge my head to the camera.

Isaac curses, but the concerned expression on his face relaxes when he notices the camera in the room. *Did he seriously think I was rejecting him?* He's the most riveting man I've ever met. I'd never reject him. My body isn't capable of saying no to him.

If it isn't bad enough I just participated in raunchy foreplay in a manager's office of a bustling nightclub, having it

recorded makes my embarrassment ten times worse. My stomach swirls just from the thought someone may be watching us right now.

“Can you get Hugo to turn the camera off?” My voice is husky from the erotic screams torn from my throat but also pleading.

My body is thrumming from the two toe-curling orgasms that just shredded through me, but I don't want our night to end just yet.

Isaac's mouth carves into a yummy smirk. “I could.” His tongue darts out to lick his lips.

When his eyes darken, I know he can taste me on his mouth.

“But I want to fuck you in bed.”

His rough tone vibrates through my soaked sex, impelling a throaty moan to spill from my lips.

“Because once I'm done with you, you'll no longer have the ability to walk straight.”

I gulp, knowing without a doubt what he says is fact, not fiction. He barely touched me, and my orgasm was teetering on the brink, dying to break free.

Winking at the lust creeping across my cheeks, Isaac yanks his cell phone out of his pocket. “Hugo, I need you to wipe the images off the camera in the manager's office at 57 for the last hour.”

His mouth seductively crimps. “Thanks, Hugo.”

Disconnecting his call, he places his cell phone into his pocket along with my shredded white lace panties.

Not speaking, he disappears into the bathroom, only to return five seconds later with a washcloth. My clit throbs when he places the washcloth between my legs to clean me in a nurturing manner. The rough and abrupt Isaac from when we first arrived at the club is no longer in existence, replaced with an attentive and gentle lover.

With an impish grin on his face, he ties my dress back into place. I eye him curiously, studying him in silence for further information.

“Hugo turned the cameras off the instant he knew you were coming to the club with me,” Isaac tells me, his smirk enlarging to a full-toothed grin. “At times, it’s like he knows me better than I know myself.”

My lips curve into a grateful smile. *The elusive Mr. Hugo is growing on me.*

Once I’m respectably dressed, sans underwear, Isaac clasps my hand within his and walks us out of the manager’s office. Blaring music booms into my eardrums the instant we step out the door. The smell of sweat and sex lingers in my nostrils from the mass of bodies dancing under the warm, strobing lights.

Ignoring the shocked stares of the patrons in his club, Isaac weaves us through the densely populated dance floor. When the crowd sees Isaac coming, they part, giving us an unobstructed path to the front door of the club.

The cold night air is refreshing to my sweat-slicked face and neck when we merge onto the sidewalk. My thighs are still quivering, and I’m exhausted, but my excitement on what’s about to come enhances my eagerness.

Isaac's grip on my hand tightens so much I wince in pain when a heavy, profound voice says, "The prodigal son returns."

"Get in the car, Isabelle." Isaac releases my hand, spinning on his heels.

Ignoring his demand, I pivot around and come face to face with the non-stoic face of Col Petretti, suspected mob boss and the number twelve man on the FBI wish list.

*Shit!*

To Col's right is the man FBI believes to be his top henchman. He has been with Col for longer than I've been born, yet he still remains nameless. The FBI simply calls him Col's right-hand man. To Col's left is his youngest son, Dimitri. He does not yet have an FBI file, but they believe he's being groomed by Col to take over the family business.

Isaac glares at Col furiously, the twitching of his jaw so profound I can almost hear it ticking.

"What has it been... six years? And I don't even get a greeting from you." Col's words drip with sarcasm.

Isaac remains quiet with his fists clenched. The veins in his neck are protruding so far, they look like they're about to burst. When Col's depraved gaze assesses my body, my skin crawls.

Noticing the direction of Col's gaze, Isaac pulls me in close to his side. When Col sees Isaac's protecting gesture, he inhales a large, undignified whiff through his nostrils, mocking Isaac, pretending he can smell his fear.

Isaac's angry eyes glare at Dimitri. When Dimitri's gaze drops to his polished black shoes, Isaac sniffs back. Col

follows Isaac's gaze to Dimitri, his jaw ticking and nostrils flaring when he notices Dimitri's passive stance.

"Go!" Col's loud voice rumbles through the bustling side street.

Dimitri's eyes lift from the ground and shoot to his father. He appears to be considering a response. I wait with bated breath. From what I've read in Col's file if Dimitri denies his father's command, his punishment will be severe, favorite son or not. I expel the breath caught in my throat when Dimitri does as commanded and walks away from our group.

The sting of Isaac's fingers on my hip firms when Col steps toward us, stopping in front of me. His eyes scan my flustered, post-orgasmic face.

"You're exquisite." Col's evil eyes stare into mine. "You have the face of an angel," he whispers. "*E voi diventerete uno.*"

When Col raises his hand to my face, Isaac snatches his wrist. His grip is so firm, even the massive set of wrinkles in Col's face can't hide his grimace.

"Don't fucking touch her," Isaac snarls, his tone clipped and unnerving.

My heart skips a beat when Col's right-hand man moves closer to our gathering. He adjusts his suit jacket to expose he's carrying two semi-automatic Glocks on his waist.

"Isaac, let's go."

I scramble backward, pulling Isaac with me, but his stance is so strong, he doesn't budge an inch. His infuriated gaze remains focused on Col. His jaw is ticking so furiously, his back molars grind together.



“Please, Isaac, he has a gun,” I beg, motioning my head to Col’s henchman.

If Isaac doesn’t agree to come with me, I’ll blow my cover and announce I’m an FBI agent. Col Petretti has always been paranoid about being under surveillance or infiltrated by an undercover agent, so my confession may be enough to force him to leave our group immediately.

Isaac’s eyes flick to Col’s henchman. He sniffs, goading him. “A real man doesn’t need a gun. His body is his weapon.”

“It’ll be in your best interest to remember that,” he threatens before he relinquishes his grip on Col’s wrist.

I sigh when Isaac grasps my wrist and spins on his heels, not once glancing back on Col or his henchman left standing on the sidewalk.

## CHAPTER 23



“**G**et out.”

I shake my head and re-latch my seat belt Isaac just unlatched.

“For once, do as you’re told and get out,” he screams, making me jump in fright.

Gritting my teeth, I shake my head once more. “No.”

Isaac growls. This time, it isn’t a sexy-as-sin growl, it’s a growl that shows his unrelenting anger.

He throws open the driver’s side door so hard I’m surprised he didn’t break the hinges. He stomps toward the passenger side door and pulls it open so violently, I have no chance of holding it closed.

Leaning in, he unclasps my seat belt and lifts me out of the car. His angry strides don’t stop until he dumps me onto a wicker chair on the front veranda of Cormack’s mansion.

His icy gaze turns to mine the instant I spring out of the chair. “Stay here.”

I freeze, truly scared by his infuriating gaze.

I’m not stupid. I know where he’s going and what he’s planning on doing. That’s why I’m trying to stop him from

leaving. You can't insult a man with a reputation like Isaac's and not create a devastating ripple.

Isaac didn't speak a word the entire drive home. His fists clenched the steering wheel tightly, and his gaze remained planted on the road. I tried to soothe his anger, but nothing I said altered the furious mask marring his handsome face. He was physically in the car with me, but his mind was occupied elsewhere.

Tires screech as his car whizzes out of the driveway, gaining the attention of Harlow and Cormack, who are sitting in the den.

Cormack rushes onto the front patio. "What's going on?"

"We ran into Col Petretti on the way home," I stutter, my mind blurred with confusion.

"What happened?" Panic echoes in Cormack's tone. "Did he say anything, do anything... Izzy?"

He grasps my biceps and shakes me, lifting my fogged haze.

"He didn't say anything. He... umm... said I have the face of an angel." I'm utterly confused as to why it would cause such a negative response from Isaac.

"Fuck." Cormack scrubs his hand over his head. "Where did you see Col?"

"At 57." My panicked eyes lock with his. "Can you stop him?"

"No one can stop Isaac, but that doesn't mean I won't try."

He places a peck on Harlow's shocked mouth and darts toward a garage housing his extensive collection of cars.

---

By the time Isaac and Cormack return, two hours have ticked by on the clock. Harlow encouraged me to have a shower and change out of my dress, then I spent the last hour and a half wearing a hole in the expensive Persian rug in the den with my ponderous pacing.

Isaac's eyes stray to mine the instant he walks into the room. His anger is still visible in his slitted gaze. I scan his body and sigh noisily when I notice he doesn't have any physical damage to his body.

My steps toward him halt when he roughly shakes his head and exits the room as quickly as he arrived. When I dash after him, Cormack grasps my elbow, stopping me.

"You won't get anything out of him, Izzy," Cormack warns, his tone as low as my heart rate. "He locks up his emotions tighter than Fort Knox."

"Then, you either tell me what's going on, or I'll force him to tell me." My tone tells him I'm not kidding. I want answers, and I want them now.

"Then, you'll lose him forever." Cormack's tone is as bitter as the bile sitting in my throat.

Tears well in my eyes so fast they burn from the sudden rush of moisture.

Spotting my dour expression, Cormack says, "I haven't seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you in years. Not since Ophelia, but if you force his hand, you'll lose him, Izzy."

My eyes dance between Cormack's, silently pleading for more information. *Who's Ophelia? What does it mean that he*

*looks at me differently? Was it Ophelia who forced Isaac's hand previously? Is Isaac as captivated with me as I am with him?*

“If he wants you to know, he will tell you himself,” Cormack responds to my wordless interrogation.

---

I've been tossing and turning in bed nonstop the past several hours. My body is still relishing my previous orgasms, but it's the gnawing pit twisting my chest that's keeping me awake. There was palpable tension between Col and Isaac, but it seemed to be so much more than just rivalry. Their hate for each other is personal and goes much deeper than some stupid mob turf war.

I stiffen when the hinges on the old wooden door in my room creak. My pupils widen when Isaac strides into the room. He's still wearing the same three-piece suit he was wearing at dinner. I remain quiet as he removes his shoes and jacket. My pulse quickens when he continues undressing until he's wearing nothing but a pair of black boxers.

I squeal when he slides in between the sheets and flips me over. His hand splays across my stomach, pulling me back toward him. My curvy backside snuggles in close to his erect crotch, and his bare chest heats my barely covered back.

“No questions, just sleep, Isabelle.”

I don't know how he expects me to sleep. Not only are there hundreds of questions running through my head, I feel his monstrous manhood grinding my backside. Sensing my reluctance, Isaac glides his hand up and down my arm in a

soothing motion. Over time, my blinking lengthens, and my breathing slows until I fall blissfully asleep.

---

I don't need to open my eyes to know Isaac isn't in the room with me. The aura of a man like him permeates the air. His power, his stature, his importance—it's all something you feel, not visualize. That's how I know he left the room hours ago.

Sluggishly opening my eyes, I stretch my arms out in front of my body, which is still adoring the two toe-curling orgasms I had last night. Although Isaac's confrontation with Col filtered through my mind all night long, I had the most restful sleep I've ever had. Two consecutive mind-blowing climaxes shattered me, rendering me physically exhausted. Then being snuggled into Isaac had me sleeping like a baby.

I climb out of bed and head into the expansive guest bathroom attached to my impressive suite. My toes grip the plush, luxurious carpet pile as I increase my strides, the shower beckoning me to it. I take my time shampooing my hair with the deliciously fragrant toiletries supplied.

Sprts of warm water slide down my face before stopping and clinging to my top lip. All the forbidden images of Isaac nipping, lashing, and tasting my mouth come rushing back to the forefront. When my tongue darts out to lick my top lip, I can still taste him on my skin.

My leisurely shower becomes hurried, my urge to see Isaac outweighing my love of long, heavenly showers. I dry myself with a plush towel before running my fingers through my shampooed hair and securing it into a messy bun. Because of my late awakening, the temperature has already heated up

enough to know I'll be either spending the majority of my day in the coolness of the sea breeze or by the grotto pool.

Turning my eyes to my suitcase, I catch a glimpse of my minuscule bikini hanging on the railing in the bathroom. *Maybe it will aid in releasing Isaac's tension from last night?*

Once I'm dressed in a pair of tiny cotton shorts, a bikini top, and a crushed natural linen blouse I've left open at the front, I exit my suite. Compared to the constant bustle of the main house yesterday, today it's eerily quiet. I move through the vast rooms of the palatial McGregor residence, seeking any other signs of life.

A hive of activity sounds through a pair of French doors attached to the rec room. Upon exiting, I notice a substantial buffet has been set up on the paved patio next to the pool. I spot Harlow, Cormack, Cate, and Colby gathered around a wrought iron table enjoying the splendor of croissants, fresh fruit, pastries, and coffee.

Harlow smiles and motions for me to join them at the table. Returning her smile, I signal that I'll join them once I have my required morning caffeine fix in my hot little hands.

I nearly drop my mug of freshly brewed coffee when 'Isabelle' rolls off a tongue that had me quivering last night.

Isaac is standing so close, I'm trapped between his firm body and the buffet table. His elongated cock is felt through my thin cotton shorts, and his delicious scent lingers in my nostrils.

Air catches in my throat when he snags a croissant off the table, his forearm skimming the side of my boob on the way past.

Raising my eyes, I catch him smirking down at me. He winks before striding away, his cockiness uncontained. I'm unable to move from my spot, frozen in place with desire. When he enters the French doors without a backward glance, I sigh, disturbed by my lack of self-control when he's in my presence.

Once the shred of dignity I barely hold is collected, I mosey to the table where everyone is gathered.

"Holy fuck," Colby murmurs under his breath.

I'm pretty sure his comment is directed at me, considering the fact he's staring at me with his mouth opened wide, his eyes roaming over my body. Colby stumbles out of his chair, tripping over his own feet. Once he regains his footing, he gestures for me to sit in the chair he was sitting in.

"T-take a seat."

I try to hide my smile at his clumsiness, but I find it so endearing that the sight of me has him falling over himself, my lips tug higher. When Colby notices my smile, he shakes his head and chuckles.

"You have me stumbling around like a teenage boy." He doesn't stutter this time around. "But seriously, Izzy, you need to issue a warning before you bring out that ammunition." His gaze locks onto my chest. "Where the hell were you hiding them yesterday?"

I don't know if he wants me to answer him or not, so I remain quiet.

When he cocks his eyebrow at me, waiting for a response, I answer, "Under my shirt."

Colby chuckles. "Well, you need to bring those puppies out to play more often."



Our banter is interrupted when a stern cough bellows across the table.

Cormack shoots daggers at Colby. “You were warned yesterday.”

Colby doesn’t seem phased by his older brother’s stern glare or statement. He just smiles at him and winks before removing his shirt.

*Holy cupcakes! Did I die in my sleep and wake up in a ‘Bachelor of the Year’ contest?*

I’m not the only one hiding desirable *assets* under my shirt. Colby’s pecs are impressive, his stomach is ridged, and his guns are—*Oh. My. God!* But even with his drool-worthy body on display, Colby still can’t compete with Isaac. Isaac’s body isn’t just perfect, it’s pussy-clenching delicious. I don’t think any man will ever steal my attention away from Isaac.

---

My bare feet pad along the beautiful ebony hardwood floor as I make my way back to the room Cormack assigned to me this weekend. I’m in desperate need of a shower to rid my body of the sand and salt embedded on my skin. I’m still wearing my bikini, but I’ve placed a light, flowing, blue cotton dress over the damp material.

Tonight’s setting for dinner was casual, but I still don’t think it’s suitable to wear only swimwear to a dinner table, although it appears no one informed Colby of that. He sat barefoot and in just a pair of board shorts. His long blond hair was tousled loosely on the top of his head, and his skin had color from spending hours at the beach.

Colby is a real lady charmer. There's no doubt in my mind he could woo the panties off any girl he sets his sights on. He has just chosen the wrong lady to pursue. My attention remains focused on Isaac, even though he wants to be left alone.

I felt Isaac's eyes on me throughout the day, but he hasn't uttered a word to me. His dark, gloomy mood makes me hesitate to interact with him. Not that his appalling attitude should be rewarded with attention, but I can't help but feel I'm missing out on a prime opportunity to unearth the real Isaac Holt.

My mind is still a jumbled mess of confusion. I'm beginning to wonder if the explicit sex scene in the nightclub office actually happened, or if my overactive imagination is more phenomenal than I comprehended.

One might assume most of my thoughts would be consumed with unearthing everything about Col and Isaac, considering unraveling that secret would be critical for the FBI's investigation, but it isn't. I can't stop thinking about what Cormack said.

Who is Ophelia, and what does she mean to Isaac? Why would I lose Isaac if I tried to force him to share information with me? And why did a dark pit form in my chest the instant I thought I might lose him? These are the questions I want answered, but no one seems willing to talk about them.

Upon entering the long, dark hallway, the sudden flash of a smirk halts my long strides. Mere feet from me is Isaac, leaning in the doorjamb of my room a few doors down from where I've stopped. His arms are crossed in front of his well-formed chest, and the danger in his eyes would have most men shuddering in their boots, but instead of feeling fear, my body

quivers with anticipation, and stupid butterflies form in my stomach.

I strengthen my posture before finalizing the last strides down the hall. Offering him a quick smile, I skirt past him to enter my room. He seizes my wrist, halting my reluctant retreat. My pulse quickens from his simplest touch.

Air traps in my throat when he leans in close to my neck. His hot breaths flutter my earlobe when he hisses, “Stay away from Colby.”

Gritting my teeth, I yank open my bedroom door so hard it slams into Isaac’s trouser-covered hip.

“You shouldn’t have a problem with my request unless you’re interested in sleeping with him,” Isaac snarls, following me into my room. “Are you interested in him, Isabelle?”

His pathetic question doesn’t warrant a reply, so instead, I glare at him. He isn’t the slightest bit intimidated by my angry stance. If anything, he seems to find it amusing. His eyes are shimmering with mischief, and his lips are curved high.

“I’ll answer your question if you answer one of mine.”

“Ain’t going to happen,” he replies, not considering my suggestion.

“Then get out of my room.” I march into the bathroom and slam the door.

I have the longest shower I’ve ever had. Taking my time, I pamper my tired and exhausted body. The past forty-eight hours feel like the longest days of my life. I’m not just exhausted, I am also emotionally drained.

Isaac’s emotions are worse than whiplash. He goes from lavishing me with his attention to cold and distant in an

instant, but no matter how hard I try to put him to the back of my mind, he always pushes into the forefront. Although I barely know him, my heart yearns for him when he isn't around.

I freeze. Even with my body covered in a thick coating of body wash, I step out of the shower, dazed and confused. *Holy shit*. I catch my wide-eyed expression in the vanity mirror. No, I can't be. *Oh God*. I'm falling in love with Isaac Holt.

*No, no, no, no, no!* I can't let this happen. I can't fall in love with a man I'm investigating. I hardly know him. He is a stranger. So what if he can make every hair on my body bristle to attention by the simplest touch of his fingertip, that doesn't mean anything. *Does it?*

Stunned and muddled, I remove the bubbles from my body with a luxuriously thick towel and throw on a pair of panties and a short-sleeve cotton shirt I found discarded on the floor. Exiting the room, I freeze for the second time.

"Get out of my bed." My voice croaks with emotion.

Isaac's shirtless torso is leaning against the leather headboard of my bed.

"This is my bed," he responds, "and that's my shirt." He points to the shirt I've just put on.

"What?" Negative thoughts clusters in my head so fast I feel giddy. "This is the room Cormack assigned to me."

Isaac shakes his head. "This is my room. I brought you in here the first night when you blacked out on the plane and last night—"

"Oh my God, you didn't sleep with me last night because you wanted to. You slept with me because I was sleeping in your bed," I interrupt. *I'm going to be sick*.

“I’m sorry.” I shove my clothing into my suitcase. “I didn’t realize.”

Isaac clambers out of bed to yank my suitcase out of my grasp. In silence, he places it back onto the luggage stand.

“Get in bed, Isabelle.”

I shake my head. There would be at least a dozen spare rooms in this mansion. I’m sure I’ll have no trouble finding a warm bed for the night.

“Now!” Isaac barks, startling me.

He moves back to the left-hand side of the bed. As he glides back in between the sheets, his stern eyes never once leave mine. I suck in numerous breaths to settle my rattled nerves. *Is this what you want, Isabelle?* My head is screaming no, but my heart pleads louder than my brain.

The sternness in his eyes lessens as I step toward the bed.

“Good choice,” he murmurs when I slide into the bed next to him.

By the time two hours have passed, I’ve counted every rose petal adorning the ceiling medallion. It took longer than usual as I had to wait for the moon to adjust its position to finish the lower half. I shift to lie on my hip and catch the profile of Isaac. Even in the shadows of the night, my heart still skips a beat when I appraise his tempting features.

“Stop staring at me.”

My lips curve into a smile. “Are you awake?”

Isaac rolls onto his hip, mimicking my position. “Yep. You need to learn to count in your head.”

“I’m so sorry,” I respond, mortified. “I have a terrible habit of mumbling out loud.”

“I’ve realized that,” he jibes, his tone playful.

We lay across from each other in silence for several minutes, each appraising the other’s moonlit face in great detail. I have so many questions I want to ask him. Not one of them has anything to do with the investigation the FBI is running on him.

Isaac runs his hand over his head. “One question, Isabelle.”

After drawing in a shaky breath, I ask the one question I’ve wanted to ask since last night. “Did you love Ophelia?”

“Yes,” he replies without a smidge of hesitation.

Tears well in my eyes, and a stabbing pain hits my chest.

“Do you still love her?” I whisper.

“I said one question,” he replies bluntly before rolling onto his opposite hip.

## CHAPTER 24



I stumble into the plane, and my knees knock with every step I take. When I raise my wide gaze, I spot Isaac sitting in the only single reclining chair. This is the first time I've seen him today. By the time I woke up this morning, he had already vacated the room.

He jerks up his chin in greeting before devoting his attention to the plane's window, revealing his dreary mood from yesterday has returned full force. I plop into the closest chair before fumbling with my belt. I'm all thumbs, meaning I can't get the buckle to latch together. Seeing my struggle, Isaac curses under his breath before he releases the mechanism of his belt to aid in securing mine.

Once my belt is tightened around my waist, he heads back to the reclining chair. With everyone seated, the plane taxis toward the runway. While biting on my lower lip, I grip the armrest. I want to wipe away the annoying tear sitting high on my cheek, but I'm too terrified to loosen my grip.

The closer we get to the end of the runway, the more my panicked pants fill the silence of the cab.

"Breathe," Isaac demands upon hearing my loud wheezes.

My body snaps to his command, but my panic is too intense. I can't get enough oxygen, and my lungs are burning

in protest. I truly feel like I'm suffocating.

When I shake my head, wordlessly relaying I can't fill my lungs, Isaac magically kneels in front of me. I want to scream at him to return to his seat, but my fear is rendering me speechless.

He clasps my hands in his. "Breathe, Isabelle."

This time, my body obeys. The crippling pain in my chest lessens when I inhale a sharp, quick breath.

"Good girl."

He brushes away the tears marking my white cheeks, his touch gentle almost loving. Once he has taken care of the moisture on my face, he traces the cupid's bow on my top lip. The saltiness of my tears can't stop tingles dancing across my face.

Fat, salty tears are streaming down my face. It isn't just my fear that has me sobbing, though. It's glancing into the eyes of the man I'm falling in love with knowing I can't have both him and my illustrious career.

"What are you doing?" I blubber out when he unlatches my seat belt without warning.

He doesn't grace me with a reply, he just scoops me into his arms, then walks toward the back of the plane. When we enter the luxurious bedroom at the end, he secures the latch, then places me on the bed. My insides tighten when he stoops down to unclasp my shoes. Once they're removed, he dumps them next to the bed before removing his polished dress shoes.

I watch him with zeal when he undoes his cufflinks to remove his jacket. My mouth dries when his eyes lower to mine. They're as teasing as his impromptu strip.



Electricity bolts up my arm when he clutches my hand to yank me up from the bed. My breasts press against his chest, budding my nipples.

He gazes into my eyes. “Do you want this?”

I nod.

His lips crimp, apparently unimpressed by my non-verbal reply. “No, Isabelle. Say it.”

My thighs quake as I reply, “I want this.”

The most mouth-watering smirk sneaks onto Isaac’s face as he steps away from me. Upon hearing my shameless groan at the loss of his contact, his grin enlarges, making my thighs shudder more.

His eyes rake my body before they return to my face. “Strip.”

My cheeks inflame, but the desire in his eyes has me feeling more daring than usual, so I strip as instructed. He stares at me in admiration like I am his salvation.

My heavy pants push my breasts up and down as I undo each button of my shirt. His eyes remain fixated on my face until the last button on my blouse is undone. I shimmy my shoulder, sending my shirt plummeting to the floor.

He draws in a sharp breath when his eyes land on the steel-gray Dream Angel Victoria Secret padded lace bra I’d purchased. When I saw its dark gray coloring matched his eyes, I had to buy it.

When his eyes return to mine, the primal, hungry look in them has me squirming on the spot. I stop slithering my arms around my back to unlatch my bra when he shakes his head. “Leave the bra.”

His devilishly wicked smile makes me wet. While chewing on my bottom lip, I undo the button of my jeans then lower the fly. As I tug them down my thighs, Isaac loosens the knot on his tie, his eyes never leaving me. His smile grows when he notices my matching steel-gray lace panties.

“Please don’t shred these. They cost way more than you think.”

Isaac doesn’t grace me with a reply. He merely smirks while skimming his eyes over my body. As he twists his tie around his right hand, he pads closer to me. “Are you a screamer, Isabelle?”

“No.” *But that may be because no guy has made my body ignite the way Isaac can.*

“You’re about to become one.”

I roll my eyes at his pigheadedness, but the lash of his tongue on my gaped mouth has them freezing halfway.

Our kiss is furiously violent as the pent-up sexual frustration the past two days is unleashed. I yank his white business shirt out of his trousers before fumbling with the pearl buttons. When the buttons refuse to cooperate with my trembling hands, I clasp his shirt and rip it open.

Isaac groans into my mouth when buttons sprawling onto the polished wooden floor tinkle around us.

“That shirt cost way more than you think!”

I tug on his black leather belt. “I’m sure you can afford another.”

My blood thickens when his chuckle rumbles through my pussy. Through a stimulating blur of bites, sucks, and kisses, I find myself trapped between the wall and him. Gripping my

thighs, he curls my legs around his waist. I grind my sensitive clit along the ridges of his erect cock, my patience to feel him inside me stretching thin.

“Do you have a condom?” I ask, praying to the Lord he has some form of protection. I’ll never forgive myself if I have to stop this now.

He smirks before slipping his hand into his pocket. My lips tug into a victorious grin when he produces a Trojan condom. The tingles wreaking havoc with my core grow when he rolls the condom down his gorgeously thick cock.

Once it’s in place, he raises his eyes to mine. Air leaves my lungs in a rush when he shreds my panties off my body in one rapid movement, their frail material no match to his brutal force.

“You’re buying me another pair.” I pull his lips to mine by his sweat-drenched head.

“It will be my pleasure,” Isaac talks over my mouth.

Cupping my ass cheeks in his hands, he guides my body backward until my torso is leaning on the wood-paneled wall. My breasts thrust forward when my arms band around his shoulders. When the head of his cock brushes the entrance of my wet sex, my eyes drift to the bed.

Noticing my gaze, Isaac mutters, “Next time.”

A smile stretches across my face, pleased there will be a next time.

“Hold on, baby, this is going to hurt.”

My nails dig into Isaac’s shoulders when he impales me in one ardent thrust. Tears spring to my eyes as I struggle to

acclimate to taking a man of his size without adequate preparation.

Sensing my hesitation, Isaac remains motionless, giving me time to adjust to the sheer girth of him. Although my body is stinging with pain, it's also aching in pleasure at being the fullest it's ever been.

My cheeks heat when Isaac murmurs, "Fuck, you're tight."

Suddenly, he stiffens before his eyes rocket to mine. No words need to escape his lips. His freaked expression is questioning enough.

"Thank fuck," he mutters when I shake my head at his unspoken question.

It's been a while since I've participated in sexual activities, but I'm definitely not a virgin.

He adjusts my position to a better angle before asking, "You ready?"

Instead of gracing him with a reply, I squeeze his cock with the walls of my pussy. The raspy moan roaring from his throat nearly makes me combust on the spot, much less his cock slowly inching out of me.

The first few pumps of his thick shaft are painful, but the pleasure far outweighs the discomfort. My orgasm builds with every relentless pound, and I'm soon quivering without restraint.

My body coils tight, striving for release as my moans turn husky. When Isaac pulls down my bra and traps my nipple in his warm mouth, I throw my head against the wall. Maintaining his tempo that's driving me into a quivering, blubbering mess, his skillful tongue teases my nipples into hardened peaks.

I'm moments away from falling into orgasmic bliss, my body heightened beyond belief.

"Eyes on me, Isabelle," Isaac demands when the power of our exchange overwhelms me so much my eyelids flutter shut.

Snapping my eyes back open, I tighten my grip around his shoulders, afraid I may topple to the ground during ecstasy.

"I've got you," Isaac advises, sensing my concern.

*Oh God, he has got me, and it feels so good. He is so deep, and I'm stretched so wide.*

His name thunders from my lips when I implode into the most body-shattering orgasm I've ever had. I moan on repeat, relishing the spark adoring every inch of my body.

Overwhelmed by the sensation heating my veins, my eyes snap shut.

"Eyes, Isabelle," Isaac commands, never once easing his unrelenting pummeling that has reduced me to a trembling mess.

When my eyes pop back open, my climax intensifies from peering into his primal, alpha gaze. He stares at me in adoration, enhancing the electricity crackling in the air.

Once every pleasurable shudder has been exhausted, Isaac moves us to the bed. A disappointed moan spills from my lips when his throbbing cock slides out of my drenched pussy.

"Bend over the bed, open palms flat on the sheets." Isaac's voice is hoarse with lust. "Legs open wide."

Blinded by excitement, I do as requested without protest. When I hear shuffling behind me, I tilt my head to the side. My mouth salivates when my eyes lock in on Isaac's magnificent naked body. Just watching a bead of sweat roll

down the bumps in his stomach before being absorbed by the dark patch of hairs above his mouthwatering cock nearly has me toppling into ecstasy all over again.

My heart rate kicks into overdrive when Isaac places his dark blue tie over my eyes, then secures it behind my head.

“It will heighten your senses.”

Swallowing harshly, I nod instead of telling him I don't need any assistance in enlightening my senses when he's in my vicinity.

Placing his hand on the lower half of my belly, he adjusts my position, so my ass is thrust high into the air. My knees scrape across the crisp sheets when his index finger glides past my sensitive clit not even two seconds later.

“Open wider, Isabelle. I want to see all of you.”

*Oh God.*

When ruffling sounds behind me, I prick my ears, straining to hear every move he makes. Thankfully, I'm not left waiting for long.

Time stands still when the head of Isaac's cock braces the entrance of my weeping sex. “This will be hard and fast.” The rasp of his voice sends a revitalizing shiver through my body.

He waits for me to nod before slamming back into me in one quick thrust. I purr a grunted moan of satisfaction, relishing being filled by him again.

My moans lengthen when one of his hands grips my hip while the other fists my hair. His hold is dominant and strong, and it has my second orgasm rapidly gaining in intensity.

The coils in my womb tighten when Isaac tilts my head back so he can cover his mouth over mine. His tongue invades

my mouth as roughly as his cock assaults my pussy. It's a stimulating kiss that hits every one of my hot buttons, and it thrusts my climax to within an inch of the finish line.

Gripping the satin sheets in a white-knuckled hold, a second orgasm rockets through my body like fireworks exploding in a dark sky. When I muffle my grunted screams into a pillow, Isaac's raspy groans become more prominent. I never thought I was a screamer, but Isaac has proved me wrong. My throat is as raw as my heart.

I knew Isaac would be fantastic in bed, but I'm still astounded by his impressive stamina.

"One more," Isaac suggest once I've returned from climax oblivion.

I shake my head. My body is slack, unresponsive, and covered head to toe in slick sweat. The only reason I'm still upright is because of the tight grip Isaac has on my hip. The sting of his fingers cakes my skin with more excitement.

An unexpected squeal rips from my dry mouth when Isaac flips me onto my back. My eyes blink in quick concession to adjust to the bright light illuminating the room when he removes my blindfold. Any protest on further contact is disregarded when I catch his intense gaze scanning my face as he slides back inside me. His eyes look as content as my body does.

A husky moan rolls up my throat when his mouth seals over mine. This time, his kiss is passionate and slow, expanding my heart with every caress, nibble, and lick he does. Even the relentless rhythm of his pounding eases.

Placing his open palm on my back, Isaac tilts my hips higher, giving him unrestricted access to my throbbing pussy.

I'm surprised a short time later when a familiar tightening in my lower stomach gains intensity again so quickly.

"Eyes," Isaac demands.

My orgasm rushes to the surface, excited he can already intuit my body so well he knows I'm moments away from climaxing.

Isaac's hoarse groan booms through my sex when I hook my leg higher on his waist, so our hips can grind in sync. He pumps into me on repeat, stealing the air from my lungs with every perfect stroke.

"Oh God..." I pant, overcome by the tingling in my core.

The desire to snap my eyes shut is overwhelming when a third orgasm roars through my spent body, but I keep them open, fighting through the sensation eating me whole.

When my nails dig into Isaac's back with force, spurts of cum brutally erupt from his throbbing knob.

"Fuck, Isabelle," he groans before leaning over and entrapping my bottom lip between his teeth. The sting of his bite is painful, but his tongue soon soothes the pain.

Once every drop of his spawn has been released, he frees my lip from his menacing teeth before rolling off me. His eyes remain locked on mine as he removes the condom from his still throbbing cock. Disposing the condom into a trash can, he rejoins me in bed. Even exhausted beyond comprehension, my lips tug high when he spoons his body in close to mine.

With three earth-shattering orgasms rendering me immobile, I soon fall into a blissful post-orgasmic sleep.

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“Isabelle...”

My hand shoots away something brushing my lips. When a profound chuckle booms through my eardrums, I jolt upright and crash into a hard surface.

“Shit.” I rub the brutal sting on my head.

Peering out of my eye, I catch the incredibly attractive and fully dressed Mr. Isaac Holt, pinching the bridge of his nose.

*Oh shit!*

I scamper my naked body across the bed and yank his hand away from his nose to inspect it. “Is it bleeding?”

“It’s fine, Isabelle,” Isaac remarks.

I continue with my perusal of his nose while his eyes appraise my naked body. I’m too mortified that I’ve managed to headbutt him twice in less than six months to form a response to his overly eager assessment.

“Isabelle, I’m fine,” Isaac growls when I continue to fuss over him.

He must have been sitting very close to me when I struck him as his nose already has a red bump forming. When I lick my dry lips, I can taste him on my skin.

“Were you kissing—”

“We’re back in Ravenshoe.”

“What?” I’m utterly confused.

My eyes dart to the window. I gasp when I notice the plane is in an airport hangar instead of the sky.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” I dart out of bed.

“You look tired. I wanted you to sleep.”

My lips curve into a broad grin as I yank on my shirt and jeans, sans underwear. *Hold on!*

“So, we did the whole landing without a seat belt? Are you crazy?”

“Do you truly believe a scrap of material will save you when a plane is plummeting to the ground?”

My quick movements freeze as my brows furrow. *I’m never flying again.*

Isaac chuckles at my reaction before clasping his hand around mine. My brows scrunch more when I walk out of the bedroom and discover the plane is deserted. My bewilderment intensifies when I spot Hugo leaning on Isaac’s town car when we exit the galley of the aircraft.

“We landed over two hours ago.”

My eyes bulge. “You let me sleep that long?”

“You looked tired.”

My lips tug into a broad smile that remains planted on my face while Hugo stows our luggage in the back of Isaac’s car and during the entire trip back to my apartment. It only falters when I catch the quickest glimpse of remorse in Isaac’s eyes when he follows me into the elevator of my apartment building.

“Did you want to come inside?” I ask once I reach the front door of my apartment.

My heart plummets into my stomach when Isaac shakes his head. “I have some business to take care of.”

*He’s lying.* Isaac always maintains eye contact, but his eyes strayed to the floor the instant I asked if he wanted to come in.

“Okay.” Ignoring the gnawing pit in my chest, I thrust my hand toward him. “Thank you for a lovely weekend.”

He smirks at my gesture, but he doesn’t shake my hand. He raises it to his mouth and places a kiss on my palm. My heart leaps.

“The pleasure was all mine, Isabelle,” he croons before spinning on his heels and striding down the hall.

I stand mute in my hall, utterly confused. I also have the worst case of whiplash I’ve ever experienced in my life.

## CHAPTER 25



“*I*f you sign a contract, you’re required to fulfill your contract for the set amount of time on the said contract.”

“But...”

“No buts, Isabelle. You’re not getting out of your contract. I don’t care if your cat gets run over by a truck or your grandma dies. You signed a contract. You’ll fulfill your obligation,” Alex snarls. “Now go and do the job you’re paid to do.” His angry roar reverberates through the office building.

After gathering the scraps of dignity I have left, I scamper out of his office. I’ve just experienced the worst shredding of my life. He literally tore me apart.

After tossing and turning all night long, I concluded my relationship with Isaac, no matter how confusing it may be, is highly unethical. Not wanting to shroud Alex’s team and my uncle’s name in controversy, I decided it would be best to have my position relocated to another unit.

There are hundreds, no scrap that, there are thousands of people the FBI targets every week, so it wouldn’t be difficult to be transferred to another unit, but the instant I suggested a transfer to Alex, he shot it down. He refused my request, wadded up my transfer application into a ball, and then threw

it into the trash. He then went on a half-hour long rambling tirade about my integrity and due diligence to his team, and how I'd be letting everyone down by transferring to another unit.

*Who would have thought a coffee girl was such an integral part of a team?*

Brandon's eyes lift to mine as I scurry past his desk. "What crawled up his ass and died?" I ask.

Brandon grins a full grin while shaking his head. Dumping my satchel into the bottom drawer of my desk, I plop into my chair and fire up my computer. The first thing that pops up onto my monitor is the extended search I'd started for Megan Shroud before I went away. I'd completely forgotten about her the entire weekend.

I'm so immersed in reading Megan's extensive medical history, I don't notice Brandon sitting on my desk until he waves a blue manila folder in my face.

"Hey," I greet, my mind hazy. "Did you look any further into Megan Shroud over the weekend?"

"No. I showed Alex her license details you gave me. He said to drop it. It looks like she's just a random acquaintance who has formed an attachment after a one-night stand. Every guy's worst nightmare." Brandon chuckles over his comment.

Gritting my teeth, I snub the pain burrowing my chest from his comment.

"Why, what did you find?"

"Your worst nightmare." I swivel my monitor to face him.

The more Brandon's eyes glance at the screen, the more his brows furrow.

“Jeez, that’s what you call a certified lunatic.”

“When was she last photographed at the nightclub?”

“Umm...” Brandon flicks through a selection of photos in the blue manila folder he’s holding. “She was at the club this weekend.” He hands me two pictures of Megan standing in the queue to enter Isaac’s nightclub, The Dungeon.

“Shit. According to her medical records, she’s supposed to be admitted as an inpatient at a psychiatric hospital in Hopeton.”

Brandon eyes me apprehensively, but he doesn’t utter a sound as I print out the extensive collection of medical records on Megan and bolt toward Alex’s office.

“Come in,” Alex instructs, his mood still surly.

When he notices me approaching his desk, he rolls his eyes. Snubbing his imprudent response, I hand him Megan’s medical information. His eyes lift to mine and narrow before he snatches the documents out of my firm grasp.

“Who’s Megan Shroud?”

My brows tuck as my gaze turns to seek Brandon, who is sitting on my desk, eyeballing the exchange between Alex and me. He just informed me he advised Alex of Megan this weekend, didn’t he? Shrugging, I turn my gaze back to Alex.

“She has been photographed at Isaac’s club on numerous occasions the past several months.”

Alex’s stern blue eyes meet mine. “Hundreds of women are photographed at his clubs every day.”

“But she was there day and night, every day for the past several weeks.” I try not to let my genuine concern for Isaac

be heard in my voice. “She has also been in and out of psychiatric hospitals her entire life.”

“Then he should’ve been more cautious about who he takes to bed.”

“Who said he slept with her?” I ask through gritted teeth.

Alex glares at me. The expression on his face reveals he thinks I’m an imbecile.

When I remain quiet, he continues, “Would you like me to supply you with the extensive list of women Isaac Holt has slept with?”

“No.” My swirling stomach amplifies so much I feel queasy. *They have a list?*

“Then drop it,” Alex instructs. “We’re here to investigate Isaac, not every floozy he’s slept with.”

Grimacing, I nod, although my gut is telling me not to drop this. With reluctance, I head for my desk. Brandon doesn’t need to ask how it went. The distressed look on my face tells the whole story.

“Maybe try again in a few days when his brooding mood improves,” Brandon suggests.

“He’s never in a good mood.” I flop into my chair.

Brandon chuckles at my statement before his eyes lift to mine. “How was your weekend away?”

A smile tugs my lips higher. “It was good.” Even with the whole Col Petretti and whiplash issues that plagued my weekend, I still thoroughly enjoyed my time away.

“How was your weekend?” I ask.

“Quiet.”

I arch my brow. Even though my day is full of the most boring, tedious tasks you could imagine, Alex's team is always a bustling hive of activity, so I find it surprising Brandon had a quiet weekend.

"The surveillance team lost track of Isaac for three days. No one knew where he was," he tells me.

My eyes snap to his.

"That's why Alex is in such a pissy mood. Isaac only resurfaced again last night."

Brandon hands me the blue manila folder he has been grasping the past twenty minutes. A lump lodges in my throat when I scan through the surveillance photos. Isaac, as always, looks impeccable in a black three-piece tailored suit, and his vibrant red tie matches the dress of the slender blonde intimately attached to his side.

"I don't know how the surveillance team keeps losing him, but..."

He knows we're tailing him.

I realize I said my last statement out loud when Brandon asks, "How do you know that?"

Air snags in my throat as my eyes roam over the photos, trying to think of a legitimate reason I'd know that.

"Look." I lift a picture of Isaac helping his companion out of the back seat of his car at the back entrance of his nightclub. "He's looking at the camera and smiling. He knows we're watching him."

Brandon removes the photo from my grasp to appraise it. "He is, too. Good call, Izzy," he comments, his tone proud.



I smile at his praise, but can't tear my gaze away from the final surveillance photo sitting in the manila folder. It's time-stamped three hours after the picture Brandon is holding. It shows Isaac and his female companion standing next to the open back door of his Mercedes-Benz.

They are kissing.

## CHAPTER 26



**Two weeks later...**

“*Wow*, Isabelle, swanky residence.” An impressive whistle sounds from Brandon’s lips.

Smiling, I lean over and press a chaste kiss to his cheek before gesturing for him to enter. A grin curls my lips when he hands me a floral bouquet of irises and baby’s breath.

“Thank you.” I offer to take his coat.

Once I have his black woolen jacket on a hanger in the coatroom, I enter my compact but well-designed kitchen to search for a vase for the flowers. Brandon shadows closely behind me with his eager eyes darting around my apartment. I’ve lived here the past nine weeks, but this is the first time I’ve invited him inside. I like my privacy in general, but I appreciate it more since I’ve started working with the FBI. Privacy is a very undervalued commodity in the world of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

I giggle when Brandon walks into my kitchen and inhales a vast, impressive whiff through his nostrils.

“It smells delicious in here.” His hand rubs circles on his t-shirt-covered stomach. “It smells just like my grandma’s kitchen used to smell.”

He sucks in another gulp of air.

“Mariana meatballs?”

Grinning, I nod.

“Hold on.” He holds his index finger into the air, requesting a minute before taking another unabashed sniff. His moan is one that should only come out of a man’s mouth when he’s in ecstasy. “Oh, for the love of God, please tell me that’s homemade peanut butter and chocolate chip cookies?”

My lips curve into a full-toothed grin.

“They’re due out of the oven any minute,” I answer just as the oven dings.

Brandon doesn’t respond, he merely growls, and his mouth salivates. After removing two trays of cookies from the oven, I spend the next five minutes slapping Brandon’s hands away.

“They need to cool and harden,” I reprimand. “And you’ll spoil your dinner if you eat them now.”

Rolling my eyes at his pleading gaze, I submit and hand him the still-warm tray of cookies. I swear he demolishes the first cookie so fast, his taste buds didn’t get a chance to sample their scrumptious flavors.

“Would you like a glass of milk with your cookies?” I question since he’s acting like a boy who’s never eaten homemade cookies before.

“Yes, please.” He sprays crumbs over my countertop.

I smile, glad he's enjoying the treats Harlow made for him. I lack any real domestic skills. I can cook a mean batch of Mariana meatballs and spaghetti bolognese, but that's about the limit of my culinary skills.

Harlow remembered Brandon telling her months ago how much he loved his grandma's peanut butter and chocolate chip cookies, so she made me a double batch and brought them over this afternoon. All I had to do was place them on a tray and bake them in the oven for twelve minutes, and presto, fresh-baked cookies.

For the first week, I hesitated every time Brandon tried to schedule the date I'd agreed to before I went away for the weekend, but after a week of endless surveillance photos of Isaac surfacing from his clubs with a vast range of blonde beauties on his arm, I decided to uphold my original offer.

I can't believe I was so stupid to think I could fall in love with a man like Isaac Holt. He couldn't even go a night without a female companion warming his bed. I guess that's why he shared his bed with me. He is probably one of those guys who can't sleep unless they're next to a warm body.

"Brandon, can I ask you something?" I move to the fridge to get the glass of milk I offered.

"Anything," he replies without hesitation.

"Do you think Isaac Holt is a criminal?"

Even irately angry at Isaac, he's still in the forefront of my mind. *Why can't I just forget about him?*

Brandon stops gorging on the cookies like it's his final meal as his hazel eyes lift to mine. His brows furrow before he begins to answer, "His file—"

"Don't tell me what his file says, tell me what *you* think."

His eyes dart down to the countertop. He takes several moments to seriously contemplate my question. “I don’t know what to think.”

*He isn’t the only one.*

“But I’ll say one thing. I’ve been part of this investigation for nearly a year, and I’ve not yet stumbled on one shred of information that corroborates Alex’s presumptions of Isaac.”

“Do you think he’s hiding something?”

Brandon chuckles under his breath. “Are we still talking about Isaac, or have we switched to Alex?”

“Both.”

“Everyone is hiding something, Isabelle,” he replies. “Even you.”

I don’t refute his accusation. Even if I did, he’d see through any elaborate ruse I’d dangle in front of him. Brandon appears laid-back, but when you watch him closely, you soon realize he’s a genius wrapped up in a humble boy-next-door disguise.

“Speaking of secrets.” His mouth is stuffed to the brim with cookies. “That file you requested has arrived.”

My shocked eyes meet his. Smiling, he nudges his head to his leather satchel resting on my dining table.

“Can I?”

When he grins and nods, I smack a sloppy kiss on his cheek. His face flushes with heat as his jaw drops. I probably shouldn’t be so bold, but I’ve been waiting to get this file in my hot little hand for weeks.

“You have to promise Alex will never find—”

“Alex will never know,” I interrupt. “I promise, Brandon.”

Brandon went through an immense amount of hassle to secure this file for me. I’d never allow him to be reprimanded for it.

“Come on, I’m dying.” He nudges me in the ribs with his elbow.

After releasing the butterflies in my tummy, I open the thin, cream manila folder. My eager eyes run over the police report displayed on top of the documents and photos. Brandon’s concerned eyes lift to mine when he spots a tear rolling down my whitened cheek.

Marjorie Anne Hawke, a twenty-four-year-old native of Rochdale, was struck by a vehicle on May twelve, five years ago. She was thirty-four weeks pregnant at the time of the accident. Marjorie survived the initial impact, but her son was delivered stillborn by cesarean the same day. Marjorie’s husband, Carey Hawke, returned from active duty in Iraq, and on his request, Marjorie’s life support machine was switched off. She passed away three hours later.

“That’s incredibly sad, but it doesn’t warrant the shroud of secrecy,” I blubber through the sheet of tears flowing down my face.

“No, but this does.” Brandon hands me a heavily blacked-out court document.

One name stands out in thick black ink when I scan the document—Mr. Roberto Petretti, son of Col Petretti. *Oh God.*

“Roberto didn’t do any time behind bars, even with being arrested at the scene and recording a blood-alcohol level three times over the legal limit,” Brandon advises, his eyes darting up from the documents in his hand. “His name was never

reported in any news or press articles. He'd have had to give the DA something substantial to get a plea that lenient."

"Or someone," I interrupt.

There's no doubt Marjorie is Hugo's sister. He's in nearly every family picture in her file. My heart breaks when I see the photo of Marjorie and her husband, Carey. It looks like it was taken not long before her accident. They're smiling at each other, and he has his hand hovering over her protruding stomach. It's a beautiful photo that shows their unbridled happiness before their lives were brutally ripped apart.

Now Isaac's reaction two weeks ago makes sense. His hatred of Col is personal. It has nothing to do with the mob.

## CHAPTER 27



“*T*hanks for a great night, Izzy! But next time, I’ll cook.”

I slap Brandon’s arm. “It wasn’t that bad.” My bottom lip drops into a pout. “It was your fault the Mariana sauce burned. You shouldn’t have told me about the file until after I finished cooking.”

He chuckles a hearty laugh that bellows down the corridor. Removing my arm from the crook of his elbow, I push the down button on the elevator dashboard. Although we spent the majority of our night discussing work-related matters, I enjoyed the past two hours in his company. Brandon is a great guy. He is very witty, and our conversation flowed as freely as the wine.

“I appreciate you getting me that file, Brandon.”

It would have taken Brandon a lot of wheeling and dealing to get me that file, and he came through for me.

“No worries, Izzy. I was happy to help.”

A thick cloud of awkwardness plagues the air when the elevator dings, announcing its arrival to my floor. Sensing Brandon’s apprehension, I lean in to place a peck on his cheek. Just as my lips brush his cheek, he tilts his head, and his lips



land on mine. I freeze in shock when his tongue glides across my gaped mouth. His lips are smooth, and his tongue is laced with the red wine we drank with our dessert.

Placing one hand on my neck and the other on my back, he pulls my body closer to his. Unexpectedly, a moan simpers from my throat, my body choosing its own response to Brandon's slow and tantalizingly teasing kiss.

My eyes open when he draws away from our embrace. His cheeks are pink, and his eyes are glossed with lust.

"I've wanted to do that for months."

My lips curve into an apprehensive smile. Brandon's kiss was touching, and he is a brilliant kisser, but our embrace didn't create the knee-wobbling reaction I get when I kiss Isaac.

"You don't have to say anything," Brandon says, noticing the worried look on my face. "I shouldn't have been so stupid to think someone as stunning as you would be interested in me."

My heart slithers into my stomach. Brandon is a wonderful guy. Any girl would be lucky to have him. *I'm the only stupid person standing in this corridor.*

Slinging my arms around his shoulders, I hug him fiercely. "If my heart weren't foolishly seeking an unattainable man, I'd have forgone my three-date rule and dragged you back into my apartment."

He chuckles before his hazel eyes seek mine. Although his gaze still shows his confusion, the hurt in his eyes has lessened.

"So, I was too late?"

I nod. “That’s the only reason, Brandon. Any girl would be privileged to date you.”

“Can you get me their numbers, then?”

I giggle at his playful comment.

“I’m not joking. Have you tried dating these days? It’s a battlefield.”

I don’t reply to his statement. I simply shrug and grimace. ‘Battlefield’ is too kind of a word for dating in this new age. When the elevator dings again, Brandon and I end our night back in friendly territory. After a kiss on the cheek, we embrace each other with a brief hug.

Once he walks into the elevator, he turns around to face me. “If it doesn’t work out with Mr. Unattainable, let me know.”

I smile and nod. “Without a doubt.”

Brandon grins as the elevator doors snap shut.

Upon entering my apartment, my long strides halt. Isaac is in my dining room. His fists are balled at his side, and his narrowed gaze is roaming over the empty dishes and wine bottles sprawled on the wooden tabletop.

“What are you doing in my apartment?”

My voice quivers, not just in fear but because of how quick my pulse is racing from seeing Isaac again. This is the first time I’ve laid eyes on him in person in over two weeks.

“How did you get in?” I interrogate, stepping toward him.

I’m sure I locked the door on my way out, but even if I didn’t, you don’t just enter someone’s apartment without

permission. I halt again when Isaac's icy eyes lift to mine. His gaze shows his undeniable anger.

His jaw ticks when his eyes travel over the long-sleeve jersey dress I'm wearing. I chose this dress to ensure Brandon knew our date was more a casual get-together between friends and not a romantic date. From the snarl forming on Isaac's lips, I'd say my clothing choice was a mistake on my part.

"Who was the man in your apartment?"

"How do you know it was a man?" My anger rises as the images of Isaac with a bevy of blondes rushes back to the forefront of my mind.

"Lipstick, no lipstick." He hooks his thumb to the two wine glasses.

My glass has an outline of the light pink lipstick I'm wearing while Brandon's has no lipstick smears.

"He's a *friend*." I overemphasize my last word.

Isaac growls a low, menacing groan that surges through my sex. My knees buckle as a hot slickness forms between my legs. *Stupid, traitorous body.*

Isaac's furious gaze stays planted on me as he removes his ringing cell phone from his pocket. His greeting is short and clipped. I don't know who he's talking to, but the tick in his jaw grows the longer their conversation continues. My heart stops beating when he disconnects the call and places his phone back into his pocket. His gaze is unrelenting, furious, and solely focused on me.

When he steps toward me, I back away, intimidated by his unnerving composure. He smirks at my reaction before continuing on his original endeavor. Before I can protest, Isaac

has me trapped between his impressive body and the wall in my entryway.

He grips my chin, yanking it to the side. A moan tears from my mouth when he bites, sucks, and nips on my exposed neck. Gripping my ass cheeks, he pulls me into his body, so his lengthened cock braces my throbbing clit and halfway up my stomach.

I whimper when he withdraws from our embrace as quickly as he came. His eyes absorb my kiss-swollen lips and flushed cheeks before settling on my eyes.

“No more men in your apartment, Isabelle.”

Since my legs are no longer capable of holding their own weight, my body slides down the wall, and I sit on the ground. Lifting my lust-hazed gaze, I watch Isaac stride toward my front door. He exits without a single glance back in my direction.

I’ve barely regained the ability to stand, let alone comprehend what just happened when I hear someone tapping on my front door. Begrudgingly, I scamper off the floor and pace to the door. I inhale deeply to relieve my flushed cheeks before swinging open the front door. I’m shocked and a little disappointed when I discover Brandon standing on the other side. My heart was hoping it was Isaac.

Brandon’s eyes scan my face. The longer he appraises me, the more his brows scrunch.

“I... umm... forgot to get my coat.” He spins on his heels. “But you look busy, so I’ll come back later.”

“Brandon, it’s fine. I’m not busy.”

I’m sure my flushed cheeks and wide eyes are awkwardly exposing my arousal, but I’m not too busy to gather his coat

for him.

When he remains quiet, I grab ahold of his arm and drag him into the entryway of my apartment. His eyes bounce around the interior more eagerly than they did when he arrived hours ago. When he doesn't find what he's looking for, he returns them to me. I smile at his erratic behavior before moving to the coatroom to collect his jacket.

It's only when I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the entryway mirror do I realize what has caused his odd reaction. Right on my neck, as clear as day for all to see, is an unmistakably large and undignified love bite.

*I'm going to kill him!*

---

After ushering Brandon out of my apartment, hailing a taxi, wrangling with a colossal-looking bouncer to cut a long line, and weaving my way through a mass of sweaty bodies, I find Isaac in an impressive office at the back of his nightclub.

Two walls of his office are lined with dark mahogany bookshelves that go all the way to the ceiling. Every shelf is filled to the brim with a range of books. Isaac has his back turned and is peering out a window that faces the side street. His body is covered with an impeccably tailored three-piece suit.

Letting my anger get the better of me, I grab one of the hardcover books and send it hurtling across the room.

My anger makes me forgo rational thinking. "You son of a bitch!"

Isaac pivots around to face me, his eyes stern and unnerving. The roughness of his five o'clock shadow can't hide the tick of his jaw, and his lips have thinned.

Slanting his head, his eyes dart to the book that missed his back by mere inches before shooting back to mine. "I'll call you back."

He snaps shut the cell I didn't realize he was holding until now, then houses it in his pocket, but he doesn't remove his hand. The evil expression on his face is all the indication I need to know he did this on purpose.

"This wasn't an accident. You marked me. You branded me like some sort of... *animal*." I stop talking and grit my teeth, fighting the urge to sob.

The ticking of Isaac's jaw is more noticeable when he strides toward me. The look in his eyes is dangerous and solely focused on me. Although I should see his gaze as fearful, my body shudders in exhilaration. Not trusting myself around him, I flee toward the door I just entered and twist the handle.

Isaac's hand slaps the wooden door, holding it closed and blocking my exit. He leans in close, trapping me between him and the door. His breath flutters my ear when he hisses, "Did you enjoy his kiss, Isabelle?"

He saw me kiss Brandon?

When he lifts his spare hand to my neck, his pulse surges through his fingertips. "Did it make the veins in your neck throb faster like it does when I kiss you?"

My disloyal nipples harden when his hand glides over my breasts.

"Did your breasts become heavier and your nipples erect?"

Unable to speak, I shake my head.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach when he cups my pussy in his hand. The sting of his fingers forces a whimper of pleasure to escape my lips.

“Did you get wet?” he sneers, his tone unapologetic.

Blinded by rage, I buck against him. He has no right to be questioning me after how many women I saw entering and exiting his nightclub on his arm the past two weeks.

“He needs to learn not to touch what isn’t his.”

Through gritted teeth, I sneer. “I’m not yours either.”

Isaac recoils at my statement as his hand holding the door shut balls into a fist. I grip the handle and yank on the door. Isaac pulls away from me so quick, air blasts my neck.

I scurry out of the door, denying him the opportunity of seeing the tears splashing down my cheeks.

## CHAPTER 28



“*H*ey, Isabelle,” Hugo greets when I stumble onto the sidewalk of Isaac’s nightclub.

He’s leaning on the back quarter-panel of Isaac’s black Mercedes-Benz town car. His grin falters the instant he notices the tears dripping down my face. Ashamed at my immature tears, I brush them off my cheek with one swift sweep of my index finger.

“Get in. I’ll take you home.” Hugo gestures his head to the car.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’d prefer to grab a taxi.”

In reality, I just want to get as far away from anything or anyone associated with Isaac Holt.

“It’ll be at least a two-hour wait.”

My eyes rake the street. A gasp expels from my mouth when I notice the long line at the taxi stand. Hugo smiles before opening the back door of Isaac’s car. He chuckles when I walk past him and hop into the front passenger seat. I latch my belt while he jumps into the driver’s seat.

Keeping my gaze planted on the star-filled black sky, I try to unravel the confusion muddling my mind. Hugo remains



quiet, but I can feel his gaze occasionally shifting from the road to me.

“Did Isaac do that?” Hugo questions a short time later. His words have an edge of anxiety to them.

“Yep.” I pivot to face him.

He strengthens his grip on the steering wheel and works his jaw side to side. “Don’t take this the wrong way...”

I huff. Anytime someone says, “Don’t take this the wrong way,” it gets taken the wrong way.

Hugo’s lips furl. “I know you’re not happy about it, but would you rather him not care that you were kissing someone in the hallway of your apartment?”

“So, I should be happy he branded me?”

“I’m not saying that, but he cares enough about you, Isabelle, that the instant he knew you had a man in your apartment, he left a *very* important meeting to go to you.”

My brows squeeze as my confused eyes scan Hugo’s face. “How did Isaac know I had a man in my apartment?”

I’ve seen Isaac’s town car parked outside of my apartment or Harlow’s bakery numerous times the past two weeks. At first, I thought it was endearing. Now, I realize it’s because Isaac doesn’t want another man moving in on his turf.

“Are you protecting me, Hugo, or spying on me?” My tone is stern and unapologetic.

Hugo swallows raggedly before returning his attention to the road. Not a word seeps from his lips the remainder of the trip, revealing where his loyalty lies.

When Hugo pulls into the front of my apartment building, I unlatch my belt and climb out of the car while mumbling a quick thanks for the lift. When I'm halfway down the sidewalk, Hugo calls out my name. His face is marred with apprehension, his eyes full of remorse.

"Give Isaac the benefit of the doubt," he requests. "Not everything is black and white. There's a whole heap of gr—"

"Gray no one pays any attention to," I interrupt, repeating the saying Isaac quoted weeks ago.

Hugo grins so broadly, his eyes crinkle. I return his smile before pivoting on my heels and stalking away. After a few strides, the fog in my brain clears. I stiffen before spinning back around. My lips curl when I see Hugo standing by his car waiting for me to enter my building.

"I'm sorry for what happened to your sister, Marjorie."

For the quickest second, Hugo's face scrunches before a mask of composure slips in its place.

"Thank you."

I want to offer him a more heartfelt condolence, but Hugo doesn't seem like a hugging type of guy. So instead, I awkwardly wave and walk into my apartment building.

---

My lip crimps into a snarl. "Stop smiling, Harlow. It isn't funny," I growl through clenched teeth.

Ever since I entered the bakery, Harlow has been eyeing me curiously. When I yank the collar of my shirt up high, trying to hide the gigantic hickey, she boisterously laughs. Her

chuckle is so loud, she startles the lady sitting in the window seat. Her scared yelp echoes around the nearly empty bakery.

“I’m not laughing at you, Izzy. I think it’s hot.” She moves to the table next to mine to gather the used dinnerware.

“You think branding is hot? What’s wrong with you?”

My tone is quickly changing from angry to playful. I can never stay mad for long, let alone at someone with Harlow’s personality.

“No, I don’t think branding is hot, but it’s sexy he wants other guys to stay away from you. That warning is a clear stay-the-hell-away message for any guy. It’s more efficient than putting a ring on a girl’s finger.”

“A love bite doesn’t discourage men, it encourages them.” I grimace over all the horrid men I’ve crossed paths with.

Harlow’s manicured brow shoots up into her hairline.

“Because they think I’ll put out,” I reply to her shocked expression.

She remains quiet as confusion intensifies on her adorable face.

“I once went on a date with a guy who told me he only dates single mothers. When I asked him why, he said it was because he knew she wasn’t a virgin, so she’d be more likely to put out.”

“That’s disgusting.” Harlow gags.

Her tone doesn’t match her words. Her cheekbones rise as her mouth curves. The instant I spot the white of her teeth, a smile sneaks onto my face.

“At least he was honest,” she says between a fit of giggles.

Rolling my eyes, I return my attention to the gossip magazine I was reading before Harlow interrupted me. My eyes bulge when they land on a gossip article in the back pages of a well-respected glossy magazine—*Three Eligible Bachelors Taken Off the Market in One Devastating Weekend*. It isn't the headline that has my heart palpitating faster. It's the photo of Isaac, Cormack, and Colby standing side by side. My eyes glance over the printed article under their picture.

*Millions of women around the world are sighing in sync this weekend. Latest reports circling the gossip mill say billionaire McGregor brothers, Cormack (28) and Colby (24), are no longer on the market. The two eligible bachelors were sighted at their elaborate family beachside estate enjoying a lavish long weekend with their respective partners. It has been reported things are seriously heating up with each respective couple, and that this weekend was a way of formally introducing their new loves to their extended family.*

*In related matters, philanthropist, Isaac Holt, was also spotted the same weekend riding a jet ski with a brunette female companion. Later that same night, he was sighted exiting his award-winning multi-million-dollar nightclub, 57. Several patrons were surprised when he was spotted holding the hand of an attractive brunette. Sources believe it was the same brunette he was spotted with earlier that day. Isaac is well known for his playboy lifestyle, and it's the first time the public has witnessed a significant partner in his life the past six years.*

*Many single females are waking up to this sad news!*

“Did you see this article?” I ask Harlow, who has finished gathering the crockery from the table next to mine.

“Yeah,” she replies apprehensively. “Thankfully, the paparazzi didn’t get any photos of the actual weekend. Cormack said that’s an old photo from the Fourth of July weekend.”

My heart stops beating. I didn’t consider the fact Isaac and Cormack would be followed by the paparazzi. I only scanned the areas for surveillance vans. I sigh, glad no incriminating evidence was captured that weekend.

“You should be sighing in relief,” she jests. “You’re the brunette in both reports. Colby didn’t bring a girlfriend that weekend. They’re quoting from people who witnessed you guys at the beach together on Saturday morning.”

Harlow smiles before sauntering toward the bakery counter. I grin back before returning my attention to the photo of the boys. It’s a good photo of them all. I can mentally picture the devastated faces of millions of women around the world when they read this article. It’s just a pity the report is only accurate for one of the three men photographed.

“Oh, before I forget, can I borrow your black pumps Friday night?” she asks, turning around to face me.

“Sure, no worries.” I waggle my eyebrows. “Do you have a romantic date with Cormack?”

Harlow only freezes for the quickest second, but it was enough for me to notice. She smirks before dashing to the counter. Her quick movements cause the dishware in her hands to clang together.

“Harlow?”

I follow her to the counter. Noticing no customers are waiting to be served, I shadow her to the kitchen located at the back of the bakery. She is washing dishes. Her anger is so

paramount, she chips two plates during the process. I've never seen Harlow pissed. I'll admit, she's as scary as hell when she is mad.

I rush for her, easing her hurried movements with my hands. Her glossed-over green eyes apprehensively lift to mine. She swallows hard before telling me, "I'm going on a double date with Cormack Friday night."

I eye her curiously. From the stories she's been telling me the past two weeks, things are going great with her and Cormack, so I don't understand her apprehension.

"We're going with Isaac. I assumed his date was you. Obviously, my assumption was wrong considering the fact you don't have any clue about Friday," Harlow enlightens me.

I grit my teeth hard, fighting the urge to sob. Isaac marked my skin as a warning for other men to stay away, then not only does he continue to date, he throws it in my face by ensuring my friend witnesses his dates firsthand.

Harlow moves to her handbag stored on a wooden shelf. "I'll cancel the date."

I bolt toward her and snatch her phone out of her grasp.

"Don't cancel," I request. "Add another two people to the reservation."

She eyes me curiously before the most mischievous grin etches on her mouth.

Returning her smile, I yank my phone out of my pocket.

"Hey, Regina, remember that hot detective you wanted to hook me up with? Can you see if he's free Friday night?"

## CHAPTER 29



**D**amn! I underestimated Regina's hotness radar. Glacier-blue eyes, straight and prominent nose, a razor-sharp jaw hidden under day-old stubble, all combined on a face that looks like it belongs on the cover of *GQ* magazine. Although his blue suit doesn't look nearly as expensive as the suits Isaac wears, it showcases his muscular physique well.

His eyes peruse my body just as vigorously as I appraised his. His glowing gaze glides over my freshly shaven legs, lingering on the indecent length of my skirt before filtering over the curves of my breasts. My breath snags when his intriguing gaze settles on my face. When he smiles, my heart freezes. Straight pearly white teeth and small dimples in the creases of his mouth add even more allure to his already rugged appeal.

"I might need to start paying more attention to Regina's recommendations."

His voice is thick and gruff as if he smokes a pack of cigarettes per day. I know he doesn't, though, because I got his life history from Regina this morning. Ryan is twenty-eight years old. He's been working at Ravenshoe Police Station since he left the police academy at the tender age of nineteen. He was promoted to detective three years ago. He's unmarried,

has no kids, and although he has no troubles attracting the ladies, Regina assures me he's not a ladies' man.

“Did you want to come in for a drink?”

Even though I originally planned to use Ryan to exact my revenge on Isaac, his incredibly gorgeous face has me reconsidering my initial approach.

Ryan smiles before glancing down at his watch. “With how dense the traffic is tonight, I don't think we'll have enough time for a drink, but I won't say no to a nightcap later.” He returns his intense eyes to me.

Smiling, I grab my coat from the entryway table before closing my front door behind me. “I have a stringent three-date rule.”

“I'm free all week.” He gives me a sassy wink before offering me the crook of his arm.

The drive to the restaurant was pleasant. Our conversation flowed freely, and there was never any awkward silence. Although Ryan doesn't know I work for the FBI, he has heard of my Uncle Tobias. He even shared a few stories with me about my uncle that I hadn't heard before.

By the time we walk into the restaurant, I'm so immersed by Ryan, I've forgotten we're meeting other guests until the restaurant hostess walks us to the table Isaac and his date are already seated at.

Isaac's date is beautiful in a slutty type of way. Unsurprisingly, she's blonde as that seems to be Isaac's preferred choice of late. She's wearing an elegant dress that cost more than I earn in a week. It's just a pity she ordered it two sizes too small as her silicon breasts are threatening to spill out of the top of it at any moment.



Isaac glances up at me, our gazes colliding with palpable tension. He lowers his heated gaze down my body, loitering on my bare thighs longer than what could be classed as an acceptable glance. My ego awakens. I chose this dress with my four-inch-high stilettos as I knew it made my legs look like they went on for days and days. My outfit is the perfect cock-teasing ensemble.

His gaze turns icy-cold when he notices Ryan and my interlocked hands. After working his jaw side to side, he returns his eyes to mine. His stare quickens my pulse, but I remain quiet, letting him stew, grateful the shoe is finally on the other foot.

“Isaac, I haven’t seen you in months. Where have you been?” Ryan releases my hand to offer it in greeting to Isaac. “How is Nick? How many months left until we have another Holt player running around?” he continues, making me realize he knows Isaac more personally than just a casual acquaintance.

Isaac stands from his seat, his demeanor commanding the attention of everyone surrounding him. Numerous women—and even a handful of men’s eyes—turn to watch him as if he’s performing an act instead of doing something as simple as standing.

“I’ve been around. I’ve just been busy.” Isaac’s infuriated gaze shifts to me before he continues in a friendlier tone, “Jenni is due in a couple of months.”

A smile curls on my lips. Even in his bad-tempered mood, he can’t hide his excitement when he talks about his nephew due in a few months.

“Isabelle, this is Isaac Holt. I’ve not yet had the pleasure of arresting him, but I’m sure my day will come soon. Isaac, this

is my date, Isabelle,” Ryan introduces us, unaware that we’ve already met.

Isaac isn’t the slightest bit fazed by Ryan’s cheeky statement. His captivating gaze remains steadfast on mine as he offers me his hand to shake.

Rolling my eyes, I accept his offer. My heart thumps in an unnatural rhythm when he raises my hand to his mouth to kiss my palm. Although my heart is flipping, my outward appearance doesn’t give any indication that his simplest touch has affected me.

“Are you going to introduce us to your date?” I drop my gaze to Isaac’s date, who’s more interested in the polish on her nails than participating in an adult conversation.

“Isabelle, Ryan, this is…” Isaac’s brows draw together as confusion slides over his face.

“Tatiana,” she informs us.

Her nasally whine screeches through my eardrums. If I’d only heard her speak, I would’ve assumed she was a twelve-year-old boy going through puberty.

“Tatiana.” Isaac shakes his head before his mouth carves into a smirk.

I huff, disgusted he doesn’t know his date’s name. Sighing, I plunk down in a spare chair and skim my eyes around the restaurant while Isaac and Ryan continue with their chit-chat.

Thankfully, not long later, Harlow saunters toward our group. My mouth gapes, and my pupils widen. It isn’t just her beautiful canary yellow dress that has my eyes bugging. It’s the pair of Jimmy Choo gold and black Lana stilettos encasing her feet, capturing my attention. When we were fantasy shopping online a few weeks ago, she told me they were her

dream pair of shoes, but at nearly twelve hundred dollars a pair, they were to remain a fantasy.

“Cormack’s two-month anniversary present,” she explains to my shocked expression before sitting down in the chair next to me. “I got him a present, but it’s only suitable for him to open in private.” She gives me a cheeky wink.

Her playful commentary improves my sour mood. I’m glad things are going well for Cormack and Harlow.

When Ryan takes a seat next to me, I jump when he places his hand on my bare thigh. Lifting my eyes, I meet his rugged grin. He seems pleased my body reacted to his touch. Although it did respond, it was more because I wasn’t expecting his hand on my thigh than a zing of intimacy. Ryan is gorgeous, but no man can make my senses ignite as Isaac does.

“How do you know Isaac?” Ryan probes, gesturing his head to Isaac, who has sat back down next to his date.

Hearing Ryan’s quiet interrogation, Isaac’s unique colored eyes lift to mine. He shifts his head and cocks his brow, not attempting to conceal he’s eavesdropping on our conversation.

“I don’t know him. He’s practically a stranger,” I reply, my tone pompous.

A ravenous smile morphs onto Isaac’s face before his tongue slides out to lick his top lip. When his eyes darken, I know he’s recalling our time in the office of his nightclub.

Isaac’s pussy-clenching chuckle sounds around our group when I dart my eyes away from his, needing to look at anything but his sinfully striking face.

For the next hour and a half, I keep my focus on Ryan. He has been a perfect gentleman with the occasional flirty line

thrown in. He asked me what I'd like to eat instead of assuming, and not once did he bat an eyelid when the waiter filled my wine glass numerous times throughout the evening—unlike Isaac. Every time the server returned with a bottle, Isaac's eyes connected with mine. His lips would thin into a sharp line, and his brow would arch when I nodded at the waiter's silent question of a refill.

Although it has been awkward sitting across from Isaac, the night has gone surprisingly well. But I swear if I hear, "It feels so big," come out of Tatiana's mouth one more time, I'm going to snap.

I was always under the impression restaurants made sure each of their patrons had their own chair to sit in, but apparently, no one has informed Tatiana of that. She's been sitting in Isaac's lap since the first course was served. Isaac doesn't seem concerned about her closeness, but I've heard several other restaurant patrons' gasps of disdain when Tatiana's immature giggles bounce around the restaurant. Tatiana is beautiful, but she's a dimwit. I'm surprised someone as entrancing as Isaac would have any interest in wanting to date someone like Tatiana.

This time, when Ryan places his hand on my bare thigh, I don't jump in fright. Looking up from the extensive dessert menu, I lock eyes with his twinkling baby blues.

"What would you like for dessert?"

"Umm." My gaze returns to the menu. "There are too many choices. Why don't you pick something for me?"

His face spreads with a full-toothed grin as he waggles his eyebrows. My interest piques when he swivels his back and sneakily orders from the waitress. *What is he up to?*

“It feels so big,” screeches Tatiana.

Gritting my teeth, I clench my fists around the white napkin on my lap. The urge to scream the obscenities running through my head is overwhelming. Before I can come up with a more respectable response, Harlow snarls.

“Okay, we get. It feels so big. It’s so big. Isaac has a ginormous cock, but can you please shut your mouth for the next thirty minutes so I can enjoy my dessert without having to hear your nasally, whiny voice anymore? Thirty minutes of peace! That’s all I ask.”

My eyes snap to Cormack, wanting to gauge his reaction to Harlow’s outburst. He’s staring at Harlow in complete awe and admiration. Harlow gives me her I’ve-got-your-back look. I bestow my silent thanks with a grateful smirk before turning my annoyed gaze back to Tatiana. Her mouth is ajar, and her slitted green eyes are shooting daggers at Harlow.

“You’re just jealous,” Tatiana sneers.

“Oh, honey, please. I have absolutely nothing to be jealous of.”

She doesn’t. Harlow wins hands down in the looks department and don’t even get me started on personality.

A bitter taste scorches my throat when Tatiana informs Isaac he can show her *exactly* how big it is tonight. Shifting my eyes to Isaac, I catch his gaze at me. When I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes, he winks. *Arrogant asshole.*

“Open up,” Ryan croons.

My lips curve into an illustrious grin when Ryan dangles a cherry in front of my mouth. Since I was distracted by Isaac, I didn’t notice the waitress serving Ryan one of the biggest banana splits I’ve ever seen.

Feeling playful and a little tipsy, I accept Ryan's offer. A long, salivating groan erupts from my throat when a burst of cherry goodness engulfs my taste buds. Ignoring Isaac's menacing growl vibrating across the table and Harlow's boisterous giggle, I dig my fingers into the gooey ice cream and fish out a cherry from the sticky goodness for Ryan. My cheeks heat when Ryan's teeth graze my fingertips before his moist tongue delves out to collect the cherry.

*Holy shit!*

Ryan winks before leaning in close to my side. He's so close, we could be perceived as an intimate couple. My eyes snap to his when he questions, "How far do you want to take this?"

My nervous eyes dance between his. "You're striving to make Isaac jealous, aren't you?"

My heart stops beating until I realize he isn't the slightest bit upset I've been using him to antagonize Isaac.

Twisting my napkin, I ask, "How did you know?"

"I'm a detective." His mouth curves into a huge grin. "And I'm not just good at my job, I'm the best they have ever fucking seen." He stills my nervous fidgeting before continuing, "That and the fact Isaac hasn't taken his eyes off you all night."

My eyes shift to Isaac, whose infuriated gaze is flicking between Ryan and me. His freshly shaven jaw is ticking profusely, and his hand resting on the white tablecloth is clenched in a tight fist.

"He will kill you." My tone is crammed with sarcasm as I turn my eyes back to Ryan.

“Please, you don’t think I can handle Isaac Holt?” He smiles an evil grin. “The bigger question is, can you handle Isaac Holt?”

My pulse quickens as my core tightens. Not just at the idea of making Isaac jealous, but from having Ryan’s incredibly handsome face so close to mine. “I can handle Isaac better than you think.” The alcohol running through my body is making me more brazen than usual.

“All right, if you ar—”

Before all the words spill from Ryan’s lips, I enclose my mouth over his. A fiery warmth ignites in my chest from his skillful kiss. Ryan is a talented kisser, and he knows how to use his skills to his advantage.

Just as a husky moan tears from my throat, an arm curls around my waist. With a growl, I’m yanked away from Ryan. At first, I’m too dazed to configure a response. My mind is a blurred mess of confusion, not just from Ryan’s thrilling kiss, but from a few glasses of wine as well. It’s only when Isaac’s scrumptious scent fills my nostrils does realization dawn.

“Put me down,” I request as my mortified eyes dart around the restaurant to see several patrons watching our exchange.

I’d hoped Isaac would react, but I would never have thought he’d drag me out of an elegant restaurant while hundreds of patrons watch in hilarity.

“Isaac, put me down,” I demand more sternly.

Jerking my arms and legs out, I try to get him to release his grasp around my waist. He doesn’t utter a word, but I can hear his jaw ticking relentlessly. Frigid air causes my arms to bristle with goosebumps when he walks us outside. I stop wailing, expecting him to put me back on my feet now that we’re

outside and no longer attracting the attention of other patrons, but he doesn't put me down. Instead, he shoves me into the backseat of his Mercedes-Benz town car.

"Stay here," he demands through gritted teeth before slamming the door.

I crawl across the plush leather seat and yank on the door handle. Growling in frustration, I flop into the dark gray seats. The door is locked, and there's no locking mechanism in sight.

I stop banging my fists on the window when a chuckle echoes in the cab. Turning my infuriated eyes, I'm greeted by the mischievous grin of Hugo, glaring at me through the rearview mirror.

"Hey, Isabelle," he greets, his tone full of amusement.

"Unlock the doors, Hugo."

He shakes his head. "No can do. I like my job."

I glare at him, unappreciative of the humor in his tone. He isn't the least bit fazed by my irate scowl. His grin enlarges the longer I stare at him.

Just as I'm about to crawl over the privacy divider to unlock the doors myself, the back passenger door opens, and Isaac peers inside.

Time stands still when I catch his angry glare. It's pulse-quickenning delicious.

When he throws my coat and purse to me, a smile curves on my mouth. My inner vixen is pleased that even while angry, he's still considerate enough to collect my belongings.

My smile is wiped right off my face when Tatiana slides into the seat next to me. Her cheap floral perfume makes my wine-sloshed stomach churn.



When Isaac slips in next to her and slams the door shut, my anger returns full pelt.

“Open the door, Hugo,” I demand when my rough yanks on the door latch are fruitless.

My jaw twitches so badly, my back molars grind together, and blood surges through my veins so fast, I’m afraid I may soon have a coronary.

Hugo snubs my request. “Where to, boss?”

“Isabelle’s apartment,” Isaac’s eyes flick to mine.

He’s watching me but has Tatiana snuggled in the crook of his arm. I nearly heave on the expensive leather seats when he runs his index finger along my clenched fist, and the hairs on my arms bristle from his touch.

*Stupid, traitorous body.*

Disgusted with my body’s reaction to him, I grunt, “Move!”

When I dive over Tatiana’s barely-covered stick-thin thighs, I kick my legs out wildly, ensuring my four-inch heels dig into Isaac’s trouser-covered leg as I throw my body over the privacy partition.

“Close your eyes, Hugo, or you’ll cop an eye full,” I warn before scissoring my legs into the front seat as he speeds down the street.

My maneuver is extremely unladylike with my backside being thrust into Hugo’s face, but effective when I plop into the seat beside him.

Hugo remains quiet, but his teeth glow in the moonlight when I lean over his chest to raise the blacked-out partition, blocking my view of Isaac and his date.

---

By the time we arrive at my apartment, my anger has gone from a slow simmer to a full boil. I thought listening to Tatiana's annoying voice was torture, but not hearing it was ten times worse. Once I raised the privacy partition, I couldn't hear or see one thing Isaac and his date were doing the entire trip. I chewed off two of my French-manicured tips just to force myself not to lower the partition.

"Thanks for the lift," I grunt when Hugo finally releases the lock mechanism.

Mumbling incoherently under my breath, I flee to my apartment building. My angry strides slow when I hear a car door opening in the distance. Turning my head, I spot Isaac gliding out of the back of his vehicle.

I huff before quickening my pace. Darting through the spinning glass doors of my building, I rush toward the elevator banks, my heart rate increasing with every step I take.

"Thank you," I praise to the gentleman holding the elevator open for me.

I race to the dashboard, pushing the close door button before Isaac can board the elevator. A triumphant grin morphs on my face when the doors slam shut just as Isaac enters the foyer.

I suck in numerous big breaths as I mosey to the back of the elevator. My overheated skin relishes the coolness of the mirrored walls when I lean my back against them.

Hearing my loud sigh, my elevator companion questions, "Exciting night?" His tone is friendly, but it still has an edge of

cheekiness to it.

“You could say—”

Before the whole sentence spills from my lips, the elevator jolts before plunging into terrifying blackness. It’s darker than usual as the elevator dashboard isn’t illuminated. My stomach lurches, all the wine and food I’ve consumed tonight threatening to resurface as my panic surges from being trapped in a small, dark box. *Claustrophobia and I have never been close friends.*

“It’s okay. It should only be a few minutes before it begins working again,” assures my companion when he hears my ragged breaths filling the cab.

My death grip on the railing lessens when the elevator lights flicker back on as it jerks back into action.

Only once I calm the reckless beat of my heart do I realize the elevator is descending instead of ascending.

Retightening my grip on the stainless-steel rail, I watch my companion step toward the dashboard.

“Push any button.” I’d rather walk the stairs than be stuck in this death trap as it plummets to the ground.

My companion swallows in dismay when he illuminates every button on the dashboard, but the elevator continues descending, not once stopping on any of the floors we have requested. It’s only when the doors ding and open on the ground floor do I comprehend what’s happening. There, in all his six-foot-plus glory, is the incredibly alluring Mr. Holt, smirking condescendingly.

“You’re an asshole.”

He grins at my comment before shifting on his feet to face a security officer who works in the lobby of my apartment building. While slipping the attendant a folded-up bill, they shake hands before Isaac steps into the elevator.

His infuriated gaze darts to my elevator companion. “Get out.”

My companion doesn’t argue with him. He just scurries out of the elevator as fast as his legs will take him. *Coward.*

I try to follow him, but Isaac seizes my wrist before I can get a foot out of the elevator. Even fuming with anger, my body can’t deny the sexual energy zapping up my arm.

Yanking out of his grip, I head to the back of the elevator to lean on the cool, mirrored wall. Isaac’s presence is so strong it suffocates the air surrounding him. My cheeks are already flushed from his closeness.

Once the elevator starts ascending, Isaac pivots to face me. His narrowed eyes study my body before lifting to my face. His gaze is unnerving and primal, and it has my pulse quickening. When he drinks in my flushed cheeks, he cockily winks.

“You’re a pig.” I cross my arms in front of my chest, still annoyed at spending the last two hours in the presence of him and his dim-witted date.

“And yet, you still want to fuck me.”

My eyes shoot to his. His hungry, heavy-lidded gaze stares into mine, daring me to deny his statement.

“You wish,” I snarl in a whisper.

He inhales an unashamed whiff through his nostrils. “Deny it all you want, Isabelle, but I can smell how aroused you are.”

My knees pull together as a bashful whimper hums my lips. When he steps closer to me, I hold my hand out in front of my body, stopping him mid-stride. I can feel my qualm slipping, so the closer he gets to me, the more my levelheadedness will falter.

Ignoring my silent warning, Isaac nods, smiles a devilishly evil grin, then steps closer.

---

In a blur of bites, tongue lashes, and mini-climaxes, I somehow end up being held against the wall in my apartment. My dress is bunched around my stomach, and two of Isaac's long, gifted fingers have my orgasm teetering on the brink. Our movements are frantic, both blinded by a lust-filled frenzy. Stars form, I scream his name, and my legs buckle when an explosion of fireworks erupt through my body so hard and fast I nearly tumble to the ground.

Once my womb stops clenching, Isaac removes his talented fingers from my soaking wet pussy. He tightens his grip on my ass before sliding down the zipper of his trousers. His pants slip off his muscular legs, gathering in a heap around his ankles. I suck in a breath when his perfect cock springs free from his black boxers. Just the sight of his cock has a fiery warmth building in my lower gut.

When plastic ripping sounds through my ears, my insides tighten and not in a good way.

*“Any guy who tells you he’s carrying a condom in his wallet in case of an emergency is full of shit. We only put a condom in our wallet with the full intention of using it the night we put it in there.”*

*Oh God, I'm going to be sick.*

I slap my hand over my mouth as my stomach heaves. Isaac didn't know I would be at the restaurant. So, he was planning on using that condom on, on, Tatiana.

Gritting my teeth, I place my open palms on Isaac's sweat-drenched, shirt-covered chest and push with all my might. The biggest grunt of anger erupts from my lips, but Isaac doesn't budge an inch.

"Get out," I sneer, clenching my fists and digging my nails into my palms. My breathing returns, but instead of panting in ecstasy, I'm gasping in pure, unbridled anger.

Isaac's brows scrunch together as he glares at me in confusion. He shouldn't be confused. He knows the game he's been playing.

For weeks, I've watched him emerge from his nightclub with a range of women on his arm. I stupidly told myself that not everything is as it seems. I remembered what he said about there being a whole heap of gray no one pays any attention to. I gave him the benefit of the doubt as Hugo requested. *How could I have been so stupid?*

"Get out!" I shout again as tears spring down my face.

When Isaac remains standing in the entryway looking baffled and angry at the same time, I slip under his arm and bolt to the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

By the time I've scrubbed my skin red raw to remove Isaac's intoxicating scent from my body, tears are streaming out of my eyes more forcefully than the water flows from the faucet.

## CHAPTER 30



**Two weeks later...**

“*H*ey, it’s nearly ten o’clock, and we have the weekend off.” I amble into the dimly lit conference room no one ever uses. “So, what are you still doing hiding out in here?”

My enthusiasm about having the weekend off gets sucked right out of me when my eyes roam over the various moldy boxes surrounding Brandon. For the past two weeks, I’ve thrown myself into work. The only time I’ve been cooped up in my apartment is when I need to shower and sleep, but no matter how occupied I keep my brain, my thoughts always drift to Isaac.

“I no longer have the weekend off.” Brandon’s tone relays his disappointment.

Brandon’s eyes lift from the document in his hand. He grimaces and gags. Smiling at his playful response, I walk into the room and lift the lid on the first storage box. It’s filled to the brim with documents and reports.

My lips twist as I spin around to face him. “What are all these files?”

“They’re your Uncle Tobias’ records Alex had shipped here,” he explains, his tone reserved.

I remain quiet as Brandon heads for a larger section of boxes on the right-hand side of the room. “These are your uncle’s files from when he worked undercover in the Petretti Family. And these are his records on the Gottle family.” He points to the smaller pile of boxes I’m standing beside.

My brows scrunch. I didn’t know my uncle worked undercover in either of those families.

An overwhelming sense of deceit plagues me when I blurt out, “Isaac Holt doesn’t have any business connection with either the Petretti or the Gottle family.”

My statement isn’t a total lie. From what I’ve perceived in private, Isaac’s connection with both families is personal, not business-related.

“We already know Isaac is acquainted with Henry Gottle from the surveillance photo you got of Delilah Winterbottom months ago, but I agree, there has been no known association between Col Petretti and Isaac that would warrant me investigating them. Other than being rivals, I can’t find any connection between them, but Alex is adamant I have to spend my weekend rifling through these documents until I unearth Isaac’s dark secrets.”

“Do you believe Isaac’s secrets are held within these boxes?”

Brandon stays quiet as his curious hazel eyes filter over my face. He curses under his breath and runs his hand through his hair before his eyes collide with mine.

“Maybe ask me again next month?”



My lips curve into a smile. “Where do you want me to start?”

“It’s fine, Izzy. Go and enjoy your weekend off.” His eyes relay his appreciation of my offer to help.

I don’t grace him with a reply. I just remove my coat and hang it over the back of Brandon’s jacket flung over a spare chair. Brandon grins at my silent response. Once he finishes rolling up the sleeves of his crisp, blue business shirt, he pulls out a handful of manila folders from the closest box and gestures for me to take a seat opposite him.

His grin enlarges to a full smile when I murmur, “You’re paying for the pizza.”

---

Brandon’s eyes lift to mine as he snags the last slice of pizza out of the grease-lined box. “So, we have worked out Delilah is a cradle snatcher, dating a man six years her junior. Her husband, Henry Gottle, III, Isaac Holt, and Cormack McGregor went to the same university,” he says through a mouthful of cheese pizza.

“Yep. Cormack and Isaac were roommates, and Henry was their RA.”

“Henry now works as a promoter for the UFC in New York City, and he hasn’t had any known contact with his father in over five years.”

“Nearly six,” I interrupt, checking the information my Uncle Tobias noted in his file on Henry Gottle, III. “Isaac’s fighter, Jacob Walters, was a UFC fighter before he was issued a two-year probation for assault on a gentleman named Callum

Parker. Jacob retaliated when Callum brutalized his on-and-off-again girlfriend, Lola. Isaac paid Jacob's extensive legal bills."

"But why would Isaac be interested in organizing a fight for Jacob in the UFC? Wouldn't he make more money by keeping him in his private fighting circle? The rumors are those fights can range from five thousand to over one hundred thousand a fight."

"This is why." I hand him an arrest warrant for domestic abuse filed three years ago for a Curtis Parker. "That's Callum's brother, Curtis. Curtis is a contracted UFC fighter. His contract is locked up so tight, he can't fight anyone not in the UFC for at least the next three years. Jacob and Curtis fought early in Jacob's UFC career. That's the only match Jacob was defeated in so far in his illustrious career. After that match, the referee was cited for biases. Maybe if Isaac can organize this fight for Jacob, Jacob will continue to fight in Isaac's fighting ring?"

"So, Jacob is the one forcing Isaac's association with Henry. It has nothing to do with the mob. Jacob just wants a chance at a fair rematch?"

Smiling, I nod. "Henry's ex-wife, Delilah Winterbottom, started working at Destiny Records one month before her husband filed for divorce. Destiny Records is owned by Isaac's best friend, Cormack. Some may say it's a coincidence, but I think Isaac did Henry a favor by getting Delilah out of his hair in the hopes Henry would help him find a way for Jacob to fight Curtis."

Brandon's brow arches as his lips curl into a grin. "It's plausible." He seems genuinely surprised. "I'll put it in a report and see what Alex has to say in the morning."

I smile, glad that Brandon's views on Isaac are swaying toward the positive. Even being hurt by Isaac, I'll continue to defend his integrity until I find a credible reason to believe he's the man his FBI file portrays him to be. My Uncle Tobias may not have taught me to cook or clean, but he did teach me to make my own informed opinions. *Oh, and how to shoot a pistol like a real gunslinger, but that's a story for another day.*

"So that's one mystery solved. Now, onto the much bigger one." Brandon's eyes lower to the stack of boxes.

Following his gaze, I catch a glimpse of the time on my watch. My eyes bug when I realize it's almost two in the morning. "Holy crap, it's close to 2:00 a.m.!"

"I'm so sorry, Izzy. I didn't know it was that late," he apologizes. "I hope I'm not keeping you from anything."

I expel a puff of air. "Watching re-runs of *Sex and the City* or unearthing the secrets of an enigma. I'll take what's behind curtain B, please, Roger."

Deliriously fatigued, I giggle louder than usual at my pathetic joke. My immature laughter halts when I catch Brandon's admiring gaze watching me in awe.

"What?"

I pull up the sleeves on my shirt since the room has become stifflingly muggy.

"You have a beautiful laugh, Izzy."

Through heated cheeks, I respond, "Thank you."

After the severe beating my ego took two weeks ago with Isaac and Tatiana, I'll accept any compliment I can get. Not giving us the chance to slip into uncomfortable territory, I grab a handful of the manila folders in the vast Col Petretti section.

When I sit back at the desk, Brandon smiles before holding out his hand for his share of the pile.

---

Mumbling, I shift my head away from the sharp pointy object digging into my cheek. A groan rolls up my throat before I reluctantly open my eyes. The morning sun is barely contained by the white vertical blinds on the window in the conference room. My head is thumping from the minimal amount of sleep I got, and my mouth is parched from being left hanging open.

Peering down, I soon discover what was piercing my face the past few hours—my open red ballpoint pen. I run my hand down my face to check that there are no red smear marks on my cheek.

A ghost of a smile forms on my face when I catch the figure of Brandon slumped on a hard chair across from me. My smile enlarges to a full-toothed grin when I discover Brandon's blazer jacket draped around my shoulders. He must have placed it there after I'd fallen asleep. Brandon is a real sweetheart, but for some reason, I'm drawn to an alpha male who infuriates me more than he nurtures me.

My bones creak when I stand to stretch my weary body. After spending three hours reading Col Petretti's file, we're no closer to finding any connection between him and Isaac. Other than me personally knowing they've met, there's not one shred of information in Col's file that alludes to them knowing one another privately or in business.

"Shit," I croak when my cell phone beeps in my pocket.

Fumbling, I yank my cell phone out and silence it before it wakes Brandon. I sneak out of the conference room while

glancing down at my phone screen. Confusion smashes into me when I read Harlow's message.

**Harlow:** *Get your coffee at Starbucks this morning.*

My heart thrashes my ribcage as I dial the number for Harlow's bakery and press my phone to my ear.

"Harlow's Scrumptious Haven, how can I help you?"

"Hey, Harlow, it's Izzy. Is everything okay?"

"Oh, hi, Mom, how are you?" she replies quickly.

I remain quiet, completely dumbfounded.

"I heard you and the ladies from the bowling alley got into a little mischief last night. *Dad* isn't happy with you this morning. How many times have you been told if you're going to spend all night out with your *friends*, you should inform someone?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Harlow—"

"Hey, give the phone back. I'm talking to my mom."

I can barely control my breaths when the deliriously seductive voice of Isaac Holt sounds down the line two seconds later. "Where are you, Isabelle? And don't you dare say your apartment as I know you haven't been back there all night."

One, how the hell does he know that? And two, he has no right to be questioning me. His *dates* haven't stopped since we returned from our weekend away. The long line of women didn't even falter after I kicked him out of my apartment two weeks ago.

Before I can form a response, Alex walks through the glass door of our office. When he notices my wide-eyed expression,

he closes the distance between us. He appears surprised to see me in the office so early.

“Good morning, Isabelle.”

“Morning,” I babble, trying my hardest to ignore the angry growl of Isaac grumbling down the line.

“If he touched you, I’ll break every fucking bone in his body,” Isaac snarls viciously.

Although I can’t see him, I can imagine how fast his jaw is ticking right now.

Unleashing my inner bitch, I reply, “I’m sorry, I’m indisposed right now, but be sure to say hello to Tatiana for me,” before disconnecting the call.

There must be something wrong with me because not only is my blood rushing through my body so fast my veins are bulging, but my sex is soaking wet. An angry Isaac is sexy as hell, so imagine what an angry *and* jealous Isaac would look like?

Raising my hand to fan my flaming cheeks, I catch Alex’s confused gaze raking over my face.

“Are you okay?” he questions, noticing my flushed expression.

Unable to form words through my lust-filled haze, I smile and nod. I may be treading in shark-infested waters, but I’m fine nevertheless.

I freeze as part of Isaac’s statement runs through my mind. *“I’ll break every fucking bone in his body.”*

My heart rate quickens as I skedaddle back to the conference room to rustle through the folders my eyes skimmed early this morning. My quick movements wake

Brandon from his restless sleep. He rubs his eyes before moving to stand next to me.

“How many years ago was Col Petretti’s son admitted to the hospital?” My words come out in a hurry.

Brandon takes his time considering a response to my question. His brain is obviously still jumbled from only two hours of sleep. “Umm, around six, seven years ago,” he eventually replies.

After I find Col Junior’s (CJ’s) hospitalization record, I move to the stack of Isaac’s bank records, which date back to when he was a freshman in college. My eyes dart between the date on the hospital files and Isaac’s bank statements. *Bingo. I’ve found a connection between Col Petretti and Isaac.*

“Look.” I thrust the papers toward Brandon. “Isaac’s hefty Monday morning cash deposits during his first two years at college ceased the weekend Col’s son was admitted to the hospital. CJ’s medical report indicates he was extensively covered in bruises, and he sustained multiple broken bones and fractures.”

Brandon examines the extensive medical report.

“Isaac was a fighter in the underground fight ring, just like his fighter, Jacob, is now. I’d put money on it that Isaac and CJ fought that weekend...” I suddenly stop talking, realizing I just spilled private information on Isaac I gained in confidence.

Alex enters the room. “How do you know Isaac was a fighter?”

*Shit!*

“Umm... I’m just assuming.” My heart rate increases. “It doesn’t seem like an industry you would get into unless you

had some prior knowledge about it.”

“Your investigating skills are starting to flourish, Isabelle. I’m very pleased with your dedication of late,” Alex commends me.

I remain quiet, riddled with guilt that I just snitched on Isaac. Even angry at him, I didn’t intentionally mean to break his trust.

“We recently discovered Isaac was indeed a fighter in an underground fighting ring during his years at college. That fighting ring’s organizer was Col Petretti,” Alex informs us.

“Ah, hold on,” Brandon interrupts, his eyes meeting mine. “CJ’s injuries weren’t from a fight. That weekend he was involved in a car accident with his sister, Ophelia.”

My eyes burn from a sudden rush of moisture in them. “What?”

“CJ and his younger sister, Ophelia, were involved in a fatal car accident six years ago.” Brandon hands me back the medical record along with a police record on the crash.

My hand trembles when I remove the documents from Brandon’s hand. As I scan the reports, my mind flicks back to the night Isaac ran into Col.

*“The prodigal son returns. What has it been... six years, and I don’t even get a hello.”*

*“He hasn’t looked at anyone the way he looks at you in years. Not since Ophelia.”*

*Oh God!*

“Was anyone else in the car with them?”

Brandon shakes his head



“Did Ophelia survive the accident?”

My vision blurs with tears when Brandon once again shakes his head.

## CHAPTER 31



“*W*here is he?”

Hugo’s tormented eyes lift to mine. He smiles before releasing the lock mechanism of Isaac’s town car. When I slide into the passenger seat, he pulls the car into the midday traffic and heads outside the city. He remains quiet, but he occasionally glances my way.

As soon as I could, without drawing attention to myself, I left the office and went straight to Harlow’s bakery. I knew either Isaac or Hugo would be there waiting for me. I’ve noticed the past few weeks whenever I exit the bakery, Isaac’s town car would be parked somewhere along that street.

I used to think it was because Isaac is a dominant alpha male, and he couldn’t stand the idea of another man moving in on his turf. Although part of his stalker behavior is because of that exact reason, I now believe I have a better understanding of why his behavior can be so erratic. After experiencing a loss, most people are reluctant to form an attachment again. They fear if they do, they may also lose that attachment. Although finding out Isaac has suffered a significant loss doesn’t excuse his poor behavior of late, my heart still yearns to comfort him.

My anxious eyes dart to Hugo when he pulls into a rundown building located an hour from Ravenshoe. He remains quiet, not answering my silent questions as he parks next to Isaac's sleek black sports car. Once he turns off the ignition, he nudges his head to a roller door slightly ajar at the side of the warehouse.

I unlatch my belt and open the door. My steps freeze when Hugo starts the car and backs away from the rundown warehouse.

"Isaac will give you a lift home," he says to my panicked expression before skidding out of the driveway, leaving nothing but a cloud of dust in his wake.

Clenching my fists at my side, I stride toward the metal and glass warehouse. Air traps in my throat when I walk into the desolate, rundown building. Isaac is wearing nothing but a pair of black gym shorts and dark running shoes. He's covered head to toe in sweat and is undertaking a grueling routine on a cracked boxing bag hanging from the ceiling by a sizable rusted chain.

Sensing my presence, Isaac's punishing onslaught on the bag stops. When his livid eyes turn, I'm rendered motionless, pinned in place. His heavy-lidded gaze rakes my body before returning to my face. He works his jaw side to side before turning his attention back to the bag. This time, his fury is unleashed with so much force, sand trickles from it like blood seeping from an open wound.

My panties moisten watching him work the bag so expertly. The way his muscles contract as he moves around the bag is an incredibly arousing visual, but even with it being a sexually inspiring sight, his anger projects off him in invisible waves. *That anger is only there because of me.*

Knowing there's only one sentence a dominant male like Isaac wants to hear flowing from my mouth, I shout, "I didn't sleep with anyone last night."

My voice barely projects over his loud, angry grunts. "I haven't had sexual contact with anyone but you in over a year."

Isaac's unbridled onslaught against the worn bag halts. He remains facing the bag, allowing my eyes the chance to absorb every muscle, dip, and curve of his sculptured back. He's breathing so hard, his heavy pants echo through the deserted warehouse.

When he turns to face me, my pupils enlarge. His gaze is unnerving, but even with his eyes showing his anger, I see a small amount of reprieve forming in them.

"Say it again," he requests, his voice hoarse from the harshness of his panting.

"I haven't had sexual—"

"Not that statement. The one about last night," he interrupts, his tone clipped.

Swallowing hard, I repeat, "I didn't sleep with anyone last night."

"Where were you?"

"I was working."

His eyes stare into mine. He can see through to my soul, so he knows I'm telling the truth. Furthermore, he'd detect my deceit, so it would be fruitless for me to lie to him.

"Why didn't you say that this morning when I asked you the same question?"

“Because I was angry with you.” Honesty echoes in my tone. “I wanted you to feel what I felt when I saw you with Tatiana.”

“I already felt it, Isabelle,” he retaliates with a snarl. “When you had your lips on not one, but two men in a week.”

“That isn’t even close to the hurt I felt watching you fuck your way through half the female population in Ravenshoe.”

My anger boils when he smugly smirks. Shaking my head, I spin on my heels and pace toward the roller door. “I don’t know why I bothered coming here.”

“Stop, Isabelle.”

Ignoring his request, I increase my long strides. My tears are threatening to spill, and I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing he has upset me.

Without warning, Isaac bands his muscular arm around my waist, halting my rapid steps. “I said stop!” he hisses into my ear.

My anger over everything I’ve witnessed in his surveillance photos and in person the past five weeks is unleashed when I vehemently throw my legs and arms out. Angry grunts emit from my lips as I struggle to breathe through the tears streaming down my face.

No matter how hard I fight, Isaac doesn’t release or loosen his tight grip.

My ferocious battle lessens when he whispers, “I haven’t slept with anyone since you.”

“You’re a liar!” I fire back. “You had a condom in your wallet. You were planning on sleeping with Tatiana.”

Isaac's clutch on my waist constricts. "Let's get one thing straight, Isabelle. I don't fucking lie, ever!" he rebuts. "And two, I got that condom out of *your* purse. That night, I gave you the benefit of the doubt that you put it in there for me, not Ryan, but you didn't consider giving me the same courtesy?"

My struggle halts. I did put a condom in my purse that night. I went into that date wanting to spark a reaction out of Isaac, so I went in fully prepared. I knew my desire for him always outweighs my levelheadedness. I didn't think to ask him where he got the condom. I just assumed he had brought it with him.

"Not everything is as it seems, Isabelle, but I haven't been with anyone sexually except you since our weekend away. Whether you choose to believe me or not is your choice."

Once he places me down onto my feet, I brush my unnecessary tears off my cheeks and pivot around to face him. His handsome face is taut and constricted, and his beautiful eyes are shifting between mine. He's still panting heavily, making his well-toned chest rise and fall with every breath he takes. His black UFC open-fingered, glove-covered fists are clenched at his side. This is the rawest I've ever seen him, and it's an equally stimulating and emotional sight at the same time.

Although I have deep-seated trust issues from my childhood, I trust what Isaac is saying. You can't fall in love with someone and not trust them. *Without trust, there would be nothing.* So as much as my brain is telling me to wait and evaluate the situation once I have a clear and conscious head, my heart has already formed its own decision.

"I believe you." I take a hesitant step toward him.

The agitation marring his beautiful face softens the instant the words filter from my mouth. Lifting my hand, I cradle his sweat-drenched cheek in my palm. The muscle in his cheek tremors from my touch. A smile curves on my lips pleased his body reacts to my meekest touch just as robustly as my body does to his. Brazenly, I propel onto my tippy-toes and seal my mouth over his. His mouth is warm and inviting and tastes salty from the sweat running over his lips. I inwardly cheer when Isaac allows me to control the pace of our kiss.

When Isaac caresses my ass cheeks in his hands and squeezes them, my legs lift and curl around his waist. A husky moan rumbles up my throat when my pussy connects with his stiffened shaft. His dominant nature is unleashed when he increases the tempo of our kiss.

Unashamed, I grind my aching sex along his cock in a rhythm matching the lashings of his tongue. Because he's only wearing thin running shorts, the massive ridges of his cock are felt through my damp panties. A familiar coil twists in my drenched sex as my anger morphs into desperate need. Isaac plays my body like a gifted musician plays guitar, and it doesn't take him many strums to have it prepared to topple into ecstasy.

Sensing my impending climax, Isaac withdraws from my embrace.

"No," I gasp breathlessly, my voice whiny.

"Not here," Isaac replies to my shameless protest.

Placing me on my feet, Isaac yanks my skirt to a modest level before clasping my hand in his. I struggle to maintain his frantic pace to his car parked outside. Acknowledging my fight, he scoops me into his arms before continuing with his long strides.

Remaining quiet, he places me in the passenger seat before latching my seat belt. The air sucks out of my lungs from the sheer closeness of his striking face. My God, he's a handsome man. Beautiful, yet enigmatic.

Suddenly stopping, Isaac inhales a vast whiff through his nostrils. The growl he releases when he exhales causes a pleasurable zap to my sex. I squeeze my thighs together when his sultry gaze locks with mine. It's hot and heavy, and they have me wiggling in my seat.

“Stop looking at me like that, Isabelle, or I'll take you on the hood of my car.”

My sex aches. “Please,” I whimper, unashamed.

Isaac smiles an evil grin. “As tempting as that offer is, you've been a bad girl, Isabelle, so your punishment is only suitable for behind closed doors.”

My cheeks flame as unbridled desire heats my veins. Winking at my enthusiastic response, Isaac jogs around the car and slides into the driver's seat. In the process, he slips on a cotton shirt and removes his gloves. When he cranks the ignition of his flashy car, I barely hold back a soft moan. The purr of his engine sends a thrill of excitement to my already oversensitive pussy, adding to my eagerness.

I still my breathing when Isaac revs the engine several times before shifting the gears. After fishtailing in the loose gravel, his car whizzes toward the road.

Once we're on the highway, Isaac places his hand on my bare thigh. His is high enough his pinkie finger can teasingly graze my panties, but not high enough to subdue my eagerness. Although his touch is as soft as a feather, it commands my body's full attention.



I shift my position, craving more. My core is twisted up so tight, I'm confident one touch of his talented fingers will have me toppling into orgasmic bliss.

"Not yet," Isaac teases, lowering his hand to its original position.

Groaning, I shift my focus to the derelict buildings whizzing by my window, hoping the bland scenery will quell my excitement.

It doesn't.

I thought the forty-five minutes on the Wave Runner was torture, but this is ten times worse. Isaac's seductive scent is invading every surface of his car, and his index finger tracing a figure-eight pattern on my inner thigh has my sex dripping wet. Furthermore, just being aware of his sexual prowess has my anticipation of what's about to come overwhelming all rationalism. I'm so worked up, I could cry.

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After thirty torturous minutes, Isaac pulls his car into the underground garage of his apartment building. Our elevator ride is intense with the heady lust energizing the air between us.

Isaac calms my fidgeting hand, twisting my skirt by holding it in his. His simple touch surges my horniness to an even higher level. When an elegantly dressed elderly lady enters the elevator at the lobby, her narrowed eyes bounce between Isaac and me. Seemingly unimpressed with my flamed cheeks and wide eyes, her top lip forms into a snarl.

“Cute dog,” I praise, nudging my head to her toy poodle she’s cradling in her arms.

Huffing, she turns her indignant face to the elevator doors. A giggle spills from my lips when she covers her dog’s eyes. Anyone would swear she caught us in a lewd act from the way she’s acting, where all she saw is a couple holding hands.

Hearing my immature giggles, Isaac’s grip on my hand tenses. Before I can comprehend what’s happening, I’m spread against the elevator wall, and Isaac’s skillful lips and tongue are exploring my mouth.

The elderly lady’s loud gasp of disdain mimics the throaty moan rolling up my chest. While she frantically stabs the ‘Open Door’ button, my hands eagerly explore the firm ridges in Isaac’s torso and back. His body is as scrumptious as his mouth.

When the elevator lurches to a stop on the next floor, the old bitty flees like her backside is on fire. Her disgruntled mumblings and the yap of her dog barking is the last thing I hear before my sole devotion returns to Isaac and his sinful mouth.

I unashamedly whimper when he pulls away from our embrace, but my disappointment doesn’t linger for long. He looks as torn as me.

He runs his finger along my kiss-swollen lips. “If you’re going to be accused of something, you may as well do it.”

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A disgruntled growl emits from my lips as I clench black sheets in a white-knuckled hold. Isaac’s chuckle booms

through my pussy before his God-crafted body glides along mine. Although his mouth is glistening with evidence of my arousal, I'm annoyed beyond comprehension. *I'd thought the car ride was agony, but this is ten times worse.*

Isaac is so well in tune with my body, he's using it as punishment for kissing Brandon and Ryan. Until I beg for forgiveness, he refuses to let me come. Over the past hour, his tongue, fingers, and mouth have teased my core so tightly it has nearly snapped more times than I can count, but seconds before my climax topples into oblivion, he withdraws contact.

It's been hell—absolute agony. I'd rather be spanked with a paddle than go through this for another hour.

“Not yet,” Isaac mutters before sealing his mouth over mine.

Bombarded with sexual frustration, I snap my mouth shut and crank my head to the side, denying his kiss. I'm so annoyed. If his knee weren't in between my legs, I'd snap them shut too.

Isaac chuckles against my mouth, seemingly pleased he has me rattled. Sliding his hand up my sweat-slicked body, he cups my engorged breast in his hand. His talented fingers soon tease my nipple into an erect bud, encouraging a raspy moan to spill from my lips.

The instant my lips part for a needy breath, Isaac's tongue slides inside my mouth. I fight with all my might to deny his kiss, but I can't. It's too scrumptious to ignore.

Weaving my fingers through his hair that's damp at the tips, I pull him onto my overheated body. A throaty moan rolls up my chest when his rigid cock brushes my throbbing clit.

Tilting my hips higher, I seek direct contact. I nearly cry in frustration when Isaac pulls back from my embrace.

“Not yet,” he teases, nipping at my lips with his teeth.

While kneeling between my milky white thighs, his smoldering eyes rake my naked form. I study him with just as much eagerness. His body is nearly enough to make me come just by looking at it.

Air hitches in my throat when he leans over to snag a condom out of his bedside table. Peering at me with lust-crammed eyes, he rests his backside on the balls of his feet before ripping open the foil packet with his teeth.

I watch in awe when he rolls the condom down his erect cock. Once it's in place, he bands his hands around my back to tilt my hips high into the air. A long, purring moan topples from my mouth when his cock sinks into my pussy at a painstakingly slow pace.

Once every delicious inch of his manhood has invaded me, his movements cease. I wiggle my hips, wordlessly begging for him to increase his tempo. He grips my hips, snubbing my plea without words.

Growling, my eyes pop open and lock with his. “Please,” I shamefully beg, my high tone leaving no doubt to my excited state.

Isaac's lips curl into a heart-fluttering smile as he withdraws his cock all the way to the tip. Pleasure rockets to my womb when he slams back into me in one ardent thrust. I moan, adoring being filled by him once more.

When Isaac stills his movements again, I barely hold back a sob. The veins in his neck are bulging profusely, showcasing

his arousal, but there's a gleam in his eyes that reveals he can maintain this pace for hours if required.

"I'm not going to beg," I snarl through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, you are." Isaac's tone is as cocky as his facial expression.

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. Isaac executes an expert roll of his hips, faltering my firm stance. Pleas for forgiveness come spitting out of my mouth so hard and fast, my lips can't keep up with the words they're trying to form.

"Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

My shameful begs turn into a shallow moan when Isaac increases the tempo of his thrusts. His speed is perfect, and it has me racing toward release at a record-setting pace.

I dig my nails into his back as an orgasm waves in my stomach before cresting in my aching core. My body heats up as his magnificent thrusts dominate my pussy. This is brilliant, the best sex I've ever had.

He drives me to the brink, screwing my body as well as he fucked my mind the past hour. He claims every inch of me, making me feel thoroughly whole. I'm moaning on repeat, incapable of intellectual thoughts, much less words.

"This is mine," Isaac grunts between big pants.

His possessive eyes scan my naked body, activating every one of my hot buttons. "All of this is mine. Say it, Isabelle. Say it, and I'll let you come."

"It's yours, all of it is yours. I'm yours," I purr without hesitation, not only encouraged by my rampant horniness but because I've wanted to be his since I crashed into him at the airport.

Isaac thrusts into me deeper, rolling his hips at the exact spot that drives me crazy. Shudders wreak havoc with my frame as my climax wavers on the edge. My body is heightened and primed for release, knowing it's moments away from pure bliss. I'm purring like a pussycat, loving the sensation bristling the fine hairs on my body.

"Oh. Oh. Oh." My veins thicken when a fiery warmth spreads across my skin, coating it with a thin layer of sweat.

"Eyes on me, Isabelle." Isaac's voice reveals I'm not the only one caught off guard by the brilliance of our exchange.

My eyes pop open when his thumb circles my pulsating clit. His name roars from my throat in a grunted moan when I freefall over the edge. My nails bend harshly into his back as an orgasm scorches my body like an out-of-control wildfire.

My violent orgasm inspires Isaac's release. He fills me to the hilt seconds before spurts of hot cum explode from his throbbing cock.

My pussy clenches around him, milking his veined manhood. Once every drop of his spawn has been released, his hooded eyes collide with mine.

"You are mine," he says before sealing his mouth over mine.

He kisses me so passionately, and my sex clenches around his still convulsing cock. "Every inch of you is mine, Isabelle."

## CHAPTER 32



Groaning a long and tedious grunt, my eyes flutter open. My muscles are weary, and my temples are throbbing from the lack of sleep I've gotten the past two days. Scanning the room, I realize it's just as bland and uninviting as it was months ago. The walls are void of any paintings or pictures, and no knick-knacks adorn the bedside tables. When I roll over and snatch my satchel from the bedside table, my face winces. It isn't a bad pain, but more of a reminder of what Isaac and I did numerous times earlier this evening.

What Isaac said the last time I was in his room is undoubtedly accurate. You don't have any doubts when you've been bedded by Isaac Holt. If every muscle in your body aching in pain isn't an adequate sign, the surge of adrenaline running through your veins hours after the event is a sure-fire indication.

My nose screws up when I fire up my phone and see it's ten o'clock at night. As much as I'd like to sleep until next week, I can't go back to bed now, or I'll be awake in the middle of the night.

Reluctantly, I scamper out of bed. My lips curve into a broad grin when I snag Isaac's shirt he was wearing this

afternoon off the floor. I shift my eyes around the room to ensure it's empty before raising his shirt to my nose and inhaling a huge whiff. A shiver runs through my body when his delicious scent invades my senses.

My eyes skim the room, seeking any article of clothing that was discarded when we barely made it from the entryway to the bedroom. Since my impromptu gaze has come up empty, I pull Isaac's shirt over my head. After removing my unruly hair from the collar, my bare feet pad along the floor as I exit the room.

My long strides halt when, "Oh, hey, Isabelle," sounds through my ears.

I freeze as my hands shoot down to the hem of Isaac's shirt. Yanking on the hem, I pray my private parts aren't visible. Hugo chuckles boisterously at my panicked reaction. *I'm glad he can see the humor in the situation.* I stiffen even more when Isaac strolls out of the kitchen with a crystal glass in his hand. His smoldering eyes run down my body before lifting to my face.

Swallowing harshly, I scramble back, intimidated by his darkened glare.

"Stop, Isabelle."

I halt, rendered motionless by his pinning gaze. Smirking at my passiveness, he glides toward me, his steps as striking and bold as his handsome face.

He stands so close to me, his whiskey-scented breath fans my lips. "As ravishing as you look right now, I don't like other men eyeing what's mine." His words are only for my ears.

Although his warning could be mistaken as intimidating, his tone doesn't reflect that.



“There are clothes in the closet for you. Go and get dressed, then I’ll take you home.” He runs his thumb under my eyes to remove the mascara caked there.

Ignoring the disappointment clawing my chest that he already wants to take me home, I pivot on my heels and stalk back to his bedroom. I’m barely two feet away from Isaac when he calls my name. My heart beats at an irregular rhythm when I crank my neck back to peer at him. It grows wilder when I spot the dominant gleam brightening his dark eyes.

“From now on, anytime you leave my room, you’re only to wear my shirts,” he commands as his eyes scan my body.

My brows squeeze together as I hesitantly nod. *Didn’t I just get reprimanded for wearing his shirt out of his bedroom?*

Shrugging off my confusion, I head for the hidden walk-in closet. My bewilderment intensifies when I enter the expensive space. The vast collection of suits that were housed here months ago have been removed, replaced with a handful of dry-cleaning bags.

My toes dig into the plush carpet as I saunter further inside. My breathing labors when I spot over a dozen Jimmy Choo shoe boxes lined underneath a handful of designer dresses and ball gowns. Allowing my love of Jimmy Choo to overrule logical thinking, I stoop down and pry open the lid on the first box.

An excited squeal emits from my lips when I spot a pair of Kia 110 boots. My eyes absorb every perfect stitch and exquisite design when I lift them from their box. My excitement is squashed when I see they’re a petite size six. Even on a non-humid day, my size eight feet will never squeeze into them. After giving them one final hug, I place the shoes back into their box.

Once I've changed into a fresh set of clothes, I saunter back to the living room. My pulse quickens when Isaac's eyes lift and lock with mine. The dominant gleam I spotted in his eyes earlier triples when he absorbs the white-wash jeans and light pink cashmere sweater I chose from the women's clothing in his closet that was my size. All the designer dresses were two sizes too small for my generous breasts.

As I glide past a grinning Hugo, I mouth a silent apology for the awkward predicament I placed him in.

"It's all good, Isabelle. I saw more the night you climbed over the privacy partition," Hugo replies to my wordless apology, a sassy wink adding to the playfulness in his tone.

My eyes snap to Isaac when he growls at Hugo's taunt. His jaw is quivering, and his hands are balled at his sides.

"I'm joking," Hugo assures as his confused eyes flick between Isaac and me. "You know me, boss, I never water another man's turf."

Remaining quiet, Isaac lifts a crystal glass to his mouth. He downs the generous nip of brown liquid inside in one swift motion. After running the back of his hand across his stern lips, he sets the glass on the coffee table, then rises from the white leather sofa he's sitting on. Although Hugo's eyes show his apprehension, he's the first man I've met who doesn't cower from Isaac's infuriating glare.

Pretending he can't feel the tension in the air, Hugo rubs his hands together. "So, where are we off to?" His inquisitiveness conceals his unease.

"Your services won't be required again until Monday morning." Isaac's words are for Hugo, but his eyes are for me.

An unexpected giggle erupts from my mouth when Hugo vaults off the sofa. His excitement at having the weekend off is displayed all over his ruggedly handsome face. “Hell, you don’t have to tell me twice.” He wiggles his brows. “You’ve got my number if you need me.”

He bolts for the door so fast, air glides over my forearms.

Once the vault-like door slams shut, I drift my eyes to Isaac. “You need to give him more days off,” I jest, my tone lighthearted.

Isaac doesn’t grace me with a reply, but a smirk tugs his full lips higher. “You ready?”

Smiling, I nod.

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My brows join together in a scrunch when Isaac turns left at Remington Avenue T-intersection, instead of right.

“My apartment is that way?”

Isaac has been to my apartment on three occasions, so I’m somewhat surprised he has forgotten the directions. *I never expected a man with an astute business mind like Isaac to be forgetful.*

“We’re not going to your apartment.” His grip on his steering wheel tightens.

I arch a brow. “You said you were taking me home.”

Isaac shakes his head. “No, I said I’ll take you home. I didn’t say whose home we were going to,” he corrects as his gaze drifts from the road to me. Excitement slicks my skin when he clarifies, “I’m taking you to my private residence.”

In a nanosecond, my eagerness dampens, and anger takes its place. “Where did we just leave if that isn’t your home?” I ask, my tone indicating to my growing aggravation.

Isaac’s lips twitch, but not a word is spat from his mouth. He returns his eyes to the road, ignoring my question with the skill of a nark. Every second he delays answering me has my anger intensifying. It brews in my gut until I can’t hold it back for a second longer.

Struggling to keep down the contents of my stomach, I clench my teeth together. “Was that your fuck pad?”

Isaac’s eyes snap to mine. Although his livid glare could cut through ice, I don’t back down from my angry stance.

“Was that your fuck pad?” I ask again, my tone sterner this time around.

He works his jaw side to side. “I don’t call it that, but I guess most people would see it that way.”

“How many other women have you slept with in that bed?” I ask before I can stop my words. “Actually, don’t answer that. I don’t want to know. I already feel sick enough.”

My reply isn’t a lie. My stomach is rolling, threatening to spill at any moment. I also have an overwhelming desire to take a shower. I’ve never felt as dirty as I do right now.

“Take me home,” I request, fighting my hardest to ignore the moisture welling in my eyes.

“I’m taking you home.”

“No, take me back to my apartment.”

Isaac’s grip on the steering wheel tightens so much, his knuckles go pasty white. His jaw muscle quivers as he inhales a large breath through his nostrils.

“No, Isabelle. You’re mine. Which means my home, my bed, my rules.” His tone is as dangerous as my heart rate.

I glower at him, too stunned to form a response. I fought Alex tooth and nail not to become a commodity, but Isaac is making me precisely that. I’m not a possession. Nobody owns me.

“Don’t look at me like that, Isabelle.” Isaac’s tone lowers in warning.

Rolling my eyes, I turn my infuriated gaze to the star-filled night, thankfully blocking him from seeing the tears splashing my cheeks. Anger is burning through my body, but it isn’t potent enough to dry my tears—*unfortunately*.

Not even a heartbeat later, my hands shoot out to brace the dashboard when Isaac slams his foot onto the brake and yanks his car to the side of the road. After unclasp my seat belt, he drags me across the center console to sit side-straddled on his lap. His nostrils flare with every breath he takes as his remorseful eyes dance between my tear-filled ones.

The pain scorching my veins fades when he cups my face with his hands, so his thumbs can rub away my tears. Not a word spills from his lips, but his eyes beg for forgiveness. His beautiful gray irises are my biggest weakness. They’re the gateway to his soul and the key to unlocking the real Isaac Holt. Although Isaac has a reputation for being cold-hearted and ruthless, his eyes relay an entirely different story. They’re my greatest ally in unearthing the man behind the enigma.

Once my tears have settled, Isaac presses his lips to mine. Even upset, my body melts into his embrace, incapable of denying his affection. His kiss is scrumptious and sweet, and it clears the turmoil swirling in my stomach.

Our heated exchange doesn't lessen until the windows of his sports car are covered with fog, and the air in the cabin is stifling.

While rubbing my plump lips with his thumb, Isaac's eyes filter over my face. "I shouldn't have taken you there, but I needed to be sure you were mine before I fully let you in."

Tears form in my eyes so fast they sting, but this time, they're from happiness, not hurt. Isaac is a highly private man, so for him to accept me into his life has my heart enlarging so much it's close to exploding.

Shocked by my uncommon response, Isaac eyes me curiously. I'm certain I look ridiculous with tears flooding my cheeks while a huge grin spreads across my face, but my response can't be helped. I'm too happy to hold back my excitement.

Slapping my hands on each side of his cheeks, I place a dramatically sloppy kiss on his stern mouth. I feel him smirk against my lips before he takes our kiss from playful to teasing.

Isaac's talented mouth soon has me wishing we weren't in the tight confines of his car. I meet the lashing of his tongue stroke for stroke as my hands slither over the contours of his chest and abdomen.

I'm seconds away from tackling the impressive bump extending in the crotch of his trousers when a brief tap hits his driver's side window.

"Move along," A male police officer in a fluorescent yellow vest waves us along.

When Isaac lowers the window of his car, the officer's stern glare lessens. "Oh, good evening, Mr. Holt. I'm sorry, I

didn't realize this was your vehicle," the handsome African American officer apologizes.

"That's okay, Jimmy, it's new. I've only taken her out a handful of times." Isaac's eyes scan my face.

I return his stare, confused by the gleam in his eyes. *Is he talking about the car or me?* When his cock twitches under my backside, my eyes open wide. *He's talking about me.*

"How are Marisha and the kids?"

I'm shocked Isaac can engage in conversation without alluding to his sexual arousal, which is struggling to be contained in his trousers.

The officer smiles. "They're good. Bobbi just made the varsity team."

When his eyes drift to a car approaching on the other side of the road, I swivel my hips, vying to alter Isaac's flawless composure.

Although his cock stiffens to a mouthwatering thickness, Isaac's conversation doesn't falter in the slightest. His tone remains neutral, not responding to the raging boner sending my thoughts into a tizzy.

After Isaac bids the police officer farewell, I flop into the passenger seat. Once my seat belt is latched, Isaac pulls his car back onto the road, waving to the police officer on the way by.

A shiver of excitement, and if I'm being totally honest, a slight tremor of fear runs through my body when Isaac mutters, "You'll pay for that tease later."

## CHAPTER 33



*H*oly moly! My breathing stills when my eyes absorb the impressive private residence in front of me. Isaac opens his window and leans over to enter a security code into the black box at the edge of the driveway. The black wrought iron gate in front of us creaks as it opens, exposing a curved path that weaves up to a beautiful brick house sitting at the top of a hill. The manicured gardens are well maintained but have a classic bachelor design with manly-trimmed hedges and a collection of potted plants.

Isaac drives up the pebbled driveway, stopping in front of his remarkable mansion. Stepping out of the car, the first thing my eyes zoom in on is the beautiful arched window on the third floor. Each window in the mansion is either a circular or curved design, but the only window on the third floor is a perfect half-circle.

Noticing my gaze, Isaac says, “That’s my bedroom.”

The purr of his voice roars through to my sexual core, igniting my senses.

“At night, you can see the whole of Ravenshoe from my bed.”

“It’s beautiful, a fitting castle for a prince.”



He chuckles at my comment. “There’s nothing princely about me.” His brow arches into his dark, luxurious hair.

I shrug. He may not be a prince charming, but not every girl wants a prince. Some want a brainy geek, some want a rock star, and others want an alpha male who makes them scream his name at the top of their lungs while the most earth-shattering climax rips through their body so hard they see nothing but fireworks exploding before their eyes.

Feeling my composure waving, I question, “How long have you lived here?”

I occasionally need to rein in my desires and participate in other activities with Isaac that don’t involve sex. He places my hand within his and walks us toward the curved glass French doors at the front of the mansion.

“I’ve owned this house for nearly three years.” He stops his long strides when he reaches the front door and pivots around to face me. “This is my private residence.”

My heart warms, loving that he’s inviting me into his private sanctuary.

“I don’t think you fully understand what I’m saying. This is my *private* residence. I don’t let anyone come here. Hugo has only been here a handful of times.”

*Oh.*

“Anything you hear or see behind these doors has to stay behind these doors.” He motions his head to the front door. “I share enough of my private life with the public. I’m not willing to give them any more of myself than I already do.”

“I understand.” A broad smile spreads across my face making my cheeks ache.

He shifts his head to the side, and his brow bows high into his hairline as if to ask why I'm grinning like the cat who ate the canary.

"You *like* me." I overemphasize the word 'like.'

He shakes his head at my bold comment, but the smallest curve of his lips reveals his true reply. My heart skips a beat when he walks us through the front door, not attempting to refute my claim. *Yes!*

The inside of Isaac's house is just as spectacular as the outside with beautiful antique furniture, rich and luxurious material draped over arched French doors, and even priceless paintings and sculptures adorning the walls of each room. My impromptu private tour of his private oasis ends in his impressively large black and cherry oak kitchen. Releasing my hand, he strides toward the refrigerator.

"What do you feel like eating for supper?"

Snubbing my grumbling stomach, I reply, "You."

Isaac's head pops out of the fridge. Tremors shake through me when his sultry eyes absorb my body. "You'll be dessert, but first, I need to feed you so you can keep up with my stamina."

I chew my bottom lip, lessening the intense fire building in my womb. Isaac winks before returning his attention to the refrigerator.

"Being Saturday, our options are limited, so it's either Catherine's lasagna or chicken parmigiana."

My lips purse as I struggle to work out which meal sounds more enticing. My brain is in such a lust-filled fog, I can't decide which I'd rather eat.

Sensing my reluctance, Isaac decides on my behalf. “Lasagna it is.”

My eyes track him as he places two containers of lasagna inside a convection oven. After hitting the reheat button, he walks to an overhead cupboard located above a wine fridge and pulls down two china plates. He places them on the island countertop on my left before proceeding toward a stack of drawers next to the double sink to remove two sets of cutlery. Even watching him do something as simple as setting the table is an exhilarating experience.

Once he has the countertop set for an intimate dinner for two, he motions for me to join him. A girly squeal spills from my lips when he lifts me to sit on a high-backed barstool. Flashbacks of him doing the same thing six months ago in the business class lounge come rushing to the forefront of my mind.

“Can I ask you something?” I ask, my tone apprehensive.

Isaac freezes for the quickest second before replying, “Can we have dinner before the interrogation begins?”

I remain quiet while watching him remove his jacket and sling it on the beautiful wooden bench. Once he has his cufflinks undone, his eyes lift to mine. Our gazes lock and hold for several electrifying minutes. There’s no doubting the sexual connection between us, but there’s also something much greater drawing us to each other.

I grin when he asks, “What do you want to know?”

“What did you think when I tumbled at your feet at the airport?”

Relief washes over his face before he smirks. “You continue to surprise me every day, Isabelle.”

“Why, what type of question were you expecting?”

He smirks again before moving to the convection oven that’s signaling our meals are ready. “To be honest, I thought your fall was a ruse to gain my attention. I’ve become accustomed to the tactics women use to secure my devotion these past few years.”

He removes the lasagna from the oven before placing a generous serving on my plate. “But the instant your big, beautiful eyes looked up at me, I knew it wasn’t a ploy. You were truly embarrassed and seemingly unaware of who I was.”

“I didn’t have a clue who you were until after I arrived at Ravenshoe...” I stop talking, wondering if I’ve revealed too much.

Slowly raising my gaze from the plate of lasagna, I catch Isaac staring at me cautiously. Seconds feel like minutes as we undertake an intense, chemistry-riddled stare-down. A smile curves on my lips when he breaks the connection first by nodding and striding toward the fridge.

“I guess I allowed my stellar reputation in Ravenshoe to get the better of me.” He pulls a bottle of red wine from the wine fridge. “I’m certain everyone in Ravenshoe knows who I am, but you’ve humbly reminded me there’s a whole world outside of Ravenshoe that doesn’t have a clue about some arrogant businessman named Isaac Holt.”

Hoping to ease the tension in the air, I reply, “Their loss.”

His chuckle has my mind wandering away from the food in front of me.

Forever diligent, Isaac says, “Eat, Isabelle. You’ll need your energy.”

He wasn't joking. Once we finished our dinner and two glasses of wine, Isaac had his dessert on the very countertop we were eating on. Then in the shower. Then in his monstrous four-poster bed.

By the time we're preparing to go to sleep, the sun is already rising over the horizon. Isaac emerges from the bathroom. He has disposed of his used condom and has a washcloth in his hands. Even sexually sated and deliriously tired, the pulse in my neck thrums when he places the washcloth between my legs and cleans me. Once all the residue of my climax is removed, he slips back in between the sheets and pulls me in close to his body.

An appreciative moan tears from my throat when the soft curves of my body mold into the hard firmness of Isaac. "Stop moaning, or neither of us will get any sleep." He sounds as exhausted as I feel.

"Is that even possible?" My words are muffled by a yawn.

My heavy-lidded eyes flutter open when his stiffening cock digs into my backside. "Does that answer your question?"

Biting my bottom lip, I roll over to face him. My glowing eyes bounce between his as he saves my bottom lip from my menacing teeth.

"You're going to be the death of me," he says before sealing his mouth over mine.

## CHAPTER 34



“*I* didn’t know there was a muscle there,” I grumble to myself.

Every muscle in my body is throbbing. Now, don’t get me wrong, it’s a good pain, one I’d happily choose to feel every day, but I’m suffering soreness in areas I didn’t know housed muscles.

After working my neck side to side to relieve the kink formed there from sleeping on Isaac’s drool-worthy pectoral muscle the past several hours, I climb out of bed. Unsurprisingly, I’m once again waking up in an empty bedroom. I feel like a zombie, so I have no clue how Isaac can live off such little sleep.

This room is much more adeptly decorated than the room in Isaac’s fuck pad. The color theme is a luxurious burgundy and charming dark steel gray. His bedside tables have pictures and knick-knacks on them, and the ceiling isn’t mirrored. I guess the mirrored ceiling in his apartment should have been my first clue that it wasn’t his primary residence.

“Wow.”

The view from his bedroom window is remarkable. My attention was so focused on Isaac last night, I didn’t pay any attention to the spectacular view out his window. You can see

nearly the entire downtown area of Ravenshoe from this vantage point. A smile curls my lips high as I slide my arms into the sleeves of Isaac's blue business shirt he was wearing last night. Once I have the top three buttons done up, I pull my unruly hair from the collar and exit his room.

It takes wandering around his imposing mansion for nearly twenty minutes before I locate him sitting behind a mahogany desk in a vast office.

He's seated in a black leather chair, swiveled around to face an arched window behind his desk. He's talking to someone on his phone. From his tone and demeanor, I'd say it's a business associate or a staff member.

I prop my shoulder on the doorjamb, intending watch him in silence. Forever vigilant, Isaac senses my presence. My breath hitches when he pivots the chair around to face me. He's wearing a pair of dark washed jeans and a fitted white shirt. To add even more allure to his sexiness, he's also barefoot.

As my eyes absorb the sexually satisfying visual of a casual and laid-back Isaac, his eyes study my body with just as much eagerness. He smirks a panty-clenching smile when he notices I'm wearing nothing but his blue shirt from last night.

"Yes, I'm here," he snaps down the phone when his perusal of my body interrupts the flow of his conversation.

My pulse quickens when he gestures for me to join him. Fiddling with my shirt, I pad into his office. When I accept the hand he extends, he pulls me down until I'm sitting on his lap. A strong surge of yearning ripples through me when his erect cock digs into my backside. I'm surprised when he continues with his call, his authoritative tone not once faltering, not even

when his hand slips under my shirt to tweak my nipples into stiff peaks.

“Henry, enough stalling. I don’t care what it costs, just get it done.”

He disconnects his call, not giving Henry the chance of a reply.

“Was that the Henry I met when we went away for the long weekend?”

“Yes,” he answers as his gaze becomes more hooded.

A moan seeps from my lips when he massages my aching shoulders. “Are you sore?”

“Uh-huh.” I moan, loving his fingers kneading the painful kinks in my neck and shoulders.

A groan rips from my throat when he withdraws his talented fingers from my neck. He stands from the chair, scooping me into his arms at the same time. His long strides down the hallway are quick and efficient. A grin curves on my lips when he places my naked backside down onto an expansive marble vanity in the main bathroom.

My grin turns into a full-toothed smile when he draws a bath. After squirting delicious smelling bath products into the fast-running water, Isaac turns to face me. Although his gaze is hungry and lust-ridden, there’s also a sparkle of something else shining in his eyes.

My breathing slows when he pulls his shirt over his head in one fluid movement. Then my pulse quickens when he undoes the button on his jeans. Once his jeans and boxers are removed, he undoes the top button of my shirt. My mouth is ajar as my eyes drink in his magnificent body.



“See something you like?” His words are drenched with cockiness.

Unable to speak through my gaped mouth, I nod. Winking, he slips his shirt off my shoulders. A triumphant grin stretches across my face when he inhales a sharp breath, my inner vixen pleased he finds my body as tempting as I find his.

My voice drips with sarcasm when I quote, “See something you like?”

He doesn't grace me with a reply, but from the stiffening of his cock, I can make my own assumption.

After assisting me off the vanity, he walks us to the nearly overflowing bathtub. He slides into the bubble-filled tub before offering me his hand. A moan seeps from my lips when I join him. The warm water is heavenly to my overworked muscles.

When I lean against Isaac's torso, a gush of water splashes over the rim of the tub.

“You're dealing with Catherine tomorrow,” he informs me, his tone hindered with laughter.

I moan, adoring his happy mood. “Who's this Catherine I keep hearing about?”

My body melts when he rubs my shoulders. “She's my...” He stops talking mid-sentence.

My closed eyes snap open since my curiosity is piqued.

“Trying to give Catherine a title is like trying to give Hugo one. They're both all-rounders. I'd say Catherine is a housekeeper, personal assistant, shopper, grandma.”

My heart warms when he says, “grandma.”

“So, she isn’t someone I should be worried about?”

Isaac chuckles. “Ah, no. She and her husband celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary last month.”

He shifts my position until I have a clear view of his handsome face. “You don’t have *anyone* to be worried about, Isabelle.”

Unsure of a reply, I nod. I rest my cheek on his pec muscle so my eyes can absorb all the striking features of his face. The longer I stare at him, the more his jaw muscle ticks.

“What?” I question when the tension in the room reaches a breaking point.

“Do I have anyone to be worried about? Because I’m already acutely aware of the stellar impression you made on Ryan, so I was wondering if there might be anyone else I should be informed of.”

My breasts flatten on his glistening chest when I roll over. When I lift my eyes, I’m met with the infuriated gaze of the incredibly attractive Mr. Isaac Holt. My heart skips a beat. *I knew a jealous Isaac would be just as sexy as an angry Isaac.*

“As handsome as Ryan is...”

Water splashes over the rim of the bath when Isaac clenches his fist so fast it creates a ripple.

“Let me finish my sentence before you get all tense.”

His eyes darken with every second that ticks by, but it isn’t scary enough to stop me from saying, “As handsome as Ryan is, no one makes my body ignite the way you do. No one ever has, and no one ever will. You’ve ruined me for any other man.”

I slide my body along his until we meet eye to eye. “And no man could ever compete with a man as incredibly gorgeous as you. Not even Kellan Kyle.”

Stealing his ability to reply, I seal my mouth over his. His lips curve into a smile before he returns my kiss with the same amount of intensity I’m giving.

Our kiss starts slow but soon builds in urgency. I drink him in, tasting, licking, and absorbing every delicious portion of his mouth.

Spurred on by his raspy moans, I slither my hand down the ridges of his six-pack before grasping his erect cock. Isaac’s rugged pants overtake spilling water when I drag my hand down his lengthened rod. My seamless—and somewhat frantic—pumps soon have him chasing his release.

A husky gasp expels from my mouth when the tip of his cock grazes the entrance of my pussy. Blinded by lust, I adjust my position so his shaft can dip into my weeping sex with each stroke of my hand.

Overcome with desire, each stroke has him inching into me more and more.

Sensing my qualm slipping, Isaac’s heavy-lidded gaze pops open as he calms my frantic movements. “As much as I want to plunge into your pretty pink pussy right now, we need a condom.”

The throaty deepness of his voice spikes my relentless pursuit. “I’m on the pill.”

Isaac stiffens for the quickest second before pinching my chin to raise my downcast head. When I stare into his beautiful eyes, his reluctance reflects back at me.

“Are you sure, Isabelle? Because once I make you entirely mine, there’s no turning back. There will be *nothing* between us again.”

Deciding to give my reply by using actions instead of words, I remove my hand from his throbbing cock and slam down. Water splashing onto the marble tile echoes around the room along with our gruff moans.

“Fuck, Isabelle.”

The sting of Isaac’s fingers when he grips my hips add to my excitement. After adjusting my position, I increase the tempo of my thrusts, encouraged by Isaac’s provocative groans.

“You feel so good. So tight. So fucking wet.”

He releases me from his grasp to clutch the bathtub. A rumbling moan tears from my throat when he adjusts the tilt of his hips. Our new position allows every inch of his cock to fill my clenching pussy.

I purr his name when his hand slithers between our connected bodies. He rubs my clit in a circular motion, forcing me to call out.

“Oh...” I want to say more, but I can’t, lust has stolen my words.

My nails dig into Isaac’s shoulders as I scream in orgasmic bliss. My pleasurable moans reverberate through the bathroom as an orgasm cascades through my body. It’s so strong, even I’m surprised by its intensity.

My orgasm deepens when hot cum rages out of Isaac’s cock, coating the walls of my pussy. I clench my sex, greedily milking his throbbing member, craving every drop of his spawn.

Several body-shuddering minutes later, I collapse onto his sweat-glistening torso. I'm exhausted and gasping for air.

After sinking back into the tub, Isaac runs his hand down my frazzled hair. Even with the temperature of the water beyond chilled, the heat of our bodies is enough to keep us warm.

My heart flips when Isaac presses a kiss to my temple. "That was a first."

Once my heart rate settles, I peer into his sparkling eyes. "That was a first for me, too. I've never had sex in a bathtub."

Isaac stiffens, and his cock still caressed inside me softens. "I meant it was my first time without a condom."

Although I should be mad he just mentioned previous sexual encounters in front of me, a smile curls my lips.

I slip off his semi-erect cock. "I'm glad I was your first."

Isaac's jaw ticks so profusely, it's heard over the sloshing of the bathwater when I step out of the tub.

"Isabelle..." His angry roar would usually have me freezing in fear, but not this time. I wrap a plush towel around my quaking body, pretending I'm not the least bit concerned.

My trembles from the cold water turn into shudders of excitement when Isaac stands from the tub. His domineering stature already demands my attention, but it's his relentless gaze securing my utmost devotion. It's infuriatingly angry and solely focused on me. He glares at me, demanding I answer the silent questions pumping out of him.

*Without a doubt, I can testify that a jealous Isaac is by far the sexiest Isaac I've ever seen.*

His stern gaze lessens when I admit, “It was also my first bareback ride.”

## CHAPTER 35



*A*fter my tease in the bathroom, I spent the next two hours paying for the repercussions of my frisky taunt. Isaac's stamina astounds me. I've never met a man with so much self-control in the bedroom. I lost count of the number of orgasms that ripped through my body this afternoon. I was left sated, delirious, and unable to move. I had so much adrenaline running through my body, I felt drunk even though I haven't had a drop of alcohol the past week.

Thankfully, Isaac let me rest the majority of the afternoon, only waking me when it was time for dinner.

We've spent the last hour in his living room, eating homemade tacos and talking. I've loved every moment I've spent with him, whether we're in the bedroom or just hanging out. Only thirty-six hours have passed since we left the abandoned warehouse, but it feels like a lifetime.

"I'll be back in a minute." Isaac collects our empty plates from the coffee table before heading to the kitchen.

After placing my phone on the coffee table, I glance at an extensive collection of pictures proudly displayed on the mantel above the fireplace. There are over two dozen photos of various people in different poses. Their ages and gender

range between each picture, but I notice one gentleman appears in the photos more than any other individual.

When Isaac walks back into the room, I ask, “Who is this man?”

He stands next to me, his lips arching when he peers at the photo I’m clutching. “That’s my brother, Nick.”

When he removes the picture from my hand, the grin on his face enlarges to a full-toothed smile. My brows lower down my face as my lips purse. Although the gentleman in the photo is handsome, he has no similar features to Isaac at all. Isaac has brown hair, gray eyes, and a light olive complexion. This gentleman has blond hair, dark blue eyes, and his skin is pasty white. Let alone the fact Isaac’s persona demands respect and authority, while his brother seems a little roguish and cheeky.

Noticing my odd expression, Isaac chuckles. “He’s my brother. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

He places the photo back onto the mantel before turning to face me. Air snags in my throat just from the sheer closeness of his ruggedly handsome face. I don’t think I’ll ever get sick of seeing his tempting features.

“Do you have any siblings?”

Grimacing, I shrug. Isaac eyes me curiously but remains quiet, patiently waiting for me to decide if I want to respond any further. Sensing my reluctance, he sits down on the sofa and gestures for me to join him. A smile sneaks onto my face when he interlocks our hands and lowers me to straddle his lap.

I settle my nerves with some big breaths. “I have siblings, but half of them probably don’t remember me, and the other



half don't know I exist."

When our gazes collide, I suck in a sharp breath. Although his eyes reveal his comfort, he remains quiet, giving me the chance to gather my composure. I'm grateful for his patience as tears are already welling in my eyes.

"You don't have to say any more," Isaac assures a short time later, his voice deep. "But I'm ready to listen once you feel comfortable."

A smile curves on my lips, grateful he isn't going to push me. Just knowing he won't force me makes me want to share information I've never shared before.

"My mom fell in love with the wrong man." My voice is barely a whisper. "My father was already married and had a handful of kids with his wife and mistresses by the time they met. He promised my mom a lavish life if she'd give up her current lifestyle and become his mistress. Because my mom grew up in a family living well below the poverty line, and she was only seventeen, she readily agreed. Instead of a life of luxury, my mom got a long list of false promises."

I stop talking when a tear splashes my cheek. My heart leaps when Isaac beats me to wiping it away.

"She got pregnant with me not long after they got together, and that's when her life spiraled out of control." My words croak with each one I speak. "My father preferred to have sons, and since I was born a girl, he despised me on sight."

I swallow hard before continuing with my story before I lose my nerve. "My mom died of a drug overdose when I was six years old."

Isaac's thighs stiffen, but his face doesn't alter from his usual expression.

“My father didn’t want me, and his wife didn’t know I existed, so I was... umm...”

I stop talking to wipe under my nose to ensure the contents inside doesn’t spill. *This is harder than I ever imagined.*

When an unexpected sob tears from my mouth, Isaac says, “That’s enough for tonight, Isabelle.”

His thumbs wipe away the tears now cascading from my eyes before he leans over to place a kiss on each of my eyelids. His loving gesture causes a sudden shift in the air. Sexual tension builds as we assess each other’s faces.

When the tension grows too great to ignore, I tilt my hips forward, seeking his cock I feel thickening beneath me. My movements are slower than the pace we’ve been going the past two days, but fire-sparking at the same time.

Goosebumps break across my stomach when Isaac slips his hand under my shirt. Although his touch is as light as a feather, it’s robust enough to gain my body’s full attention. His slow but sensual pace heightens my senses, making sure they pay careful attention to his every move.

A shallow moan vibrates my lips when he kneads my breasts. He rolls my nipples, sending a roaring sensation through my body, only stopping when they cluster in my needy pussy.

Standing from the leather sofa, Isaac places me onto a white fur rug in the living room. He guides me backward until my back molds into its soft fibers.

Moving his hands to my shirt, he glides it over my head. Once it’s removed, his lust-ridden gaze lowers to mine.

“Stretch your arms above your head and clasp your hands together.” His soft rumble has my insides purring.

When I do as instructed, he uses my shirt to secure my hands at the wrists. “Keep them above your head.”

Biting my bottom lip, I nod. My pulse quickens when he tugs off his shirt. My pulse thrums when he stands before me barefoot, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans undone at the button. My eyes greedily absorb his magnificent body, drinking in every spectacular ridge as if it’s the first time they’ve sampled it.

Once he removes his jeans, he crouches next to my trembling thighs to unbutton the three-button fly on my jeans. My core clenches when he slides them down my legs, his hand brushing my sensitive pussy on the way by.

His fluid movements continue until I’m lying before him as naked as the day I was born. After his eyes appreciatively study my body, he stands and moves out of my vision.

Confusion slips over my face, confused by his sudden departure.

A short time later, he returns with a pillow in his hand. My lips furl high when he places it under my head. “Your eyes are never to leave mine, Isabelle.”

Unable to speak, I nod.

After gracing my skin with gentle nips and caresses, Isaac’s attention shifts to lavishing the throbbing areas of my body.

Any time my gaze falters during his tantalizing teases, he commands my eyes back to his. Watching him worship my body is an exhilarating experience that has me freefalling into ecstasy more times than I can count.

Once my body is lax from sexual exhaustion, Isaac adjusts my position. A familiar tingle builds in my stomach when his

swollen knob braces the entrance of my sex. Even exhausted beyond comprehension, my body can't help but react to his.

My back arches with a throaty moan when he inches his cock into my drenched pussy.

“Eyes, Isabelle.”

My eyes snap to his as a long, salivating moan rumbles from my throat. Our bodies are joined in the most intimate way, heightening my senses even more.

Isaac's muscles flex with every thrust his body makes. Each grind fills me to the brink before his rolling hips send a jolt of pleasure to my tightening core.

Sometime later, I wriggle my hands, fighting against the restraints binding them together. The urge to run my hands over Isaac's sweat-slicked body is so overwhelming, I can't hold back my desire for a moment longer.

Noticing my struggle, Isaac releases my hands from their restraints. My hands dart to his body to eagerly run them along his bulging biceps before raking them down his sweat-drenched back.

With every pump of his hips, pleasure rockets through my body. I moan his name when a long and intense orgasm lights up my body. I shudder in ecstasy, growling his name on repeat.

“One more,” he requests through panted breaths.

He adjusts his position, so he's kneeling before moving his hands to my back. Scooping me in his arms, I end up straddled on his lap. My breasts squish against his smooth chest when my arms band around his neck.

I inwardly squeal when Isaac mutters, “Choose your pace, baby.”

Barely able to move since my legs are Jell-O, he shifts his hips upward, gliding his throbbing cock in and out of my saturated pussy.

“Like that?”

I don't grace him with a reply. I just groan a long, purring moan as warmth flames my skin. A bead of sweat runs down Isaac's cheek as his precise rhythm has me chasing my next climax.

If I weren't already close to the brink, his dirty mouth soon has my orgasm teetering on the edge. All his comments about how much he loves fucking me, how good my pussy feels wrapped around his cock, and that he could fuck me for years and never get enough, has my climax building at a rapid pace.

His cock thickens as his sprint for release grows. Spurred on by his impending climax, I increase the tempo of our thrusts. Our pace turns wild that only skin slapping skin echoes around the living room.

“Fuck, Isabelle, you get tighter when you're about to come.”

“Oh, God,” I pant before fireworks explode in front of my eyes.

Isaac's name tears from my throat in a rumbling scream as I quiver through a blinding orgasm. My climax lengthens when the sting of his teeth is felt on my shoulder blade, closely followed by the hot spurts of his seed erupting inside my convulsing pussy.

## CHAPTER 36



*M*y eyes flutter open when Isaac scoops me into his arms and strides through his impressive mansion. I snuggle into his sweat-slicked chest, loving that he can carry me with such ease.

Once we reach his bedroom, he continues with his fast pace until we're standing at the entrance of the double shower located in his ensuite bathroom. Adjusting my position, he turns on the faucet, not once relinquishing me from his grasp or making me concerned he might drop me.

When the water is warm, he steps us into the shower. The heavy spurts of the hot water flowing from the showerhead massage and revive my overtired muscles. Once the ache in my body lessens, Isaac places me down onto my feet.

In silence, he squeezes body wash onto a shower puff and lathers it over my entire body. Once he washes away the suds, his pampering shifts to my hair. My heart swells from witnessing a side of Isaac I don't think many people have ever had the pleasure of experiencing. The powerful and ruthless businessman has succumbed to a mere man, lovingly nurturing a person he cares for.

"You really *really* like me," I mumble through a heavy-lidded gaze.

His dedication to my hair halts as his darkening eyes lower to mine. “Why do you think I forced myself to stay away from you.”

He returns his attention to massaging the shampoo in my hair. His thick, powerful fingers have goosebumps breaking out over my skin.

Since his remark was more of a statement than a question, I don’t bother compiling a response. Instead, I nervously chew on my bottom lip. I know the reason why I had to stay away from Isaac, but I was unaware he was fighting the same internal battle. How many months have we wasted fighting an urge greater than us both?

Sensing a change in my composure, Isaac expels a sharp breath. “I’m not a good man, Isabelle. I tried to stay away from you so I could protect you.”

My brows draw together as my eyes shoot up to his. Before a reply can form in my mind, he silences any response from seeping from my lips with his index finger.

“It would have been safer for you if we’d never met, but now that I’ve claimed you as mine, I can’t give you up, but I promise I’ll protect you, and no one will ever hurt you.” His beautiful eyes relay the truth in his declaration.

His statement adds more suspicion to a theory that’s been running through my brain the past several weeks. Realizing this may be my only opportunity to ask a question that’s been haunting me for weeks, I blurt out, “What did Col Petretti say to me in Italian the night we left your club?”

Isaac stiffens as his gaze shifts to the side. Although he could be perceived as looking at my face, he isn’t. He’s

glancing straight past me. How do I know this? His gaze is so hot, when it leaves you, you experience the loss of its warmth.

Before any lies can spill from his lips, I demand, “Don’t lie to me, Isaac. You said you never lie.”

His gaze snaps back to mine. The loving man who was mere minutes ago shampooing my hair has been replaced with a man whose gaze alone would have the toughest men shivering in their boots.

Clenching his fists open and closed, he answers, “And you will soon become one.”

My brows pull together as confusion bombards me. *Why did such a simple statement create such an adverse reaction from Isaac that night?*

It’s only when the first part of Col’s sentence filters through my mind do I understand Isaac’s reaction.

*“You’re exquisite. You have the face of an angel... And you will soon become one.”*

My heart constricts as tears form in my eyes. Grimacing, I snap my eyes shut to stop my tears from falling. “Is that why you went out on all those dates? So Col would think I wasn’t any more significant than the woman keeping your bed warm that night? You were protecting me?”

He coughs to clear his throat, which forces my eyes back open. “That was my original plan, but even Col could see...” He stops midsentence to swallow hard. “Whatever this crazy thing is between us. He knew the instant I retaliated to his threat that you were more than some random one-night stand.”

I try to hide my smile, but the smallest one creeps across my lips. Isaac stares at me, seemingly dumbfounded by my odd response. I shouldn’t be grinning, but having him admit



there's some 'crazy thing' between us makes my heart palpitate.

My smile is slapped right off my face when he informs me, "Col Petretti has been spotted several times the past four weeks in Ravenshoe."

Now it makes sense why I've noticed Hugo outside my apartment several times the past few weeks.

"You have Hugo watching me?"

The tick in his jaw becomes prominent. "I won't let Col hurt you, Isabelle."

"I know that." My tone is confident. "To begin with, I'm more worried about why Col wants to hurt you. Why does he have a vendetta against you?"

Isaac's throat works hard to swallow as the room plunges into an awkward silence.

Just when I think he won't answer me, he says, "He blames me for his daughter's death."

Before I can reply, his guarded barrier mentally rises in front of my eyes. His face is marred with remorse, his beautiful eyes dark and stormy. No words are uttered from his lips as he washes the shampoo out of my hair and steps out of the shower. Although his face is full of confusion, he still dries my body with a lush towel before carrying me in his arms into his bedroom. Once he places me down, he moves toward a cabinet of tall drawers.

My heart cracks when he pivots back around to face me. His eyes are riddled with remorse. Not only does Col blame Isaac for Ophelia's death, so does Isaac. I can't comprehend why he'd think a traffic accident was his fault?

“Thank you,” I whisper when he places his t-shirt over my head.

Once he has removed my hair from the collar, his gorgeous eyes run over my face. A smile tugs my lips higher when he cradles my cheek. When I lean into his embrace, wanting to offer him quiet comfort, he pulls away.

I stalk him as he moves around the room. Even though my urge to know everything is gnawing away my insides, hounding me to probe him for answers to the questions muddling my mind, my heart knows now isn't the time to drill him. He needs comfort, not an interrogation.

Once he dons a pair of black cotton sleeping pants hanging down low enough I can tell he's commando underneath, he slips into his side of the bed. I scoot across the mattress to rest my cheek over his heart. Blood surges through my veins more rapidly when he doesn't repel from my loving gesture.

His mouthwatering scent invades my senses and spurs on my pursuit to offer him comfort in the only way I know how. *Sexually.*

My hand slithers over the ridges of his abdomen. My heart flutters when his muscles spasm with each movement I make.

“Isabelle,” he groans in warning when my hand skims the rim of his pants, his tone indicating I'm treading into uncharted waters.

Ignoring his gruff growl, I place a kiss on his unshaven jaw before shifting my focus to his chest. When I nip and tug on his erect nipple, he releases a throaty moan.

His pleasurable growl turns menacing when I shoo his hand out from underneath my shirt.

“It’s my turn to play,” I advise him as my sparkling gaze lifts in anticipation of participating in an intense stare-down.

His brow shoots into his hairline.

“Please,” I shamelessly beg, wanting him to relinquish his dominance for just one night.

Shockwaves shiver through my sex when he smirks a ravenous, wicked smile before adjusting his pillow. Once he has scooted up the bed, positioning his back on the headboard, he glides his hand down his body, granting me access to his smorgasbord to do with as I please.

My inner vixen cheers before my pursuit commences with more eagerness. My desire to taste him for the first time spurs on my eagerness. Wetness slicks between my legs as I glide my way down his magnificent body. When I place a kiss on each muscle of his six-pack, he groans. My heavy breasts brush against his stiffened cock, which his pants are struggling to contain.

I connect my eyes with his intense gaze as I yank his pants down his thighs. My jaw gapes open when his cock springs free from its restraints. It’s beyond perfect.

Not being able to wait any longer, my tongue darts out to moisten my lips before they cover the wide crest of his cock. My cheeks hollow from the pressure I apply when I suck him into my mouth.

“Yes, Isabelle,” he moans. “Suck me hard and fast, baby. Make me come in your pretty little mouth.”

While groaning at his sinful mouth, I run my tongue along the seam of his hot flesh, absorbing his delicious taste.

By paying careful attention, I soon work out which method of sucking produces the most intense reaction. Once I get the

perfect combination of suction and speed, his hands grip the bed sheets tighter, and his eyes snap shut.

“Eyes,” I babble through a mouth full of cock.

His eyes darken with amusement from my playful taunt. They watch me eagerly sucking, licking, and stroking his cock. His gaze is hot, heavy, and solely focused on me. My excitement at knowing I’m the one causing his lack of composure is thrilling. It sends a shiver scuttling through my veins, making every fine hair bristle.

Over and over again, I draw his wide-girthed cock into my mouth, only occasionally triggering my gag reflex.

The longer my seamless pumps progress, the more Isaac’s moans spur on my own climax. His hips buck off the bed when I increase the strength of my sucks.

Over time, my jaw aches, but my rampant horniness overrules that zing of pain. Having him unravel before my eyes is a thrilling experience that will always outweigh any discomfort.

His grip on the sheets tightens as the thrusts of his hips become more urgent. He’s so close to orgasming.

A short time later, when the veins on his cock throb more urgently, I draw him in until the crest of his cock hits the back of my throat.

“Fuck, Isabelle,” Isaac roars as spurts of salty cum pump onto my tongue.

I drink it all in, swallowing eagerly, loving the taste of him in my mouth. Greedily, I milk his cock with my hand, relentlessly pumping his stiffened shaft until every last drop of his seed is expelled into my mouth.

After licking my lips to gather any spilled cum, I crawl up his body to rest my head on his glistening torso. His heart is thrashing wildly as he comes down from his brutal climax. My lips curve into a triumphant grin, glad I'm capable of rendering him mindless while also lessening his agitation.

After some time, his heart rate returns to a safe level. He runs his hand down my hair, smoothing the damp, frazzled pieces back into place. Feeling the safest I've ever felt snuggled on his chest, my mouth starts spilling secrets I've never shared with anyone before.

“My uncle who raised me isn't really my uncle.” He stiffens at my comment but remains quiet. “I was sold to him when I was six years old.”

His grip on my hip tightens so much, it sends pain shooting through my hipbone.

“My father hated me so much he didn't care who bought me. He just had one stringent requirement. Whoever was the highest bidder had to pay for me in cash.”

Isaac's teeth grinding together shrills through my eardrums. Lifting my head off his chest, I prop myself on my elbow so I can look into his beautiful eyes.

“My uncle was a good man, Isaac. He saved me from a life of misery. If it weren't for him, who knows where I'd have ended up.”

His Adam's apple bobs up and down. “Did he...” He doesn't need to finish his question, the terrified look in his eyes is questioning enough.

“No, Isaac. God, no. He wasn't that type of man. He never touched me like that, I promise.”

Isaac expels a quick exhalation of air.

“He treated me as if I were his daughter. I’ll be forever grateful for the day he came into my life.” Before I can chicken out, I blurt, “My father is Vladimir Popov.”

When Isaac’s breathing ceases to exist, I realize he’s heard of my father before.

## CHAPTER 37



Gripping the marble vanity bowl, I lift my eyes to the large mirror in front of me. My face is white and gaunt, and my pupils have sunken. The dark circles plaguing my eyes make it look like I haven't slept in over a year, but it isn't a physical illness afflicting my appearance, but the muddled mess of confusion in my mind making me feel physically ill.

Being immersed in Isaac's world the past forty-eight hours made me forget the FBI is investigating him. When I'm with Isaac, I only see him. Everything else is just a blur of white noise, but now that the dreaded Monday morning has arrived, reality has come to painfully bite me on the ass.

After my confession last night, Isaac remained quiet. Even with not seeing his eyes, I knew he was awake. He ran his hand along my arm for nearly an hour before he slipped out of bed and left the room. I considered following after him, but remembering Cormack's advice from weeks ago, I left him alone to contemplate.

Isaac is a very guarded man, so I wanted to give him time to process my confession in privacy. It isn't every day the woman you're sleeping with acknowledges being the daughter

of a well-known mob boss. That type of revelation would rattle even the strongest man.

I'll be frank, Isaac's apprehension of my confession last night did make me wary of advising him that I'm an FBI field agent. Although legally I cannot disclose I am a field agent to anyone, morally, it's the right thing to do. My heart wants to be truthful and tell Isaac everything, but my head is telling my heart it's not the rational thing to do.

My heart-and-head fight continued well into the early hours of this morning. After many hours of silent debating, my head eventually overruled my heart. The reason my head won isn't what you might think. It's because I truly don't believe Isaac is the man his FBI file portrays him to be. So, I've made it my mission to ensure Isaac's investigation is handled fairly. Once Isaac's investigation is closed, and he's acquitted, I'll make sure his file reflects the true Isaac Holt. I'm confident once he realizes I defended his integrity, he will forgive me for deceiving him.

At times, government departments can be unjust. My own childhood story reflects that. My Uncle Tobias was undercover in the Popov family for nearly five years before I was put up for auction. Once I was old enough to understand, Tobias explained that he initially tried to have the sale canceled legally, but since the FBI didn't believe I was a valuable enough asset for him to break years of cover for, the auction went ahead as originally planned.

My memories of Tobias at the time are vague as I was so young, but the image of his huge smile and roguish face when he'd bring me and my brother groceries will always have a special place in my heart.



My mom was unfortunately addicted to meth. The urge for her next fix was greater than her desire to feed and look after her children. Since my mother graced my father with a son a year after I was born, he arranged for a family member to assist her in raising his children.

Although my Uncle Tobias isn't related by blood, he was still addressed with the title of uncle. Any male with a close connection to the *family* was classed as uncle, even if he weren't blood-related. Uncle Tobias was the man my dad tasked with looking after me and my little brother, Enrique. Tobias said I was just shy of my first birthday when he came into my life. He gave me the nickname 'Rabbit' because I was nothing but skin and bones. That nickname stuck until the day he passed away.

Since the FBI refused to help, my Uncle Tobias went against their strict protocols. He mortgaged his family home in Tiburon and overdrew every credit card he owned to ensure he had enough cash on hand to buy me. When his bid was successful, Tobias and I left Las Vegas that very same day. Once news of Tobias's abandonment surfaced through the FBI, he created the ruse that he was in a relationship with my mother the whole time he was undercover and that Vladimir had found out about his indiscretion, meaning he was shunned by the family. The FBI believed his story, and he was soon recruited to a new task force.

With the help of Regina, I was issued a birth certificate stating I was the daughter of Tobias's deceased brother, Abraham, who had died three years earlier. For the past nineteen years, I was raised by Tobias and his *Dedushka*—grandpa in Russian—in the house Tobias mortgaged to bid for me. To this day, the FBI is none the wiser of my connection to the Popov family.

My gloomy thoughts are interrupted when a heated gaze ignites every nerve in my body. Lifting my eyes, I discover Isaac leaning in the doorjamb of the ensuite bathroom, watching me inquisitively. His enthralling eyes are raking my body.

Happily, my eyes absorb the satisfying visual of Isaac in an impeccably tailored dark blue three-piece suit. His primal gaze has my pulse quickening when he returns his eyes to my face.

I shake my head. “No, Isaac.”

Our rigorous physical activities this morning have already stretched my time thin. I’ll be late to work if I don’t leave this house within the next thirty minutes.

Isaac chuckles while strolling into the bathroom. Rolling my eyes, I turn back to face the mirror to continue my fruitless attempt to hide the dark circles plaguing my eyes with the compact foundation I carry in my clutch purse. It appears to be a shade too light since my skin is blessed with the hue of ecstasy, but it’s the only makeup I have available, so it will have to do.

My heart flips when Isaac leans over to place a quick peck on my freshly shampooed hair before snagging his toothbrush from the ceramic holder on the countertop.

Every hair on my body bristles to attention because of his close proximity. His erect cock scorches my curvy backside when he leans over my shoulder to dampen his toothbrush under the running tap, and a tiny shudder flows through me. Even being sexually sated numerous times the past forty-eight hours, I can’t stop my body from reacting to Isaac. The more I have him, the more I want him.

Swallowing hard, I stash my compact back into my purse and grab the spare toothbrush from its holder. Isaac remains quiet, but my awareness of his closeness is paramount. I don't need to look at him to know he's watching me. The heat of his eyes is an obvious sign.

Intimacy fires in the air as we brush our teeth side by side. Although there's a double sink, Isaac spits his toothpaste into the one in front of me. Every brush of his body against my arm heightens my senses, and every time my body responds to his touch, his smirk enlarges.

I nearly choke on the mouthwash I'm gargling when he tugs open the knot on the towel curled around my body two seconds later. After drawing in a sharp breath, his eyes assess my body. From the bulge his dark blue trousers are straining to contain, I'd say he appreciates the visual of me standing before him naked.

I spit my mouthwash into the sink before turning around. "You have twenty minutes," I warn him with my brow cocked in the air.

His lips crimp into a mouth-watering smile that makes my body quiver and my heart beat in my throat.

Returning his smile, I throw myself into his arms and seal my mouth over his minty lips.

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Over thirty minutes late, I scamper into the office as fast as my quivering legs will take me. I should have known a man with impressive stamina like Isaac wouldn't have known the definition of a quickie. Even with Hugo driving like a maniac

and taking every shortcut he could find, there was no way I could gain back the hour I lost in the bathroom earlier.

My nervous eyes shoot to Alex's office as I scramble toward my desk. I sigh in relief when I spot Alex sitting on his desk with his gaze planted out the window. Plopping into my chair, I fire up my computer before throwing my purse into the top drawer of my desk.

A girly squeal erupts from my lips when I raise my gaze. Brandon has sneakily moved to my desk, undetected.

"Holy crap, you scared me." I clutch my breathless chest.

He smiles and wiggles his eyebrows. "Sorry, Izzy. I just thought these might stop you from getting another one of Alex's famously long tirades for being late this morning." He gestures his head to the eight cups of steaming hot coffee he's holding.

My eyes bulge. "Oh my God, Brandon. I love you. I love you. I love you." Leaping out of my chair, I plant a huge, sloppy kiss on his cheek.

His face turns the brightest shade of red. "That's okay, Izzy. I'd do anything for you."

Just as he hands me the two crates of coffee, Alex pivots around. Our eyes lock and hold for several terrifying seconds. Seconds feel like hours anytime Alex's stern blue eyes reprimand me. His gaze is so troubling, a sweat mustache forms on my top lip. My breathing returns when Alex's eyes snap down to the coffees in my hand, and his lips curve into a smile.

"I owe you, big time," I whisper to him before racing around the office to dispense the coffee to each recipient, making sure I drop off Alex's black coffee first.

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By the time lunch rolls around, my neck no longer feels the dull ache from Isaac's fingers when he arched over the bathtub this morning. It's from scanning hundreds of documents into the geriatric copy machine in the dingy, cramped supply closet. Alex wants a digital copy of my uncle's hand-scribbled notes and files, which means thousands of documents need to be manually scanned into the FBI database. In a much larger office, this task may take a couple of days, but using an ancient copier that only scans one page at a time, it will take weeks, if not months to complete this meaningless task.

I'm still rubbing the kink in my neck when the supply closet door creaks open. My breathing levels when Alex strolls into the room. The air in the minute-size closet turns stifling when a thick stench of awkwardness suffocates us.

After offering Alex a quick, unassured smile, I return my focus to scanning the documents. Clearing his throat, Alex makes his way to the corner of the room to gather some camera equipment. Because of the lack of space, his hand accidentally connects with my backside as he passes by me.

After gathering a digital camera with a long zoom lens, he makes his way back out of the room. I draw myself in as close to the copier as possible to ensure he can glide by without bumping into me.

Upon exiting the door, he spins around to face me. "You can make up your late arrival by either skipping your lunch break or staying back later tonight," he advises, his tone stern.

Swallowing harshly, I nod. Obviously, Brandon's clever ruse has been unhatched.

## CHAPTER 38



Two hours later, Brandon discovers me sitting on the floor in the supply closet. He offers me a reassuring smile before making his way into the room. An appreciative grin forms on my mouth when he sits down next to me and hands me a club sandwich and a bottle of OJ from Harlow's bakery.

"I heard you had to work through your lunch break." He leans his back against the shelving I'm resting on.

"Yeah. I think Alex is more watchful than either of us perceived." I run the cuff of my blouse under my eyes to ensure I don't have raccoon eyes from my mascara running down my face.

Once the smears of mascara are on the sleeve of my white blouse, Brandon asks, "Why are you crying?" His genuine concern shows on his adorable face.

I hand him the photo I'm clutching in my shaking right hand. "Ophelia Whitney Petretti was only nineteen years old when the car she was driving was struck by a B-double truck that veered onto the wrong side of the road. She was killed on impact," I answer.

Brandon's eyes snap down to the photo I found of Ophelia in Col Petretti's file. Ophelia was beautiful. In the picture

Brandon is holding, she has light brown, wavy shoulder-length hair with some caramel highlights. Her dazzling brown eyes are so light in color, they're nearly transparent. She's smiling, even with the tip of her pointed-up nose red from a sprinkling of snow landing on it.

A smile curls my lips when Brandon places his arm around my shoulders and pulls me in close to his side, offering quiet comfort. "I read the police report on her accident over the weekend. It's always sad when you hear of any life being taken too soon." Even with him offering me comfort, he sounds hesitant. I guess it's hard for him to understand the reason for my tears.

I'm genuinely upset that Ophelia's life was cut short at such a young age. Just from her photo, I can tell she was a wonderful person, but my tears aren't for her—they're for Isaac. Once I dove into more of Col's file, I discovered several handwritten notes my uncle had scribbled on napkins from a diner called Buck's. Ophelia was a waitress at Buck's Diner for a little over a year before she was involved in the accident.

All the handwritten notes were about Ophelia and a young man he'd spotted her with numerous occasions over a three-month period. From the timeline of the napkins and some more detailed reports, it appears Isaac and Ophelia were an official couple for nearly six months before she passed away.

I hesitantly hand Brandon the second photo I'm clutching. It's a picture of Isaac and Ophelia together. It is time-stamped a few hours before she was killed in the traffic incident. Isaac is wrapping a scarf around her neck. He's grinning a smile I've never seen on his face before, and his beautiful, entrancing eyes are staring into hers. You can see nothing but love and admiration all over his face.

Brandon's eyes drop to absorb the photo before lifting to mine. "Isaac and Ophelia were a couple?"

His eyes sparkle with excitement when I nod. "Izzy, you have to tell Alex you've unearthed the connection between Isaac and Col Petretti." His voice is laced with euphoria. "This will get you off coffee and filing duties in an instant."

Brandon jumps up off the worn carpet, excitement beaming from him in invisible waves. I accept the hand he thrusts out in front of me. His sharp yank on my arm pulls me off the ground and has me crashing into his firm chest. My breasts squash up against his well-defined pectoral muscles. *Brandon is a lot harder under his clothes than I'd initially perceived.*

Grimacing, I step backward and run my hand down my blouse to ensure it didn't rise to an absurd level during Brandon's eager lift. When I raise my gaze, I'm confronted with Brandon's flushed face. *Obviously, I'm not the only one who noticed our inappropriate closeness.* With a hesitant smile, I turn my attention back to scanning the documents into the old copier.

"I don't have time to type up a whole report on their relationship." My eyes roll at my dim excuse. "This scanning will take me months as it is."

I turn back around to face Brandon, who is eyeing me curiously. "You spent your whole weekend going through Col's file. Eventually, you would have discovered these photos yourself." I return Brandon's confused stare. "If you're willing to type up the report, I'll let Alex believe you discovered the photos."

"I don't want to take your credit, Izzy."



“You’re not taking my credit, Brandon,” I interrupt. “You’re helping me out. I’m snowed under here.” I gesture to the mountain of papers I still have left to scan. “This isn’t even a small dent in the boxes left in the conference room.”

Brandon remains quiet as his concerned eyes shift between mine. After what feels like a lifetime, but is more like minutes, Brandon agrees to compile the report to present to Alex. “But you’ll get the credit for finding the connection between Isaac and Col,” he says before walking out of the supply closet.

I drag my palm over my sweat-drenched neck. This leading a double-life business is a lot harder than I originally anticipated. My heart is pounding just from sharing one snippet of Isaac’s personal life. Although I feel guilty, either way, this secret would have been unearthed eventually. If it weren’t by me, Brandon would have found it.

Once my erratic heart rate is back under control, I scarf down the sandwich and OJ Brandon brought me before recommencing with the scanning. I’m famished since my breakfast was burned off during my impromptu romp in the bathroom with Isaac this morning.

A short time later, Brandon’s head pops back into the room. “Your phone has been vibrating nonstop on your desk the past thirty minutes,” he tells me apprehensively.

My lip drops into a frown. I don’t know who would be contacting me with such urgency. I mumble a quick thanks to Brandon before scooting past him to make my way to my desk. The muscles in my body creak with each step I take. I’ve spent the last nearly five hours crammed in that small office, and my body is screaming in protest.

“Holy crap.” There are over a dozen missed calls and text messages from an unknown number and a handful of messages

from Harlow.

My brows tuck closer with every message I read.

**Unknown number:** *Isabelle, I'll meet you at Harlow's bakery at 1 p.m. sharp.*

**Unknown number:** *Isabelle, where are you?*

**Harlow:** *Did you know Isaac was meeting you here for lunch today?*

**Harlow:** *Jesus Izzy, the veins in Isaac's neck are about to burst.*

**Unknown number:** *I've been waiting for nearly an hour.*

**Harlow:** *Will you hurry up? Isaac is scaring my customers away ;)*

**Unknown number:** *You will be lucky if I let you come for a week after standing me up. Call me as soon as you get my messages.*

**Harlow:** *He's gone, but you have some explaining to do young lady... p.s. an angry Isaac is as sexy as fuck.*

A chuckle escapes my lips when I read Harlow's last message. If she thinks an upset Isaac is sexy as hell, wait until she sees a jealous Isaac.

My uneasy gaze bounces around the room. Other than catching the eye of Brandon, the rest of the team's focus remains on other tasks. I send a message to Harlow telling her I'll pop into the bakery later this afternoon and explain everything. Once I have the crumpled business card Isaac scribbled his cell phone number on months ago in my hot little hands, I scamper back to the supply closet.

I nearly lose the grip of my phone while dialing Isaac's private cell phone number since my palms are slick with sweat. I'm nervous Isaac will uphold his threat of not letting me orgasm for a week. *I really hope it's an idle threat.*

Isaac connects our call before one full ring sounds through my ear. "Isabelle."

Although his tone is clipped, my name rolling off his tongue sends an excited thrill through my body.

"I just got your messages now," I blurt out.

A length of silence crosses between us.

"Because I was late this morning, my boss made me work through lunch," I explain, my tone getting edgier.

It is technically Isaac's fault I arrived late, so if anyone should be punished for my tardiness, it should be him.

"A simple message advising me you were unable to attend lunch would have been appreciated. Then I wouldn't have been spending the last two hours panicked something horrible happened to you."

My heart clutches in my chest. "I'm sorry." Tears dampen my eyes. "I left my phone in my desk drawer, but I promise I'll carry it with me at all times from now on." I'll say anything to relieve his worry. I don't want to be responsible for any more concern in Isaac's life.

Another stretch of silence fills the void. "Hugo will pick you up outside of your office building at six o'clock."

Before I can reply, Isaac disconnects the call.

Pulling my phone down from my ear, I return a message to the unknown number.

**Me:** *I'll make up for our missed date tonight. Dessert is on me. ;)*

A short time later, my phone dings, indicating I've received a text message.

**Isaac:** *Dessert IS you, Isabelle.*

Warm slickness pools between my legs... until my phone dings again.

**Isaac:** *But that doesn't mean I'll let you come.*

Pouting, I shove my phone into my pocket and spend the next two hours miserably scanning documents before going to Harlow's bakery for the afternoon coffee run.

While Harlow prepares the coffees, I give her a rundown on everything that happened over the weekend, skimming over the parts of the story I uncovered immorally. She fans her cheeks during some of the more heated parts of our conversation. Once I've finished spilling every sordid detail of my weekend with Isaac, my jaw muscle is burning in exhaustion from how much talking I've done.

"I'm so glad you guys have finally gotten your shit together." Harlow hands me the two crates of coffee she has just finished preparing. "I'll text Cormack later and see if we can organize a double date sometime next week."

I freeze. I can't risk being seen with Isaac in public. Well, not until his investigation is finalized.

"Why don't we have a more intimate gathering? I could cook dinner at my place?"

Harlow glares at me like I've grown a second head.

"I could *try* and cook us dinner," I add on.

Harlow's boisterous chuckle echoes around the nearly empty bakery. "We'll work something out."

Rolling my eyes, I wave goodbye as well as I can while carrying two full crates of coffee before exiting the bakery.

## CHAPTER 39



At precisely six o'clock, Isaac's town car pulls up to the curve in front of the building my office is housed in. I scan the surrounding area, ensuring no one is watching before opening the passenger side door and slipping into the front seat.

"Hey, Isabelle," Hugo greets me in his usual friendly tone before pulling the car into the dense commuter traffic.

After securing my seat belt, I reply, "Hey, Hugo," trying to mimic the long drawl of his rugged voice.

He chuckles at my taunt. My smile freezes halfway when I hear my name roll off a tongue that has made me quiver more times the past seventy-two hours than I have in the entire span of my sexually active life.

I twist my head to the back of the car so quick, I nearly give myself whiplash. My mouth waters when I spot Isaac sitting in the backseat. He has removed his jacket and tie, and the sleeves of his shirt are rolled up near his elbows. Even with his handsome face marred by an angry scowl, he looks scrumptious enough to eat.

Unlatching my belt, I throw myself over the partition with more eagerness than I did weeks ago. Hugo slaps my backside when it's thrust in his face during my unladylike maneuver.

Isaac's face remains stern during our playfulness, but I see the slightest curve on his lips that gives away his true feelings. He's happy.

"Hi," I greet, plopping into the space next to him.

My teeth menace my bottom lip as my eyes absorb his handsome face. He appraises me with just as much eagerness while pushing a button on the console of the back passenger door.

I swallow to relieve my dry throat as my eyes flick between Isaac and the rising privacy partition.

Once the barrier is in place, Isaac lifts his eyes to me. "Remove your clothes, but leave your panties on."

A rush of heat blemishes my cheeks as my eyes stray to the partition. "Hugo can't hear or see anything," Isaac assures me.

Licking my parched lips, I do as instructed. If our time together has taught me anything, it's that submissiveness is well rewarded by Isaac.

Once my clothing is removed, Isaac slides down the zipper on his trousers. My eyes widen when he releases his stiff cock from its tight restraints before fisting it in his hand. Warm slickness builds between my legs when he slides his manly hand up and down his thickened shaft. His seamless pumps have a fire raging out of control in my sex.

"Tonight, you're not allowed to touch me, Isabelle." His husky voice adds more excitement to the sexually satisfying visual playing out in front of me.

*Hell, if watching Isaac pleasing himself is my punishment, I'll happily accept it.* I'm confident watching him crumble into ecstasy will have me toppling into orgasmic bliss.

My breaths increase with every stroke to his magnificent cock. He glides his thumb over his engorged knob, gathering a sticky bead of goodness pooling at the top from raking his eyes down my naked body. I groan when he slides it down his shaft, using it as lubricant to increase the quickness of his grinds.

Over time, the urge to touch him overwhelms me. I thought the visual alone would be enough to quell my need to touch him. It isn't.

Although Isaac's stern gaze hides his inner battle, his beautiful eyes relay he's also fighting the same struggle. He wants to touch me as bad as I'm dying to touch him.

“Are you wet?”

Unable to speak, I nod. I'm beyond wet—I'm drenched. Every spring in my body is coiled, prepared to snap at any moment, but my desire to touch him is more rampant than my wish to climax.

The heat in the interior of the car turns stifling when Isaac continues his pursuit of his climax. Although the visual of him stroking himself is one I'll forever cherish, not touching him is nearly killing me. One touch. That's all I want. I need to feel my skin on his.

My bottom lip drops into a pout when Isaac slaps away my hand.

“Please let me touch you,” I shamelessly beg, no longer capable of fighting my desire.

I need to feel him, touch him, taste him. I need it more than I require my next breath.

“I wanted to touch you today.” A bead of sweat glides down his cheek as his strokes quicken. “Even just your lips on



mine, but I was denied. Now, I'm denying you the same opportunity."

"That isn't fair." My voice is nearly a sob. "I got reprimanded for being late to work because *I* gave in to *your* pleas this morning."

My anger boils when he shrugs.

Fuming with rage, I scoot across the cold leather seat.

Isaac's hand that isn't pounding his cock seizes my ankle to drag me back next to him. Ignoring the pleasing zap jolting through my body from his touch, I stab my stiletto into his thigh. I'm so angry, tears well in my eyes.

"You're being cruel," I yell. "You're taking your anger out on the wrong person..." I stop talking when a blob of moisture splashes my cheek.

My tears are more from the emotionally draining day I had going through Ophelia and Isaac's private life than Isaac teasing me, but once my tears start flowing, I have no chance of reeling them back in.

The instant Isaac sees my glistening cheeks, his frantic pumps halt. In a matter of seconds, I go from being seated on the dark leather seat to being cradled in his firm chest.

His cock braces my damp panties as his thumbs rub away my tears. "Please don't cry," he mutters so softly I can barely hear him.

My faint sobs turn into a moan when he slips my panties to the side and enters me in a slow, mouthwatering thrust. His apologetic eyes never once leave mine as he undoes the buttons on his dress shirt and flattens my palms on his sweat-slicked torso. His eyes permit me to access his body as his cock demands the attention of my pussy.

The fire in my belly gains in intensity with every kiss, caress, and pump he does.

My anger is soon forgotten when a quivering orgasm sweeps through my body, igniting my senses like fireworks in a pitch-black sky. Although I'm barely coherent, Isaac continues with his slow, soul-stealing pace. He guides his cock in and out of my pussy as his eyes remain locked on mine.

After a while, my name tears from his throat in a seductive purr as the hot spurts of his cum line the walls of my pussy.

Exhausted—both mentally and physically—I rest my head on his sweat-misted chest. He stays quiet but maintains physical closeness by keeping his semi-erect cock surrounded by my heat.

After a small amount of time, my blinking lengthens until my eyes no longer have the ability to stay open, and they flutter shut.

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By the time Isaac wakes me, the night sky is pitch black. Not even the moon illuminates the sky tonight, it being hidden behind a scattering of dark clouds from a storm brewing on the horizon. My dazed eyes glance at my watch in confusion. The standard thirty-minute drive to Isaac's private residence has taken over two hours to complete.

“I asked Hugo to take the long route home.”

A soft sigh seeps from my mouth when he withdraws his still-firm cock from me. The sigh is my body's way of expressing its sadness about the loss of his contact. Isaac smirks at my reaction before reaching over and snagging his

suit jacket from the floor. I must have kicked it off the seat during my tantrum earlier tonight.

My heart flutters when he wraps the jacket around my shoulders and secures the buttons, so my private parts are covered.

Cranking open the passenger door, he exits the vehicle. My lips tug higher when he leans in and offers me his hand to help me out. My eyes dart around the area surrounding the car. I expel the breath I'm holding in when I don't see Hugo anywhere. Although I'm fully covered, I don't want him to see me like this.

Not one word spills from Isaac's lips the next forty-five minutes. Instead of the rough and abrupt Isaac I experienced earlier this evening, he has turned into the caring, nurturing man I encountered during the weekend.

He remains quiet as he heats us a generous serving of chicken noodle soup. My heart swells when we eat our meal by using the same spoon.

Once our dinner is consumed, he carries me into the shower and pampers my body and hair before placing me on my side of his bed. I say 'my side' as he always puts me on the same side every time I sleep in his bed.

A smile spreads across my face when he joins me in bed and spoons me until my back is splayed against his torso. Interlocking our hands, he wraps them around my waist.

My hips swivel when I feel his impressive erection straining against my backside.

He scoots back. "Not tonight. You need your sleep."

His rumbling laughter vibrates through my bursting-at-the-seams heart when I murmur, "You really really *really* like me."

My heart bursts open when he replies, “Maybe.”

## CHAPTER 40



**Four weeks later...**

“*H*ow many?” Harlow’s brows etch high into her hairline.

Playfully biting my bottom lip, I raise three fingers into the air.

Harlow gasps so loud, air blows onto my face. “In a row, or did he take a break in between?”

“Isaac doesn’t break between orgasms.” My cheeks heat as my eyes dash around the half-full bakery to make sure no one is paying attention to our private conversation.

“I thought guys need time for... you know... down there to pump back up,” Harlow half-queries, half-informs.

I cock my brow before tilting closer to her to ensure the elderly lady seated next to me doesn’t have a coronary from my question. “So, Cormack has never fucked you so hard once he came, he kept going until he climaxed another two times?”

Harlow’s pupils dilate into saucers. “Honestly, no, he hasn’t, but that’s because I have a hard-enough time keeping

up with his sexual prowess as it is. By the time he does come, I'm so exhausted, I can't keep my legs in the air."

Our immature giggles are interrupted when the elderly lady next to me touches my arm. "Make sure you hold onto those two fine gentlemen." Her twinkling blue eyes flick between Harlow and me. "It's rare to find a guy who can pop a cork on a champagne bottle these days, let alone find your G-spot."

Mine and Harlow's mouths gape in sync. We watch the elderly lady in awe as she stands from her seat and puts on her light teal trench coat. She'd easily be in her eighties if not older. Every hair on her head is a beautiful strand of silver, and even a full face of makeup can't hide her heavy set of wrinkles that come with her age.

"Suck them dry for every orgasm they're willing to give," she advises before strolling out of the bakery with an extra spring in her step than when she entered.

My shocked gaze remains planted on the door she exited for the next several minutes. I've been stunned into silence. It's pretty obtuse of me to think only young couples can enjoy vigorous bedroom activities. I don't believe it would matter if I were twenty or seventy, I'll never stop enjoying the bedroom antics of Isaac Holt, so why would I expect it to be any different for her?

"I think I'm in love," Harlow mumbles a short time later.

A full smile cracks onto my mouth. "She was pretty cool. I can only hope to be as rocking as her when I'm her age." I return my gaze to Harlow.

When I see the quickest second of panic smearing Harlow's face, I realize she isn't talking about the elderly lady.

She's referencing Cormack.

My face scrunches. "Then why do you look so worried? Love isn't supposed to make you stressed."

The grim expression on my face grows. No matter how much my head tries to deny it, my heart has already fallen in love with Isaac. I've loved him from the moment I laid my eyes on him. I'm just too terrified to tell him.

The past four weeks have been a crazy lust-filled blur. I've spent every waking moment I'm not at work with Isaac—sleeping in his bed, eating his food, or snuggled on his lap while he makes business calls.

Because of his crazy schedule, our sleep patterns are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Before I was in the picture, Isaac never came home until after three in the morning, but because he knows I'm there waiting for him, he generally makes sure he's home no later than ten o'clock.

His business is most likely suffering because of me, but I love that he's willing to make sacrifices to ensure he has the time to see me. It's another reason why I fell in love with him so quickly.

For the past four weeks, I haven't had any struggles hiding my relationship with Isaac. Other than Harlow and Cormack, no one is none the wiser that we're a couple. Isaac wants to ensure Col Petretti never finds out who I am. I agreed with his plan, knowing I couldn't run the risk of Alex or the surveillance team finding out about our relationship.

Although the secrecy adds intrigue to our relationship, I look forward to the day I can declare we're in a relationship. I can't wait to go on double dates with Cormack and Harlow

and not need to look over my shoulder every time I slip into his town car each evening.

Shrugging off my confusion about my relationship status, I return my focus to Harlow's statement. "Does Cormack feel the same way?"

Her glossed-over eyes dart down to the tabletop. "I don't know." She exhales a nerve-cleansing breath before returning her beautiful green eyes to me. "I may have accidentally declared my love during an intense orgasmic experience."

Smiling, I wiggle my brows.

"Shut up." She slaps my arm. "It was more the fact he didn't say anything back. I know he heard me as he stopped thrusting, but not a word seeped from his lips. Not even a thanks."

I giggle at the last part of her comment. "One, you would have been mortified if he said thanks."

She grins while nodding.

"And two, maybe he thought you said it in the heat of the moment. Have you said it to him outside of the bedroom?"

She shakes her head. "I'm too petrified he won't say it back."

My heart squeezes from her panicked tone. "If he didn't say it back, would it change how you feel about him?"

Harlow's lips quirk as she contemplates my question. "No. I'd still love him."

My brow arches high. "Well, there you go. That's the answer to your question. You have to tell him."



Not giving her the chance to reprimand me on my double standards, I thrust my hand toward her. “Hi, Kettle, my name is Pot.”

---

Harlow and I spend the remainder of my lunch break discussing our plans for Thanksgiving. Isaac has invited his dad, his brother, Nick, and his fiancée, Jenni, over for dinner. Thankfully, he also arranged for a catering company to prepare the feast. He did initially ask if I’d like to make the meal, but I had to regretfully decline. I’m not going to lie, my ego took a big beating when I had to admit I struggle to make mashed potatoes, let alone a full meal.

While I am being honest, I’ll admit I’m both nervous and excited about meeting Isaac’s family. Worried, because I want them to like me. Excited because it’s a step forward in our relationship. Although we’ve only been officially together a little over a month, it’s been a crazy whirlwind affair that makes it seem so much longer. One I’d happily experience again and again.

---

Walking back into my office, a commotion of laughter gains my attention. After placing my satchel in the bottom drawer of my desk, I saunter to the window that has captured the other agents’ attention.

“What’s going on?”

Brandon’s eyes stray to me. Unlike the other agents, his gaze is reflecting concern, not amusement. “Megan Shroud.”

He continues speaking, but I don't hear a word he's uttering. All I heard was Megan Shroud, then my hearing blurred. *Why are people laughing about Isaac's mysterious, deranged stalker?*

Beyond panicked something horrid has happened to Isaac, I rush to the window. Overwhelmed, I barge agents out of the way so I can get a clear view of Isaac's nightclub. Fear clutches my heart when I spot the gigantic bouncer who usually mans the front door of the nightclub holding Megan captive in his arms. Her legs and arms thrash as she fights to free herself from his firm hold.

Ignoring her screaming pleas to be put down, the bouncer continues his long strides, only stopping to dump her next to a yellow car she's been photographed in numerous times.

As soon as the bouncer releases his hold, Megan charges toward the entrance of the nightclub. The bouncer wraps his massive arms around her waist again, thwarting her endeavors to enter the premises.

"Why isn't someone calling the police?" My words quiver with fear. "She's clearly unstable and not just a threat to the public. She's a threat to herself."

Michelle's eyes rocket to mine. The amusement brightening her gaze changes to remorse from my statement. The other agents watch the spectacle unfold without any concern for anyone's safety.

"Alex, you need to call the police."

I place my hand on his forearm to empathize he knows it's the right thing to do in a situation like this. His stern gaze shoots down to my hand resting on his arm.

His brows twitch before he returns his confused gaze to my face. “Isaac made his bed, now he has to sleep in it.” His words aren’t as determined as usual.

After shooing the agents away from the window, he lowers the blinds, blocking their live drama sitcom for the afternoon.

My eyes lock with Brandon. His face is marred with just as much concern as mine. He’s also at a loss on what to do in this situation. He offers me a smile before apprehensively shrugging his shoulders.

Urged on by panic, I scamper to my desk and remove my FBI-assigned pistol from my second drawer. My eyes shift around the room as I secure my revolver to my ankle. Because the other agents are too busy laughing at the scene they just witnessed, no one pays me any attention—except Brandon.

Gesturing his head to the corridor, Brandon requests for me to join him outside. I nod while lifting my finger in the air, requesting a minute. I need to make a phone call before I do anything.

Unsurprisingly, my call goes straight to Isaac’s voicemail. My lips quiver as I begin to speak. “I know it’s early in our relationship, but I wanted you to know I love you, Isaac,” I whisper into my cell.

Silencing my phone, I place it into the pocket of my trousers. After ensuring no one is watching me, I make a beeline for the corridor.

When Brandon notices I’ve entered the hall, he stops his panicked pacing and moves to stand in front of me. “I’ll follow her.”

I scan our surroundings, making sure we’re alone before I reply, “They’ll know you’re gone, Brandon. They won’t notice

me as I've spent the last four weeks in the supply room scanning documents.”

His brows pull together as panic clouds his gaze.

“Nobody ever comes in there looking for me but you. Cover for me, and I'll owe you big time.”

Brandon runs his hand over his head. He's quiet, but I still catch part of the curse words he murmurs under his breath. After a few big breaths, his hazel eyes lift to mine.

A smile curves across my face when he places a set of keys into my palm. “It's a blue BMW coupe half a block down.”

I rush toward the exit of the building before gratitude washes over me. Pivoting around, I dart back to Brandon. He balks when I sling my arms around his neck and whisper my thanks for his support into his ear.

Brandon returns my hug with so much force, he squeezes the bejeebus out of me. “Be careful, Izzy,” he pleads, his eyes relaying his genuine concern.

Nodding, I rush out of the building.

## CHAPTER 41



Megan fights the bouncer for nearly twenty minutes before she gives in and walks back to her compact yellow car. Her steps are slow, and her shoulders are slumped in defeat.

I stab the key into the ignition. Brandon's car roars to life, startling me. Its engine is a lot bigger than I'm used to driving, plus it's a stick shift. I was taught to drive an automatic, but this is the only car I have access to, and I will not lose the opportunity to follow Megan because I can't drive a stick shift.

The instant Megan pulls her car onto the road, I merge Brandon's car into the heavy traffic. Several motorists honk their horns, annoyed I pulled out without signaling.

Metal grinding together roars through my ears when I forgot to push in the clutch before shifting the gearshift.

I crunch through my first gear change. "Shit. Sorry, Brandon."

My knuckles go white from my determined hold of the steering wheel. My heart palpitates so fast, I feel like I'm about to have a heart attack, and the gnawing pit in my chest is nearly crippling me. Even being riddled with fear, my urge to protect Isaac outweighs my panic.

Other than hearing my madly beating heart, my drive across town is made in silence. I follow Megan close enough I won't lose her in the dense traffic but not close enough for her to become suspicious.

When she pulls into an old rundown motel on the outskirts of town, I park Brandon's car along the curb at the front of a McDonald's restaurant.

A large droplet of water splats on the windshield, followed by another and then another. In no time at all, my view of the hotel is clouded by a sheet of water. Pulling my jacket over my head to shelter myself from the heavy pelts of rain, I peel out of Brandon's car. Once the street is clear of traffic, I run across the road and seek cover under the rusted hotel awning.

My fear surges when Megan emerges from a room two doors down from where I'm standing. She's mumbling under her breath. Because she's so focused on her tirade, she doesn't notice me hiding under the awning. She jumps into her car and reverses dangerously. Her vehicle whizzes out of the hotel parking lot so fast, she'll be long gone by the time I scamper back to Brandon's car.

My eyes survey the area. Because of the pelting rain, most hotel guests have congregated inside. I walk toward the room Megan just exited. My steps are so nerve-wracking, my legs shake uncontrollably. Once I'm sure no one is watching me, I crouch down onto the ground and try to jimmy the lock.

“Come on.”

After two long, panicked minutes, I still haven't picked the lock. This latch is, of course, more technical than the locks I trained on.

Gritting my teeth, I ram the door as hard as possible with my right shoulder. Pain shoots up my arm so fast, and tears sting my eyes. Even grimacing in pain, a grin curves on my mouth. My harsh hit on the door was successful, and it swings open with the tiniest creak.

After darting my eyes around the area, I walk into Megan's hotel room, closing the door behind me. The room is spotlessly clean with a pungent aroma of disinfectant and bleach. From the two stars on the sign hanging at the front of the hotel, I'd say it's Megan who keeps this room so sparkly and hygienic.

The bed has been perfectly made to where you could bounce a nickel off it. She has replaced the standard hotel bedding with a more elaborate love heart quilt. My heart plummets into my stomach when I notice a crib set up in the room.

*Is Megan pregnant? Oh God, please don't let it be Isaac's baby.*

Snubbing the queasiness swirling in my stomach, I head for the only desk in the room. My fear that Megan is indeed pregnant surges when I spot several textbooks on pregnancy and medical procedures stacked on a crumbling shelf above the desk.

Grabbing a wad of tissues out of a box to cover my fingerprints, I yank down the first lot of books. My eyes filter down to a picture that slipped out of a pregnancy pamphlet from an obstetrician's office in Ravenshoe. My breathing halts when I flip the photo over. It's an ultrasound picture of a distinguishable fetus. With the baby's face so prominent, Megan must be over six months pregnant, which is surprising, considering she didn't have a bump on her medium frame.

Swallowing to eliminate the lump lodged in my throat, I slip the photo back into the pamphlet, then place it in its rightful spot on the shelf.

Ignoring my hammering heart, my eyes appraise the spotless room. Other than a bed, desk, chair, and a baby crib, the room is empty. I make my way to the only other door in the room other than the entrance door.

“Holy shit.”

Every surface of the bathroom is covered with a range of different size photos. Most are of a heavily pregnant female with strawberry blonde hair. In multiple images, she has her eyes gouged out and trails of blood streaming down her legs. Moving deeper into the room, I spot a handful of photos of a blond gentleman who appears to be in his early twenties.

Adjusting my eyes to the flicking fluorescent light, air traps in my throat. The gentleman in the photo is Isaac’s brother, Nick. Although I’ve never met him, I can recognize him from the numerous photos Isaac has of him on his living room mantel.

*Megan isn’t after Isaac. She wants Nick?*

Yanking my phone out of my pocket, I collect digital evidence in case these documents get destroyed before the investigation team arrives. Some photos have ‘I hate her’ and ‘She must die’ scribbled over the female’s face and torso.

Once I’ve taken numerous pictures of the incriminating evidence, I walk back into the main room. My heart stops beating, closely followed by my steps. Megan is walking into the main entryway, her gaze focused on a magazine in her hand. Her grin makes the contents of my stomach lurch into



my throat. I pace backward, praying she can't hear my ragged breaths.

My nostrils flare as my lungs struggle to fill with air. The burn of their fight warms my chest. Darting my eyes around the room, I realize the only safe place to hide is behind the shower curtain. As noiseless as possible, I move into the bathtub and plaster my back on the sparkling white tiles.

Closing my eyes, I try to calm my nervous breaths. The hiss of my panicked pants echo around the outdated, but spotlessly clean bathroom. Not long later, Megan walks into the room. The smell of bleach intensifies, plunging the room into a muggy, uncomfortable heat.

“I'm waiting for you, my love. We'll be together soon. You just have to be patient. Wait for me.”

I adjust my position so I can get a better view of Megan. She has a torn-out magazine page in one hand and a roll of duct tape in another. She rips off a large section of duct tape and sticks a paparazzi photo of Nick and his bandmates onto the wall solely dedicated to pictures of Nick and cardboard hearts.

Megan's fidgety movements halt as her manic eyes dart around the bathroom. I plaster my back on the tiles and keep my body void of any movements. I don't even breathe as I'm afraid she may hear my inhalations of air.

After several terrifying seconds, Megan darts out of the bathroom as quickly as she arrived. I wheeze in a shaky breath, and my burning lungs relish the fresh air even being riddled with toxic bleach.

Another twenty minutes pass before Megan leaves again. I rush out of the hotel room as fast as my quivering legs can

take me. My eyes widen when I cross paths with Megan in the corridor of the hotel. She's carrying a full ice bucket in her hand. A sigh spills from my lips when I realize how close I came to having my escape foiled. Dangling on the front of the ice machine located next to Megan's room is an out-of-order sign with the instruction to use the ice machine one floor above. If that ice machine were working, Megan would have busted me exiting her room.

By the time I park Brandon's car outside of my office, my erratic heart is still pounding out of control. Although I'm relieved Megan isn't targeting Isaac, I'm beyond panicked at what Isaac's reaction will be when he finds out Megan is threatening his brother. The whole drive back to the office, my mind replayed Isaac's statement from months ago. *"What about for someone you love? You wouldn't get your hands a little dirty for someone you love?"*

Isaac undoubtedly loves his brother, and deep down in my heart, I know he'd do anything in his power to protect him. Anything at all.

Brandon's eyes lift to mine the instant I walk back into the office. He gulps before he rushes toward me.

"I should have never let you go alone." He pulls me into his arms and squeezes me tight.

*It's lucky I went alone as there was no way Brandon and I would have both fit in that shower!*

"Did anyone notice I was gone?"

My eyes dash around the office. Surprisingly, the usually bustling space is relatively quiet for the late hour.

"No, they've been too busy with the local cops versus FBI turf saga that happens in every town we go to." Brandon's

voice gains a hint of arrogance. “A local detective arrived on the scene not long after you left. Alex is worried he’s going to quote ‘piss all over his investigation’ unquote.”

My heart swells, pleased Isaac sought legal help to deal with Megan.

Over the next three hours, Brandon helps me compile the longest and most tedious report I’ve ever filed. We both want to ensure we have dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t,’ so the report doesn’t have any chance of being dismissed. Once the report is perfect, we head to Alex’s office to share our findings.

“Are you ready?”

After a quick breath to calm my nerves, I briskly nod.

Alex’s head lifts from some reports when he hears Brandon’s curt taps on the glass door. Brandon gestures for me to go first when Alex permits us to enter his office. Once we gain Alex’s full attention, Brandon hands him the extensively-noted documents along with several printouts of the photos I took in Megan’s bathroom. The more Alex’s eyes wander over the report, the closer his eyebrows become.

“How did you get these photos and information?” Alex’s tone is surprised.

“I followed Megan to a Motel Six on the outskirts of town.”

I wait to be reprimanded for going out in the field unassigned. Astonishingly, no negative remarks leave Alex’s mouth.

“I’m very impressed with the caliber of this report.” Alex’s shocked eyes dart between Brandon and me. “First thing in the morning, I’ll have two special agents assigned to Megan.”

“Really?” I interrupt in surprise.

As a grin stretches across Alex’s face, Brandon squeezes me tightly. “Good job, Izzy.”

My smile falters when I slide into the back of Isaac’s town car at six o’clock, and Hugo tells me, “Unfortunately, Isaac is indisposed tonight, and he has asked me to take you back to your apartment.”

## CHAPTER 42



*I* probably shouldn't have told Isaac that I loved him over the phone. If I waited and did it in person, I'd have been able to gauge his reaction by reading his face or staring into his entrancing eyes. Now, I have the misery of wondering if my message was the cause of his sudden change in routine the past four weeks, or if he really is indisposed for the night.

*What does 'indisposed' mean, anyway?*

"Are you sure you don't want to come inside? It's getting a little chilly out there."

Half of me is being genuinely friendly, whereas the other half wants to probe Hugo until he spills the beans on where Isaac is tonight.

"For the fourth time, I'm okay out here," Hugo replies from his station outside of my door.

He's sitting on a wooden chair that's part of my dining table set. After the first hour ticked by on the clock, I gave him one of the cushions from my sofa as his bottom would have to be getting sore sitting on the firm seat.

A smile tugs my lips high when Hugo drones under his breath, "I prefer my nuts attached to my body."

“And here I thought you were the first guy I met who isn’t scared of Isaac Holt,” I reply in sarcasm. “I guess tonight I’m being proven wrong.”

Hugo works his jaw side to side before rising to his feet. I try to hide my smile when he looks at me, but just from the gleam in his eyes, I can tell he knows I’m goading him.

“You do remember what happened the last time you had a man in your apartment, don’t you, Izzy?” he replies, wiping my smile right off my face.

“So, since it isn’t me who will cop the punishment for denying Isaac’s request, I guess I can come inside.”

A shiver of excitement and a tremor of fear runs through my body at the same time.

---

Trying to pry information from Hugo is like drawing blood out of a stone—impossible! After two hours, I give up and toddle off to bed. After tossing and turning for nearly an hour, I give up my endeavor of sleep and pull my phone off the bedside table. My nose screws up when I see it’s a little after two in the morning. I haven’t received any messages or calls from Isaac all day today. Even though it has only been a month, my bed feels cold without him.

Deciding I can’t dig my hole any deeper than it already is, I send a message to Isaac’s private cell.

**Me:** *I miss you. I’m lonely and cold without you.*

I lie in silence, staring at the phone’s screen, willing for it to ding saying it has received a message.

After twenty minutes, my eyes grow weary.

---

I don't know how long I've been sleeping when I'm awakened by someone slipping into my bed. My tense body relaxes when Isaac whispers, "Don't scream, it's me."

"What time is it?"

"It's nearly dawn." My heart rate quickens when his lips brush my ear. "I only just got your message."

I want to ask which one. The one that said I missed him and I'm cold or the one where I declared my love for him?

Before any words can spill from my lips, Isaac silences me with his perfectly etched mouth. His kiss is lush, deep, and passionate. Every lash of his tongue and nip of his teeth has my heart enlarging.

While raking my hand through his luxuriously thick hair, I pull him closer to deepen our kiss. My relationship with Isaac could be construed as only being based on lust, but it's the affection we display during sexual contact that proves even if the fiery passion dampens, something greater will still tie us together.

He tweaks my nipple until it's a stiff peak, every roll increasing the tingle in my aching sex.

"Could you come just from me playing with your nipples?" Isaac asks when my pants of ecstasy purr throughout the room.

"Uh-huh." I'm not the slightest bit embarrassed. "I could come just by looking at you."

Isaac emits a sexy-as-sin growl that has my thighs trembling. My sex grows wetter when he adjusts the position

of my leg, so his rapidly hardening rod can rub the seam of my panties.

---

Not long after the first orgasm rockets through my body, my alarm clock on my bedside table starts hollering. Not adjusting the speed of his seamless pumps, Isaac grips my alarm clock, yanks its cord out of the wall, and throws it across the room. The alarm clock shatters into pieces when it hits the wall with a thud.

Surprised, my eyes missile to Isaac.

“I don’t care if I have to fuck you for twelve hours straight, you’re not leaving this bed until I hear those words come out of your mouth in person.”

*Oh God.*

Without warning, an intense, core-clenching climax rushes through my body. My back arches off the bed as my nails drag down Isaac’s back so harshly, I’m certain I’ve drawn blood.

Isaac lessens my purrs of ecstasy by sealing his mouth over mine, stealing every breathless moan with lashes of his tongue. My skin is coated in a fine mist of sweat, and my hair on my body bristles to attention.

Once my trembles lessen, he rolls over, keeping his big cock hilted in me during the process. The change of position means he can plunge into me deeper with every thrust he does.

When I lean back, my nails dig into his muscular thighs. I ride him hard and fast, overcome with chasing my next release. My speed is relentless and unforgiving. Although my



pussy is swollen from our hours of sexual contact, my body is still hungry, craving, and needing more.

It wouldn't matter how many orgasms ravished my body, the chase never ends when I'm with Isaac. I want to unravel him, to have him exposed and as open to me as I am to him. I want him raw.

"Eyes on me, Isabelle," Isaac demands when the shiver of orgasm shudders my body.

Releasing my grip on his thighs, I lean toward him and entrap his mouth with mine. My kiss is selfish and starved like I haven't tasted his mouth in months when it has only been mere minutes.

"Oh God," I purr in a grunted moan along with, "I love you, Isaac."

Upon hearing my declaration of love, Isaac's eyes darken before the hotness of his seed coats the walls of my clenching sex. Even though he doesn't return my words, his actions make my heart swell, and a violent climax shreds through me so hard and fast, my vision blurs.

---

A leisurely hot shower, more orgasms than I can count, and access to my endless supply of cosmetics have me walking out of my room with an extra spring in my step.

My mouth curves into a grin when I spot Isaac sitting in my living area. When I rented this apartment, I thought the living room was an adequate size, but having a man like Isaac sitting in it depreciates its size dramatically. It isn't the room's

fault a man with an aura like Isaac's suffocates the room, making it appear smaller than it truly is.

Seeing Isaac is on a call, I enter the kitchen and pour myself a freshly brewed cup from the coffee pot Isaac brewed earlier.

Isaac's eyes lift to mine when I enter the living room. His gaze is stern, but it still causes a shiver of excitement to run through my body.

Not waiting for permission, I dump my phone and mug onto the coffee table, then straddle his lap. His conversation never falters, but his cock does stiffen. I feel sorry for whoever he's talking to. His tone is clipped and furious, his surly mood bouncing off him in invisible waves.

Snubbing his dreary mood, I press kisses on his unshaven jawline. His skin smells fresh as if he's recently showered, but his hair is dry, so I'm going to assume he's been awake for a while longer than me.

"Good morning." I tug his earlobe with my teeth.

His smirk makes me purr like a kitten. He glides his hand down my back until he cups my backside to give it a gentle squeeze. I return his flirty move by grinding my pussy against his thickened cock.

A thrill of anticipation rockets through my body when he hisses at my playful tease. Usually, his calm composure never falters, so I love that I can spark reactions from him, little flaws no one else has the privilege of seeing.

"I'll call you back."

Isaac disconnects his call, stealing his caller's chance of a reply. Remaining quiet, his tired, withdrawn gaze studies my face.

“Are you okay?”

He considers my question before nodding. Although he nods, I can hear his brain ticking over, no doubt overrun with all the information he has jammed in there.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

He smirks a deliciously wicked smile that has my core clenching.

“Oh, no. I remember what happened the last time I arrived late to work. That’s *not* happening again.”

When I attempt to remove myself from his lap, Isaac seizes my wrist before I get two steps away from him. His hot, heated gaze absorbs my body before his eyes return to my face. His desire, his needs, his every want is projected from his beautiful eyes. A smile curves my mouth when I realize his every wish is me.

“You’ll get me fired.”

He chuckles a laugh so thick, it rattles through my body before stopping to swell my heart even more.

*Actually, getting fired could be the best thing for our relationship.*

---

“Good afternoon, Izzy,” Hugo greets me, rolling down the window of Isaac’s town car.

“Harlow threw a couple of extra treats in the bag for you.”

I hand him a cup of coffee and a white bag stuffed with freshly baked goodies. His eyes bulge when he spots the scrumptious treats Harlow has supplied him with. Ever since I

found out Isaac has Hugo shadowing me, I added Hugo into my morning and afternoon coffee orders. I've tried numerous times the past several weeks to tell Isaac I don't require Hugo's services during working hours, but Isaac is adamant that if I'm not with him, Hugo will be with me.

Hugo must be bored out of his mind sitting in a car for a minimum of eight hours a day. I figure if there's anything I can do to ease his boredom, I'll do it. Coffee and cakes might not be much, but it's better than nothing.

"If this storm ends up brewing, wait under the awning of your building, and I'll pull up at the front." Hugo gestures his head to clouds in the sky.

"All right." I smile. "I'll see you in a couple of hours."

The hairs on my arms bristle when a cold breeze shivers through my body. Goosebumps form and my body shudders, the air is riddled with gloomy darkness.

When I step into the foyer of my office building, my heart stops beating. A hive of frantic activity flurries around me. Agents run in all directions gathering bulletproof vests and holstering pistols onto their waists. My heart thrashes my ribs as panic scorches my veins.

Brandon rushes toward me. He yanks the coffees out of my grasp, dumping them into a waste bin in the foyer.

"You need to get your vest on." He places a bulletproof vest over my head.

"What's going on?"

Brandon doesn't grace me with a response. He just continues putting my bulletproof vest on me before handing me my FBI-issued revolver I usually store in my desk drawer.

“We have a five-minute window. Move in quickly, secure the target, and move out. This needs to be done fast and with minimal fuss,” Alex yells over the buzz of activity.

“Who are we arresting?” I ask anyone who might be listening.

“Let’s go. Move, move, move!” Alex screams, ushering the agents out the double-glass doors.

Brandon and I shadow the other agents hustling out of the office building at a frantic pace. My heart plummets into my stomach when they race across the street and storm into Isaac’s nightclub.

“Get on the ground!” is yelled over and over again by numerous agents. Their screeching roars through my ears so loud, it overtakes my frenetic pulse.

Riddled with fear, I adjust my position to improve my view. With every shaky step I take, I pray we aren’t here to arrest Isaac. A sharp ache stabs my chest when the image of Isaac standing in front of a handful of agents with their guns drawn comes into my peripheral vision. Isaac’s livid eyes glare at Alex. His nostrils are flaring, and the tick of his jaw is noticeable even with me being halfway across the room.

“Get on the ground,” Alex sneers, directing his gun at Isaac’s head instead of his chest.

My heart constricts as time stands still. “Please, get on the ground, Isaac,” I silently chant.

Isaac’s infuriated gaze shifts sideways. I can’t breathe when our eyes lock and hold for several terrifying seconds. I wordlessly plead for him to get on the ground before Alex or one of the other agents shoot him.

Even with numerous guns pointed at him, Isaac's dignified stature beams out of him. His eyes never relay his fear, they merely convey his anger and disgust.

"Please get on the ground." My appeal is more a plea than a demand.

The agents surrounding Isaac grow panicked when he storms away from them. His long, powerful strides as he rushes my way quickens my pulse, but this time, it's fear, not euphoria responsible for its spike.

After holstering his gun, Alex grips Isaac's shoulder. He attempts to tackle Isaac to the ground, but Isaac's pursuit to reach me is too strong for Alex to overcome. Isaac's determination is unnerving and solely focused on me.

My legs quiver when I raise my gun to Isaac's erratically panting torso. Tears well in my eyes so fast, they burn from the sudden rush of moisture.

"Please get on the ground," I beg, my nerves so rattled, my gun shakes in my hand.

Isaac's delicious scent engulfs me when he stops to stand in front of me. The barrel of my gun digs into his suit-covered chest as his eyes furiously glare at me. They're the darkest I've ever seen—desolate and broken. My heart cracks from the utter hurt reflecting from his beautiful gaze.

A frightened squeal omits from my lips when gunfire ricochets around the room.

"The next one won't be a warning." Alex's tone is as vicious as the tautness of his face.

After inhaling a shaky breath, my eyes pop back open. I stare at Isaac, wordlessly begging for him to surrender before Alex makes true on his threat.

“Please,” I beg, staring at him as a tear runs down my cheek.

For the quickest second, remorse flashes through his squinted gaze. He seems torn, unsure if he’s coming or going. *He’s not the only one.*

A shudder runs through my body when he drops to his knees. Although I didn’t hear a gunshot, my panicked eyes scan his body.

I sigh upon discovering he’s uninjured.

Remaining quiet, Isaac places his hands behind his head as Alex instructs from across the room.

When I raise my eyes, I’m met with the confused gazes of several agents watching the exchange between Isaac and me. The only face not showing confusion is Alex’s.

He instructs me to arrest Isaac.

In a blur of tears, I holster my gun and place my hand on Isaac’s tense shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

I lower him onto the ground until his torso hits the mahogany dance floor in his nightclub. The loud thump his defeated body makes when it hits the ground adds more nicks to my already crumbling heart.

In an instant, several male agents scurry toward us. My heart shatters more with every brutal knee and harsh elbow they inflict on Isaac’s still body, but he remains completely motionless.

Not a noise seeps from his lips as he’s cuffed and read his rights. His gaze only leaves the ground when I stop to stand in front of him.

His eyes are livid and broken—they appear almost soulless.

“If you’re going to be accused of something, you may as well do it,” he mutters through gritted teeth.

---

To be continued in *Unraveling an Enigma*

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We also get inside Isaac’s head from here on out!

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Hunter’s, Hugo’s, Cormack’s, Hawke’s, Ryan’s, Rico’s, Regan’s and Brax’s stories have already been released. Brandon, and all the other great characters of Ravenshoe will be getting their own stories at some point during 2020/21.

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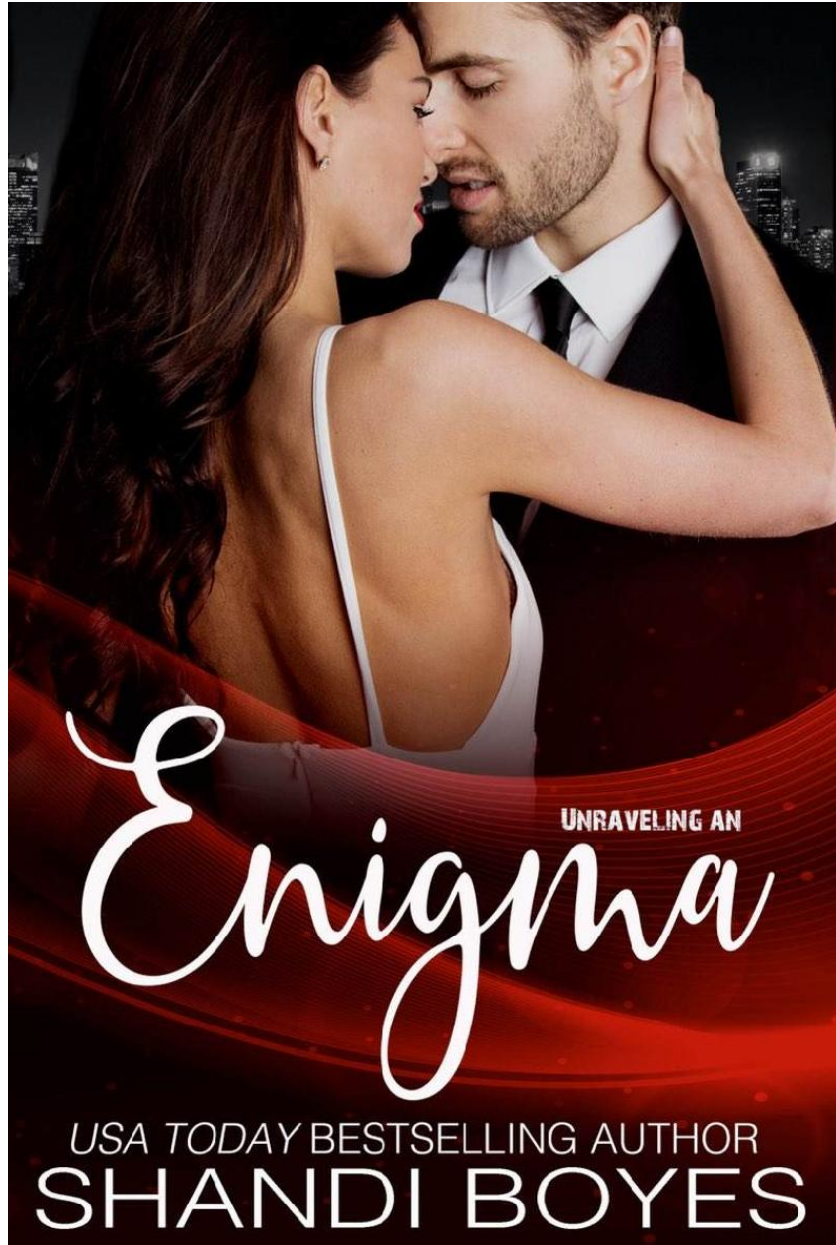
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# UNRAVELING AN ENIGMA





*All the fans of Isaac and Izzy.*

*Thank you for your messages of support.*

*I hope you enjoy Unraveling an Enigma.*

# CHAPTER 1



## ISAAC

“*H*ow much longer do they expect me to wait?”

I glare into the police officer’s dark eyes that are gawking at me with a hint of infatuation. He’s so young, he looks fresh out of the academy. Even his uniform still has the crinkles from where it was folded after manufacturing.

“They either charge me or let me go.” I turn my gaze to the camera hanging in the corner of the room. “My patience is stretched thin.”

Although I’ve been remanded at the Ravenshoe Police Department for the past two hours, I’ve yet to be informed of the fabricated charges they’re attempting to pin on me. Other than being handed a two-page report on my rights while in custody, I haven’t had any contact with the agents who arrested me—including Isabelle.

After throwing down the documents the rookie officer handed me onto the desk I’m sitting behind, I run my hand over my head. It freezes halfway when the agent who read me my rights enters the room. When he tilts his head to the side, his smirk arrogant, I ball my hands, fighting not to wipe the pretentious look off his face with my fists. This isn’t a game. It’s never been a game to me.

His arrogance falters when my gray eyes land on his. He clears his throat with an annoying cough that echoes in the silence teeming between us, no doubt to ensure fear isn't heard in his voice. He doesn't need to speak for me to know he's scared. His whole stance gives it away. His slumped shoulders, twitching thighs, and the skittish gleam in his eyes are all I need to see to know he's scared. Rightfully so, he should be.

"I can remand you for two days without charge if I so wish." I'm impressed when his words only come out with the smallest quiver. "So, I suggest you get comfortable, Mr. Holt." This time, his voice gains an edge of arrogance.

When I stand, his eyes follow me. I'm not big. I'm average height for a guy, just over six feet tall, and I'm not bulked with muscles like my fighters, but it isn't my size that has men quaking in their boots. It's my reputation. A reputation that took me years to build, and one I plan to keep no matter how ruthless it makes me seem. This isn't just my business, it is my life—it's what I live for. I fought my way to where I am, and I'll fight to keep it. Nothing has diverted my attention from my goals and aspirations the past five years. Nothing at all, until I saw her.

This will sound conceited, but I've grown accustomed to the vicious ploys women use to get my attention. The spilled drinks, the damsel in distress. Hell, I've even been offered money from wealthy business associates just for the chance to occupy my bed. However, Isabelle was by far the most elaborate ruse I've ever come across. I'll give it to her, she performed well. She played me like a fucking fiddle.

The instant my eyes landed on her sprawled at my feet, I knew she'd be my eternal weakness. For years, I've never looked at women without comparing their qualities to

Ophelia's. That didn't happen when I appraised Isabelle's striking features. I only saw her—her big, beautiful chocolate eyes, her pouty cupid's bow lip, and the most seductive body I'd ever seen.

If she hadn't been on her period, I would have claimed her in that washroom thirty thousand feet in the air. Alas, it seemed more than womanly issues were between us. I'm usually more vigilant with the people I permit into my life. Exercising control has ensured my empire's success the past seven years, but one look into Isabelle's eyes had me forgoing all lucid thoughts. She had me acting as if I were a college boy enjoying the thrill of the chase.

I had never been that way before—not even with Ophelia. It truly shocked me, so much so, for the six weeks following Isabelle's sleepover at my apartment, I kept my focus solely on my empire. My ploy was working. Isabelle only slipped into my thoughts three to four times a day instead of the standard eight. I had everything under control—until she kissed me.

Our kiss was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It catapulted my obsession with her to a never-before-reached level. From then on, every move I made was strategically planned to get her into my bed. The cupcakes order, her apartment, even Cormack's long weekend away—that was all me, an intricate ruse to make Isabelle mine. My bed. My house. My rules. *Mine*.

When my ruse worked, I thought I had won the ultimate prize. I had Isabelle. She was mine—then it all came tumbling down. Only now, after being arrested by her, do I realize my assumptions were terribly inaccurate. I don't know Isabelle at all. She's practically a stranger.

Or she'll soon become one.

## CHAPTER 2





## ISABELLE

“*J*eez, do you think there’s enough oxygen in the room to sustain both of those personalities?”

I stop pacing in the observation chamber attached to the interrogation room to stray my frightened eyes to Brandon. His brows are drawn together so tightly, a ‘V’ is in the middle of his forehead. When he notices my confused gaze, he nudges his head to a once-frosted window. It’s no longer frosted. It’s clear enough to unearth the heart-stuttering image of Isaac and Alex undertaking a sweat-producing stare-down. They’re being kept apart by the stainless-steel table Isaac has been sitting behind the past two hours.

Isaac’s handsome face is scoured with anger, but his impressive stature still bounces off him in invisible waves. Alex’s stance is just as rigid as Isaac’s. His blue eyes are narrowed, and his twitching top lip is noticeable from a distance.

When Brandon fiddles with some knobs on the sidewall, Isaac’s profound voice rumbles into the observation room, sparking an excited shiver to zap down my spine. “You have ten minutes to issue your findings before I walk out of this room and head straight to my lawyer to commence my own proceedings.”

“You won’t be walking out that door in years, let alone minutes.”

Queasiness hits my stomach, my body incapable of ignoring the viciousness in Alex’s tone. I’m the only one bothered by his comment. Isaac smirks, unaffected by the underlying threat in his tone.

After retaking his seat, Isaac taps the face of the platinum Rolex circling his wrist. “Tick tock.”

Alex’s nostrils flare as the spasm in his lip moves to his jaw. “I strongly suggest you take my advice and call a lawyer, Mr. Holt.”

Isaac scrubs his jaw, highlighting its magnificent cut. “I was once told only people with something to hide need a lawyer.”

When his eyes flick to his right, air hitches halfway to my lungs. He appears to be staring right at me. “I thought this was a two-way mirror?”

“It is.” Brandon sounds as shocked as me.

Through trembling thighs, I move to the furthest corner of the room. My pulse triples when Isaac’s commanding gray eyes track me. Even the tense circumstances can’t stop me from smiling. I love that he can sense my presence as strongly as I detect his. It proves what I’ve always known—we were made for one another.

“That’s freaky.” Brandon’s massively dilated eyes bounce between Isaac and me. “What’s the deal with you two—”

Before his interrogative question can escape his lips, we’re interrupted by Alex. He storms into the room with his hands clenched into tight balls. The twitch of his top lip is more noticeable now he’s standing before me. I swallow bleakly,

eradicating the lump in my throat when his knee-quaking eyes snap up from the polished concrete floor. “Brandon, I need that envelope—”

“Here.” Brandon shoves the yellow envelope he’s been clutching the past hour into his chest.

As he yanks out the envelope’s contents, the anger on Alex’s face switches to conniving. He smiles a full-toothed grin, appearing to have the world at his feet. After appraising each photo, he locks his eyes with mine. They have a gleam behind them, one I don’t know how to explain. Winking, he jerks his chin to the door he stormed through only seconds ago. “Follow me.”

I touch my chest. “Me?”

He doesn’t reply. He just strides out of the room even quicker than he arrived. I shadow him, my steps reluctant and shaky. When he stops outside the closed interrogation room door, I shake my head, advising him I can’t go in there. His request won’t just cause a conflict of interest, my heart also won’t survive the carnage.

Ignoring my silent pledge, Alex swings open the door. “Remain quiet and follow my lead.”

“You have two minutes remaining, so you better make this quick—”

Isaac stops goading Alex when he notices me entering the room on his heel. The amused twinkle in his eyes morphs to irate as his jaw gains a quiver. I can barely contain my breaths when he suddenly stands. He stares down at me with his pulse beeping in his neck and his hands shoved into his pockets. Although his dominance can’t be denied, the man standing across from me isn’t the man who made love to me this

morning. He's the strikingly handsome shell of Isaac Holt, but he isn't the Isaac I fell in love with.

This is the first time I've seen him since his arrest. For the past two hours, I've been endeavoring to pry information from the agents surrounding me. It did me no good. They're just as baffled by his arrest as me. None of them had any useful information. I shouldn't be surprised. I've been a part of Alex's team the past six months, and I've yet to discover one shred of information that corroborates Isaac is the man his FBI file portrays him to be. Nothing he's done the past six months warrants his arrest. If anything, he should be commended. He does more good for the residents of Ravenshoe than bad.

My thoughts are interrupted by Alex's deep timbre. "Sit down." He glares at Isaac, his stance strengthening as he fights to show Isaac he isn't intimidated by him.

He isn't fooling anyone.

After shifting his head to the side, Isaac inhales a giant whiff through his nostrils. "Can you smell that?" His voice is so rugged, it hits every one of my hot buttons. "That's the smell of fear, baby."

He strays his eyes back to Alex before doing another undignified sniff. When the most wickedly evil smile hardens his features, my panties become moist. There must be something wrong with me. Isaac is clearly angry, but instead of my body shuddering in fear, it's quaking with excitement.

"The only person who should be afraid is you, Mr. Holt." Alex slides the envelope Brandon handed him earlier across the table. "Especially when you discover what I have hiding up my sleeve."

Isaac's eyes drop to the envelope. He peers at it for a mere second before devoting his attention back to Alex. "Your ten minutes are up."

When he commences placing on his suit jacket, Alex stares at him in shock, flabbergasted by his calm demeanor. Once he has the three buttons secured, his eyes lift to mine. His gaze is captivating, yet fear-provoking. I'm not scared. I'm just petrified by what he says next. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Isabelle." It's so formal like today was our first and *only* meeting.

The undeniable connection teeming between Isaac and me doesn't render Alex speechless like me. "Aren't you the least bit curious as to what evidence I have on you?"

Isaac's lips crimp before he shakes his head. "You don't have any evidence on me as I always ensure my hands are thoroughly cleaned."

Even though Alex only groans for a nanosecond, it's long enough for Isaac to hear. He smiles, the twist of his lips cruel. When he heads for the door I'm standing next to, instinctively, my hand shoots out to seize his wrist. I have no clue what I'm planning to say. I just know I can't let him go without saying something.

Before a syllable can escape my lips, I'm interrupted by Alex. "I strongly suggest you don't leave town, Mr. Holt."

Anger beams out of Isaac, however, it has nothing on the hurt in his tone when he replies, "This is my town. If anyone is leaving, it won't be me."

With that, he exits the interrogation room, not once glancing back at me.

## CHAPTER 3



## ISABELLE

Goosebumps form on my neck when a frigid breeze blasts through my jacket. After adjusting my satchel, I continue weaving through the dense foot traffic. Although the torrential downpour has thinned the usually jam-packed sidewalks, there are still a lot of people scampering by. Most, unlike me, packed an umbrella when rain was forecast this morning. Since my morning was spent in an Isaac Holt lust phase, the weather was the last thing on my mind when I left my apartment.

Mere hours ago, Hugo advised me to wait under the awning of my building if it was raining. So much has happened since then. It honestly feels as if weeks have passed, not hours. When Isaac left without any formal charges being pressed, Alex was furious. He was the maddest I'd ever seen him. Although his anger was off-putting, nothing could leash my curiosity on discovering what was in the envelope. Alex was convinced he had a credible reason to arrest Isaac, and the evidence he had was sitting mere inches from me. The temptation was too great. I had to sneak a peek.

The envelope was barely in my hot little hand for a second before Alex snatched it from my grasp, then stormed out of the interrogation room. With tension high, I spent the afternoon

hiding in the supply closet. None of my fellow agents uttered a word to me, but their questioning looks were enough to have me laying low.

Although my career should have been at the forefront of my mind, it wasn't. Isaac was. I tried his cell numerous times the past two hours. All attempts to reach him were thwarted. My calls went straight to voicemail, and my text messages were unanswered.

Apparently delusional, I waited under the awning for Hugo for thirty minutes this evening before the fog in my head cleared. I'd become so accustomed to him collecting me every night, it became the norm, so it took longer than I'd care to admit for me to register that he'd no longer be picking me up.

By the time I walk into my apartment building, I'm soaking wet from the tips of my hair to my nearly snap-frozen toes. I'm beyond freezing, but it's nothing compared to the iciness surrounding my heart. In some ways, the downpour was a godsend. The people rushing past me to enjoy their weekend were unaware not all the dampness on my cheeks was rain. I held back my tears for as long as I could, but now that they're flowing, I'll have no chance in hell of reeling them back in.

A fresh batch of tears stings my eyes when I stagger through the front door of my apartment. A man with an aura like Isaac permeates the air, clinging to the environment hours after he's left. I can still smell him throughout my apartment.

My hurried strides to the bathroom stop when I spot the rumpled sheets on my bed. Only twelve hours ago, I was in that bed telling Isaac I loved him. I do love him. I love him more than words will ever explain. That's why I have to make



this right. He needs to know I didn't do anything wrong, and that I'll support him through this.

I rush into the bathroom to take one of the quickest showers I've ever had. When the scorching hot water hits my toes, they burn from the sudden change in temperature. Once I'm donning a fresh set of clothes and dry shoes, I sprint out of my apartment, grabbing my umbrella from the entryway closet on the way by. Because it's a Friday night, it takes a lot longer than usual to wrangle a cab.

By the time the taxi pulls into the driveway at Isaac's private residence, it's a little after nine o'clock.

"Thank you." I hand the driver my credit card to pay the exorbitant fare.

Once he drives away, I jab my shaky finger into the intercom button on the wrought iron security box. Several long, tedious minutes pass with my call remaining unanswered. Assuming Isaac isn't home, I head back to the road while yanking my cell out of my pocket. If I'd been thinking straight, I would've asked the cab driver to wait. Alas, my mind is nothing but a blurred mess of confusion tonight.

---

Another twenty minutes pass before headlights beam down the eerily black, isolated road. While sheltering my eyes from the blinding light, I pace toward the vehicle that has come to a stop at the entrance of the driveway. My quick strides halt when I realize it's Isaac's black Mercedes-Benz town car, not the taxi I was expecting.

Seconds feel like minutes when the driver's side window slowly glides down. My normal heart rhythm returns when Hugo's apprehensive eyes peek past the tint. "It's not a good time, Izzy."

"I know, but I need to see him." My voice is barely a whisper since it's full of shame. "I have to explain—"

"You have a lot of explaining to do, but believe me, now is *not* the time."

I take a step back, shocked. This is the first time Hugo has been anything but friendly. Although his angry tone stabs my heart with fresh wounds, nothing can leash my campaign. "Please, Hugo. I'll get down on my hands and knees if I have to."

I'll do anything to see Isaac again, to articulate my side of the story. Once Isaac realizes I was defending him, he might be open to the possibility of forgiving me. "I never meant to hurt him. That was never my intention. I love him, Hugo."

Hugo exhales harshly while scrubbing the scruff on his chin. After taking in my watering, pleading eyes, he punches the security code into the black box with force. My heart drums my ribcage more with every creak the gate makes as it slowly opens.

Once the gate is opened, Hugo leans over to open the front passenger door. With my heart in my throat, I slide into his car without a peep oozing from my lips. The driveway leading to Isaac's private property has always been impressive, but it feels so much longer when awkward tension is firing in the air. Although Hugo doesn't say anything, the unease bouncing off him is disgusting. It stifles the air of oxygen, making not just my insides a mucky mess but my skin as well.

When we come to a stop outside the front stairs, I curl my hand around the door latch. I'm just about to fling open my door when Hugo hits the central locking button, trapping me in the car. With furrowed brows, my eyes stray to him. Now is not the time for jokes.

I realize I have the situation all wrong when he asks, "Are you carrying a weapon?"

"No." I shake my head. "I'd never... I don't... I'm not here officially."

I'd never come to Isaac's house on work-related matters. I'm only here for personal reasons.

"I was asking for safety reasons, Izzy." Hugo's voice is raspy and jam-packed with emotion. "I've never seen Isaac like this before. I honestly don't know how he'll react when he sees you."

I grit my teeth, battling not to sob. I hate that they did this to him—*I did this to him*.

I'm still lost as to everything that is happening, so I can imagine how bewildered Isaac is. It feels like I'm trapped in a horrible nightmare. I'd give anything to wake up and start this day anew. My rendition of Groundhog Day would be perfect right now.

After reading the truth from my eyes, Hugo unlocks the doors. I suck in a big breath to calm the nerves fluttering in my stomach before clambering out of the car and climbing the stairs of Isaac's residence.

My eyes snap to Hugo when we break through the large glass door. Torn cushions, ripped paintings, upended furniture, and broken ornaments cover nearly every surface from the entryway and living room. "What happened?"

Hugo joins me at the side of the trashed living room. “The two hours they had Isaac in the interrogation room, they did an in-depth search of his property.” He shakes his head, his cheeks reddening. “No room was left untouched.”

The photographs that once adorned Isaac’s mantel are scattered on the floor along with shattered glass, the frames broken from being handled so roughly. The insides of the sofa cushions have been yanked out, leaving white fluff strewn over the beautiful woolen rug Isaac made love to me on. Not even his expensive white leather sofas were spared. They have knife gashes down the middle of them, reducing them to trash instead of the priceless antiques they once were.

Noticing the direction of my gaze, Hugo murmurs, “You never know what someone might be hiding inside a couch.”

I pace out of the living room when a light switching on down the hallway attracts my attention. My heart beats triple-time when I walk the hallway Isaac has carried me down many times the past month. Every step I take adds to the queasiness swirling in my stomach. The beautiful paintings that once graced the walls have been removed. Some are untouched. Others are so severely damaged, they’re beyond repair.

When I round the corner, I halt, my heart squeezing. Isaac is in his office. He’s still wearing the suit he was arrested in, but he’s removed his jacket, vest, and tie, and his crisp blue business shirt is rolled up to his elbows. I can only see the glass of whiskey in his hand since he’s facing the window that overlooks the manicured gardens below. His stature still commands attention, but his slumped shoulders and low-hanging head exposes his defeat.

After rolling my shoulders, I enter his office, stepping over first-edition books and months of paperwork scattered across

the floor. I'm barely halfway across the room when Isaac senses my presence. As he shifts on his feet to face me, the anxious expression on his face morphs to fury. He's blackened with rage.

Before I can comprehend what's happening, he storms my way. My first thought is to flee, but as quickly as that idea transpired, it vanishes. Running won't fix anything. I made a mistake, and I'm big enough to admit that.

Hugo places himself between Isaac and me. "Give her a chance to explain."

My heart launches into my throat when Isaac shoves him aside. He sails across the room as if he is weightless, landing on his backside with an almighty thump. I scamper backward, only stopping when I'm pinned between Isaac's imposing frame and the bookshelves lining his office. Although my body is shuddering with anxiety, excitement is still coursing through my veins. My inner vixen doesn't care how angry Isaac is. All she cares about is his closeness.

When Hugo leaps back onto his feet, I signal for him to stand down. I created this mess, so I need to fix it. Hugo stops his aggressive charge, but he watches us closely with his fists clenching open and closed. Isaac won't hurt me, but I don't see that being the same for anyone who dares to come between us.

Isaac's hot, heavy breaths blast my overheated cheeks with more warmth as he glares down at me in disdain. He must have consumed a substantial amount of alcohol since he left the Ravenshoe PD because not only is his breath riddled with whiskey, alcohol is seeping from his pores, suffocating his alluring scent.

I swallow, hoping a bit of moisture will help free my words from my mouth. It does—somewhat. “I didn’t tell them anything—”

“You’re lying.”

“No.” I shake my head, nearly sending tears toppling down my cheeks. “I never shared anything about you. I’ll defend you before I ever prosecute you.”

Isaac chuckles, a scary, menacing laugh. “You’ll defend me?” When I nod, he throws his hand around his barely recognizable office. “Is this defending me?”

“This wasn’t me. I was at the police department with you the entire time. I never left your side. I didn’t even know they’d been granted a search warrant.”

“Stop lying, Isabelle.” His roar startles me so much, my jump nearly spills the moisture pooling in my eyes. “Don’t you dare cry. You have *no* right to cry.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, fighting to keep my tears at bay. Isaac hates when I cry, and he doesn’t need more hurt added to the already bursting-at-the-seams pain in his beautiful eyes.

Confident I have everything under control, Isaac continues to interrogate me. “No one knows this place exists except Hugo and you.” His narrowed gaze flicks to Hugo, who’s watching our exchange with cautious, wide eyes. “It isn’t even registered in my name because I wanted to ensure something like this would never happen. So, either you or Hugo told the authorities about it. Hugo has been with me for years. You’ve only been in the picture the past six months—around the same time my empire was placed under the spotlight.”

“It wasn’t me.” My knees feel like they’re going to fall out from beneath me when he glares at me, but it doesn’t stop me saying, “Maybe the surveillance team followed you here one day, or...” I stop mid-sentence, incapable of finding a reasonable explanation as to how the authorities learned about his private residence. “I don’t know who it was, but it wasn’t me.”

Isaac smirks a wickedly evil grin. It doesn’t make my knees pull together. If anything, it has the opposite effect. I’m more unnerved now than I was when I had my gun pressed against his chest.

When he steps back, I gulp down a big breath, grateful I can fill my lungs with air again. It’s forced back out in a hurry when he slings his eyes to Hugo and says, “You’re fired.”

*What?* “Isaac, no. I’m not saying it was Hugo. I’m just saying it wasn’t me.”

My pulse quickens from the sheer closeness of his handsome face when he turns back to face me. “You’ve declared it wasn’t you, so either Hugo told them I lived here, or the surveillance team followed him here. Unless you’re willing to recant your confession, Hugo is fired.”

When my lips twitch, Hugo shakes his head, advising me not to fall into Isaac’s trap. Although I hate lying, I can’t let Hugo take the blame for this. With everything going on, Isaac needs someone like Hugo in his corner.

Before I lose the nerve, I murmur, “It was me.”

My eyes stray to the ground, needing to look at anything but Isaac. If he sees my eyes, he’ll know I’m lying. They’re the gateway to my soul.

“Look at me, Isabelle.” The anger beaming out of him fans the hairs stuck to my temples when I keep my eyes planted on a pile of crumpled papers to the left of his desk. He’s furious I’m ignoring him, but not as much as I’m angry at myself when he sneers, “Get out of my house before I show you just how unlawful I can be.”

He pulls away so viciously, hot air blasts my already overheated face. He strides to a bar on our right to refill his glass with whiskey. Once it sloshes over the rim, he returns to his original position by the window. I watch him in silence, begging for him to look back at me just once. He does no such thing. He’s so angry he can’t stand the sight of me. When an arm unexpectedly curls around my shoulders, I jump out of my skin. “Sorry.”

Hugo spins me around before guiding me down the hallway we walked only minutes ago. It breaks my heart walking away from Isaac, but I’m not sure what else I can do. Today has been such a clusterfuck of emotions, I’m surprised I’m still standing.

Halfway down the hall, glass being smashed sounds out of Isaac’s office. I stop dead in my tracks, a cold chill running down my spine. When I attempt to pivot around, Hugo maintains his firm clutch on my shoulders. “He needs time, Izzy. You both need time.”

By the time we reach Isaac’s town car, shock has truly set in. My heart sits heavy in my stomach as everything around me blurs. During our drive back to Ravenshoe, I keep my gaze planted on the gloomy sky. There’s not a single star in heaven tonight—even it can feel the darkness wreaking havoc with my stomach.



After pulling into the curb at the front of my apartment building, Hugo drifts his eyes to me. They're full of apprehension and remorse. "You shouldn't have lied."

"Who said I did?"

He huffs. "Come on, don't treat me like an idiot. I know you lied." His tone is a cross between angry and confused. "I just don't understand why. Isaac will never forgive you if he thinks you deceived him."

Tears burn my eyes. "I did deceive him. I may not have told the Bureau about his house, but I did deceive him. I've been lying to him for months."

Not allowing Hugo to deliver one of the many replies I see in his eyes, I scramble out of his car, then dash for my building as quickly as my quivering legs will take me.

## CHAPTER 4



## ISAAC

*A*s I bend down to gather my shattered whiskey glass from the floor, my mind drifts back to my exchange with Isabelle. I'll admit I handled the situation poorly, but I've been pushed to my absolute limits today. I'm also drunk, so the brunt of my fury was handed to a woman not deserving of all my anger. It is excusable, though. My home, my private residence, the one thing that's solely for me, has been trashed beyond recognition.

Artwork I collected over the years is damaged beyond repair, antique furniture was hacked with box cutters, and priceless ornaments are chipped and broken, but even more concerning than that is the damage they did to items with a high sentimental value. I can't replace those things. They're irreplaceable. They didn't need to conduct their search the way they did. Whoever did this wanted my attention. They have it now. I won't stop until I find out who did this as I refuse to be blindsided for the second time.

When I was arrested this morning, I felt Isabelle's presence before I saw her. That's not uncommon. She has that effect on every red-blooded man she meets. Time stands still when she enters the room. She doesn't walk, she floats like an angel. Just one glance into her rich eyes makes my cock as hard as

stone. I'm talking from experience when I say it only takes a mere second to grow infatuated with her. That's how thought-provoking she is.

When I sensed her presence this morning, I spun to face her, prepared to launch into a campaign about her not needing to panic, and that everything would be okay, so you could imagine my surprise when I noticed she was wearing a bulletproof vest and had a Bureau-issued revolver in her hands.

I've known for months she was hiding something. I just had no clue it was something so mammoth. The woman who invades my every waking thought is an undercover FBI Agent—an elaborate ruse to pry me for information. People are always gunning for me. I learned early on in my career about tall poppy syndrome. If you're already wealthy, say like Cormack, with old family money, it's okay your success is expected, but if you build your wealth from pennies as I did, you must be doing it unjustly and illegally. There's no middle ground.

People often assume my wealth was gained from fraudulent, underhanded activities. It wasn't. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I am a saint. Like many red-blooded Americans, I've dabbled in some illegal activities in my life. Enough to warrant an FBI investigation? I don't think so. Obviously, my reputation has even superseded me.

When I say I fought my way to where I am, I'm not being facetious. Bare knuckles and a dirty concrete floor gave me the capital to start my empire.

*For months, my college roommate, Cormack McGregor, pestered me to go out with him on the weekends. He was the definition of a popular school jock. He wasn't just well-liked*

*because of his cocky personality and playboy reputation but because his family was obscenely rich. They didn't just have decent-paying jobs, they were so wealthy, Cormack wouldn't have to work a day in his life if he didn't want to.*

*I was attending college on a scholarship, so a majority of my time was spent with my head in a book to ensure I maintained the grades needed to keep it. Regrettably, Cormack didn't understand the word 'no.' After pleading relentlessly for an hour, I agreed to put my business paper on hold for another night.*

*Inquisitiveness made itself known with my gut when an hour after me agreeing, Cormack pulled his BMW into the driveway of a derelict building on the outskirts of a town forty miles from our college. Cormack noticed my grim expression, but he did nothing to settle it. He just smiled a beaming, full-toothed grin before making his way into the dusty building. I trailed closely behind.*

*We walked into a dingy space that appeared to be a college gym in its heyday. The walls hadn't seen a coat of paint in years, the windows were covered with cobwebs, and the floor was brown, appearing as if it hadn't seen a mop in over a century.*

*The further we walked, the greater the smell of sweat became. I unearthed the reason for the scent when we broke through the hundreds of people huddled in a circle in the middle of the warehouse. Two well-built men were fighting toe to toe. One had blood running from a split above his left brow. The other had a variety of bruises scattered across his torso. Both were covered in soot.*

*The crowd sighed in sync when the guy with the split eye was hit with a grueling right-swung fist. He plummeted to the*

*floor, his sickening crunch occurring a mere second before an African-American man in his early twenties checked him for a pulse. Although he was breathing, he was knocked out, so the plain-clothed referee declared the fight over by technical knockout.*

*My interest piqued when he handed a wad of cash to the winner. He shared a portion of his prize money with a middle-aged man at the side of the makeshift ring before giving a smaller cut to the referee. Once they dragged the unconscious man out of eyesight, a new, less-battered fighter took his place. He was massive, easily five to six inches taller than me, and his bicep was bigger than my head. His veins were either laced with steroids, or he worked out for hours on end.*

*My eyes strayed to the referee when he snatched a microphone off a portable speaker on his right. "All right, gentleman, who's it going to be?" He scanned the crowd, eyeing off men as big as the one standing mid-ring. "Is anyone brave enough?"*

*The room fell into silence. It was both uncomfortable and amusing.*

*"What does he want?"*

*Cormack's attention diverted from a pretty blonde cozying up to his side. "He's looking for a contender to fight Bruno." He nudged his head to the brute in the ring. "People are reluctant to fight him because he's undefeated."*

*"How much is the buy-in?"*

*A condescending grin formed on his face. "For who?"*

*"Me," I answered without pause.*

*Cormack laughed so loud, he gained the attention of the MC/referee. "Do we have a challenger?"*

*Cormack stopped shaking his head when I said, "Yes."*

*The MC cupped his mic with his hand before stepping closer to me. "Who's your fighter?"*

*I gave him a playful wink, loving the unease in his tone. "Me."*

*"Seriously?"*

*Broadly smirking, I nod. "What's the buy-in?"*

*"Two G," the MC replied.*

*I cursed under my breath. If I had known where Cormack was taking me, I would have gone prepared, but I didn't carry that sort of cash around, but I knew someone who did.*

*I lifted my eyes to Cormack, who was watching me curiously. "Buy me in, and I'll give you a cut of the profit."*

*His brows pulled together as he glared at me in disbelief. "Are you fucking kidding me?" His tone was dead serious like he was petrified about my well-being. "He'll kill you."*

*"He has to catch me first." I smirked like the arrogant prick I was. "Trust me. I know what I'm doing."*

*He took several minutes pondering my request before he reluctantly yanked his wallet from his jeans. "I don't care about the money, but if you die—"*

*"Won't happen."*

*My eyes darted down to my clothes. I'd never fought in jeans before, but I didn't have anything else to change into, so they had to do. After pulling off my shoes and socks, I handed them to Cormack. He cocked a brow before thrusting my shoes into the chest of the blonde attached to his side.*

*Her huff of annoyance changed to a gasp when I removed my shirt. With flaming cheeks, her bugged-eyes glided down my body. I winked at her shocked face before shadowing the MC into the ring. Tae kwon do, boxing, mixed martial arts, karate. You name it, I had done it. After being weak and sick the first five years of my life, I became obsessed with anything that required strength and conditioning.*

*My body showed my dedication.*

---

*Halfway back to Cormack's car, he leaped into the air. "You crazy son of a bitch!"*

*I smirked; smugness was all over my face. "I told you to trust me."*

*The fight had gone as I had predicted. Bruno was all brute and no brains. He was exhausted after only a handful of swings of his chunky arms. That's when I moved in. Two left and right combinations, then a swift kick to his temple, and he was kissing the pavement. I didn't break into a sweat, and not one of Bruno's hits landed on me.*

*Cormack slid into the driver's seat of his car before drifting his eyes to mine. "Do you have any plans next Friday night?"*

*When his curious gaze floated over my face, I arched a brow, unimpressed by his prying glance.*

*He smiled at my snappy reaction. "We have to play this." He flattened my hair, then fiddled with the collar of my shirt. After squinting his eyes, he murmured, "Yes." His rummage*



*through his glove compartment produced a pair of thick-rimmed glasses and an ugly peaked beanie. “Perfect.”*

*He laughed when I put on the items as requested. All I needed was some knee-high socks, and the dorky, school nerd look would be perfected.*

*“Now, we’ve got the perfect ruse.”*

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*For the next six months, we jibbed the underground fight scene at any college within a three-hundred-mile radius of ours. I would arrive separately, dressed down in the dorky clothes Cormack supplied, acting innocent and unaware. Only once Cormack negotiated a fight did I reveal my true self.*

*With my bank balance the highest it had ever been, I quit my barista job at the local coffee shop so that I could concentrate on my new Friday-night schedule. Most circuits had a two to three grand buy-in, but a few men got cocky. They increased the purse, believing they were playing me. I walked away with four grand those nights.*

*I met Col Petretti’s son, Dimitri, on the way out of one fight that netted me a little over three grand. “How long do you think your con will last?” He strolled our way, his strut cocky. “You’re almost out of contestants in this circuit.*

*I smirked before continuing to Cormack’s car. I had been approached by several wannabe managers the past few months, but since I wasn’t interested in what they were selling, I kept walking. Our days were numbered—I had fought at nearly every college I could—but I already gave a share of my profits to Cormack, so I wasn’t willing to part with more of my money.*

*My eagerness to get away slowed when Dimitri said, "I can guarantee you five grand a fight." His voice was void of any emotion. He appeared to have the world at his feet. It was only his eyes that gave away his deceit. They were empty and soulless. "Fight for my father, and he'll pay you five thousand dollars a fight."*

*When I peered at Cormack, he notched up his shoulder, leaving the decision up to me. It wasn't his life on the line every fight, so he always left that side of the business to me.*

*"Where are the fights located?"*

*"Hopeton." Dimitri stepped closer, his attitude too arrogant for my liking. "Just near your hometown."*

*My brow arched. He had done his research on me, making me realize my ruse may end sooner than initially perceived.*

*"How often are the fights scheduled?" Five thousand dollars a fight was impressive, but not if I only fought once a month.*

*When Dimitri shrugged, my lips hard-lined. "Not interested—"*

*"What if I guarantee you five thousand a week, even if you don't fight."*

*My heart whacked out a funky tune. My future goals and aspirations would greatly benefit from five thousand dollars a week. Any deliberations ceased when Dimitri said, "Five thousand dollars a week, and my father becomes your owner."*

*My jaw ticked. "My owner?"*

*Dimitri smiled and nodded, like the idea of me being owned would impress me. It didn't.*

*"Nobody owns me."*

*“Everyone is owned.” Dimitri’s voice was haunted and shallow.*

*I stepped closer to him—so close, I could smell his fear. “Nobody owns me.”*

*Dimitri’s eyes flashed to the side when car doors being opened broke through the silence teeming between us. Two large men in expensive suits stepped out of a black Escalade. One of the men, whose attention was fixated on me, pulled back his suit jacket to show he was carrying a semi-automatic weapon.*

*“As I said, everyone is owned.” Dimitri signaled for the men to stand down before he joined them. Just before he slid into the back of the Escalade, he drifted his eyes back to me. “I’ll be in contact.”*

*When his taillights blurred into a sea of many, I shifted my focus to Cormack. “Who the fuck was that?”*

*He shrugged because back then, we didn’t have a clue who we were dealing with.*

## CHAPTER 5



## ISABELLE

*I* press my palms on the vanity sink before raising my eyes to the mirror. Disheveled—that’s the only word I can use to describe myself. My hair is oily and unkept since I haven’t washed or brushed it in over forty-eight hours, and my skin is pale, which amplifies the dark rings under my eyes. I look horrific. Rightfully so. I spent my weekend wrapped up in my bedsheets, but I barely slept a wink. My sheets are the closest thing to Isaac I have, so I haven’t let them out of my sight.

Some good came from my lack of sleep, though. A small portion of the confusion in my mind lifted. Alex must not have unearthed anything incriminating during his invasive search of Isaac’s home, or he would have never let Isaac leave during questioning. It’s immensely satisfying knowing the Bureau doesn’t have enough evidence to issue an arrest warrant on Isaac, but I’m still confused as to why he was arrested to begin with. Alex would have needed something substantial for the judge to agree to a search warrant, but for the life of me, I can’t work out what it is.

I do know one thing. No matter what it is, I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding. Isaac isn’t the man his FBI file portrays. He’s kind, honest, and has the biggest heart. I’m so confident

in my assumption, even with him giving clear signs he wants nothing to do with me, I'll continue defending him. I'll fight for justice right alongside him, not stopping until his name is clear of controversy.

After a steaming hot shower, and a good thirty minutes striving to remove the disheveled look from my face, I walk out of my apartment. It's a crisp, dreary morning. The rain brought in a cool change, and my wool jacket and beanie-covered head make it easy to ignore. The smell of rain and fresh-cut grass filters in my nostrils when I exit the rotating glass doors of my building. Birds are chirping in the distance, and the constant honk of impatient motorists announce morning commuter traffic is at full capacity.

Since the rain has cleared, the sidewalks are more popular than they were Friday night. In true modern times, most travelers conduct their journeys with a cell phone attached to their hands. It's rare to see anyone without an electronic device these days. It's nice to keep in contact, but since they rarely look up from their phones, I'm constantly elbowed or barged.

Not wanting to get trampled, I move to the furthest edge of the sidewalk. Traffic is dense, but my odds of being hit by a car would be significantly less than the number of elbows I've already been subjected to this morning.

Two blocks down, the beat of my heart increases to a steady pace. A dark blue sedan is tailing me. I wouldn't have noticed if its speed wasn't matching mine. Commuter traffic is thick, but it's not heavy enough they need to drive at a walking pace.

While adjusting my satchel, I inconspicuously peer over my shoulder. The sedan's dark tint is already a hindrance, much less the sun beaming off the windshield. I can't see any

of the driver's features. When the light ahead of me changes to red, I sprint across the intersection, breaking away from the shadow following me. He can't follow me since there are three cars between us.

By the time I reach Harlow's bakery, I'm covered with a sheen of sweat and suddenly regretting my thick coat. After closing the bakery's front door, I lean my back against it, close my eyes, then suck in several big breaths to settle my flipping heart.

Once I've regathered my composure, I pop my eyes back open. The nerves I've just expelled return full force when I'm subjected to Harlow's furious wrath. Her arms are crossed in front of her chest, and her hazel eyes, which have tears, are glaring at me. Her lips twitch like she's about to speak, but no words seep from her mouth. It isn't that she can't talk. She just doesn't want our showdown witnessed by the handful of customers enjoying the breakfast items her bakery supplies every morning.

With a shake of her head, she spins on her heels to enter the kitchen at the back of the bakery. I take off after her, smiling a greeting to Renee, one of her workers, on my way past. My brisk pace slows when I notice Harlow's clenched fists. She's angry, but it has nothing on the disappointment in her eyes. They reveal what her anger centers around. She knows my secret.

"Legally, I couldn't tell anyone..." My words trail off when she huffs. She's pissed I'm giving her the same old excuse as everyone else, and she has a right to be. She deserves better than that. "I'm still me." I step into the firing zone. "I'm the same person you became friends with. I just

don't do the job I said I did, but nothing else about me is different.”

A disbelieving chuckle rumbles in her chest. “And your relationship with Isaac? Was that you? Or Izzy, the FBI agent, diving under the sheets for the good of society?”

*Ouch.* That's a sting my bruised ego did, but I deserve her anger. I did lie to her. “I understand that you're angry—”

“I'm not angry, Izzy. I'm pissed off. You lied... for months!”

“Nothing I told you was a lie.” I move closer to her, wanting her to look into my eyes, so she knows I'm telling the truth. “Anything I ever said or did when I was with you, was me, Izzy, your friend. I was *never* an agent when I was with you.”

“Some friend.” Her glare cuts through me like a knife. “Not only are you suffering the consequences of your actions, but others are as well.”

I step back, confused. What is she talking about?

My heart breaks when a tear splashes onto her cheek. “Harlow...”

She holds her finger into the air, begging for a minute. If I didn't feel responsible for her tears, I'd leave her alone as requested, but since she's my friend, and I care for her, I step closer to her instead.

When I curl my arms around her quivering shoulders, she attempts to shrug out of my embrace. I hold on tight, refusing to relinquish her from my grip. “I'm sorry. I should have been honest. I would have if I could.”



The reason for her heartbreaking sobs come to light when she murmurs, “Cormack hasn’t returned any of my calls this morning.”

“Oh, Harlow, I’m so sorry.”

Her hand sweeps across her wet cheeks. “He probably thinks I knew all along you were working with the FBI.”

“I’ll explain everything to him. I’ll make this right, I promise.”

I have to make this right. Harlow loves Cormack. She told me precisely that only days ago. I wish I had put more thought into the ripple effect my deceit would create. Alas, when I’m in Isaac’s world, I forever wear rose-colored glasses.

My eyes float up from the floor when Harlow murmurs, “Cormack has a reason to be suspicious. I did conspire to set you up with Isaac.” She blows her nose before her purge fess begins. “I met him a few weeks before we went out to celebrate your birthday. He ordered cupcakes for a meeting he was holding. With Fallon quitting the night before, I delivered his order instead of having them couriered. It wasn’t the norm, but the instant I saw him...” She stops talking, her face expressing what her mouth can’t. She fell in love with him on sight, just like I did with Isaac.

“As I was leaving, I ran into Isaac. He interrupted us...” Her heated cheeks have me wondering what Isaac walked in on. “After some not-so-fun to and fro, I discovered Cormack and Isaac were good friends. Cormack was hesitant, but I convinced him we should conspire to get you two together.”

She sucks in a big breath before continuing, “I didn’t book a table at that restaurant the night we went out for your birthday because I knew Cormack already had one booked. He

and Isaac did the same routine every week. I saw the way Isaac looked at you but thought you were being stubborn. I had no clue what I was pushing you toward. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's not your fault. I should have been honest from the get-go."

She nods, agreeing with me. "Please tell me you weren't with Isaac solely for the FBI." She glances into my eyes, hers once again welling with tears. "Because if you were, not only will Cormack never forgive me, I won't forgive myself."

Her devastated tone kills me, but nothing can alter the facts. "I love Isaac, Harlow, more than I could ever explain, so you can be assured I was never with him for the Bureau."

She nods for the second time, once again believing me.

If only Isaac could be as easily convinced.

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By the time I leave the bakery, things aren't back to normal between Harlow and me, but they're better than they were when I arrived. I'll do everything in my power to ensure Cormack understands that Harlow is innocent in this situation. I don't care if Cormack never speaks to me again. He can despise me for the rest of his life, but he needs to take his anger out on me, not Harlow.

A vehicle parked across the street from the bakery halts my quick exit. A blue sedan is parked two spaces up. Although I can't confidently declare it's the same vehicle that was tailing me earlier, my intuition is warning me to remain cautious.

With my body facing the shop frontage, I commence walking down the street. I don't even get four steps away

before the sedan begins following me. When I increase my speed to a jog, it also increases its speed.

Against my better judgment, I freeze before turning to face the vehicle that's come to a stop three car lengths behind me. If they're going to blatantly follow me, I want them to be aware I know of their pursuit. When I step closer to my pursuer, it heads in the opposite direction. It reverses down the street, its tires squealing from the heavy compression of the accelerator.

My heart feels seconds from escaping my chest cavity, but instead of it pounding in fear, it's thumping with adrenaline. I'm sick and tired of being pushed around. It's time for me to give as good as I'm getting.

## CHAPTER 6



## ISABELLE

Numerous pairs of eyes track me when I enter my office building. Ignoring the tension ridding the air of oxygen, I deliver the morning coffees as I have every day since joining the team six months ago. Since Alex isn't in his office, I leave his on his desk.

Brandon is the only agent who acknowledges me during my deliveries. He's quiet, but his eyes are missing the judgment every other agent had while glaring at me. Once my deliveries are over, I store my satchel in the bottom drawer of my desk, then fire up my computer. While it starts the slow process of downloading the malware required for my job, I hang my coat on the rack next to the front entry door.

When I spin back around, I come close to losing my footing. A female agent I haven't met previously is standing within an inch of me. "Sorry I didn't see you there."

"That's fine. I'm sure your daftness can be excused after the tense week you've had." Her eyes are friendly, even though her tone is anything but. "Isabelle Brahn, I assume?"

"Yes." I accept the hand she's holding out in offering.

"Theresa Veneto. I'm from the Internal Affairs Division of the FBI."

Her handshake is robust, nearly as sturdy as her lips, which are set in a straight line. She's attractive—if you can look past the harshness of her punitive glare. If I had to guess her age, I'd say early to mid-thirties. Her long blonde hair frames her oval face, and her eyes are blue.

“How can I help you, Ms. Veneto?”

It takes me yanking my hand out of her clutch to free it from her rigid grip, and even then, she seems reluctant to let me go. I stuff my hands into my pockets, uneasy by her odd-ball behavior. When her humored eyes float around my office, I follow the direction of her gaze. Every agent in the direct vicinity of us is watching our exchange, including Alex, who's standing next to Brandon's now-empty desk.

“Perhaps we should take this somewhere private?”

When she gestures for me to follow her, I do, albeit hesitantly. She guides me to the dimly lit conference room where Brandon and I discovered Isaac's connection with Col Petretti. My already wobbly strides increase their shake when I notice a male agent in the room. He's seated behind a camera tripod on the table that once held the files I've been scanning the past several weeks. They're not the only thing missing. My uncle's moldy storage boxes have also been removed.

When I enter the room, the male agent assesses my body in a creepy, skin-crawling way. “I understand Isaac's interest.”

Either missing her partner's statement or happy to ignore it, Theresa requests for me to sit in the chair across from the video camera. Just as I plop down, a knock rattles the window behind my head. Relief washes over me when I see Brandon on the other side.

“As the union representative for this division, I need five minutes to talk to Ms. Brahn before her interview commences.” Brandon’s tone conveys he’s not seeking permission. He’s telling them this is what is happening.

Theresa huffs, annoyed. “Five minutes.”

The male agent places on his suit jacket, his belly so round, the buttons nearly burst during fastening. When the glass door of the conference room closes with them on the other side, I drift my eyes to Brandon.

“Wha—”

“Be quiet, Izzy.”

“I—”

“Shut up, Isabelle.”

I freeze, stunned. This is the first time I’ve heard him curse. When he jerks his chin up, I look in the direction he nudged. There’s a security camera mounted in the corner of the room. It’s flashing red, indicating we’re being watched.

“What the hell,” I murmur to myself when the blinking light ceases a few seconds later.

Before I can ask what is happening, Brandon locks his panicked eyes with mine. “I strongly advise you to plead the fifth—”

“I don’t have anything to hide.”

My relationship with Isaac may be construed as immoral, but nothing I’ve done the past month was criminal.

“Please don’t be stupid. They’re here to charge you with conspiracy in aiding and abetting a criminal by supplying him

with official government documents. If you don't plead the fifth, you're looking at over twenty years in jail."

"Why?" I mutter, my one word breathless. "I've never given Is—"

"Shut up!" Brandon's growl vibrates right through my chest. "I can't guarantee they don't have ears in here." After pressing his sweat-slicked palms to the white melamine tabletop, his gaze seeks mine. "Plead the fifth, then I'll do everything in my power to help you through this." Even though his tone is stern, his request still comes out as a plea.

I still feel it's the wrong thing to do, but I nod. Brandon has gone out of his way to help me. He wouldn't do that unless he believes it's imperative.

"I'll stay with you during your interview, but no matter what they say or do, continuously plead the fifth."

My stomach churns so much, I feel like I'm about to be sick, but I still nod—somewhat. It's more a halfhearted agreement than a determined one.

Not long later, Agent Theresa and her partner re-enter the room. "Your five minutes are up." She nudges her head to the door, giving Brandon his marching orders.

"Isabelle has requested a union representative be present during her interview."

Theresa's jaw ticks as her eyes drop to mine. "Is that correct, Isabelle?" She sneers my name like it left a nasty taste in her mouth.

I nod. "Yes, that's correct. "

When she closes the door with more force than needed, the room plunges into an awkward silence. She dumps a spare



chair next to Brandon's thigh before taking a seat in the one opposite me. It's not hard to work out who plays good cop and bad cop in her partnership. Theresa's face is as hard as stone, whereas her partner looks seconds from laughing.

His smile sags when Theresa ribs him with her elbow. After coughing to clear his throat of laughter, he leans over to switch on the camera. The instant it flashes its familiar red light, Theresa breaks into the bad cop script every agent is taught during training. It's just not the standard set of questions I was anticipating. "Are you in a relationship with Isaac Holt?"

"I plead the fifth."

Theresa's manicured brow bows as her face strains with confusion. She wiggles her ear, certain she heard me wrong. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I plead the fifth amendment."

With an evil grin, she tries another tactic. "Are you in a *sexual* relationship with Isaac Holt?"

I swallow harshly, praying my voice doesn't stutter when I reply, "I plead the fifth."

"Have you had physical contact with Isaac Holt since your placement commenced in this division of the FBI?"

"I plead the fifth." My reply comes out sterner than I'm anticipating. It can't be helped. Theresa's tone could only be murkier if she dumped her words in the Hudson before articulating them.

Theresa flicks her humored gaze to Brandon. "She's clever. A rookie agent knowing to plead the fifth. Who would have thought?" After returning her eyes to me, she snarls,

“Are you planning to answer any of my questions, Ms. Brahn, or will you continue pleading the fifth amendment?”

Her partner chuckles when I declare, “I plead the fifth.” Blood races through my body, my annoyance at an all-time high. “I choose not to answer your questions on the consideration that I may be unwillingly incriminating myself.”

Brandon may have suggested I plead the fifth, but I’m not as stupid as she’s making me out to be. I did learn some tricks during my time at the academy.

A scrape bellows around the room when Theresa stands from her chair. After running her hands down her starched-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life blouse, she snags a manila folder from a black leather briefcase open on the desk. “You read a law book during your training... *impressive*.” She taps the folder on the desk three times, her smirk condescending. “So, you’re aware prostitution is illegal?”

“I’m well aware of that.”

Brandon squeezes my thigh, wordlessly cautioning me to stay on script.

Theresa isn’t worried about his silent warning. She’s confident she has her case in the bag. “Just because he didn’t leave money on your bedside table when he was finished, doesn’t make it any less of a crime.”

She places down a sheet of paper in front of me. It’s the lease I signed for my apartment months ago. I’m a little lost as to where our conversation is heading—until she adds a second paper to the mix. As clear as day, written in the owner section of the report is Mr. Isaac Holt.

“I *pay* rent for my apartment in full every month.” Ignoring Brandon’s painful squeeze that will most likely leave

a bruise, I raise my eyes to Theresa. “The owner’s details were *not* disclosed when my application was processed.

“I thought you might say that, so I dug a little deeper.” She hands me a list of addresses with monthly figures on the side. “The same two-bedroom apartments in your building rent for over three thousand dollars a month—you pay twelve hundred.” Her composure drips with cockiness. “That’s not even half. Do you get a friends-with-benefits rate?”

It’s the fight of my life not to tell her exactly what I think of her and her inappropriate suggestions. I would if I weren’t worried she’d use it to railroad me even more than she already is.

“I plead the fifth.”

She continues with her interrogation as if I never said anything. “Then, there’s this.” She slides another piece of paper across the desk. “A charter for a private jet booked under Isaac Holt’s name. How romantic; most men don’t take their mistresses on holidays with them.”

Brandon snatches the flight manifest out of my hand. “Isabelle’s name isn’t even on the manifest. That’s explicit conjecture. Everything you’ve presented thus far is speculation.” His legal knowledge is impressive. “Isaac Holt owns over half of Ravenshoe, so it would be virtually impossible for Isabelle to rent anything in this town that didn’t belong or have an association with him.” He stands, knocking over his seat in the process. “This interview is over. If you speak to Isabelle again without a lawyer present, I won’t hesitate to contact my father, who in turn, will have a word with your superior officer.”

With a sharp yank on my arm, I’m removed from my seat. Brandon guides me out of the room, his steps so furious, I

have to jog to maintain his rapid pace. His angry strides don't stop until we arrive in the supply closet that's been my office the past month.

He drags his fingers through his hair, giving it an appealing sexed-up look. "You didn't have a clue about any of that, did you?"

I shake my head. "I plead the fifth."

He mutters something under his breath that sounds similar to "Jesus Christ, Isabelle." His voice is clearer when he warns, "You need to be vigilant about anything you say or do over the next few days."

When I nod, he steps closer to me. "Is Isaac Holt Mr. Unattainable?"

He stares at me with unease, begging for me to deny his accusation.

His pleas are left unanswered when I nod.

"Jesus, Isabelle." He drags his hand over his head, flattening his new do. "How long?"

I hesitate. He just cautioned me to remain quiet, but now he wants all the details. "Officially, a little over a month. But I met him before I knew he was being investigated."

When Brandon gives me a look as if he's not buying my story, I explain, "I'm petrified of flying." My fear is so nerve-racking, my knees knock even while explaining my concern. "I was working up the courage to enter the boarding area at the airport when my push off the railing had me crashing into Isaac." I smile when the memories of that day filter through my mind. "Isaac took care of me. He iced the bump on my head before offering up a pain reliever for my throbbing head. I didn't think I'd see him again, so you can imagine my

surprise when I was seated next to him for my flight to Ravenshoe. If that wasn't already shocking, it was a business-class seat."

I'm still shocked about that day. What would the odds be out of the millions of people traveling that day, we'd be seated together?

"You flew business class?" When I nod, Brandon's lips crimp. "Who paid for your flight?"

I give him my best *duh* face. "The Bureau."

He knows this. When you're assigned a team, travel expenses are included.

"Did you request for your ticket to be upgraded to business class?"

I shake my head at Brandon's question. I don't have the means to upgrade my ticket now, much less back then.

Brandon's chest expands so much, the buttons on his dress shirt nearly pop. "Did Isaac have any way of knowing you were on his flight?"

I almost shake my head until the memories of that day trickle through my mind. "Isaac collected my belongings, so he may have seen the boarding pass I had printed earlier that day, but it would have only been for the quickest second..."

My words stop when the supply closet door swings open. When Alex enters the already stuffed room, its minute size shrinks even more. He bounces his eyes between Brandon and me before they finally come to rest on Brandon. "It's after eleven, and the report I requested first thing this morning is still not finalized, yet you have time for a chit-chat with Isabelle in the supply closet. Perhaps I need to increase your workload?"

Brandon remains quiet, but he doesn't need to speak to express his anger. It's visible on his usually expressionless face. Happy he has Brandon on tenterhooks, Alex shifts his focus to me. "I need to see you in my office." He pivots and stalks to the door, only stopping to ensure I'm following him. "Now, Isabelle."

Nodding, I drift my eyes to Brandon, praying today won't be the last time I associate with him on a professional level.

## CHAPTER 7



## ISABELLE

*M*y heart smashes against my ribs when Alex lowers the privacy blind in his office. The glass wall I've never seen shadowed frosts, plunging the room into an eerie gray coloring. After switching on an antique lamp, Alex gestures for me to sit in the chair opposite his well-organized desk. Once I'm seated, he sits in a leather chair, then props his elbows on his keyboard. Although his gaze is stern, there's something behind them that has the vein in my neck working overtime.

“Because of your unwillingness to cooperate with their investigation, IA is recommending you go on unpaid leave until they finalize their inquiries.”

The room spins around me. This is worse than first perceived.

“Although I don't agree with their scrutiny, I believe it'll be best for all involved if you take a step back.” His deep timbre softens to a whisper. “Running an investigation like ours is hard enough. We don't need IA breathing down our necks.”

Guilt makes itself known with my gut. The last thing I wanted to do was shroud his department with controversy. That's why I fought my feelings for Isaac for so long, I didn't



want this to be the outcome, but now that I'm in love with him, I can't give him up. The only thing I'd change if given a redo of the last three months would be to tell Isaac the truth from the beginning, then maybe I wouldn't be left defending my honor on my own.

“Once IA's investigation is found unwarranted, I'll accept you back into my team, Isabelle, but until then, you need to gather your belongings and leave the office immediately.”

With a fake smile plastered on my face, I nod before standing to my feet and heading for the door. Once I have the stainless-steel handle grasped in my hand, I crank my neck back to Alex. “Isaac isn't the man you think he is.”

I exit his office, denying him the opportunity to reply. Several eyes follow my brisk track to my desk. Other than my satchel, phone, and FBI-issued revolver, I don't have any other personal belongings, so I'm ready to leave in mere seconds.

As I place my gun into my satchel, the heat of a gaze captures my attention. Theresa is gawking at me from across the room. A smirk is stretched across her face, hiding her vicious snarl, and her arms are crossed in front of her chest. Her condescending stature reveals what I already know—the instant I leave this office, gossip about my dismissal will spread like wildfire.

I stop returning Theresa's glare when a deep voice says, “I'll walk you out.”

My eyes stray to Brandon, who has his backside propped against my desk. “I appreciate the offer, but I don't want you thrown under the bus with me.”

He makes a *pfft* noise. “I don't care what they think. You're my friend, Izzy, and until proven guilty, which will

*never* happen, I'll have your back."

I bump him with my hip, pretending his words don't have me on the verge of tears. "Thanks, Brandon."

When we exit the brick-and-mortar building I use to call my office, I squint. When you sit behind a desk all day, you forget how bright the midday sun is. Since winter is approaching, my cheeks are more than appreciative of the warmth.

With a sigh, I sling my arms around Brandon's neck. "Thanks for your help."

His hug is warmer than the sun, only dampened by his whispered warning, "Fly under the radar, Izzy. Once I have any information, I'll bring it straight to you."

"I will, and thank you again."

As I inch back, a smirk tugs at my lips. Not even the brisk weather has reduced the hue on his cheeks. He's such a sweetheart, and although I'm sure he's regretting siding with me, I'll be eternally grateful he is a part of my life.

"See you around?"

He returns my earlier hip bump. "You'll be back here filing before you know it."

"Don't forget the coffees. God forbid Alex would have to fetch his own cup."

Brandon's laugh makes what I'm about to do ten times easier. With a wave, I pivot on my heels and mosey down the sidewalk. I don't turn back around, but I know his eyes remain on me until I turn the corner. I can feel it deep in my bones.

I stand on the corner of First Avenue and Welsh Boulevard, a little perplexed on what to do. It's only 11:20

a.m., so it's too early for lunch, but I'm lost on how else to occupy my time. Just as I consider going to Harlow's for brunch, a brilliant idea pops into my head.

Stepping onto the curb, I flag down a taxi. Because of the early hour, I secure a ride rather quickly. I scamper into the back seat, removing my coat in the process. The driver has the heat up so high, the cab is super muggy.

“Destiny Records in Hopeton, please.”

After securing my belt, I raise my eyes, noticing the cab hasn't pulled away from the curb yet. When my eyes collide with the driver's in the rearview mirror, he eyes me with caution. “Hopeton is an hour's journey from here.”

My eyes bulge. I've lived in Ravenshoe for six months, but a lack of free time meant I've never ventured far. I had no clue about the distances between towns.

“How much will the fare be?” Nerves jangle on my vocal cords. Alex said I'm on leave without pay, so I need to be cautious with my spending until IA finalizes their investigation.

The driver twists his lips. “Approximately one-fifty each way.”

“Each way?”

When he nods, I hand him a few bills from the limited number in my purse before sliding out of his cab, taking my coat with me. I just lost my job. I can't afford hundreds of dollars in cab fares. A bus ticket, on the other hand, I'm sure I can scratch up the fare.

I'm standing at the bus stop, checking the times of the buses departing to Hopeton when a rumbling voice asks, “Where are you going, Izzy?”

Hugo's grinning face comes into sight when I slant my head to the side. "I'm trying to fix some errors I made."

A bus leaves for Hopeton every hour. With the stops in between, it'll take me a little over two hours to get there, but I have to do this. I hate that Harlow and Cormack's blossoming relationship is suffering because of me.

When Hugo jerks up his chin in understanding, I drift my eyes over the shiny red muscle car he's sitting in. Two black stripes roll down each side of its candy apple red paint. Its tires are as wide as they are tall, and the healthy purr of its engine is encouraging as many admiring glances as its owner. Upon noticing my appreciative gawp, Hugo revs his engine, startling a baby waiting to board the bus with his mother.

"A little different from your usual ride."

"This is my baby." Hugo's tone hints at the fascination he has with his car. "A fully rebuilt 1969 Chevelle."

I smile at the pride beaming out of him. *Boys and their toys.*

"Get in; I'll give you a lift."

"I'm going to Hope—"

Hugo cocks his brow. "I know where you're going. Get in."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

His brow arches even higher.

"Okay, thanks."

Grinning, I dash around his gleaming muscle car and jump into the passenger seat. After tossing my jacket and satchel into the back seat, I peer at Hugo's profile. He's dressed

differently today. His black suit and white dress shirt have been switched for dark denim jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. He has the sleeves pulled, showcasing a vast collection of tattoos I didn't know he had.

“Day off?”

A chuckle bubbles in his chest. “Something like that.”

His gaze strays from the road to me. I'm wearing my standard office attire, which consists of black skinny-leg trousers and a long-sleeve silk blouse. “How about you? I didn't see you leave the office this early the six months I was tailing you.”

Although I should be peeved at his admission he was watching me for so long, I've got more pressing matters to deal with. “I've been suspended without pay.”

Disappointment is relayed in my tone. Even if IA's investigation comes back with no factual findings, my personnel record will be forever smeared by this controversy. Sexually cavorting with a target was never recommended during my training. My career won't come back from this. I'm just praying my personal life won't be as badly affected.

My eyes snap to Hugo when he says, “I want to say I'm surprised by your suspension, but I'm not. If you want to live a double life, you need to be more cautious.” I dance my eyes between his, waiting for him to elaborate on his response. Mercifully, he doesn't keep me waiting for long. “My sister's file was sealed so tightly, not even Isaac's detective friend, Ryan, could gain access to it, but you, a supposed secretary in legal aid, found out what happened to her.”

*Oh.*

My pupils dilate even more when he says, “That was your *second* mistake. The first was the morning you followed Isaac when he was attending a meeting with Delilah Winterbottom. You didn’t check your surroundings for potential conflicts before making the call. I heard everything you said.”

“So, you’ve known all along that I’m an agent?”

A smile furls Hugo’s lips high before he nods.

“Then why didn’t you say anything to Isaac? Why didn’t you rat me out?”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Because I knew once you learned who he really was, you’d also protect him.”

“Also? So you’re protecting Isaac... you’re his bodyguard?”

He screws up his face. “Isaac doesn’t need a bodyguard. I more protect those he cares about.”

Loving his honesty, I test the waters. “Who are you protecting them from?”

He coughs to clear his throat. “Col Petretti.”

My hands ball into fists. “Why does Col have a vendetta against Isaac? Isaac may be capable of many great things, but not even he can be held accountable for a traffic accident.”

My attitude gets nipped in the bud when Hugo discloses, “Col doesn’t blame Isaac for Ophelia’s death; only Isaac believes that. Col believes he’s a snitch.”

Confusion slips over my face. “Why would he think Isaac is a snitch?”

“The plea bargain Roberto Petretti got after running my sister was only given after he agreed to supply the DA

evidence on his father's shady deals. Since Col wasn't linked to any illegal activities, only his business associates were caught in the net of Roberto's confession. When they served time behind bars, Col's business immensely suffered, but since Col would never believe his son ratted him out, he blamed Isaac." He flexes and unflexes his fingers on the steering wheel. "Roberto already made my family suffer. I won't let his family hurt another."

My heart breaks for Hugo. Even though he masks his pain well, he carries the loss of his sister and nephew in his eyes. When I curl my hand over his balled one on his thigh, his eyes drift to mine. "Don't give up on Isaac, Izzy. He looks at you like my best mate looked at my sister. As Jorgie would say, you can't fight fate."

"I'll try." I don't want to give up on Isaac. I just don't like my chances of regaining his trust. It's so easy to break, but it takes more than a lifetime to repair. Doing anything to stop the tears burning my eyes from falling, I ask, "How can you protect Isaac if you're always shadowing me?"

When Hugo laughs, the grief straining his face slackens. "As I said earlier, Isaac doesn't need protecting. He's more than capable of looking after himself. If you don't believe me, ask Col's right-hand man. He learned a hard lesson on what happens when you threaten someone Isaac loves."

My heart nearly bursts from his statement. If I heard him correctly, he's implying that Isaac is in love with me. If that's true, there may still be hope for me yet.

For the rest of our trip, Hugo remains quiet. I don't mind. It gives me a chance to work through the panic his confession elucidated. Half of me is excited he thinks Isaac is in love with

me, whereas the other half is petrified I'll never get the possibility of discovering the truth from Isaac myself.

When Hugo pulls into the parking lot at the back of Destiny Records, I swing my eyes to him. "Thanks for the ride..." My praise halts halfway when he throws off his seat belt and curls out of his car.

I join him on the sidewalk before eyeing him with suspicion. He smiles at my quirked brow before honking my nose. "Have you met Peta, Cormack's receptionist?"

I shake my head.

"When you do, you'll understand my eagerness."

He winks before strutting through the automatic glass door at the front of Destiny Records. When I follow him, no more words are needed. Peta is beautiful, in a sexy, schoolteacher type of way. Her tight, high-waisted skirt paired with dangerously high stilettos makes it appear as if her legs never end. She reminds me of a young Halle Berry. Even their skin tone and facial structure are a perfect match.

I mill around in the foyer when Hugo makes his way to Peta's desk. I'll let him work his magic since Peta doesn't have eyes for anyone else in the room the instant she spots him. She bats her lashes as her nude lips gnaw on a ballpoint pen.

After a few minutes of chit-chat, Hugo returns to my side. He rubs his hands together while smiling a blinding grin. "Cormack is finishing up an important appointment, then the next twenty minutes of his schedule is free."

A ghost of a smile sneaks onto my lips. Although I'm pleased with Hugo's negotiating skills, not all my smile



centers around that. His gaze never left Peta during his comment.

“Why don’t you ask her out?”

With a grimace, he shrugs. If he’s planning to reply with words, he loses the chance when Isaac strides out of Cormack’s office. His demeanor is so commanding, I’m not the only set of eyes watching his every move. He’s so breathtakingly beautiful, my eyes hurt while assessing his perfect face and body, so I can’t blame others for enjoying the view as well.

After shaking Cormack’s hand, Isaac shifts on his feet to face Hugo and me. His outward appearance doesn’t give any indication he has spotted us, but I can feel the heat of his gaze raking my body—it bristles every fine hair on my body and has my knees touching.

When his attention shifts to Hugo, his jaw gains a new tick. There’s more tension in the room now than there was Friday night when Hugo placed himself between us.

As he makes his way to the front door, no words are spoken between us, but I’m hopeful my eyes will relay how much I miss him and that I’m sorry for hurting him.

Once he’s no longer in sight, my watering eyes lift to Hugo. “You’re not on a day off, are you?”

He grins. “Nope. I set a new record by getting fired twice in one night.”

## CHAPTER 8



## ISABELLE

A smile curves my lips when I read Harlow's message.

**Harlow:** *I don't know what you said to Cormack, but thank you.*

After returning her message saying I only did what I should have done months ago, I show Hugo our joint success. Cormack was more than willing to listen to my pleas for forgiveness. I don't know if it was brutal honesty that got him over the line, or Hugo telling him over a dozen men are lining up to take his place in Harlow's life if he weren't up to the task. From the recognition that dawned across Cormack's face, I'd say it was the latter. Harlow is beautiful. She has a strong work ethic and an even stronger heart. If Cormack waited too long, another man would snatch her away from him without a single regret.

"At least someone listened to my advice."

I wait for Hugo to pull his car into the front of my building before asking, "What happened between you and Isaac that got you fired?"

His teeth shine in the sun when he smiles. "I told him to pull his head out of his ass."

“Seriously?” When he nods, I slap his bicep. “How the hell are you still breathing?”

His chuckle bounces around the interior of his car. “You can’t punish someone for being honest. He didn’t give you a chance to explain yourself. He should have.”

His blind faith is shocking, but oh so needed after the shit few days I’ve had. “Why do you trust me so much, Hugo?”

He shuts down his engine before tilting his torso my way. “If you wanted to pin anything on Isaac, you had plenty of chances before you guys became official.” He licks his dry lips. “I might have also given you a handful of tests.”

“What kind of tests?” I’m more curious than angry.

My throat grows scratchy when he says, “The envelopes in Isaac’s apartment, they weren’t real. I planted them to see if you’d take them.” He works his jaw side to side. “I also tapped your phone to see if you reached out to anyone after Isaac met with Henry Gottle at the McGregor residence.”

I glare at him, furious he invaded my privacy, but also grateful he always has Isaac’s best interests at the forefront of his mind.

I take back every nice thought I’ve ever had about him when he mutters, “Also, there was the whole club 57 incident —”

“You said you turned off the cameras!”

He gags—loudly. “Believe me, I turned them off long before anything raunchy happened. I prefer participating in sexual activities, not watching them like some sicko behind a computer monitor, but thanks for your faith, Izzy.”

I try to hide my smile, but the smallest one curves my mouth. You couldn't hear the pure disgust in his voice. He's mortified just at the idea of watching Isaac and me get naughty.

Hugo tries to do a better job of explaining himself. "Isaac went in brutal, but you didn't even blink at his aggression." He smiles a cheeky grin. "Well, you did, but it was more that girly flutter-your-eyelashes-excessively type of blink that makes guys wonder if you have something stuck in your eye."

"Kind of like the look Peta was hitting you with earlier?"

He gives me a playful wink. "Something like that." He waits for my eyes to stop rolling before adding, "After I told Isaac to pull his head out of his ass, I said the same thing to him that I said to Cormack. Isaac didn't handle it as well as Cormack did. Even intoxicated, his right hook is hard as fuck."

"He hit you?"

Hugo's shoulder touches his ear. "He wasn't aiming to kill. He was just pissed. I'd have been more concerned if he didn't react to my taunt. You should have been, too."

Honestly, I'm torn on the whole situation. Did Isaac respond because he was jealous, or did he just not appreciate Hugo telling him what to do? I know without a shadow of a doubt that Isaac hates being strong-armed, so perhaps it had more to do with that than jealousy?

With my head not held as high as it was moments ago, I lock my eyes with Hugo. "Do you want to come up? I could use a drink or four, and I'd love some company."

I'm also enjoying Hugo's frankness. He's sharing information left, right, and center today, so anything I can do to extend that, I will. Even after investigating Isaac for six

months, and dating him for one, I'm still only just scratching the surface of his enigmatic personality.

“Are you ready for the repercussion that may bring?”

I stare at Hugo, confused by his statement.

“First, Isaac saw us together at Destiny Records. Now, he'll see me walking into your apartment.”

“You think he'll react?”

“I'm not assuming anything, Izzy; he *will* react. It just may not be in a way either of us are prepared for. He's naturally dominant, but when it comes to you, he's beyond saving. I'll come up if you want me to, but you need to make sure that's a step you want to take.”

I take a moment to contemplate. I want Isaac to interact with me, but not because he's coerced to. I want him to talk to me because he wants to, not because he's banging his chest in an alpha male turf war.

I return my gaze to Hugo, who's watching me intently. “Thanks for the lift.”

He dips his chin, only just hiding his smile. “If you need anything, you have my number.”

“Thanks, Hugo.” I press a kiss to his cheek before curling out of his car. My backside is halfway out when a question I should have asked at the beginning formulates in my head. “Do you know why Isaac was arrested?”

He shakes his head. “I figured if anyone would know, it'd be you.”

“I'm as clueless as the rest of us.”

With a shrug, I exit his car and make my way to my building. Hugo waits until I'm in the lobby before pulling his car away from the curb. His engine is so loud, I can hear it even when he's halfway down the block. While exiting the elevator on my floor, I ruffle through my handbag hunting for my keys. When I lift my gaze, a squeal erupts from my lips. Agent Theresa Veneto startles me from stepping out of the nook in the entryway of my apartment.

I skirt past her and walk to my door. "I'm not talking to you without a lawyer present."

Fiddling with my keys, I fight them into the lock. My hands are jittering so badly, I can't get the darn key into the small hole.

"I'm not here on official business." Theresa's whole composure is pretentious and mocking. "I'm here to talk to you, woman to woman."

Ignoring her no-doubt lie, I jam my keys into the lock, sighing when the lock mechanism clicks in the uncomfortable silence of my hallway.

"Isaac Holt isn't who you think he is."

My slitted eyes snap to hers. "No, he isn't who *you* think he is." I turn to face her, standing eye to eye. "Isaac's file leads you to believe he's a terrible man, but when you look past the highly fabricated documents, you'll see he isn't close to that."

She grins an evilly mocking smile. "I heard you were stupid, but I didn't realize you were also naïve. You're swimming way out of your depth, little girl."

I plaster my best fake smile onto my face, striving to portray that her words didn't bruise my ego. They did, but I'd

rather she didn't know that. After returning her mocking stare, I walk through my apartment door, closing it behind me.

“Isaac attacked his last girlfriend's brother so horrifically, he spent weeks in the hospital, recovering from the multiple injuries he sustained.”

That halts my swift movements. The pulse beeping through my body is nearly deafening when it clusters in my ears. I had to hear her wrong—surely. Isaac isn't a violent man. He's just misunderstood. Isn't he?

Sensing that my reluctance is slipping, Theresa pushes open my door, then steps inside my domain. Her lips twitch, preparing to talk, but I beat her. “CJ was in a traffic accident with his sister, Ophelia.”

As her lips crimp, she shakes her head. “CJ's injuries were not sustained in a traffic accident. Isaac inflicted them.”

“I don't believe you.” I'm not lying. Our exchange earlier today reveals she's out for blood, meaning she'll do or say anything to get her target. I'm not falling into her trap.

She smirks again. It's a mocking, condescending smile like the one she gave me earlier today in the conference room. “I thought you might say that.” She digs a yellow envelope out of her handbag, then hands it to me. “As I said earlier, I'm here warning you, woman to woman. What I'm about to show you must stay between us. This isn't an official visit.”

After swallowing to soothe my dry throat, I nod. She's not the only one willing to lie if it gives her the upper hand. My hand trembles when I pull out the paper inside the envelope. I'm not concerned Theresa has anything incriminating on either Isaac or me, but it's from spotting the date and time on



the bottom right-hand corner of the photo inside. It's dated an hour before Ophelia's traffic accident.

I suck in a deep breath to get over my shock before studying the photo with the eyes of an agent. Isaac's sweat-drenched body is in the middle of a boxing ring. He's fighting a gentleman of similar age, or perhaps a few years older than him. It looks like a brutal battle, although most of the damage has been endured by Isaac's competitor, who happens to look oddly familiar to CJ Petretti.

Although things look damning, I'm not willing to pass judgment until I know all the facts. "The Bureau is aware Isaac was a participant in an underground fighting ring years ago. This doesn't make him a terrible man. Fighting is a professional sport."

"No, it doesn't make him terrible, but what about this?"

She hands me a second photo. It's similar to the first one, but it's zoomed out, showing the spectators surrounding the ring—the most imperative, Ophelia. She's standing at the side with tear-stained cheeks and wide eyes. The devastation on her face twists my insides. She's much braver than me as there's no way I could watch my boyfriend fight my brother.

Before I can work through half my confusion, Theresa snatches the photo from my grasp, returns it to the envelope, then snags her cell phone from her handbag. Her fingers fly over the screen of her phone for three heart-thrashing seconds before she pivots it around to face me. There's a video displayed. It shows Ophelia being held back by a large brute of a man. She's crying.

"Please, Isaac, stop." She somehow manages to get away from the man holding her hostage, her escape conceding with

her climbing through the ropes. “Please, Isaac, don’t do it. I’m begging you.”

My hand shoots up to cover my mouth when the screen flicks to Isaac in just enough time to witness him complete a gruesome roundhouse kick to CJ’s left temple. CJ crashes to the ground with an almighty thud, his eyes closed, his body lifeless. Tears well in my eyes when Ophelia screams a bloodcurdling cry before she rushes to her brother sprawled lifeless on the dirty mat where she tries in vain to wake him up.

When the video freezes at her staring down at her lifeless-looking brother, I push Theresa’s phone away from me. “That doesn’t show the full version of events that happened that day.”

The evidence looks horrid, and my heart is pained for what Ophelia went through, but you need both sides of a story before forming an opinion. Theresa’s video doesn’t give me that. It’s as one-sided as she was during my interrogation earlier today.

Theresa glares at me like I’m an imbecile. “I may not know the full story, Isabelle, but neither do you. You *think* you know the real Isaac Holt, but you don’t know him at all...”

Her words fall short when I slam my door into her face while murmuring, “That’s why he’s an enigma. He’s supposed to be misunderstood.”

## CHAPTER 9



## ISAAC

*M*y breaths are jagged, my body is slick with sweat, and my heart is pounding against my chest. The perspiration and panted breaths are from the intense workout I'm currently undertaking at an old, derelict warehouse I own on the outskirts of town. The last statement, my pounding heart, is from seeing Isabelle again.

Today is the first time I've laid eyes on her since my less-than-stellar reaction to her arrival at my home Friday night, but she's the reason I'm working out in freezing temperatures in only a pair of running shorts. I'm aimlessly trying to replace the sexual energy coursing through my body with adrenaline because even knowing her secret didn't dampen the fire that raged inside me when I saw her. It will never be doused. It's irrepressible. My hands itched to fondle, probe, and explore her seductive body when I saw her in the foyer of Destiny Records. Her beautiful chocolate eyes were burning through to my soul, begging for forgiveness.

It took all my strength to walk away from her. Every step I took was taken with trepidation. With all the women I've bedded the last six years, the chase grew weary, my interests waned within days, if not hours. That never happened with Isabelle. It never grew old. The more I had her, the more I

craved her. Her beautiful cupid's bow lip on mine, her hands touching and exploring me with as much interest as I studied her. I couldn't get enough. I never yearned for anything or anyone when Isabelle was in my arms. Now, I have to find a way to move on—to live without her.

Just knowing I'll never taste her again has me swinging my fists harder at the bag hanging precariously from a steel beam by a large chain. Blisters started forming on my knuckles over an hour ago, but my swings haven't dampened. When I entered the warehouse, I threw on a new pair of gloves. I could have forgone the hassle and worn my run-down pair hanging over the fraying ropes of the boxing ring, but I needed a distraction, and I wanted to feel the pain that comes from breaking in brand new gloves. If I feel pain on the outside, it may lessen the ache I'm feeling on the inside.

Another thirty minutes pass before my focus shifts from punishing the bag. My distraction is caused by a cell phone shrilling through the abandoned warehouse. It isn't my sleek, modern phone stopping the swing of my fists. It is the one that only rings during an emergency.

After grabbing a white towel dangling from the chain above the sagging bag, I swipe it over my head to absorb the sweat running down my face while heading for my gym bag lying unzipped on the dirty concrete floor. My burner cell hasn't rung since the morning I got arrested. The last call I took on that phone was in Isabelle's apartment. She was sitting straddled on my lap, nibbling on my earlobe. I was so immersed in her, I didn't consider the repercussions of continuing my conversation in front of her. Call me a fool, but even only knowing her for six months and being in a relationship for a month, I trusted her. I trusted her from the moment I saw her.

I was a fucking idiot.

“Yes,” I bark into the phone, my gloomy mood heard in my voice.

“The price has gone up to one point five million dollars.”

My grip on my phone tightens. “I told you I didn’t care about the price. I want it done, so get it fucking done.”

My caller breathes heavily down the phone. “All right. I should have an answer by the end of the week.”

Not bothering to reply, I snap down the screen of my phone. A ragged breath escapes my lips when my eyes wander around the warehouse. My muscles are deliriously exhausted, which has dampened the fire roaring through my veins, giving the effect I was striving for when I arrived hours ago, but something is still off. I don’t feel myself.

Being betrayed does that to a guy.

When I dump my unregistered cell back into my gym bag, I notice I only have an hour before my reservation with Cormack, meaning I’ll have to shower in the locker rooms instead of driving back to my apartment. I could go home, but I haven’t been back there since it was trashed by the Bureau. Catherine organized a cleaning crew to come in the following day, and all the furniture and broken items have been replaced, but I can’t bring myself to go back there. It was my private oasis, my home, but now it feels like an empty shell.

After stripping off my shorts, I step into the steaming hot shower. The scorching water pumping out of the mildew-coated showerhead kneads and massages my weary muscles. Closing my eyes, I flatten my palms on the dirty, mold-covered tiles before lowering my head into the stream of

water. The pressure gives relief to the headache that's been plaguing me for the past three days.

I generally survive on approximately four to six hours of sleep a night, but even that amount has eluded me the past few nights. My hands instinctively dart out to pull Isabelle toward me, then when my hands come up empty, the complexity of the situation dawns on me, and my endeavor for additional sleep is lost.

Climbing out of the shower, I dry myself with a white gym towel I have in my bag. Its material is so stiff, it scratches my skin when I run it over my body. It reminds me how Isabelle's nails raked my back when she's in ecstasy, or how she clawed at my thighs while sucking my cock.

Ignoring the erection I'm now sporting, I place on the suit I was wearing when I arrived, but forgo my vest, tie, and jacket. My body is still overheated from the intense workout, so I don't want to be constrained by a tie. I also don't want more uncomfortableness added to the choking feeling that's been clutching my throat since my arrest.

After snagging my bag off the ground, I make my way to my car, where I make the usually forty-five-minute trip to Ravenshoe in under thirty.

The restaurant hostess's lips curve into a lusty grin when she notices me heading her way. "Good evening, Mr. Holt."

"April."

I continue on my quest, not bothering to wait for her to usher me to the booth Cormack and I frequented every week for the past five years. Our routine only faltered because Isabelle was in the picture. Although I was more than happy to

make things official, I couldn't risk taking her out in public for fear Col would see us together.

This restaurant charges exorbitant prices for the most minuscule portions of food, but the whiskey is top-shelf, and its cigars are unsurpassed. I wouldn't expect anything less from its owner. Our tradition of eating here started a few months after I earned my first million dollars. I invested every cent I made fighting heavily into stocks. Some weeks, I made seven thousand dollars fighting, but I lived as if I were a poor student who didn't have a penny to my name. I kept my grades up, so my scholarship remained valid and ate ramen noodles and canned spaghetti for supper like every other student around me. No one, except Cormack, knew my bank account was growing at a rapid pace.

With how turbulent the stock market was, it took a little longer than I would have liked for my bank account to show its first million-dollar balance, but once it was there for all to see, the achievement was incalculable, and we had reason to celebrate.

When Cormack and I first burst through the doors of this very restaurant, we were only young. I was just shy of my twentieth birthday, and Cormack was only twenty-one. We dressed in what we thought was respectable clothing, both wearing long-sleeve dress shirts and black trousers. We even rustled up two ties from the clothing Cormack grabbed in haste when he left his family estate with the intention never to return.

The restaurant manager took one look at us, then attempted to have us thrown out. I say attempt as I didn't take his rejection sitting down. After scuffling with two security guards, and leaving one with a broken nose, I told the manager



that I intended to buy the restaurant and fire his ass on the very first day I owned it.

I did precisely that eleven months later.

My hunger for success was embedded in me from a very young age. When I was four, I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of Hodgkin's Lymphoma. My only chance of survival weighed on extensive chemotherapy combined with a stem cell transplant. My parents were tested, and neither was found to be a genetic match, which isn't unusual. Most genetic matches only occur in siblings, and those odds sit at only one in four. Luckily for me, Nick was a perfect match. That may have had something to do with the fact he was conceived in a test tube to save my life.

With a high dosage of chemotherapy and the stem cells from Nick's umbilical cord when he was delivered eight weeks early, I survived, and my fighting spirit was unleashed.

People say childhood memories are configured from stories you were told while growing up. Mine aren't. I remember I felt invincible when Nick's stem cells were transplanted. I knew at that precise moment I was going to live, and I promised myself to live my life to the fullest. I also assured my baby brother that one day I'd repay him for giving me the gift of life. Every day I actively pursue that promise.

Nick is apprehensive to accept my generosity. His reluctance is spawned from watching our mother be a mooch a majority of his life. My parents were already separated before Nick joined our family. He glued them together for a couple more years, but like all glue, it eventually dried, and their marriage failed. My mother wanted possessions. My father wanted love. It's very rare to achieve both.

After sliding into the booth Cormack is already seated at, I greet him with a jerk of my chin before signaling for the waiter to bring us our whiskey and cigars.

“Izz—”

I cut off Cormack’s comment with a stern glare. “Can I at least get a glass of whiskey before you mention her name?”

Cormack is my one and only true friend. Most people I associate with are acquaintances, business companions, or staff, but I class him as my friend—a very dear friend—but even he’s treading a fine line by mentioning *her* name to me. After I was arrested, I banned Isabelle’s name from being mentioned. Not once has my demand been met.

Cormack chuckles, not the slightest bit fazed by my infuriating glance. “You might want to ask them to leave the bottle as I plan on mentioning *her* name more than once.”

## CHAPTER 10



## ISAAC

“*H*ey, boss, I’m surprised you’re still here.” Tina prances into my office before propping her backside onto my desk. “You haven’t stayed back this late for weeks.”

She’s not lying. Before Isabelle, my nights were spent in my office, watching the sales roll in. Thousands of transactions are made each night in my clubs, yet not one patron bats an eyelid at the inflated prices I charge. They’re willing to pay for the privilege of drinking in an establishment as sophisticated as mine. The Dungeon is my greatest business achievement thus far. It’s an over-eighteen dance club that grew to the number one dance club this side of the country within two months of opening. It was designed with sex and sensuality in mind. That old saying will never die. Sex does sell, and I use it in my business adventures at every given opportunity.

Although I’m proud of how well it’s doing, my onsite presence has been severely lacking the past month. Since Isabelle worked days, and I typically work nights, my usually unyielding focus shifted from my business goals to a more personal endeavor. My desire to spend time with Isabelle often had me leaving the office before my clubs reached capacity. I

have a dedicated team, so my businesses never lagged the past month, but even if they did, I valued my time with Isabelle enough, I would have taken a hit.

I stop scrolling through reports when the heat of a gaze captures my attention. Tina is gawking at me, her lashes excessively fluttering. “Did you need something?”

My tone comes out clipped. I’m not in the right frame of mind to deal with her inexorable attempts to get back between my sheets. Tina in the bedroom was precisely how I had anticipated. Her look and personality match her sexual prowess to perfection— she’s both feisty and wild. With her small height and petite frame, she can bend more ways than an Olympic gymnast. She was the first girl in a long time who could keep up with my intensity in the bedroom, but I pride myself on my ability to read people, and what was relayed through her eyes was enough to have me running for the hills.

Before Isabelle, I had no intention of securing a long-term relationship. My goals were solely dedicated to my empire. I didn’t think anything would deter my goals. Isabelle did. She flipped the coin on everything and had me believing I could love again. If I were smart, I would have walked away from her the instant she crashed into me at the airport. Alas, she was more cunning than her humble eyes give her credit for.

My thoughts return to the present when Tina crosses her legs in front of herself. Her tiny denim shorts ride up high on her thigh, exposing inches upon inches of creamy skin. As she rakes her teeth over her red-painted lip, her infatuated eyes peer down at me. “An FBI agent is requesting to see you. Travis has her holed up at the front entrance.”

I’d be lying if I said my first thought didn’t go to Isabelle. It’s only been three days since she was beneath me, but it feels

like months. My sexual drive has always been excessive, but with Isabelle, it was tenfold, reaching levels even I didn't know existed.

Tina's overly-manicured brow shoots up into her hairline. "Did you want me to let her in or tell her you've left for the day?"

Although no other words spill from her lips, her eyes beg me to request for Isabelle to leave. I kept quiet on my relationship, but Tina is very perceptive, so she knows something is more askew with my private life than I'm letting on.

"Boss—?"

"Give me five minutes, then let her in."

Tina huffs before sauntering toward the door. Even pissed, her hips swing provocatively with every step she takes. Once she's back into the main area of the club, I close my laptop screen then head for the inbuilt bar at the side of my office. I need to distract my hands from touching Isabelle. When she's in my vicinity, not even deceit can quell my desire to have her beneath me.

My back molars grind together when I discover my bottle of Teeling 30-Year-Old Single Malt Irish Whiskey is empty. "Nick," I grumble under my breath.

My little brother Nick, whom I love dearly, would happily polish off a three-thousand-dollar bottle of whiskey without seeking permission. I can't blame him. He would have needed a stiff drink after dealing with the psychotic lady who accosted him in my nightclub earlier in the week.

I've only just selected a second bottle when a female voice filters into my office. "This is more impressive than the last

office I saw you in.”

My grip on the crystal decanter I’m holding firms so tightly, the glass nearly shatters. I shift my gaze to the other side of the room, the pulse in my jaw unmissable when they land on a set of eyes I’d give anything not to see again.

“I should have put two and two together. Corruption and the FBI generally go hand in hand.”

Theresa’s lips furl. “I see your sense of humor hasn’t improved any.”

When she takes a step closer to me, my gaze floats over her body. There’s no doubt her outer shell is attractive, but her rotten insides make her hideously ugly, not even the most captivating face could have you looking past them.

If you haven’t worked this out yet, Theresa and I have met previously. Our meetings were held in my apartment or ‘fuck pad’ as Isabelle refers to it. Once I grew tired of our prearranged gatherings, I cut ties with Theresa. She didn’t take my decision too well. She’s one of many women the past five years who has staged ostentatious ruses to coerce me into interacting with them. Although her attempts were vigorous and undermining, they weren’t intricate enough to get past my astuteness.

Isabelle is the only one who has played me for a fool.

Theresa endeavors to conceal her excitement at my glance of her body, but the pink hue on her cheek and the unbridled desire of lust reflecting in her eyes, unearths her deceit. She’s hopeful for a trip down memory lane. I’d give up everything I have before that would *ever* happen.

“Humor was never my strong point, but you already know that isn’t my finest quality.” Call me conceited, but I’m aware

my strongest assets are displayed in the office and between the sheets.

“You’re still not lacking any cockiness.”

When I take a step closer to her, her pupils dilate. “You and I both know if I wanted to fuck you on my desk, I could.”

The pulse in her neck increases as her heavy-hooded gaze flicks to the desk I’m standing next to. When her tongue darts out to replenish her dry lips, I know I have her exactly where I want her.

“But we also know that’ll *never* happen.”

The vein in her neck is still thrumming, but now, it’s more from anger than desire.

“So, either tell me why you’re wasting my time or get the fuck out of my office.”

Not waiting for her to reply, I undo the button on my jacket, then take a seat in my leather chair. She remains quiet, but I don’t need to see her to know she’s still in the room. If her overly floral perfume isn’t enough of a hint, her ragged breaths are a sure-fire indication.

I stop pretending to read a business proposal when Theresa questions, “Are you familiar with a lady named Isabelle Brahn?”

Slowly, my eyes lift from the document I’m now clasping so firmly it has a crinkle down the middle. Theresa is glaring at me, her face blemished with not only disdain but jealousy as well. I smirk egotistically, unwilling to play the game she’s had us playing the past four years.

“Never heard of her before.”



Although my outward appearance doesn't allude to my piqued interest, on the inside, I'm immensely intrigued. Usually, official government visits center around my empire, not my personal life.

Theresa splays her hand across her cocked hip, exposing a revolver holstered on her waist. "That's interesting." Her tone is as mocking as her smirk, "As Ms. Brahn seems to know you very well."

"Everyone in this town knows who I am," I reply, not attempting to take a nibble out of the bait she's throwing out.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot about your infamous reputation. Maybe seeing a photo of Ms. Brahn might jog your memory?" She places a photo onto my desk. "I understand it could be hard for you to recall the faces of the *many* women you've slept with."

The smallest grin tugs my lips high. The photo Theresa presented is of Isabelle on the beach, wearing the microscopic black string bikini that almost had me falling to my knees when I first saw her in it. Nearly every inch of her beautiful curves is on display. My hands twitch in sync with my cock just from drinking in her seductiveness through a photo.

After tightening my jaw, I scrutinize the picture with more detail, while striving to keep my eyes off Isabelle's provocative frame. Anytime I'm presented with something official, I pay careful attention to every minute detail because it's usually what you're not looking at that should receive the most attention. Like the smallest guy in the group will most likely have the hardest punch, the quietest are usually the most ruthless. And obviously, the most beautiful women are the most scheming.

Ignoring the surge of blood pumping through my body, I scan the background of the photo. It was taken during our long weekend at the McGregor residence. Not only is the jetty and wooden boat shed in the background, so is Colby. Just from that minor detail, I unearth more knowledge about the FBI's investigation into me than what Hunter, my head of security, has informed me.

After every detail of the photo is memorized, I return my eyes to Theresa. "There's no way I'd ever forget a woman who looks like this." She exhales harshly as her eyes thin. Loving her annoyance, I add more salt to her wounds. "Perhaps you could do me a favor and pass my number on to Isabelle."

"I'm sure you can locate her number in her tenant application."

Theresa snatches Isabelle's photo from my hand. Through slitted eyes, she shoves it into the black handbag hanging from her now-slumped shoulders. I devote my attention back to the document I was perusing before she interrupted me, struggling not to chuckle at her obnoxious reaction. Only once my office door being slammed shut sounds through my ears do I raise my burner phone to my ear.

"Boss."

"Anything?" I ask curtly.

I hear a ruffle like someone is shaking their head. "Not a peep."

I run my index finger over my brow. "Good. Keep a close eye on her."

After disconnecting my call, I dial another number.

"Boss."

“I need you to get me everything you can on a Ms. Theresa Veneto.”

“On it—”

“Hunter?”

“Yeah,” he replies over the sound of his hand scrubbing his thick beard.

“I need it today.”

## CHAPTER 11



## ISABELLE

“*D*on’t scream, it’s me.”

My surprised eyes snap open as my heart constricts. I don’t need to roll over to know Isaac is slipping between the sheets of my bed. His delicious scent is filtering through my nostrils, sparking my senses. When he splays his hand across my stomach to pull me back, moisture burns my eyes. His cock is hot and heavy against my back, and his suit has been removed, leaving him in nothing but a pair of boxer shorts.

“Isabelle...” Isaac growls in warning when I attempt to roll onto my opposite hip. I want to express how sorry I am for everything that has happened. I want to explain why I lied to him. I’ll even shamelessly beg for forgiveness if required.

“No talking, not yet.” His teeth sink into my shoulder blade before his tongue lashes the puncture mark. “I need to taste you first, to have you underneath me. It’s been too long. I can’t wait any longer.”

Every nerve in my body tingles with anticipation. It’s only been four days since we last tangoed, but it feels more like a lifetime. It’s hard to explain, but this is us—we show our affection through sexual contact. Our love, our desires, our needs, they’re reflected in the most intimate ways. So, with

that in mind, I'll forgo pleading for clemency and express my regret in a sexual nature.

Goosebumps pebble my skin when Isaac's hand skims under my black silk camisole to cup my engorged breast. His talented fingers soon have my nipples erect and paying careful attention to every tweak he does. Excitement blasts through me, making me sticky and hot. I love how talented he is. He always ensures I'm thoroughly satisfied before he'll ever consider the possibility of getting himself off.

When he rolls over to pin me to the mattress, my breathing stills. His cock is thick against my damp panties, and the sheer closeness of his handsome face has my heart gaining an extra beat. Even in the moonlight, his entrancing features can't be concealed. With his razor-sharp jaw, plump, full lips, and striking eyes, he's a true masterpiece crafted to perfection.

He assesses my face as robustly as I just appraised his. Although his gaze is lidded, I can see his hurt reflecting back. My deceit hurt him. His eyes are circled with dark rims, and the scruff on his chin is the thickest I've seen it.

“Isaac—”

Before my apology can spill from my lips, his perfectly structured mouth seals over mine. He nips on my bottom lip before his tongue soothes the sting his teeth made, then he wrangles it with mine. It's a soul-stealing kiss that is warm, inviting, and demanding. It represents the man I'm in love with to a T.

“These are my lips, Isabelle, only mine,” he mutters in his sexy, raspy voice.

“Always.” My heart bursts with love from the dominance in his tone. “They'll never be anyone else's.”

I adjust the tilt of my hips so I can rub against the girth teasing my clit. I barely get in two grinds when he inches back, removing his erection from my buzzing clit. “Not yet.”

He drags his lips down my chin and along my neck. The prickles of his unshaven chin add even more excitement to our heartfelt reunion. My legs scissor when he places a hot trail of kisses down my body. Little bites, soothing licks, and the roughness of his five o'clock shadow have me teetering toward the brink of ecstasy in no time. His stamina has always impressed me, but tonight it's at a whole new level. He can control himself for hours if needed, ensuring he always gives a stellar performance in the bedroom.

Even after a month, his dedication never wavered. I was always satisfied to the point of exhaustion before he attempted to chase his own climax. Even during the dreaded red week of my cycle, he took care of me. I felt like a teenager when he brought me to climax without removing my panties, but it was incredible. I shouldn't have been surprised. He's an incredibly gifted man, both in and out of the bedroom.

Isaac's teasing kisses stop at the waist of my black silk panties. He lifts his lust-ridden gaze to my face, appraising my body on the way by. As he smirks a deliciously wicked smile, he shreds my panties off my body. I gasp at his domineering gesture, loving the switch of dynamics between us. I'm an independent, strong woman, but I'm more than happy to relinquish my power to Isaac. He'd never use it against me. If anything, he uses it to make me stronger. I've never felt stronger than when I'm beneath him.

The scent of my arousal filters in the air when Isaac stares at my bare mound, memorizing every detail as if it's the first time he's seen me naked. My knees curve inward when he

snaps his eyes shut to inhale a large whiff of air through his nostrils. “You smell so fucking good.”

When his eyes pop back open, they’re even more captivating than usual. They show his hunger. His every need. His desire. And they’re all pointing at me. My teeth gnaw my bottom lip when he rests his backside on the balls of his feet so he can take in the entire picture.

His needy voice rumbles through my body, clustering in my aching pussy when he says, “Place your feet flat on the bed, then bend your knees. Spread open wide for me, Isabelle, I want to see all of you.”

Even though my cheeks heat from his bold request, it isn’t from embarrassment, it’s from desire. There isn’t an inch of me he hasn’t inspected the past month, and the fact he still craves me as rampantly as I do him spurs on my need to please him. So, after shifting my legs up high on the bed, I do as requested without a peep trickling from my lips.

He runs his index finger down the folds of my wet pussy before slapping my clit with the back of his hand. “So pretty and pink.” He presses his thumb on the throbbing node before returning his eyes to mine. “Your eyes are never to leave mine, Isabelle. Do you understand?”

Unable to speak through my dry, parched mouth, I nod. I love watching him worship me, so I’d never do anything to taint that.

His dark, intense eyes remain arrested on mine as his head narrows toward my pussy. My body is thrumming with so much excitement, I’m afraid I may soon convulse. One touch, one lick, and I’ll be freefalling, toppling into orgasmic bliss.



Just as his tongue spears through the folds of my pussy, my back lurches off the bed. It isn't in euphoria. It's from Isaac disappearing before my very eyes. My bewilderment intensifies when my hand shoots to between my legs. I'm still wearing my black satin panties, and although my camisole top is drenched with sweat, it's still very much in place.

*Oh my God, was it all a dream?* It couldn't have been; it felt so real.

I flop back onto my pillow with a groan, striving to get the excitement scorching my veins under control. My skin is coated with sweat, and my breaths are ragged. I swear on my uncle's grave, Isaac was just here. With my inner vixen screaming obscenities at the top of her lungs, I drag my spare pillow over my face to muffle her cries. Even she thought it was real. It probably doesn't help that I can smell Isaac's alluring scent in the air. It's infused there, refusing to leave even after bucket loads of tears begged it to go away.

After rubbing my weary eyes, I turn them to the alarm clock that usually sits on my bedside table. It takes a few moments for me to recall why the clock isn't in its usual position. Isaac yanked it out of the wall when we made love. It shattered into pieces when he flung it against my bedroom door.

"I don't care if I have to fuck you for twelve hours straight, you're not leaving this bed until I hear those words come out of your mouth in person," he said that morning.

God, I miss him. His smell, his touch, but more than anything, his allure.

With any chance of going back to sleep lost, I yank back my pale blue bedspread, then flop my legs over the bed. From

my new position, I can see the screen of my cell phone, which is sitting in its charging pod.

“Five o’clock,” I mutter in disgrace. “I haven’t been awake this early in years.”

After stretching to loosen up my strumming muscles, I scamper out of bed and pad into my walk-in closet to change my camisole and panties to ones less drenched. In my half-asleep state, I trip over a pair of running shoes left discarded on my closet floor. I haven’t been jogging in weeks. It wasn’t just Alex’s demanding work schedule that had my exercise regime lagging, it was Isaac’s sexual workouts. There were days I turned up to work feeling like I’d run a marathon. That’s how impressive Isaac’s sexual prowess is.

I could probably use a little bit of exercise. I haven’t been to the grocery store in over a month, so I’ve been living off stale Frosted Flakes and the emergency stash of Snickers in my freezer. It’s not ideal, meaning in only four short days, I’m already struggling to fit into my jeans. Furthermore, a run could help get me out of the funk I’m in.

After throwing on a pair of running shorts, a shirt, and a thin jacket, I tie on my shoes then exit my apartment. A brisk wind cuts through me like a knife when I break through the revolving door of my building. The sun hasn’t begun to rise yet, so the morning is still shrouded in an eerie grayness. The only light supplied is by the moon or the occasional street light scattered along the street.

While putting in my earbuds, I catch the curious gaze of a security officer loitering in the lobby of my building. Upon closer glance, I realize he’s the gentleman who returned the elevator to the ground floor at Isaac’s request after our disastrous date with Tatiana and Ryan. He watches me

curiously when I take off down the near-isolated street with a wave. There are a handful of cars on the road, apparently early morning commuters heading to work, but the sidewalks are devoid of the foot traffic I'm usually hit with each morning.

A grunt spills from my lips when Kings of Leon's hit song "Sex on Fire" pumps through my earbuds. I'm aiming to run out my sexual frustration on a crisp fall morning, and what's the first song I hear? The one that instantly makes my mind drift to Isaac any time I listen to it.

Shrugging off Karma's firm bite of my backside, I continue down the street. It's been a few weeks since I've been on a run, but it's like riding a bike, you never forget how to do it. Before I know it, familiar strides increase the flow of blood through my body. In no time at all, my shirt is damp with sweat, and my heart rate has accelerated to a steady, pounding rhythm. Running is nearly as good as dancing when I need a boost of adrenaline. Both activities are exhausting, but my body thrums with adrenaline hours after. It's similar to how my body reacts after having sexual contact with the incredibly alluring Mr. Isaac Holt.

"Jesus, Isabelle, you're supposed to be running out your sexual frustration, not increasing it," I reprimand to myself.

Annoyed, I brave the grueling St. Thomas Street hill. It's the steepest and longest hill in town. By the time I make it to the peak, my brain is too busy demanding my lungs to breathe, and it can't think about the many other ways I've become breathless the past month.

Raising my arms above my head, I fight in vain to replenish my lungs with the crisp morning air. My hair is drenched from the roots to the tips. Even my socks are soaked through. While removing my jacket to relieve my overheated

body, I yank out my earbuds. Birds chirping in the distance are barely heard over the heavy flow of traffic. When I glance around at my surroundings, it dawns on me that I've been running a lot longer than I realized. If the steady stream of traffic is anything to go by, it would be close to seven o'clock. That means I've been running for over an hour and a half. No wonder my muscles are screaming.

On the pleas of my aching joints, I stroll back down St. Thomas Street. It's a nice morning, and I've got nowhere important to be, so I may as well take my time.

My leisurely pace slackens even more when I turn down the street my building is on. There's a dark blue sedan parked half a block down. Although it could be a coincidence, my intuition is warning me not to be gullible.

After swallowing the lump in my throat, I continue with my journey, pricking my ears so I can hear if the stationary vehicle commences following me. When an engine roars to life, I pivot back around. Relief passes through me when a white Range Rover pulls out from behind the suspicious vehicle. My relieved sigh turns into a squeal when my abrupt turn around has me crashing into a well-defined chest. My nose stings as moisture clusters in my eyes.

“Shit, Izzy, are you okay?”

Lifting my tear-welling eyes, I'm met with the concerned gaze of Hugo. “I think your pec broke my nose,” I murmur through the hand that shot up to soothe my throbbing nose.

When his chest heaves with laughter, I glare at him. He can laugh. He didn't run into the equivalent of a brick wall.

After mouthing a silent apology, he removes my hand from my nose so that he can inspect it. “I don't think it's broken.”

He pinches the bridge, ensuring everything is in place. “But a nasty bump is forming. We should put some ice on it.” After peering at someone behind my shoulder, he jerks his head to my building. “Come on, let’s get it taken care of.”

Suspicion makes itself known with my gut when he guides me into the elevator car of my building without needing to show ID. Although he’s with me, the security officers of my building are usually more stringent.

“Why were you outside my building so early?” Even with my nose plugged, suspicion still runs rife in my voice.

Hugo coughs before selecting my floor on the elevator panel. “I live here.”

My eyes snap to his. “What? For how long?”

“Since I started working for Isaac.” He notches up his shoulder like it’s no big deal. It is. It’s huge. “Isaac doesn’t just own your apartment, Izzy, he owns the whole building.”

*Oh.*

As the elevator ascends to my floor, I contemplate how I can ask Hugo something without sounding like I’m interrogating him.

When I fail to find a way, I try straight-up honesty. “Can I ask you something?”

Hugo nods, approving my request without pause for consideration.

“How much rent do you pay for your apartment?”

Smiling, his blue eyes drop to mine. “The same amount as you.”

I nearly fist pump the air. I knew Theresa was full of crap.

My inner monologue trails off when Hugo adds on, “Nothing.”

When my eyes rocket back to his, he winks at the astonished look on my face.

“I’ll have you know, I pay rent for my apartment every month. It may not be quite the same amount as other tenants, but it’s debited out of my account on the first of every month, thank you very much.”

My last four words are full of sass, but they do little to stop amusement from slipping over Hugo’s face. Annoyed at his wrong assumption I’m living rent-free, when the elevator arrives at my floor, I storm out. Hugo shadows me, but not a word oozes from his lips. After kicking off my running shoes, I rush into my bedroom to yank my iPhone from its charging pod.

Hugo’s eyes float down to mine when I re-enter the living room. “I’ll prove it.”

I log into my bank app, ignoring my surprise at discovering I have more money in my account than expected, then complete a search for the past three months by adding the agreed rent amount into the search criteria. My heart stops beating when my search comes up empty. It’s not showing any payments to Colt Enterprises, let alone my measly twelve hundred a month.

I stop glaring at my phone, willing for it to back me up when Hugo says, “You may have filled out a direct debit request, but that doesn’t mean Isaac’s real estate agent filed your paperwork.”

## CHAPTER 12



## ISABELLE

While clutching a piece of paper tightly in my fist, my fretful eyes dart up and down the street. Even in my furious mood, I can't risk the surveillance team, or even worse, Theresa seeing me entering Isaac's nightclub. Not only would my suspension most likely be extended, but I'd also risk being arrested.

Confident no one is watching, I slip into the back entrance of Isaac's nightclub. It's only a little after ten in the morning, so there are no patrons inside the club yet, which is surprising. Even during the daytime, his nightclubs have several dozen patrons milling around.

I bounce my curious eyes around surroundings I've taken in more via surveillance than in person. The Dungeon is an elegant-looking club that screams sex and seduction since Isaac's allure is embedded in it. No wonder why patrons don't bat an eyelid at being charged double for drinks. Even I'd pay the exorbitant fee to dance in a nightclub as elaborate as this one.

My heart beats out a funky tune when my eyes lock in on a mirrored window in the far corner of the room. I'm reasonably sure that's Isaac's office. After exhaling my nerves with a big breath, I pace for the door at the side of the mirror.



My quick strides halt when a petite lady with a pixie haircut darts in front of me. She spreads her tiny hands on her even smaller waist before narrowing her eyes. “Isaac doesn’t want to see you.” She toughens her stance by rolling her shoulders and snarling her top lip. “Ever again.”

“Then Isaac will need to tell me that.”

I try not to let irritation be heard in my tone. I fail. Just the petite brunette’s eyes reveal her interests in Isaac aren’t business-related, much less her immediate dislike of me. Although I’d usually be more than happy to put her in her place, I’m not in the mood to deal with her right now. I have much more pressing matters to handle.

When I attempt to skirt past the fairy-looking lady, she blocks my path. I glare at her before stepping to the left. She returns my glare before stepping right.

“Please move.” I’m shocked I can render up any politeness. I’m at my absolute teether.

She all but pokes me in the chest when she gives me a stern finger point. “You may have gotten your hooks into Isaac outside of these walls, but it won’t happen in my club.”

“*Your* club?” I cross my arms in front of my chest, my hackles raised. “Please excuse me if I’m wrong, but I’m reasonably sure your name isn’t written above the door.” My squinted eyes stray to the proprietor’s name displayed at the entrance of the nightclub. “Oh, nope, that’s right, it still shows *only* Isaac Holt’s name above the door.”

The pixie’s stern composure doesn’t flinch at my bitchy remark. She stands her ground, not once lessening the scowl marring her pretty face. “I was here years before you arrived, and I’ll be here years after you leave.”

I tilt closer to the pixie fairy. Because she's so short, I have to bend my knees to glance into her eyes. "As nothing more than a paid employee."

The pulse in my neck twangs when the rumbling voice of Isaac echoes through the room. "Do you want me to get some mud, or are you two happy to continue wrestling without it?"

He's leaning against the doorframe of his office. The darkness of his gray suit matches his eyes to perfection, and even with an angry scowl straining his handsome face, my heart still skips a beat.

When he notices my avid assessment of his body, his perfectly etched brow arches high, but before he can articulate either disdain or pleasure to my prolonged gawp, the fairy lady snaps, "I was telling Isabelle what you told me earlier. How you have *no* interest in seeing her ever again."

I stare at Isaac, begging for him to refute her hurtful comment. He does no such thing. He just adds to the bruise my ego just got.

"What do you want, Isabelle?" His tone is harsh, but my body still tingles from my name rolling off his tongue.

"I need to talk to you..." My words trail off when the lady standing beside me huffs dramatically. "In private."

Isaac takes several heart-clenching seconds contemplating my request. Once he decides, his eyes drift to the pixie lady standing next to me. When she sees his answer before he can voice it, she crosses her arms in front of her scarcely-covered chest and drops her jaw.

Even though she's aware of his response, Isaac spells it out for her. "Tell Roger I'm leaving five minutes later than expected."

I try to hide my smile, but the smallest smirk curves on my lips. I can't help it. Victory has never tasted so sweet. After a final glare, Tina storms toward the bar, murmuring incoherently under her breath the entire way. Isaac tracks her angry march before returning his grim gaze to me. My pulse quickens when he jerks up his chin, requesting for me to follow him. When he spins on his heels and strides into his office, I do precisely that, my knees knocking with every step I take.

As I enter the opulent space, I absorb the lavish furnishing and manly features. This is only the second time I've been here. The first time, I was too irate about the gigantic love bite Isaac left on my neck to fully take it in. Now, I'd give anything for him to mark me again.

Halfway through my scan, I stumble onto Isaac standing near a glass bar. He's pouring himself a generous helping of whiskey. "Don't you think it's a little early to be drinking?"

His clutch on the bottle he's clasping firms before he glares at me. His gaze sears me motionless, but not in a bad way. It has me heating up everywhere as blistering as the anger I felt when he didn't defend me to Tina.

"Have you slept with Tina?"

I'm reasonably sure I know the answer to my highly inappropriate question, especially considering the circumstances of my visit, but my inessential need to know everything gnawed at my insides until I had no choice but to blurt it out.

Isaac throws down a generous serve of whiskey in one hit. Heat creeps across my cheeks when his face doesn't allude to the sharp bitterness sliding down his throat. After returning his glass to the countertop, he pivots to face me. My breathing

halts at how taut his beautiful face is. His eyes are slit, and his lips are furled, but he's still the most handsome man I've ever seen.

“What do you want, Isabelle?” he repeats, even harsher this time.

When his gaze darts down to the paper I'm clutching, it dawns on me why I came to his office. I'm not being facetious when I say my inhibitions are thrown out the window when I'm in his presence. My level-headedness, my composure, and apparently my brain, disappear the instant my eyes land on him.

“I came to give you this.” I step closer to him, my thighs shaking. “It isn't as much as you receive from your other tenants, but it's all I can afford.”

When his eyes shoot down to the bank check I'm clutching, his jaw spasms. I'm only arriving at his club now as I had to wait for the bank to open so they could draw the check. Although Theresa disclosed the tenants in Isaac's building pay more than double what I pay, I cannot afford the full amount. Instead, I had the check drawn up for the initially agreed twelve hundred dollars a month that was negotiated when I signed the lease. Considering I've been living in his apartment rent-free the past twelve weeks, the check is a little under four thousand dollars.

When Isaac makes no attempt to accept the check, I place it on his bulky wooden desk. “I also called your real estate agent to advise that I'll be vacating your property by the end of the month.”

It isn't that I don't appreciate what he did for me—I truly do—I just can't continue living there at the reduced rate. If I did, it would make the Internal Affairs Department's

investigation into me appear more legitimate. It will appear as if I gave Isaac private information in exchange for free housing. If I could afford the full monthly rent for an apartment that size, I would, but since I can't, I have no choice but to move out.

My throat works hard to swallow when a thick stench of awkwardness plagues the air surrounding us. Although it's dense, it isn't abundant enough to mask the savage surge of electricity bolting between us. It's so strong, I can hear it crackling and hissing in the air, almost drowning out what Isaac says next, "Is that all?"

Unable to speak for fear my voice will crack, I nod.

"Okay. Good. Goodbye, Isabelle."

I smile to hide the sting of his blunt dismissal. "Goodbye."

Spinning on my heels, I make a beeline for the door. I need to escape before my threatening tears spill over. Just before I exit, paper being ripped overtakes my pulse shrilling in my ears. Sharply, I crank my neck back in just enough time to witness Isaac tearing up the check I just had drawn.

"What are you doing?" I storm back to him to snatch a portion of the now-ruined check out of his hand. "That's a bank check, they've already taken the money out of my account, so whether you cash it or not, the money is already gone; I can't draw you another one."

"I don't want your fucking money, Isabelle!"

I take a step back, shocked at his words, but it won't stop me saying, "I didn't ask to be placed on your payroll either, but I wasn't given a choice, was I?"

He arches his brow. "My payroll?"

“Yeah, your payroll. What did the agent from the IA call me... oh, that’s right, a paid mistress aka your prostitute.”

My teeth clench when an arrogant smirk stretches across his face. “That’s what you are, isn’t it? Whether the money was coming from the Bureau or me, you were paid to sleep with me.”

I slap him so hard across the face, my hand sets on fire, and his head rockets to the side. Slowly, almost robotically, he returns it front and center. His jaw is twitching profusely, and a dark cloud has formed in his already furious eyes. I nearly stumble out an apology before realizing I have nothing to be sorry for. He insulted me, not the other way around.

“I’m sorry I lied to you. I’m sorry for not telling you about my job at the very beginning, but don’t you dare degrade what we had by saying I was paid to do it. You know as well as I do that I *never* slept with you for my job.” My tear-filled eyes stare into his, pleading for him to believe my statement. “I love you, Isaac. Whether you choose to believe me or not is up to you, but if you ever find it in your heart to forgive me, be assured I’ll be waiting for you. You just need to realize you’re fighting a battle bigger than us both.”

No longer having the ability to hold up the flood gates in my eyes, I dart out of his office as quickly as my trembling legs will take me. I slam the door shut before leaning my back against it. As I gulp in quick breaths, I beg my tears time and time again not to spill. Unlike Friday, the sun is shining brightly, so I’ll have no way of concealing my devastation from those around me.

I stop reaching for the invisible knife Isaac just stabbed into my heart when a snarky voice whines, “I tried to warn you.”

Tina braces her back on the bar before unleashing her most brutal assault—her victorious smirk. Enjoying the spectacle of me on the verge of tears, she folds her arms over her chest before getting her legs in on the show. The indecent length of her shorts when she crosses them assures they'd never be classified as clothing. The panties I wear during the red week of my cycle have more material than her shorts.

I want to snap back at her wordless taunt, but I'm honestly too tired. Instead, I hurry for the back entrance of the club, ignoring Tina's snarky chuckle at my mad dash. "Make sure the door doesn't hit you on the ass on the way out."

With a grunt, I push open the heavy door. My eyes squint as they struggle to adjust from the darkness of Isaac's club to the blinding mid-morning sun. It's so bright, I have to shelter my eyes to see where I'm walking. Eager to return to my apartment to wallow in self-pity in private, my strides are urgent and fast.

When I reach the corner of Welsh and Trover Street, my quick pace slackens. Megan Shroud is a mere foot in front of me. With everything going on, I completely forgot about her and her freakish obsession with Isaac's brother, Nick.

At first glance, she appears as if she's any other woman going about her day-to-day routine. The only reason she's attracting my attention, and that of those surrounding her, is the yellow sundress she's wearing. Although the mid-morning sun has a nice amount of warmth to it, the breeze blowing up the hem of her dress is as cold as ice. I'm chilly wearing jeans and a thin cashmere sweater, so she must be freezing.

Ignoring the nerves fluttering in my stomach, I drift my eyes over the people milling around the bus stop, seeking the agents Alex assigned to Megan's case Thursday morning. My

first guess would be the lady sitting at the café across the street with a newspaper in her hand. She appears to be reading the paper, but her eyes aren't shifting in a left to right pattern. Uncle Tobias said that error is usually the first thing a target spots when they're under surveillance.

“Even if your gaze never leaves your target, you must shift your eyes accordingly,” he used to preach.

God, I miss him.

Once I'm standing shoulder to shoulder with Megan, I glance down at the paper she's grasping in her delicate, yet strong hand. Because her clutch is so firm, I can't see what's printed on the document, but a logo of an interstate bus company is visible in the top right-hand corner.

Unaware of my watchful glance, Megan bounces heel to toe. Her light brown hair hangs freely down her back, framing her makeup-free face. Her nude lips are curved into a smile, and her hazel eyes are sparkling in the sun. Even in her dapper mood, her body can't hide its panic. Her arms are covered with goosebumps, and the tips of her toes are blue, although her expression does not indicate her body's discomfort.

A dull ache stabs my chest. Is anyone looking out for her? She's clearly unhinged.

My worry is pushed aside when the squeak of brakes shrieks through my ears. It's closely followed by the polluted smoke you'd expect from a large coach. A white bus with 'New York City' displayed in LED lights in the window stops in front of Megan and me. Believing I'm waiting for the bus, Megan gestures for me to enter before her.

“Ah... I still need to buy a ticket.” I bite on the inside of my cheek, hating that my words come out with a quiver. I



shouldn't be so hard on myself. At least I thought of something. I'm not usually quick-witted.

Megan's grin exposes a chip in her front tooth. "The ticket office is through those doors." She points behind me, her voice so weak she sounds like a child instead of an adult.

I stray my eyes in the direction she's pointing. A large circular logo for Bellevue Buses is displayed on the front door. The frontage sign states they specialize in traveling interstate in comfort and safety.

Uneased, I return my eyes to Megan. "Thank you."

I desperately want to ask her where she's going, but she steps onto the bus before I can. When she hands her ticket to the overweight gentleman sitting in the driver's seat, he eyes her attire in confusion. Even in his heated bus, he's wearing a long-sleeve shirt and a knitted vest.

When the lady 'reading' the newspaper crosses the street to shadow Megan onto the bus, I dip my chin in greeting. She fills a vacant spot three places down from Megan before she recommences reading.

I wait until the bus is nothing more than a blip on the horizon before yanking my phone out of my pocket and dialing a memorized number.

"Miss me already?" Brandon jests a short time later.

The cool wind chills my teeth when I smile. "I do... but I also need a favor."

"Another one."

His chuckles settle the nerves in my stomach. I hate asking for favors.

“Megan Shroud was just seen leaving on a bus to New York. Can you please check if she purchased a one-way or a return ticket?”

“Yeah, hold on.” Fingers hitting keys of his keyboard sounds down the line, along with his heavy breaths. “It’s a one-way ticket.”

Relief washes over me. Hopefully, this is a sign Megan finally got the hint that Nick isn’t interested in her, but just in case, I add a little more sauce to my favor. “Can you add Megan’s name to the travel database? I want to know if she purchases a return ticket.”

Brandon remains quiet, but papers are ruffling.

“Brandon?”

I hear his cheeks rising. “Oh yeah, sorry, I was nodding.”

“Thanks, Brandon.”

He exhales sharply. “Anytime, Izzy.”

While placing my phone back into my pocket, a delicious smell streams into my nose. It smells distinctively like the scrumptious pies Harlow serves every day. Other than the message I got from her after I left Cormack’s office, I haven’t heard a peep from her. Before I stuffed everything up, we texted each other numerous times a day before finalizing our day with a call each night. I want to say her lack of contact is because she’s busy, but it’s more likely that she, along with everyone else, is still angry at me.

Determined not to make another huge mistake, I make my way to Harlow’s bakery. Because it’s only mid-morning, the bakery is pretty deserted. When the bell above the door chimes, Harlow stops replenishing the cake fridge. Several heart-clenching seconds pass with her staring at me in shock.

The silence is awkward. Usually, when we're together, no one can get in a word between us.

"I've missed you, Harlow." My voice shakes with emotions. We've only been friends for six months, but she is, without a doubt, my very best friend. "Please let me fix this. I'll do anything to make things right between us."

The tears I'm fighting to keep at bay spring down my cheeks when she dashes around the counter to wrap me up in a fierce hug. "I've missed you, too."

We cuddle for several minutes, only breaking when the bell above the door chimes for the second time. In sync, our eyes drift to the other side of the room. Renee is standing at the door, balancing a stack of bakery boxes on her slim waist.

Her brows frown when she takes in our wet cheeks and glistening eyes. "Go sit, then I'll bring coffee. You both look as if you could use a caffeine IV." Guilt washes over her face, but it doesn't stop her from saying. "Whoever invented the term 'ugly crying' was referring to this when they fabricated it."

I laugh, adoring her sass. She reminds me of a younger, more rebellious version of Harlow. Although her comment was made in jest, it holds credit. I know I look like shit, but Harlow also appears tired and withdrawn. Dark rings dull her eyes, and her smile isn't as bright as usual. After looping my arm around Harlow's elbow, I drag her toward our table. We assemble at the same table every time we get together here. It's the table Isaac was seated at the first time I laid eyes on him in his home turf. Every time I sit here, the smell of whole grain and rye toasted cheese sandwich conquers up memories. Today is no different. Not even our brutal run-in can weaken them.

Harlow remains quiet while Renee wrangles up two mugs of coffee and a gigantic slice of pumpkin pie. “You can’t have coffee without pie.” After rubbing my shoulder, she makes herself scarce.

I don’t have the heart to tell her I hate anything associated with pumpkin. Pumpkin is disgusting. Even with a whole heap of sugar and a super sweet pastry, I refuse to eat it, but even if she presented me a chocolate pie with a pile of whipped cream, I still wouldn’t eat it. My stomach is too twisted up about the anxious expression on Harlow’s beautiful face to handle food.

I curl my hand over Harlow’s clenched fist. “Do you want me to talk to Cormack again?”

I was hoping Cormack had taken Hugo’s advice and patched things up with Harlow, but from the expression on her face, I’m going to assume he hasn’t.

The pressure on my chest weakens when Harlow smiles. “No, we’re good, but thank you for offering.” Her smile enlarges to a full-size grin. “The makeup sex was great, so I should probably thank you.”

Our giggles are more noticeable since the bakery is near empty. After blowing on my coffee to cool down its scorching heat, I take a swig. “So, what’s with the odd expression on your face? You look...” I stop talking, giving my eyes time to study the look marring her face. “... scared?”

Harlow is as shocked by my admission as I am. She’s a tough cookie. She handled the Tatiana incident with dignified composure and handles irate customers daily. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her rattled.

Hold on, yes, I have. She was skittish when we first arrived at the McGregor residence. Before I can ask if the incidents are linked, Harlow confirms it. “Did you know Clara is now living in Ravenshoe?”

Ignoring the tension in my belly, I shake my head. “But I didn’t have a clue where she lived.”

After swallowing a mouthful of sweetened black coffee, Harlow’s eyes meet mine. “She was residing in New York but moved to Ravenshoe permanently the weekend following our trip to the McGregor residence. She’s living in a fancy building on Hyde Place.”

My heart stops beating. It could be a coincidence, but Isaac’s *fuck pad* is in Hyde Place. Before I can work through my confusion, Harlow continues, “Do you remember me begging you not to leave me alone when you first woke up from your famous wine and Xanax blackout concoction?”

I jerk up my chin. “Yep. I just recalled that it was the first time I’d seen you rattled.”

Harlow rolls her eyes. “That was because of Clara. She doesn’t like me very much.”

“Is she creating trouble between you and Cormack?”

Her lips thin. “I can’t one hundred percent testify to that, but I’m reasonably sure she’s narking in his ear at every available opportunity.” Her eyes lift and lock with mine. “The billionaire and the baker isn’t a story she wants plotted out.”

I make a *pfft* noise with my lips. “Then she’s an idiot. Thousands of readers would gobble up a story like that. She just doesn’t understand modern-day fairy tales.” Leaning over the table, I re-clutch Harlow’s hand in mine. “Give as good as you’re getting, Harlow.”

She arches her brow. “That goes for the both of us, Kettle.”

“Yes, it does,” I agree with a nod. “And from here on out, I’m going to do precisely that.”

## CHAPTER 13



## ISAAC

“*T*hat doesn't look like the face of a traitor.”

I close my laptop screen, which is displaying an image of Isabelle leaning against my office door. In the photo, her teeth have caught her bottom lip, and her eyes are snapped shut as she battles not to let tears spill down her ashen face. The hurt projected in her beautiful chocolate eyes when I insulted her cut through me like a knife, so I've been torturing myself the past hour by watching the surveillance video of the incident over and over again. It only made me more confused. If she were paid to sleep with me, why did she react to my taunt?

“What Hugo told you is true, Isaac. If you wait too long —”

My vicious glare halts any further relationship advice Hunter is planning to give. “If you still want to be employed by the end of the day, keep your thoughts to yourself.”

Hunter, my head of security, pops his shoulder onto the doorjamb of my office. As he authenticates my threat, he scrubs his hand over the scraggly beard covering his jawline. His dark blond hair is pulled back into a low-riding man bun, and his tattoo collection is barely concealed by the checked



shirt he's wearing rolled up at the sleeves. He has what could be termed a rough-and-rugged appearance.

When I interviewed him for a position within my empire, I initially judged him on his outer facade instead of his impressive security capabilities. He soon proved his worth when he hacked into my supposedly unhackable security system to siphon my bank account of two million dollars. He was so brazen, he did it in front of me. I fired my head of security the day he joined my team. That was a little over four years ago.

“Was that Isabelle?”

Hunter pushes off the wall to stride into my office, his hurried pace slackening when my narrowed eyes land on him. “Yes, but if the search you completed on her had been more thorough, you'd be aware of that.”

Hunter dares to smirk. “I stand by my search—”

“Then, obviously, I need a new head of security.”

“When you find the guy who hid her information so deep not even I could find it, I'll hire him myself as my replacement.” His tone relays the truth in his bold statement.

At my request, Hunter undertook a background search of Isabelle the weekend she stayed at my apartment. His investigation failed to yield any real results. He supplied me with an expired copy of her learner's permit from when she was sixteen. It revealed that she resided in a coastal town near San Francisco called Tiburon, but other than that, her file was as scarce as her bank accounts.

It may seem pretentious of me to investigate people in my life, but in my position, I have no choice. I've been burned in the past, so I'm cautious about who I allow into my life.

Generally, my searches are reserved for staff or business associates, but Isabelle intrigued me enough to warrant her own special investigation. Although frustrated with Hunter's lack of information, it made the chase even more inspiring.

Hunter plops into the leather chair across from me. "This lady, on the other hand, reads like an open book." He tosses a manila folder filled to the brim with papers onto my desk. "Was there something you failed to mention when you asked me to investigate her?"

My teeth grinding together stuff his laughter into the back of his throat. While he scrubs his beard, a trait he always does when nervous, I open the folder. A grunt parts my lips when my eyes run over the extensively noted documents inside. Hunter is meticulous about the amount of information he unearths, but right now, I don't have time to read a one-hundred-plus-page report.

I sink lower into my chair. "I have a meeting with Regan in ten minutes. Can you give me a brief rundown?"

Hunter pulls an iPad out of the hemp bag he dumped on the floor upon entry. "Did Roger scan your office this morning?"

"Yes." I snap. "He didn't find anything... today."

After I was arrested, Hunter had my office, apartment, and private residence scanned for listening devices. Two bugs were found in my home, and one was in my office. Now, Roger examines my office twice a day instead of his usual once-over before I arrive.

"From what I unearthed, I'm assuming you know a good whack about her private life..." His arrogant smirk is wiped off his face when I growl. "All right, here are the basics.

Theresa Veneto is thirty-two years old. She lives in Hopeton, she's unmarried, has one child, and her current position is an investigator in the Internal Affairs Department of the Federal Bureau of Investigation." His smile returns. "Oh, and last, but not at all least, she has a major lady boner for a businessman named Isaac Holt."

I shoot him a warning look. I'm not in the mood for his shit today. I'm at my tether. "How long has Theresa been with IA?"

"Since June thirteenth." Hunter doesn't sneak a glance at the information sitting in front of him. Hugo continuously jests that his brain is like a sponge. It absorbs every minor detail to retain it for future use.

"What was she doing before IA?"

Hunter arches his brow. "Investigating you."

"Was or is?"

"Was. Due to no credible evidence against you, she was removed from your case." His eyes snap to mine to give me a cheeky wink. "You can thank me for that later."

A subtle grin etches on my mouth. His skillset does warrant some credit, but I'll never tell him that.

"The details are a little shady, but Theresa was either demoted to IA or she asked to be transferred there." His tattoo-covered hand darts across the table to flick over a few pages of the extensive report he presented me with. "That's her current target."

Blood surges through my veins when my eyes drop to the surveillance photos displayed. The top picture is a photo of Isabelle and Theresa standing eye to eye in the entranceway of Isabelle's apartment.

“Why is IA investigating Isabelle?”

Hunter places his jean-covered ankle onto his knee before gliding his amused eyes to me. “For conspiring with you.”

“They’re investigating their agent for doing the job they paid her to do?”

Hunter’s lips crimp as he shakes his head. “Now, the slap mark on your cheek makes sense.”

His eyes float over my left cheek, which is still burning from the slap Isabelle inflicted on me over an hour ago. I’ll be frank, my cock turned to stone when she slapped me. An angry Isabelle is just as ravishing as a jealous Isabelle.

Hunter drops his ankle from his knee before his elbow takes its place. “You probably don’t want to hear this, but I’m gonna say it. Isabelle didn’t rat you out.”

A half-chuckle/half-grunt escapes my lips. “What is it with all the men surrounding me not seeing past Isabelle’s ruse? First Hugo, then Cormack, now you. I thought I was the only fool who couldn’t see past the wool she pulled over my eyes.”

Hunter slants his head to the side, not the least bit confronted about the repercussion he may ignore by saying, “Because we’d happily rot in jail just for the opportunity of tapping a woman who looks like her, let alone having her more than once.”

My back molars smack together when his eyes lower to the photo of Isabelle on my desk. Usually, my response would be much more severe, but I’m off my game, distracted by the momentous personal endeavors I’m currently undertaking. You’d think my arrest would be at the forefront of my mind. It isn’t. I have more pressing issues to handle than the FBI’s concerns about who I can or cannot dine with.

Hunter smirks, pleased with my response. “And from the way your jaw is ticking, and you look like you’re about to kill me, I’ll assume you’d accept the same fate for another night between the sheets with Isabelle.”

I don’t refute his allegation. There’s nothing to dispute since it is factual.

“As I said earlier, Theresa’s operating system is severely lacking in security. It didn’t even take me ten seconds to get this.”

He hands me the iPad device he earlier removed. It’s open on an image of Isabelle sitting in a chair behind a white melamine table. The blond gentleman she kissed in her hallway nearly two months ago is seated across from her.

“Are you trying to rub salt into my wounds, or did you just set out to piss me off today?”

“Come on, Isaac. You know as well as anyone that not everything is black and white,” Hunter waves his hand to the iPad. “Press play and watch the shadows turn to gray.”

After shooting him a wry look, warning him I’ve reached my quota of smart-ass remarks, I press play on the iPad. My brows shoot up my face when “Are you in a relationship with Isaac Holt?” comes squawking through the speakers. My heart stops beating as I wait for Isabelle’s response. Her pupils are wide, and her face is flushed. She looks like a deer caught in the headlights.

“I plead the fifth.”

A smirk curves my lips. I’d break out a full smile if I didn’t recognize the voice of the person interrogating Isabelle. Her nasally pitch is easily distinguishable. It belongs to Theresa Veneto.

My jaw muscle tenses when Theresa taunts Isabelle about being a paid mistress. It also makes sense as to why Isabelle reacted so fiercely earlier. I treated her just as poorly as the person attempting to railroad her.

When the video ends, exposing that Isabelle denied all interactions with me, my eyes shift to Hunter. “You couldn’t have brought this to me an hour earlier?” *Then I wouldn’t have insulted Isabelle so bluntly.*

“With everything going on with Nick and his fucked-up stalker, and those other matters you have me looking into, my resources are stretched thin. By thin, I mean I’m exhausted. Something had to give. Unfortunately, it was that.” He jerks his head to his iPad.

My first response is to retort that I don’t pay him to rest, but his tired eyes shelf my retaliation. He looks as exhausted as I feel. “Could Theresa’s investigation have any legalities for Isabelle?”

Hunter runs his hand along his jaw as he slumps deeper into the chair. “I’m not a lawyer, but unless they can prove she was financially rewarded for supplying you with information, I don’t see their investigation being anything more than hearsay.” His gaze shoots up to mine. “Did you ever discuss anything with her that could warrant their investigation?”

I shake my head. “We didn’t discuss business matters.” We barely discussed anything as we were too busy acting on our desires for one another.

“Then she should be okay. If you’re not sure, maybe have Regan look into it for you.”

I scratch my brow. “Regan is busy handling another matter for me.”

Hunter nods. “Speaking of situations, Peters spotted Nick’s stalker purchasing a bus ticket to New York earlier this morning. Did you want me to send someone with her? Or...” He stops talking mid-sentence, awaiting further instructions.

“Cormack has a security detail watching Nick from afar in Los Angeles. When he returns home, send one of your guys to keep an eye on him.”

“All right.” Hunter rises from the chair, snagging his bag from the ground on the way. “Let us know when he’s back in town, and I’ll send Peters over there.” He strides toward the door before stopping abruptly and spinning back around. “You need to be careful with how you tread with this Theresa issue, Isaac. She could squash Isabelle if she wants to. I know you’re pissed Isabelle wasn’t forthright with you about what she did for a living, but does a small amount of deceit warrant her spending years in jail?”

Not giving me a chance to reply, he briskly exits my office.

## CHAPTER 14





## ISABELLE

*M*y eyes stray to the door of my apartment when a brisk tap booms through it. After gathering up the documents scattered around me, I hide them in the coffee table drawer. I'm not usually so suspicious, but I'm supposed to buzz in visitors before they gain access to my floor, so my distrust is higher today.

I realize the errors of my ways when I swing open my door. Hugo's big, brooding frame hogs nearly every inch of the doorway. He's once again dressed down in a pair of ripped Henley jeans and a dark blue, long-sleeve shirt. He wouldn't need to be granted access since he lives in my building.

"Hey, Isabelle," he greets me with his familiar drawl and a broad grin.

I open my door wide before gesturing for him to come inside. "Morning, Hugo."

He takes three steps into my apartment before swiveling around to face me. His brows are drawn together, his lips pursed. "Where are you going?"

Before I can advise why I have a heap of moving boxes scattered around my living room, the intercom rings. Raising

my index finger into the air, I request a minute before pacing to my intercom.

“Hello, Ms. Brahn, we have a Brandon James here to see you,” advises a male voice over the intercom receiver.

“Thank you. Please send him up.”

I place the intercom phone back onto its receiver before spinning back around to face Hugo. The suspicion I felt earlier flourishes when I notice he’s rummaging through a box of knick-knacks I’m in the processing of packing. When he sees my watchful eye, he paces to the double door leading to my small but adequate balcony. “So, you’re really moving out?”

I nod. With the end of the month approaching more quickly than I anticipated, I’ve commenced packing in preparation for my big move.

“Where are you going?”

After blowing a wayward hair out of my face, I shrug. I haven’t worked that part out yet. Regina said I could move into the room I used when I moved to Ravenshoe, and Harlow offered me the couch in her tiny flat, but I haven’t decided what I want to do just yet. With everything going on, I’m feeling a little homesick, so half of me wants to scurry back to my hometown with my tail firmly planted between my legs, whereas the other half is adamant we stay and defend both Isaac and my name.

“Do you miss your hometown, Hugo?”

From the limited information I expelled from his sister’s police report, Hugo and his siblings were raised in Rochdale. Marjorie was born and buried there.

Hugo takes a moment to contemplate my question before shaking his head. “Home isn’t where you’re born, Izzy. It’s

where your family lives.” His words are extremely soft for a guy of his size. “Family also doesn’t mean they’re related to you by blood.”

My cheeks chuck a stink about the fast incline of my lips. Hugo is very built. His biceps are wider than my head, and his thighs are the width of my waist, but his buzz-cut hair and vast tattoo collection could have you mistaking him as a brainless brute. Only once you unearth the real Hugo do you realize his heart is the biggest muscle in his body.

I lose the chance to reply to his statement when a heavy knock sounds at the door. When I pull it open, I’m greeted by the brightly smiling face of Brandon. He’s also dressed casually, but the price tags of his garments are more pricy than Hugo’s. His Nieman Marcus Benn stretch-cotton pants and black cashmere and wool blend trench coat cost more than I earn in a month.

A much-needed smile stretches across my face when Brandon pulls out a bouquet from behind his back. One dozen long-stemmed yellow roses with whispers of baby’s breath weaved throughout are arranged in a beautiful crystal vase.

“Brandon, you shouldn’t have.”

He smiles his trademark lopsided grin. The slight fault in his smile makes him even more appealing. Not many people are faultless, but Brandon’s handsome boy-next-door looks and an even more stellar personality are cutting it closer. The slight wonkiness of his near-perfect smile makes him more realistic—an everyday person instead of an unattainable man. I’ve only met one unattainable man before. That man is the incredibly alluring Mr. Isaac Holt.

“I thought they’d brighten your day.”

Smiling, I accept the vase before placing a kiss on his cheek. I grin like a Cheshire cat when he blushes from my friendly gesture. With a wave of my hand, I motion for him to join me inside. While peering my eyes around my apartment, endeavoring to find a suitable location to place my flowers, I stumble upon the infuriating glare of Hugo. He's shooting daggers at Brandon, his stance nowhere near as casual as his outfit. If he's striving to intimidate Brandon, he's failing miserably. Brandon hasn't even noticed his brooding presence lurking at the side of my living room. His eyes are fixated on me.

I give Hugo my 'behave' face before placing the vase on the entryway table, rotating it until I'm happy with its position. The crystal vase catches the morning sun streaming through the window, sending rainbow hues dancing across my living room.

When I twirl back around, I offer to take Brandon's jacket to hang it in the entry closet. A scratchy sensation hits my throat when Brandon's removal of his coat reveals a white, long-sleeve Armani polo shirt. It hugs his frame so snugly, it showcases him in a light I've not previously seen. He isn't as built as the other male agents in our unit, but I had no clue he was hiding *that* body under the business attire he regularly dons.

My chest expands when Brandon tilts in intimately close to my side. He isn't standing close enough to make me feel uncomfortable, but to a stranger, it could look a little too chummy, which means it elicits the warning growl bellowing out of Hugo.

"Isn't he Isaac's bodyguard?" Even with Brandon's close proximity, my ears struggle to hear him.

My shoulder touches my ear when I shrug. “He isn’t Isaac’s bodyguard. He’s more an... *associate* of his.”

Smiling to ease the confused expression crossing his face, I head to Hugo to offer an introduction. Considering the circumstances, the giddy feeling in my gut is extremely ill-timed. I’m not liking the tension radiating out of Hugo. I’m just loving that even being unjustly fired by Isaac hasn’t stop Hugo from defending him.

“Hugo, this is my *friend*, Brandon.” I overemphasis the word ‘friend,’ hoping Hugo will get the hint that Brandon will never be anything more than that. “Brandon, this is my... *friend*, Hugo.”

Unappreciative of my stumble, Hugo gawks at me. I mouth an apology. I was genuinely unsure about how I ought to introduce him. He’s always been friendly, but most of our interactions occurred while he was an employee of Isaac’s, so I wasn’t sure if our interactions were because he liked me, or if he were doing the job he was paid to do.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

When Brandon extends his hand in greeting, Hugo accepts it, albeit hesitantly. “Pleasure.”

After they shake hands, the whole gathering plunges into an awkward silence. As they gawk at each other, my eyes bounce between them, pondering as to why I’ve gone from having no visitors to two within minutes of each other.

*When did I become Ms. Popular?*

I realize I mumbled my last comment out loud when Brandon and Hugo’s eyes snap to mine in sync. Over the silence, much less their dubious glares, I spread my hands

across my cocked hip. “All right, spill, what are you two up to?”

Brandon is confused by my bold statement, but Hugo smiles so vividly, only the sturdiest pair of sunglasses could reflect the glare of his vibrant grin. “I’ve got nothing better to do with my time anymore, so I may as well hang out with you.”

Regret stabs my chest. Although Hugo’s comment is painful to hear, it holds merit so that only leaves one mystery remaining. Turning my gaze, I peer at Brandon with my brow cocked and my lips twisted.

He shifts from foot to foot as the natural hue adorning his cheeks reddens. “I need to talk to you.” His gaze strays to Hugo, who is watching our exchange eagerly, not even pretending he isn’t eavesdropping. “In private.”

When Hugo gives him a look as if to say, *fuck you, I’m not going anywhere*, I clasp Brandon’s perspiration-soaked hand in mine before guiding him into the hallway of my building. Hugo doesn’t attempt to follow us. It’s for the best. I might have shot him if he did.

After swallowing bleakly, Brandon’s gaze floats up from his shoes. “I need a favor.”

“Anything, Brandon.”

He’s been nothing but supportive of me the past six months, so this is a prime opportunity for me to return the favor.

Relief skims over Brandon’s face. “Thank you, Izzy.” With how many times he wets his lips, I’m expecting something more profound to come out of his mouth than what he says next. “I need a date.” When I stiffen, he coughs to clear nerves

from his voice. “My mom’s chairman of a charity that holds an annual gala. I tried to get out of it, but she won’t accept any of the excuses I’m giving.” He takes a step closer to me, his glossed-over eyes begging. “I don’t want to go alone because Melody will be there.”

Pain claws my chest. Melody was his first love. They were high school sweethearts who only ended their relationship when he joined the Bureau. Although Brandon assured her they’d make it work, Melody didn’t want a long-distance relationship. Before I begged Brandon to communicate with her, so I could gain access to Hugo’s sister’s sealed file, they hadn’t spoken in years.

“I’m so desperate for a date, I’m not below getting on my knees and begging. Please, Izzy. I’ll do anything, anything at all if you’ll just fake liking me for a night.”

“I do like you, Brandon.” The apprehension straining his face softens from my admission. “So, I’m sure it won’t be hard pretending I’m your date for a night.”

Brandon flashes me a killer grin. “Thank you, Izzy, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Now he isn’t the only one nervous. “But now, I need a favor.”

My heart warms when he nods without pause.

“I’ve been looking a little deeper at Megan Shroud.” I stop talking, anticipating backlash. When it doesn’t come, I continue, “There are a lot of holes in her file I could fill in by driving out to her hometown to check things out.” I swish my tongue around my mouth to soothe its dryness. “The thing is, I don’t have a car, so can I please borrow yours?”

I slap his chest when he chuckles, “It hasn’t recovered from the last time you drove it.” He winks, loving my dropped lip. “But I’m more than happy to drive you there.”

“Really?”

Grinning, he nods. “I still have nightmares from when you went to her hotel room alone. I refuse to make the same mistake twice. I have the weekend off, so why not go on an adventure?”

“Thank you, Brandon.”

He squeezes my hand. “You’re welcome. I’d do anything for you.”

After arranging for him to pick me up the following morning, I pace back into my apartment. Happiness is beaming out of me until I spot Hugo standing near my vase of roses. When he absorbs my excited expression, silent accusations bound out of him so hard and fast, they nearly knock me onto my ass.

“He’s a *friend*, Hugo.” My voice gains an edge of annoyance to it. I’m sick of being accused of things I’m not guilty of. “Our relationship is no different than the one I have with you.”

“*Friends?* Come on, Izzy, who brings roses for a *friendly* visit.”

Needing distance before I say something I’ll regret, I head to my bedroom. I have a whole heap of stuff in there I need to pack before the end of the month.

“Can’t deny it, hey?”

I whip around so quick, my hair slaps my face. “Yellow roses mean friendship. Every girl this side of the planet knows



that!”

Hugo huffs. “Jeez, Izzy, don’t be stup—”

I hit him with a stern finger point. “Don’t you dare. If one more person calls me stupid, or any other name this week, I’m gonna... I’m...”

A low, simpering growl is the only way I can express my genuine anger, so that’s what I do. Within the last week, I’ve been called stupid, naïve, a paid mistress, and a range of other nasty names, but the most stinging of all was when Isaac called me a prostitute. He may not have directly said the word, but he alluded to it. That hurt. It was the biggest hit below the belt this week. Not even getting suspended from my job hurt more than his comment.

With my fists clenched at my side, I step closer to Hugo. “It’s been over a week since I confronted Isaac, and I’ve heard nothing but crickets since. I know you’re loyal to him, Hugo, and I’ll be forever grateful for that, but I have enough people dictating my life. There’s no room for another. If you truly want to be my friend, do that, but you need to leave your judgment at the door.”

Stealing his chance to reply, I storm into my bedroom. My front door slams shut not long after.

## CHAPTER 15



## ISABELLE

“**S**tupid piece of shit.”

The zipper on my suitcase just burst open for the second time today. I had forgotten about the busted fastener until I pulled it out of my closet to pack an emergency bag of essentials. Megan’s hometown is nearly four hundred miles from Ravenshoe, so I’m not sure if Brandon and I will make the trip in one go or stay at a hotel. I could purchase a new suitcase, but after the massive withdrawal from my bank account last week to pay my backdated rent, my funds are best described as limited. So, busted zipper or not, my old bag must do.

When I drop down to my knees to wrestle with my suitcase, my memories drift to the last time I’d done the same thing. Even though it took us weeks to sort our shit out, I still class that morning as the beginning of my relationship with Isaac. The instant he stepped into my apartment, I no longer had the strength to fight a battle stronger than I could have ever imagined. My body craved him more than its next breath—it still does. If Harlow and Cormack weren’t in the room with us that day, I would have shamelessly crawled to him on my knees and begged for him to claim me as his.

My heart leaps into my throat when a loud tap sounds at my front door. I know it isn't Brandon—he texted earlier saying he'll collect me at ten tomorrow morning. My heart is praying it's Isaac, but it will most likely be Hugo since security didn't call to say I have a visitor.

After zipping up from the floor, I pace to the door, cringing when I catch my reflection in the entryway mirror. In an attempt to improve my gloomy mood, I spent my morning binge eating. When it made me feel worse, I went on an afternoon run, doing anything I could to lessen the chocolate bars making their way onto my already curvy backside. I only just returned, so I'm still wearing black running shorts, a hot pink crop-top bra, and a thin mesh shirt. My shirt is so drenched with sweat, my crop-top is visible underneath, my once-high ponytail hangs loosely halfway down my back, and my face is devoid of makeup. I would get changed if my caller wasn't knocking like they're the police.

I realize how accurate my statement is when I swing open my door. Theresa and her still-unnamed male partner are standing on the other side. I thought the disdain crossing Theresa's face would be the only skin-crawling moment I'd handle today. It isn't. Her partner's vomit-provoking assessment of my body lasts for several uncomfortable heart-thrashing seconds, only stopping once he reaches my sweat-soaked socks. From the way his tongue is hanging out of his mouth, anyone would swear I was standing before him naked.

When the male agent takes his eyes off my chest to follow Theresa into my apartment, I block their entrance. "I'm not talking to you without a lawyer present."

My abrupt closure of the door wavers when, "Only people with something to hide need a lawyer," sounds through the

wood.

I said that exact statement to Isaac only a few months ago, and it would be hypercritical for me to pretend I didn't. I've been called many names the past week. I don't want another added to the list.

Against my better judgment, I swing my door back open. "I don't have anything to hide. *Nothing* I have done since I left the academy has been illegal."

"Then you'll have no problems talking to us."

Without seeking permission, Theresa enters my apartment. Her strides are efficient and confident as stuck-up as the expensive-smelling perfume she's wearing. The unnamed male agent shadows her the best he can without taking his eyes off my boobs. He must be several years older than Theresa as his hair has an abundance of gray strands throughout it, and his face is heavily wrinkled. If I had to guess his age, I'd say mid-to-late fifties. They're an odd partnership, but I'm confident Theresa always plays the bad cop during their interrogations. Excluding the occasional snicker, I've barely heard a peep come out of the male agent's mouth, proving that Theresa is the alpha in their duo.

After bouncing her eyes between the moving boxes scattered around my apartment, Theresa spins around to face me. She'd be a lot prettier if she mixed up the grim expression she frequently wears. She carries herself well, but her lips are always set in a thin line, and she's forever frowning—even when she's smirking.

"Trouble in paradise?"

I cross my arms in front of my chest before glaring at her. Her insensitive question doesn't warrant a reply, so I remain

quiet, silently brooding instead of nibbling at the bait she's leaving out.

A triumphant grin tugs my lips high when Theresa's gaze turns away first. As she paces deeper into my living room, I study her more adeptly. She carries herself with stature. It's a stance I've witnessed many times before, generally when friends of my Uncle Tobias would visit. Just from her composure, I highly doubt she started her career in IA. It might not have even been at the Bureau. Her poise and the way she moves points more to her being a police officer or perhaps even a detective.

My heart squeezes when she picks up a photo of my Uncle Tobias and me from my mantel. It's a photo Tobias's *Dedushka* took the day I arrived in Tiburon. It was the same day my auction was held. My eyes are open in fright, and my expression is puzzled. I was only six years old, so I was incapable of comprehending what had happened that day, but most of my fright was because I had just undertaken my first flight. My fear of flying wasn't something I developed as an adult. I was born with it embedded deep into my veins.

"Is this the man who raised you?" For the first time ever, Theresa's tone sounds neutral.

After swallowing the rock lodged in my throat, I nod. "That's my Uncle Tobias."

My high pitch relays my fondness for my uncle. If he hadn't come into my life when he did, I would have most likely become the person Theresa thinks I am—a prostitute. Tobias hid most of Vladimir's criminal activities from me when I was younger, but once I joined the Bureau, every sordid aspect of his empire was unearthed in pain-staking detail.

Vladimir Popov and Col Petretti's names were regularly exploited during my training at the academy. Col is no doubt an evil man, but Vladimir is a true monster. Drugs, guns, kidnapping, prostitution, his family business dabbles in it all. He's so ruthless, he doesn't care if you're related to him. Unless you're making him a profit, you're worthless to him.

"Isabelle?" Theresa paces to stand in front of me, eyeing me curiously. I must have zoned out thinking back on my memories.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

She pompously smirks. "I asked, what's your knowledge of Col Petretti?"

"Other than what his FBI file informs me, I don't have any further knowledge of Mr. Petretti."

My reply isn't a total lie. Although I ran into Col on the weekend Isaac and I went away, and he threatened me, I have no further knowledge of him.

"Why are you asking?"

The back of my neck beads with sweat when Theresa hands me a photo from her leather handbag. It shows Col Petretti's righthand man lying in a hospital bed. His body is severely injured. One of his legs is hoisted in a sling, and his face is covered in bruises of different colors and shapes.

Not trusting Theresa to give me an honest answer, I stray my eyes to the male agent, who is wandering aimlessly through the boxes stacked at the side of my living room. "When was this photo taken?"

Theresa steps in front of me, blocking him from my view. "The weekend you and Isaac stayed at the McGregor

residence.”

Bile rises from my stomach to my throat. Isaac did threaten Col’s right-hand man. He was pissed he displayed that he was carrying a weapon during Isaac’s confrontation with Col. Isaac’s file reveals he was a skilled fighter years ago, but I didn’t realize he could still inflict so much damage to another person.

“How were his injuries obtained?”

Theresa’s condescending shrug reveals I just walked straight into her trap. She’s not only baiting me. She’s laying out traps left, right, and center. “I was hoping you’d elaborate on that for me, considering you were there when it happened.”

I shake my head, denying her false accusation. When she steps up to within an inch of my face, her rich-scented perfume makes my stomach swirl more.

“How many weeks did you sleep with a man you hardly knew?”

I stare her straight in the eyes before snarling, “I plead the fifth.”

I’m not usually a catty bitch—*jealous, yes, bitchy, no*—but Theresa makes me want to bring out my claws and scratch them down her obnoxious face.

Theresa’s eyes snap to the male agent who is watching our exchange with caution. “Let’s go, this tap has run dry.” For the first time ever, her smile appears genuine. “Ms. Brahn isn’t a viable asset. She’s just as *clueless* as the rest of us when it comes to Mr. Holt.”

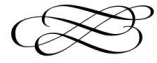
I don’t give her the satisfaction of prying a reaction out of me. Instead, I fold my arms in front of my chest before returning her evil glare. Smirking like the smug bitch she is,



she saunters to my front door, her hips swinging. The male agent shadows her, nodding farewell on the way by.

Just as she's about to exit, Theresa's shoddy gaze turns to me. "Enjoy your weekend, Isabelle, because it may be the last one where you're not sleeping in a four-by-four cell."

## CHAPTER 16



## ISAAC

When gravel crunching under tires rumbles through my ears, I lift my gaze, spotting a dark black sedan pulling in next to my Bugatti Veyron. It kicks up dust when it comes to a stop outside the warehouse I own. My jaw quivers when Theresa climbs out of the driver's seat to saunter my way.

“Isaac Holt all alone on a Saturday morning, what are the odds?”

Her obnoxious smirk falters the instant my gray eyes glare at her. Stopping halfway between her car and mine, she crosses her arms in front of her chest, hoisting her fake breasts up high in her white blouse. Although she's dressed more casual than earlier this week, she's still on the job as her pistol is holstered on her hip.

“What do you want?”

My tone is short and clipped. I'm generally a tolerant person. I take the punches life inflicts as well as anyone else, but my back gets up when someone hounds an innocent who should have never been dragged into the saga to begin with. Theresa despised Isabelle on sight, and she's only targeting her because of me.

As Theresa moves in closer, she studies my body, which is leaning against the hood of my car. I've just finished working the bag in the derelict warehouse. I'm wearing black Nike gym shorts and cross-trainer shoes. I removed my sweat-drenched shirt and have it hanging over my right shoulder.

Once her heavy-lidded gaze returns to my face, I snarl, "Never going to happen."

I drop my eyes back to my phone to see if I missed any calls from Hunter or Regan while I was working out. Upon seeing I don't have any missed calls, I jog around my vehicle to dump my gym bag into the trunk. After slipping a dark blue t-shirt over my torso, I stride toward the driver's side door.

"You think you're clever, but you'll slip up eventually." Theresa's tone is doused with arrogance.

"I don't think I'm clever, I know I am. You'll never find anything on me or anyone in my team as I always ensure my hands are thoroughly clean."

Ray-Ban sunglasses cover her eyes, but I can feel them drifting over my face, absorbing every detail that makes the girls go weak at the knees.

"I just realized I forgot to thank you." I stare into her mirrored glasses, which reflect my gray eyes. They're darker than usual due to enlarged pupils.

Theresa swallows before her tongue darts out to moisten her lips. "For what?"

"For pointing out an oversight in my accounting." My smirk picks up right along with my attitude. "Your invaluable information earned me thousands of dollars."

Her head slopes to the side, apparently confused. "What information?"

“When you left my office, I realized I had heard of Ms. Brahn before.”

Theresa sucks in a quick breath that puffs her chest out.

“Once I dug a little deeper, I discovered Ms. Brahn is one of my *many* tenants. During examinations of her account, my real estate agent found an oversight in the processing of her tenant application.”

She pulls off her sunglasses, so her icy blue eyes can glare into mine. “What kind of oversight?”

“My real estate agent failed to lodge Ms. Brahn’s application for expenses contributing to her move. Since she relocated to Ravenshoe for work, she had her rent reduced for the first twelve months. Because of your due diligence, my real estate agent has now lodged her application. The Bureau contacted my agent earlier today, and they’ve assured us Ms. Brahn’s backdated rent will be paid into my account by the end of the month.” A smug grin curls my lips high. “So, Ms. Brahn’s rental statement now reflects she was indeed paying the full and *fair* amount for her apartment.”

Theresa’s eyes narrow into thin slits as her stance stiffens. “Even if Isabelle gets cleared of all charges by my department, she’ll never talk to you again after the information I’ve shared with her this week.”

Other than my jaw involuntarily ticking, my outward appearance gives no indication her statement has affected me.

“You should have seen the tears in her big brown eyes when she watched the video of Ophelia begging you to stop senselessly beating her brother.” She steps closer to me, her glare vicious. “Isabelle thought she knew the real Isaac Holt, but she’s learning she doesn’t know you at all.”

My nostrils flare as blood courses through my body at a rapid pace.

“Have a pleasant day, Mr. Holt.” Her voice drips with sarcasm.

After placing her glasses back on, she returns to her vehicle. Only once her government-plated sedan is nothing but a blur in the distance do I slam my fists into the hood of my car. The dark metal crumples from the brutal force of my knuckles, but I don't hold back. The night she referenced earlier forever haunts my dreams. It changed me to the man I am now. It's the reason I became the myth. The unattainable. The ruthless enigma...

*Months and months of relentless chasing, denied requests, and returned flowers all came down to this. Ophelia had accepted my pleas, and our date had gone well. I impressed myself with how much of a gentleman I was. I opened her car door, pulled out her chair, and participated in an intellectual adult conversation. Then it all came down to dropping her home after the date. Was I supposed to kiss her? Should I invite her on another date right then or wait a required amount of time? It was a new experience for me.*

*Don't get me wrong, I was certainly not a fumbling virgin who didn't know what he was doing. I had bedded plenty of women before Ophelia. I just never dated any of them. Even the best lays I had didn't compare to how I felt when Ophelia's light brown eyes glanced into mine. The chase was enthralling and addictive. My heart would constrict, my palms would sweat, and all I wanted to do was claim her as my own.*

*That night, when I pulled into her driveway, my mouth was unexpectedly engulfed by a pair of warm and soft lips. “Pick me up tomorrow at six,” she instructed before jumping out of*

*my car and walking toward the dorm she lived in without a backward glance.*

*One date turned into six, then six dates turned into three months. Time was flying by. Ophelia blew my mind. She kept me fascinated. She was unlike any other girl I'd been with before, but it all changed when I received a call during one of our weekly dates.*

*"Twenty Gs! Are you fucking serious?" My tone indicated my disbelief, confident I didn't hear Cormack right as there's no way twenty thousand dollars was being offered for one fight. I received the occasional higher offer from Col, but they rarely went over seven thousand.*

*"Yeah, man, twenty thousand, but your ass has to be here within an hour, or the deal falls through."*

*My eyes darted to Ophelia. I hadn't been entirely honest with her about what I did for a career. I mentioned it was sports-related, but when she failed to probe me any further, I neglected to mention it again. Although I was unsure about what her reaction would be, there was no way I was giving up that amount of money for one night's work.*

*"I'll be there in forty-five."*

*After disconnecting my call, I gathered Ophelia's jacket, hat, and scarf from the coatrack in the diner where we had just finished eating. Her beautiful giggle echoed around the grease-smelling space when I wrapped her scarf around her neck before plopping her beanie on her head. I plucked her from the chair by a tug on her wrist, then eagerly ushered her out of the diner.*

*"Where are we going?" she questioned curiously, still giggling.*

*“You know that car you’ve been saving up for?” I stopped to help button up her jacket. Snowflakes were already making the little point on the end of her nose turn bright red, I didn’t want her getting sick.*

*“Yeah...” Her high pitch exposed her hesitation.*

*“We’re going to buy it... tonight.” I wagged my brows. “We just have to make a little detour first.”*

*I grasped her hand within mine before jogging down the slippery, icy grounds, dragging a giggling Ophelia behind me. Once she was buckled in my car, I slid into the driver’s seat and took off down the street. The massive compression of my foot on the accelerator made my car skid out of control on the icy roads.*

*Once I righted my wrong, I peered over to Ophelia. Her eyes were slitted, and she was glaring at me. After mumbling a quick apology, I continued on our route. She had been working at Buck’s Diner the past six months, saving up to buy a car. All the money I earned fighting was locked in a high-interest account, and with the way the stock market was going, it would have been ludicrous for me to sell any shares I had, but with the money from the fight that night, I could buy Ophelia the car she had been working so hard to save for.*

*When I pulled into the old gym where the underground fights were located, Ophelia’s fretful eyes turned to mine. “What are we doing here?”*

*“This is the quick detour I need to make first.”*

*I jumped out of my car before darting around to the passenger side to help her out. Before I could get to her door, she opened it and stepped outside. Her hands splayed across her hips, and her nostrils expanded with every breath she took.*



*“Please, Isaac, tell me you don’t participate in the events they hold here.”*

*I balk, unaware she knew about the events held in that old gym. Before I could answer her, Cormack was at my side, slapping my shoulder in greeting. “Can you believe it? Twenty Gs.”*

*After curling his arm around my shoulders, Cormack guided me toward the entrance of the run-down warehouse. Ophelia followed behind us but remained quiet. Needing time to prep my body for the fight, I headed straight into the locker rooms at the back of the arena to commence a dynamic warm-up routine. While I did that, Ophelia nervously paced back and forth. She mumbled incoherently and cursed several times in a row, her angry strides only halting when Cormack left the room.*

*“Please don’t do this, Isaac.”*

*I placed the jump rope onto the wooden bench before standing in front of her. Her pupils were wide, her face pale. She looked like she was going to be ill at any moment.*

*“I won’t get hurt.” Call me cocky, but the chances of me being beaten that night were non-existent as far as I was concerned.*

*“This isn’t you, Isaac.” Ophelia thrust her hand to the door that had roars bellowing through it. “This isn’t the person I fell in love with.”*

*My heart leaped. That was the first time she had told me she loved me. Hearing her say it made me feel invincible.*

*Grasping both of her cheeks in my hands, I kissed her firmly on her gaped-open mouth. “I love you too, baby,” I spoke over her lips.*

*“If you love me, you won’t do this.” With my heart in my throat, I inched back. “If you fight tonight, you’ll never see me again.”*

*“What?” I was baffled. Some people see boxing as brutal, but at the end of the day, it’s still a sport. It’s included in the Olympics, for fuck’s sake.*

*Ophelia folded her arms in front of her chest. “I love you, Isaac, but if you do this, I’ll leave you.”*

*My mind spiraled out of control. She was the first girl I’d ever loved, but she stood in front of me, giving me an ultimatum. She was forcing my hand. At the time, I was conflicted. I’d never been issued an ultimatum before, but I loved her enough, I would have done anything for her. So, with a small amount of hesitation, I put my shirt back on, grasped her hand in mine, then exited the locker room.*

*We weaved in and out of the hundreds of attendees preparing to watch the fight. The atmosphere was electrifying. A constant hum thickened my veins when we briskly strolled down a narrow hallway, but the pit in my stomach became heavier with every step I took. I was walking away from the one thing that gave me the financial security I so desperately craved.*

*Cormack’s brows lowered when I walked by him, exiting the registration room. The confusion tainting his face slipped away when he spotted Ophelia’s panicked expression. In silent support, he patted my shoulder on the way by.*

*When I took a left at the end of the corridor, I crashed into a solid chest. Every attempt I made to sidestep the person was fruitless. They kept moving back in my way, blocking my exit. With my blood black in annoyance, I lifted my slit eyes, coming face to face with Col Petretti—the most ruthless man I’d*

*encountered in my time in the underground fight circuit. He never threw in the towel, even when his fighter was close to death, and he didn't bat an eyelid when his fighters were stretchered off the mat. He was a monster, and I was desperate to get Ophelia far away from him.*

*My chances were lost when Col snarled, "If you leave now, you'll never see Ophelia again."*

*My eyes darted between his while striving to work out how the fuck he knew Ophelia's name. It was unearthed in the most horrid way.*

*"Papa." My head flung back to Ophelia, assuming I hadn't heard her right. If the gleam in her eyes was anything to go by, I had heard her right. She didn't just know Col Petretti; she was his daughter.*

*"You not only betrayed yourself, but you betrayed your family," Col spat in disgust, his angry eyes glaring at Ophelia.*

*I placed myself between him and Ophelia. I didn't care if he was her father or not, he was not allowed to threaten her in front of me. The instant I seized Ophelia's wrist to pull her behind me, the gentleman at Col's side pinched my left temple with his gun. Although pissed he brought a weapon into a fight that only needed fists, I learned early on that in my industry, I was never to show fear. Fear made you weak, and your competitors fed off it. So, instead, I strengthened my stance before glaring into the eyes of the soulless man in front of me. Our standoff only lasted seconds, although, at the time, it felt like hours.*

*"If you want to date my daughter, you must first prove your worth." Col drifted his eyes from Ophelia to me. "You'll fight my toughest competitor tonight. If you win, you'll become my fighter and have permission to date my daughter."*

*“And if I refuse?”*

*Col didn't grace me with a reply. He only smiled, a menacing, evil grin that showed the true monster he was.*

*“Be in the ring in five minutes,” a gentleman at Col's side instructed.*

*When Col and his entourage left, I shifted on my feet to face Ophelia. Tears were welling in her eyes, and she was nervously fiddling with the button on her coat jacket. “You don't have to do this, Isaac.”*

*I stepped closer to her. “Yes, I do.”*

*“No, you don't. Just walk away, and don't look back.” She scanned the arena, seeking the closest exit.*

*“Will you come with me?” She shook her head before yanking her hand out of my grasp. “Then, I'm going to fight.”*

*Before she could rebut, the brute who pointed a gun at my head stood next to her. His semi-automatic was aimed at her rib. “Let's go.” He motioned his head to the ring, indicating he wasn't leaving Ophelia's side until after the fight.*

*After curling my hand around Ophelia's clammy one, I made my way down the corridor that was filled with spectators. When we broke through the bleachers, the hum of the crowd lessened. Eyes of all ages and genders were gawking at me.*

*Once I reached the ring, a ragged gasp expelled from Ophelia's lips. She tugged out of my hold before darting to stand in front of me. “Please don't do this, Isaac. I'm begging you not to do this.”*

*“I have to. If I don't, I'll never see you again.” I stared into her glistening eyes, hating that I was disappointing her*

*but not having any choice. She had a gun pointed at her. I had to protect her. "It'll be five minutes, tops, then we walk out that door and never come back."*

*My guarantee the fight would be over in minutes didn't award her any reassurance. If anything, it made her more panicked. I discovered why when she sobbed. "He's my brother."*

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*"Throw in the towel," I pleaded, staring into the eyes of a monster. "He's your fucking son."*

*Ophelia's brother, CJ, had given a stellar performance. He was a competitive fighter, handling the match better than I had expected, but he was done. From the way his chin was dangling, I was confident he was sporting a fractured jaw. The cracking that expelled from his ribs when I punished him with a grueling left and right combination guaranteed he had numerous broken bones, and his right wrist was contorted in a weird angle. His body had endured as much hell as my mind had, but no matter how many times I pleaded with Col, he wouldn't throw in the towel.*

*There was no doubt in my mind CJ had impressive combat abilities, but my capabilities were stronger. When I peered into his bloodshot eyes, even they reflected his defeat, but Col refused to give in. The only way our fight was going to end was when CJ was stretchered out of the ring. If I were responsible for that, I'd lose Ophelia forever, but I had no choice. Col's goon was still at her side with his gun drawn. I had to pick between saving CJ or Ophelia. I was always going to choose Ophelia.*

*Every punch and kick I inflicted on CJ over the next ten minutes were met with Ophelia's panicked screams or gasps of disappointment. Halfway through the match, I realized no matter what I did, I'd lose her. If I walked away, ending the fight against Col's wishes, Ophelia would be punished. If I seriously injured her brother, she'd never look at me the same again.*

*It was a lose-lose situation.*

*As CJ staggered to the middle of the ring, I locked eyes with Ophelia. Her beautiful face was contorted with sadness, and tears were streaming down her flushed cheeks. "I'm sorry. I promise I'll make it up to you."*

*Her tearful pleas faded into the background when I strayed my eyes back to CJ. He was cradling his broken wrist with his knuckle-busted hand. When his eyes lifted to mine, a sharp niggle hit my chest. He acknowledged my regret with a brief nod, aware I didn't want to do what I was about to do.*

*After strengthening my stance, I peered into his dark brown eyes. "I'm sorry," I murmured a mere second before completing a roundhouse kick to his right temple.*

*His eyes rolled to the back of his head as he plummeted to the ground in slow motion. The sickening thud of his unconscious body hitting the mat was so loud, it was heard over the screaming cheers of the spectators.*

*"Nooo!" Ophelia yelled in a blood-curdling scream.*

*The wild thrashing of my heart lessened when Col's righthand man holstered his gun before walking away from Ophelia. Since I had done as requested, he no longer had a reason to continue with his aggressive stance.*

*After diving through the ropes, Ophelia crawled on her hands and knees to the middle of the ring, her eyes never leaving her brother. Once she reached him, she cradled his bruised head in her hands, trying in vain to wake him up. I didn't kill him, but I did knock him out cold.*

*When Ophelia refused to relinquish CJ to the medical team assessing him, I wrapped my sweat-drenched arm around her petite waist and pulled her back. She kicked and screamed, fighting against my hold.*

*"Let them help him," I whispered into her ear as I dragged her to the other side of the ring.*

*Once she stopped thrashing against me, I lowered her back onto the ground. She pivoted around to face me so fast, hot air blasted my face. Her beautiful eyes were tainted with hate, and she came out swinging. The first time she slapped me, I was so surprised, I didn't register it. The second time, its impact was felt more by my heart than my face.*

*I don't know how many slaps she inflicted before Cormack stood between us, so his body blocked her from imposing more punishment. "Let's go."*

*I shook my head. I wasn't leaving without Ophelia.*

*"She needs time, Isaac. Give her some time, then she'll understand you didn't have a choice."*

*When Cormack curled his arms around my shoulders to guide me out of the ring, I should have fought harder for Ophelia. I shouldn't have given up. I should have begged for forgiveness then and there, then she wouldn't have been in the car the night she was killed. But I was a coward who walked away. I left her crying over her brother splayed unconscious*

*on a dirty boxing ring floor, meaning her devastated, tear-stained face was the last image I had of her.*

My memories are interrupted when my phone vibrates in my hand. After unclenching my fists, I answer the call.

“Boss, we have someone in pursuit of Izzy.”



## CHAPTER 17



## ISABELLE

“*I* appreciate you doing this for me, Brandon.”

I peer at him sitting in the driver’s seat of his car. No words spill from his lips, but a fretful mask has slipped over his usually expressionless face. As his brows lower, his lips form into a harsh line. After coughing to clear his throat, he adjusts the tilt of the rearview mirror. Curious as to what has caused his sudden change in composure, I glance out the rear window of his blue BMW. Air snags in my throat when I spot a dark blue sedan tailing us.

Brandon’s foot flattens the accelerator, increasing his speed to well above the signed limit. Burning rubber lingers in the air from his tires squealing from his acceleration. He weaves and darts between a handful of vehicles in front of us, but because it’s mid-morning, the traffic isn’t as dense as it would be during peak hour, although there are still a decent number of vehicles on the highway.

Even though the blue sedan remains a good three to four cars behind us, it continues following us down the side streets and back alleys Brandon turns down in an attempt to evade them.

“How long have they been following us?”

Brandon's gaze drifts to me, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he swallows harshly. "I thought I'd lost them, but they've been with us since we left your apartment."

My mouth becomes parched. We left my apartment well over two hours ago. "Do you think it's IA?"

He shakes his head. "No."

I wait for him to pull down another isolated street before asking, "How can you be so sure?" The drumming of my heart against my ribcage is heard in my voice.

Brandon glances at me from the corner of his eyes. "They don't have government-issued plates."

Conflict makes itself known with my gut. I thought the blue sedan was Theresa or one of the agents she assigned to surveillance me. A car with a similar make and model as the one tailing us was parked on my street when I returned from a run yesterday afternoon. Not long later, Theresa arrived at my apartment. Putting two and two together, I thought I was onto a winner. Her investigative tactics have been so heavy, I wouldn't put rummaging through my garbage past her. She'll do anything she can to get a shred of evidence against me, so surveillance seems like an action she'd utilize during her investigation.

Annoyed, I lift my gaze to Brandon. "Pull over. If it isn't IA following me, I want to know who it is."

Brandon's thigh muscles spasm before he does as requested. Ignoring the tremor rattling my hands, I yank my satchel off the floor while scanning our nearly-isolated surroundings. Other than a derelict building to my right, the rest of the street is nothing but paddocks of overgrown, vermin-infested grass.

I peer at Brandon's anxious face. "You never witnessed this."

Not giving him a chance to reply, I pull my government-issued gun out of my bag then throw open my door.

"Jesus, Isabelle..."

As I move for the long grass on the road edging, I see Brandon's hands dart under the driver's seat. While using the tall weeds for cover, I brace my revolver high on my chest, then peer down the sight. Approximately thirteen heart-thrashing seconds later, the sedan that was following us pulls down the deserted street, stopping a few spaces behind Brandon's car.

A cool breeze flicks up my hair when I sprint toward the stationary vehicle with my gun aimed at the driver's side front window. My heart beats wildly against my chest, and my thighs are quaking, but my shakiness isn't from fear, it's from the adrenaline surging through my veins.

Brandon approaches me from the left. He also has his gun directed at the unknown assailant and is demanding for him to switch off his ignition. Ignoring our repeated requests to surrender, the driver reverses back two places before he attempts to complete a three-point turn. As trained, I aim my gun at the back, right tire. My pistol recoiling is almost deafening in the quietness of the crisp winter day, but it has the effect I was aiming for. The back tire blows out, and the assailant's three-point maneuver crawls to a snail's pace. Once I shoot out the back-left tire, his getaway halts altogether.

After jerking up my chin, requesting for Brandon to have my back, I cautiously approach the stationary car. The patter of my feet on the asphalt is the only sound heard in the eerily quiet morning. Once I reach a close but safe distance from the

car, I spread my feet to the width of my shoulders before adjusting my pistol, so the barrel faces the driver's side window.

“Slowly wind down your window and throw your keys onto the roadside.” My voice is surprisingly firm for how fast my heart is hammering my ribs. “Or the next time I shoot, I won't aim for a tire.”

Time stands still when the heavily tinted driver's side window slides down. A vibrant-colored, tattooed arm with keys dangling from its index finger pops out of the opening a short time later. With a swift flick of the wrist, the keys plummet onto the asphalt, mere feet from the driver's side door.

Brandon's eyes lift to mine in silent questioning. When I nod, he bridges the last few steps to the vehicle. I'm so nervous, I have to keep re-attaching the grip of my gun to ensure I don't drop it. I have no reason to be nervous, I've trained for this—not just at the academy, but at the gun range with my uncle as well, but something about this feels wrong.

I discover why when a thick familiar voice says, “Hey, Isabelle,” from inside the vehicle I'm in the process of apprehending.

When I slant my head to the side, clearing my eyes from the mid-morning sun, Hugo's mischief-filled eyes peek out from behind the steering wheel. I exhale sharply before lowering my gun, so it's no longer aimed at his chest. Brandon's stance remains solid with his feet planted at the width of his shoulders, and the barrel of his gun is aimed at the pinched skin between Hugo's brows.

Sensing Brandon's hesitance, Hugo warns, “You better point that somewhere else before someone gets hurt.” His

voice is a threatening snarl someone as cheeky as him shouldn't be able to pull off. "And it won't be me who gets injured."

When a tick hits Brandon's freshly shaven jaw, I run my hand down his arm. His muscles bunch from my unexpected touch, but it relays to him that I want him to drop his weapon without a word needing to spill from my lips. The gleam that generally clusters in his eyes returns when he holsters his gun into the waistband of his trousers.

Happy I've diffused one dangerous situation without carnage, I walk straight into another. "Why are you following me?"

Hugo stops shooting daggers at Brandon to drift his eyes to me. Although they're narrowed, I can see the remorse settled behind them. "It's my job—"

"You never got fired, did you?"

The crisp dew-filled air burns my nostrils when Hugo shrugs. "Not technically. Isaac did take a swing at me, and he said a few things he didn't mean, but he never fired me."

My fists curl into tight balls as my chin trembles. "You son of a bitch."

Hugo's lips tug higher. "It's all that gray..."

"What about the intense stare-down between you and Isaac at the record company last week?" My high tone conveys my utter confusion. They seemed as if they hated each other that day.

"Isaac prefers me to watch you from a distance. Come on, Izzy, you know what he's like when it comes to any man getting close to you."

Watching over our exchange like a spectator at tennis, Brandon joins in. “Yeah, she does know what Isaac is like. That’s why she needs to get as far away from him as possible.”

Hugo’s eyes snap to Brandon as quickly as mine. That wasn’t what I was expecting him to say. “You can’t fight fate, blondie.”

Although grateful Hugo is backing up my relationship with Isaac, I’m still angry. He said that exact thing to me last week when he was *pretending* to be my friend. “So, for the past week, the whole, *I’m your friend, Izzy*, was that part of your job description or you fighting for fate?”

This proves why I hesitated during my introduction yesterday. I should have trusted my intuition. It’s never steered me wrong before.

“I’m still your frien—”

“Don’t even go there, Hugo. You’re *not* even close to being my friend.”

Hugo has a rough exterior, but the cheeky gleam in his eyes dampens from my harsh words. “Everything I said the past week was true.” Hugo keeps his tone low, hoping Brandon won’t overhear his confession. “Whether you believe it or not, I’m your friend. Everything I’ve been doing is to help you.”

Out of the blue, a cell phone rings, startling me so much my heart almost leaps out of my chest.

As Hugo’s hand slips into his jeans pocket, he grins. “I’d say that’s for you.”

Unappreciative of his disappearing hands, Brandon redraws his gun. With his vibrating cell phone halfway out of his pocket, Hugo cocks his head to the side. “Easy there,

blondie. If you keep drawing your gun on me, I'll be forced to retaliate."

Snubbing the fact he has a gun pointed at him, Hugo hands me his phone. It's an ancient-looking cell that requires me to flip open the screen to answer it. My knees weaken when the seductive purr of Isaac sounds down the line a mere second after I squash it to my ear. "You drew your gun on one of my staff members?"

I swallow the lump in my throat before nodding. "Yes." I hate the nerves projected in my short reply, but in my defense, adrenaline is surging through my body so hard and fast, thinking rationally is above my caliber right now.

Isaac remains quiet, but I can hear his jaw ticking. I keep my gaze planted on the asphalt, not needing to look up to know Hugo and Brandon are watching me. Their heated gazes are all the indication I need to know they're spying on me.

After a short period of silence, Isaac speaks, "You had a tail—"

"I know, hence the drawing of my gun."

My attitude gets nipped in the bud when Isaac snaps, "It wasn't Hugo, Isabelle. It was a white Range Rover that's been following you the past week." Although his tone is stern, nothing can take away the concern in his rough and rugged voice. "Hugo ran a decoy to get them off your tail."

"What?" My hand not clutching my phone shoots up to cradle my neck. My pulse is racing so fast, I'm afraid I might burst an artery. I was so concerned about the dark blue sedan, I didn't check my surroundings for an additional threat. "I have a lady from the Internal Affairs Department investigating me."



“I know.” Isaac’s tone is less harsh. “But the plates on the Range Rover aren’t government-issued. I have my security team looking into whom the car belongs to, but for the time being, Isabelle, Hugo will be your shadow.”

My heart plummets into my stomach when I hear something he didn’t mean to express. “Do you think it’s Col?”

He sighs heavily. “I don’t know, but I’m not taking any chances. I promised to protect you, so that’s what I’ll do.”

Even though he can’t see me, I nod. He isn’t the cold-hearted, ruthless man everyone makes him out to be. He told me he’d keep me safe, and I trust he’ll follow through with his pledge, even if he can’t stand the sight of me.

“For once, please do as you’re told, Isabelle, and don’t let Hugo out of your sight,” Isaac requests before disconnecting our call. Although his voice was clipped, his request still came out more like a plea than a demand.

In a blur of confusion—and a slight haze of lust—I attempt to hand Hugo’s phone back to him. He shakes his head before he commences gathering his possessions from inside his car. My brain is so fried, I can’t get any words to form in my mind, let alone spill from my lips. Brandon seems just as perplexed. His handsome face is stained with uncertainty, and his eyes are flicking between Hugo and me.

The only one who doesn’t look like a stunned mullet is Hugo. Without seeking permission, he exits his vehicle then cockily strides to Brandon’s. My mouth gaps when he slides into the driver’s seat. He pushes it back as far as it can go, ensuring his large build can fit comfortably.

Once he has made himself at home, I drift my eyes to Brandon. “I’m sorry, Brandon.” I have no clue what I’m

apologizing about. It just seemed like the right thing to do, so I ran with it. “I understand if you want to turn around and go back to Ravenshoe.”

My suggestion is met with awkward silence. I never knew thirty seconds could feel like a lifetime until now.

“I know this is hard for you to understand, but Isaac is trying to protect me—”

“From what?” Brandon interjects, his voice loud. “Himself?”

Even though I’m mad at his snapped tone, I shelf my retaliation. He has a right to be angry. I just put him in a horrible predicament.

“Six weeks ago, I was threatened by Col Petretti.”

Brandon’s brows draw together as his eyes dance between mine.

“Isaac said a tail has been following me the past week.”

Nothing but panic is heard in his tone when he asks, “Does Isaac think it’s Col?”

I halfheartedly shrug. “He doesn’t know, but he doesn’t want to take any chances either. That’s why he wants Hugo to join us.”

Although his eyes show his apprehension, an uneasy smile forms on his face, silencing some of my uncertainty. He runs his sweat-slicked hands down his pants. Despite it being a crisp winter morning, the air surrounding us is stifling.

Once his hands are free of sweat, Brandon jerks his head to Hugo, who is pretending not to watch our exchange from Brandon’s car. “Do you trust him?”

I nod. Even though he was deceitful to me this week, my intuition is telling me I can trust him.

“All right. I have no reason not to trust your instincts.” A ghost of a smile cracks my lips at the actuality in Brandon’s tone. “We’re already halfway there, so we may as well continue on our journey.” After offering me the crook of his elbow, he locks his eyes with mine. “Are you ready to find out where every guy’s worst nightmare grew up?”

Cringing, I nod while silently praying weird stalker fetishes are the only hazardous things we stumble upon today.

## CHAPTER 18



## ISAAC

“*B*oss.”

“Where is she?”

“Talking to blondie outside of the car,” Hugo responds.

My jaw clenches as my top lip sets into a straight line. “Do you know where they’re going?”

“Not yet, but I’ll soon find out. I just confiscated blondie’s car for my own personal use. You’ll have to send Roger to pick up the Audi.” His chuckles fuel my annoyance instead of dousing it. “You know you could ask Izzy where she’s going. I’m sure she’d tell you.”

Snubbing his relationship advice, I sternly request, “Watch her, Hugo.”

“She won’t leave my sight.” His tone relays the truth in his statement, and it eases the uncertainty weighing down my chest. “Hey, Boss...”

I press my phone back against my ear. “Yes.”

“What I said to you the other night is true. If you don’t hurry up and pull your head out of your ass, someone will swoop in under your fucking nose and steal her.”

“Over my dead body.”

I disconnect our call, but not before his loud chuckle screeches down the line. It takes all my strength not to throw my phone onto the blue-carpeted floor beneath my feet. Just knowing Isabelle is associating with a man whose eyes light up like a Christmas tree every time she's near has blood racing through my body, but I need her to leave town as it will give my security team time to work out who's been tailing her the past week.

I'm reasonably confident it isn't Col. He rarely takes business matters outside of the family, but who else is a threat to Isabelle? The only respite I have is that I trust Hugo when he says he won't let her out of his sight. He's my most loyal employee, and the only person I trust to look after Isabelle when I can't. Under my lawyer's advice, I've kept my distance from Isabelle the past week. Our relationship must remain a secret until Theresa's investigation is found unwarranted. By not associating with her, the risk of me unwillingly implicating her in their investigation is significantly reduced. I won't lie. It's been a hard endeavor.

After housing my unregistered phone in my suit's top pocket, I pace into Isabelle's apartment. My cock twitches when I catch the tiniest whiff of her scent infused in the air. Hunter acknowledges my presence with a bob of his head before squashing his index finger to his mouth, requesting for me to remain quiet. His unusual quiet piques my interest. His scan of Isabelle's apartment must have unearthed something.

He places the all-in-one frequency scanner on the dining table before dragging a wooden chair to a hanging pot in the corner of the room. With pursed lips, he digs his hand into the pot, scattering the marble floor with potted dirt. My jaw muscle spasms when he yanks a small black device out from beneath the rubble. Soundlessly, he nudges his head to a glass

of water on Isabelle's table. When I hand it to him, he drops the bug into the glass.

"Give it two minutes, then take it out and stomp on it."

"It'll be my pleasure," I respond more to myself than Hunter. "Was there only the one device?"

After climbing down from the chair, he strolls into Isabelle's compact yet modern kitchen. The marble countertops are covered with the equipment he utilizes while searching for bugs or listening devices. "There was also a hidden camera."

My breathing stops as my eyes dart to his. "Where was it located?"

I swear the moon circles the planet three times before he finally answers, "In the living room."

My breathing returns to a normal rhythm, grateful it wasn't housed in Isabelle's bedroom. Hunter scrubs his beard before plugging the USB port from a camera with a lens not much bigger than the tip of a ballpoint pen into a larger storage device. Once he inserts that USB into his laptop, he clicks a black camera icon on the monitor. Suddenly, his pupils widen, and he freezes.

"Fuck." He pivots around, so his back now faces the laptop screen.

When my confused gaze drops to the computer screen, fury scorches through my veins so fast it burns. Inches of Isabelle's beautiful naked skin is plastered across the monitor. The first few images aren't too concerning because I'm covering most of her body, but as our vigorous morning activities progress, they grow more disturbing. Every inch of

her delicate skin I devoured the morning I was arrested is on display.

I can still recall the smell of honey on her lips from the sweetened coffee she was drinking when she straddled my lap to nibble on my ear. Never able to restrain myself when it comes to her, I ended an important call to take her for the second time that morning on the red shag rug in her living room. The photos Hunter just downloaded gives a play-by-play recount of the activities we undertook that morning.

After yanking the USB out of Hunter's laptop, I store it in the breast pocket of my jacket. "Who has access to these images?"

Hunter shrugs. "This kind of device requires them to be downloaded from the apparatus. I'm hoping since the pictures weren't wiped, it means they weren't downloaded yet."

"Who do you think it is, Col or IA?"

He winces. "It's hard to say. Whoever it is, they're smart. They placed the camera high enough it gave them a bird's-eye view of the apartment." His eyes glance down to the original device housing the microscopic USB. "But this equipment is basic. You can pick it up at any spy shop." He grabs a second drive from his toolbox on his right. "This one, on the other hand, is more complicated. This is a government-issued device."

I snatch the plastic bag out of his hand. It looks like a small storage device you'd use in a digital camera. "Do they have to download this device as well?"

"No." Hunter shakes his head. "But if it were stored in Izzy's cell, every call or message she made would have been transcribed and sent to the owner's computer mainframe."



My heart beats at an unnatural rhythm. “What about private conversations while the phone is in the area?”

Hunter nods. “Any conversations, music, radio, etc. would have been transcribed.”

*Fuck!* So, Isabelle was telling the truth. She wasn’t the one who told the Bureau about my call that morning.

I stop reprimanding myself when Hunter discloses, “The good news is that device has a serial number attached to it.”

“Have you traced it?”

He smiles a slick grin. “It’s running through my system now. Since I had to enter a few backdoors, it’ll take a few hours to finalize.”

“Be sure to inform me the instant you discover anything.” My gaze shifts back to his laptop. “Can you adjust the perimeter of my google alert to include Isabelle? If those photos surface on the net—”

“I’ll set it up. If they surface, they’ll be immediately removed. I’ll also corrupt their system with a few nasty viruses in return.” His voice rattles with nerves when he suggests, “If you give me the USB from the camera, I can run it through a program to see when it was last accessed.”

My nostrils flare as a growl rumbles in my chest.

“It’s the only way we’ll know if anyone else has viewed those images.” He seeks my gaze. “I won’t need to open the files to run the search, but I can’t execute the program if I don’t have the USB.”

“Can you run it on any computer?”

He nods.

“Good. Then meet me at my office tonight. You can run it through my system there.”

He glares at me. “If you don’t trust me, Isaac, what the fuck am I doing working for you?”

“This isn’t about trust, Hunter. It’s about Isabelle and protecting her from having her naked body plastered around the country because someone has a vendetta against me that they’re unleashing on her. You said my security servers are the best in the country, so it’s the only system I trust to ensure these images remain private.”

Hunter scrubs his hand across his hairy chin. “It’s the best system... because I designed it. I’ll drop by your office tonight.”

The knot in my stomach relinquishes its firm hold. It doesn’t last long. “There’s something else...”

Hunter is interrupted by my ringing phone. After lifting my index finger, I pull it out of my pocket. The wild beating of my heart dampens when I discover the vibration is coming from my standard cell phone, not my emergency one.

My eyes float up from my phone to Hunter. “It’s my brother, can this wait a minute?”

Hunter nods. “Yeah, I’ll make it look like we’ve never been here before heading out.”

An appreciative smirk etches onto my mouth. “Thanks. I’ll meet you at my office tonight.” As I stride to the entryway of Isabelle’s apartment, I push my phone to my ear. “Nicholas, calm down, Nick... What? I’ll be right there.”

## CHAPTER 19



## ISABELLE

*H*ugo's eyes dart to me, his scrunched-up face revealing his confusion. My lips curve into an uneasy grin before my gaze flicks to Brandon. He's sitting in the back seat of his car, his brows pulling together more the longer he peers outside. If I had to describe Megan's family home with one word, it would be 'ramshackle.'

Even in the rapidly setting sun, the white two story house doesn't look like it's seen a coat of paint in centuries, let alone years. Numerous tiles are missing from the stained brown roof, and three out of the four windows facing the road have had their holes repaired with duct tape. Yellow-tipped, overgrown grass stands as tall as the first story of the worn, rundown house, and weeds have confiscated any garden beds. In the far right-hand corner of the property, there's a red barn that's at least double the size of the house, and a big, old rusted truck is parked at the front of it.

"Are you sure this is the address you're looking for?" Hugo questions after pulling into the long dirt driveway.

After double-checking the number hand-painted on a microwave at the front of the property with the records I've gathered on Megan the past week, I nod. Hugo's features harden before he continues driving down the dirt driveway.

The only sound heard in the interior of the car is my heart madly beating against my chest. I'm not concerned about my safety. It just seems as if we're walking straight into the set of a horror movie.

Hugo is only driving five miles per hour, but the tires are kicking up the dry dirt from the ground, leaving a cloud of dust trailing behind us. Ignoring the particles of dust scratching my eyes, I absorb the properties surrounding us. Other than another white barn on the horizon, there are no houses within eyesight.

"Whose house is this?" Hugo's tone is flat and apprehensive.

My gaze drifts to Brandon. His eyes meet and lock with mine before he shrugs. After returning my focus to Hugo, I answer, "Megan Shroud."

Air puffs out of his nostrils as his lips etch into a thin line. Apparently, he's heard of Megan before. When he parks in front of a set of rickety steps, I swing open the passenger door. I don't even get one foot out of the car when Hugo's arm splay across my chest to pin me into my seat. "Let us check it out first." He waves his spare hand between Brandon and himself.

"I'm a federal agent, Hugo. I'm *not* a child."

"Yeah, and that's Freddy-fucking-Kruger's house." His voice is riddled with both nerves and cheekiness. "If Isaac finds out I let you go in there without me first scoping the premises, I won't be on his Christmas card list anymore. He gives very generous bonus checks in his Christmas cards."

Even in the tense circumstances, I can't help the smile that tugs my lips high. His playfulness suffocated the despair

ridding the air of oxygen, but there's no way in hell I'm staying out here by myself. Even from the outside, this place gives me the creeps.

After gathering my pistol from my satchel, I shadow Hugo and Brandon onto the leaf-covered veranda. The old wood creaking under my feet gives away my silent follow.

“Stay behind me.”

Hugo's tone conveys he's not requesting, he's telling. Nodding, I position myself behind his left shoulder. I hate that he's babying me, but now is not the time to argue protocol. Other than wind whistling between the cracks in the floorboards, no sounds come out of the house. The frayed curtains on the grime-covered windows are open, and the paint-peeled door is hanging by the one hinge still attached to the doorframe.

I stop drinking in the rundown home when Hugo pulls out a gun from the back of his jeans. I didn't know he carried a weapon. He takes on an active stance before straying his eyes to Brandon. With a nod, he instructs Brandon to knock. When Brandon does as requested, a loud creak screeches through the air. His tap was so firm, the door swung open. A foul stench penetrates my nostrils. It's the smell of trash, rotten food, and something else that makes my stomach churn.

“I'm an FBI field agent, is anyone home?”

Hugo's eyes snap to Brandon, making me realize I failed to mention that Brandon is also an agent. *Oops!* I was under the assumption he was aware of that fact.

When the tenant fails to respond to Brandon's question, he turns to face me. “Did you hear that?”

I eye him curiously. I didn't hear anything.

“I think I heard someone yelling for help.”

Hugo clicks onto Brandon’s ruse quicker than me. “Yeah, I heard it, too. We should probably check on them.”

Since we *hear* pleas for help, we make our way into the house. The aroma of rotting food scraps amplifies the further we walk in. The house is as desolate on the inside as it is outside. A square, box television sits on an old milk crate in one corner. It has a recliner sitting in front of it. The remaining chairs from the setting are squashed under the stairwell. They’re covered in the plastic they were originally delivered in. From the material and design, I’d say they were purchased quite a few years ago.

Scary shadows dance around the room since a hill hides the sun. When I flick on a dirty light switch at my side, the tube light on the ceiling flickers a handful of times before illuminating the room with an unnatural yellow light.

Hugo silently signals for Brandon to clear the lower level of the property before gesturing for me to follow him to the stairs. As Brandon paces toward the kitchen with corkwood floors covered with trash and rotten food scraps, we head to the stairwell. Every step we take is met with a loud creak of the frail wood, but its faint squeals have nothing on the one I do when Hugo’s boot falls through one of the steps.

I slap my hand over my mouth, my eyes darting up to the landing to make sure my squeal didn’t gain any unwanted attention.

Confident we’re alone, I return my eyes to Hugo. “Are you okay?”

Nodding, he pulls his foot out of the hole, sending splinters of wood onto the plastic-covered sofa below. We continue with

our mission, my heart thrashing more with every step we take. The smell of unwashed laundry and another scent I can't work out becomes more apparent when we finalize the last few steps.

“You clear the left, I'll clear the right.”

Ignoring Hugo's furious glare, I pace to the first door on my right. I'm not a baby, so I refuse to be treated like one. My heart freezes when sloshing filters through my ears a few seconds later. Peering down, I noticed the frayed red and black hall runner is saturated with water.

Well, I'm hoping it's water.

With my heart in my throat, my gaze floats across to the door adjacent to me. A clear liquid is seeping out from beneath it. Through trembling hands, I twist the white porcelain knob before pushing open the warped wood. I keep my gun up high as I absorb the basic yet spotlessly clean bathroom. The cold-water tap on the peach vanity sink is turned on full blast, toppling water over the edge like a rapid-flowing waterfall.

“Hello?”

When no one returns my greeting, I pace deeper into the room. While turning off the tap, I scan the space. The bathroom is outdated, but compared to downstairs, every surface is sparkling clean.

Once I've checked behind the shower curtain, and in the bathtub, I head back to the hallway in preparation to check the next room at the end of the corridor. My heart leaps into my chest when Hugo unexpectedly steps in front of me. I snap my mouth shut, suffocating the urge to scream.

After sucking in a shaky breath, I flutter my eyes back open.



“Sorry,” Hugo mutters, genuinely remorseful that he scared me. “There’s nothing down there but a bedroom with a double bed. The closets and drawers are full of clothes, but the bed hasn’t been slept in recently.”

“Okay.” I shift my gaze to the last door in the corridor. “That just leaves one room.”

Brandon climbs the stairs two at a time, narrowly missing the hole Hugo’s boot left, his head shaking when he spots my silent question. “Excluding a dozen rats, there’s nothing down there but rubbish.” His face scrunches up when he mentions the vermin.

In sync, we turn our heads to the one room that has yet to be searched. A bead of sweat rolls down my back as I follow Brandon and Hugo to the end of the hall. Hugo wraps his hand around the doorknob before cranking his head back to Brandon and me.

“One... two... three.”

On three, Hugo flings open the door for Brandon and me to rush in with our guns drawn. My eyes go crazy, rapidly absorbing every confronting detail while also making sure the room is secure. When my search comes up empty for potential threats, I lower my gun before shifting my attention to Brandon.

He’s pivoting in a circle, taking in the entire room. “Holy shit.”

His response is more reserved than Hugo’s. He bites out a string of curse words as he takes in wall after wall of photos, magazine cut-outs, CD covers, and posters of Isaac’s brother, Nick. Some images appear to be taken by paparazzi, but at least half of them aren’t professional pictures. There are

hundreds of long-range shots of Nick in various poses, but the ones that make my stomach churn are the up close and personal ones.

A handful are of Nick sleeping, but most are of him in various stages of sexual activities with a young lady with strawberry blonde hair. I thought the bathroom in Megan's hotel room was bad. This room is ten times worse.

My stomach tenses when I reach a desk in the corner of the room. "Is this Jenni, Nick's fiancée?" I lift one of the many photos with her eyes gouged out and blood trailing down her legs.

After drawing in a long, shaky breath, Hugo nods.

"Does Isaac have someone watching them?"

"He has Peters watching Nick from a distance, but I don't know about Jenni. His security team determined the threat pertained more to Nick than his fiancée."

A dull ache gnaws in my chest, my intuition warning me that something isn't right. "You need to get protection for Jenni." I shift on my feet to face Brandon. "What's the closest division associated with this district?"

Hugo exhales raggedly. "Don't call the authorities until Isaac's security team gets a look at this first. If you bring in the feds, this will get shut down quicker than Hunter turning down an offer to dance."

I hate what he's saying, but it's true. With Isaac being investigated by the Bureau, they won't let him anywhere near the scene, much less share confidential information with him. But can I do this? Can I go against everything I've been taught for a man I've only known for months?

With my stomach too twisted up in knots to think straight, I seek Brandon's opinion. He takes a few moments to deliberate on my soundless question before mumbling, "It's up to you, Izzy. I'll go along with whatever you decide."

A tense stretch of silence crosses between us. The only audible noise is my big pants of breath. I'm terrified of what Isaac's reaction will be, but nothing he's done the entire time I've been a part of the team investigating him has been classified as illegal, so I can trust him. I'm just worried this will force him to do something unlawful. He loves his brother, and he'd do anything to protect him—*anything at all*—but if I keep this from him, and something happens to Nick or his family, I'll lose Isaac forever. That's something I'll never handle.

With that in mind, I remove a layer of sweat beaded on my neck before digging out the cell phone Hugo gave me earlier. When I thrust it to him, the tension straining his face slackens. The cuff of Brandon's shirt tickles my wrist when he moves to stand next to me, but I can't take my eyes off Hugo. He dials a number he knows by heart before lifting the burner phone to his ear. He's making a call I know will break the heart of the man I love. Nothing is more important than this.

Just as faint ringing stops sounding through my ears, Hugo's eyes rocket to mine. "She's fine. She's right in front of me."

My heart swells, pleased Isaac still cares enough about me to be concerned about my welfare. My happiness dampens when Hugo says, "You need to send the security team to Parkerville. Tonight. This isn't about Izzy. It's Nick."

## CHAPTER 20



## ISABELLE

“*F*eel free to tell me to buzz off, but what’s a beautiful girl like you doing in a shithole like this?”

When I turn toward the voice, I’m met with the grinning face of a ruggedly handsome man. His jawline is covered with a thick, full beard. His dirty blond hair is pulled back into a messy man bun. His red and black checked plaid shirt rolled up at the sleeves showcases his vast collection of tattoos, and a pair of well-fitted jeans and black boots finalizes his outfit.

“That was the worst pick-up line I’ve ever heard.”

He smiles so broadly, wrinkles crinkle his murky blue eyes. “I highly doubt that, sweetheart.”

When he waves his hand at the stool Brandon just vacated, I say, “Feel free, but just a warning, I’m not the greatest company tonight.”

His chuckle vibrates my toes. “That’s okay, I’m never good company, so I’m sure I can handle your moodiness for a night.”

His witty comment awards him my first genuine smile of the night. It doesn’t linger for long. Just one sip of my wine the bartender just replenished has my happiness stepping back

to when I was born. My taste buds were spoiled the past month with expensive bottles of wine I've never heard of, so they're protesting about the harsh bitterness that comes with a three-dollar glass of house wine.

After ordering a drink, my new companion drags his eyes down my body. I don't feel threatened by his enthusiastic review. He doesn't give out threatening vibes.

"Let me guess what brings you to this fine establishment this evening." He adds a fake amount of poshness to his deep timbre. "Relationship problems?"

"All that from a glance of my body?"

He scrubs at his beard to hide his smile. "Nah. It's the fact every guy in this place is gawking at you, but not one has been brave enough to talk to you."

He pulls a packet of cigarettes out of his jeans pocket, yanks out a cigarette, then twists the packet my way. When I shake my head, he dumps the packet onto the counter between us before placing the unlit cigarette between his plump lips.

"The leave-me-the-fuck-alone vibes are bouncing off you, sweetheart. It's scaring all the guys away, so if you're out here prowling for a man to heat your sheets, you might want to shut down those vibes."

A rowdy giggle escapes my lips before I can stop it. Hugo, Brandon, and I chose this pub as we'd be less likely to get hassled by locals, wondering why strangers have suddenly arrived in their derelict town. We don't want any unwanted attention while waiting for Isaac's security team to arrive. I'm only alone because Brandon left a few minutes ago as he wanted to reach out to some contacts he has in the FBI in the hope of unearthing Megan's current location, and Hugo

needed to use the bathroom. He was apprehensive about leaving me alone, but since I refused to follow him into the men's restroom, he had no choice.

Besides, I don't feel in any danger. When I was younger, I went with my Uncle Tobias to old run-down pubs all the time. It's amazing the wonderful people you come across in the sleaziest looking places. Usually, they're the ones with the biggest hearts as they've been through the toughest struggles. I probably also feel safe as I have my pistol in my bag.

After checking his phone in the top pocket of his flannel shirt, my mystery companion props his elbows onto the countertop before inclining close to my side. "Unless you want a drove of men running toward you, you probably shouldn't giggle."

When I eye him curiously, his float over the poorly-lit space. When I follow the direction of his gaze, I do notice several pairs of male eyes watching me.

"Thanks for the warning. I'll keep my mouth shut." I return my eyes to his. "I'm not on the prowl tonight." *Or any night.*

"That's my cue to leave." He stands and swiftly walks away, getting halfway to the door before pivoting back around. I watch him with a hint of amusement, tugging my lips when he strides back to slip back onto his stool. "Ah, stuff it. I only have another five minutes before I'm due back at work, so I may as well spend it talking to a beautiful lady."

I grin at his cheeky demeanor as he once again pulls his cell phone out of his top pocket to peer down at the screen. Noticing he still hasn't lit the cigarette dangling from his mouth, I question, "Do you need a light?"

I stop grabbing for the box of matches on the sticky bar top when he replies, “No, thanks.” He pulls the cigarette out of his mouth. “I gave up smoking weeks ago.” He stabs out the unlit cigarette into an ashtray. “Old habits die hard.”

After downing the cloudy brown liquid in the shot glass the bartender just set down in front of him, he signals for another before tilting my way. “So, what caused all this worry to your pretty face?”

“No offense, but you don’t look like a therapist.”

He flashes me a cheeky wink. “Don’t judge a book by its cover, sweetheart. Under this god-gifted sexiness is a real heart of gold.”

Another broad smile stretches across my face. I have to give it to the stranger. He oozes cockiness, and he has a real bad-boy sentiment, except he’s one hundred percent man. But even more appealing than his rugged good looks is his cheeky personality.

When he shifts his head to the side, waiting for me to answer, I shrug. I don’t want to be rude, I just don’t know how to answer him without bringing Isaac into the equation. When my attention returns to my glass of wine, in the corner of my eye, I witness him once again checking the screen of his phone. He must be waiting for an important call. Otherwise, why would he constantly check his phone?

“Are you waiting for a call?”

He grins again. It’s a little shyer this time around. “Nah. It’s another bad habit of mine.”

“There could be worst habits you could have.”

“True.” This smile is genuine. “Such as?”



I roll my eyes, not falling for his tricks. He laughs before nudging his head to my nearly empty glass of wine. “This round is on me, Izzy.”

My eyes snap to his as panic surges through me. *How does he know my name? I never told him my name.*

After pushing off the barstool, I scamper backward. The stranger’s shoulders stiffen as he scrubs his hand down his face. “I’m not here to hurt you, Izzy.” He stares straight at me, stupidly believing his honest eyes will quell the panic radiating out of me. “My name is Hunter. I’m Isaac’s head of security.”

I huff in disbelief. Other than when Hugo was faking being my friend, I never saw him out of a suit. Nothing against this man, but he doesn’t seem the type to wear a suit. Lumberjack, yes. Head of security for the most fascinating man I’ve ever met—unlikely!

Sensing my silent grilling, his brow arches high into his hairline. “Hey, don’t judge a book by its cover, remember?”

As he assures me he’s worthy of my time, I examine the space, seeking any exits that won’t require me to walk past the man claiming to be the head of Isaac’s security. My heart beats wildly. Because soot and dust cover the windows, I can’t make out anything but shadows milling in the moonlit night. For all I know, I could be walking straight into a trap by leaving, but I don’t have much choice.

Anxiety plays havoc with my vocal cords when I say, “I’m carrying a weapon. If you attempt to stop me from leaving, I’ll shoot you.”

The bearded man referring to himself as Hunter smiles while standing. Although I’m warning him to stay away, he

takes a step closer to me. Meaning I have no choice. I must protect myself.

In less than a heartbeat, I snag my satchel off the counter, shove my palm against the bridge of his nose, then bolt for the exit door as quickly as my quivering legs will take me. His groans sound through my ears as I break through the barn-style wooden door. The coolness of the night gives calming relief to my overheated flushed cheeks, but nothing will ease the panic curling around my throat.

As my eyes dart up and down the deserted street, endeavoring to find a secure location to hide, I'm grabbed from behind. Their hold is so powerful, my feet lift from the ground at the same time my satchel skids across the concrete path. When my frightened screams are muffled by a hand, I kick out my legs wildly, ensuring the heels on my boots connect with my attacker's shins. I dig my French-tipped nails into his exposed arms before biting at his hand, my furious battle only simmering when the rugged voice of Hugo whispers into my ear. "It's me, Izzy. It's okay. Don't scream."

My lungs hunt for air when he removes his hand from my mouth, but their campaign is cut short when my eyes lock in on the bearded stranger briskly pacing toward us. Blood is dribbling from his right nostril, and his eyes are narrowed into tiny slits.

Sensing my panic, Hugo pivots around while discreetly removing his gun from the back of his jeans. The worry straining his face eases when he spots the bearded stranger. He returns his gun to the waist of his jeans before greeting him with a pat on his back. "Hey, Hunter, what happened to your nose?"

Hunter's heavily shadowed eyes shift to me. Even though he's angry, his dark eyes still have a sparkle of amusement in them. "I had the pleasure of meeting Izzy without a formal introduction."

Cringing, I mumble, "Sorry."

Hugo muffles his chuckle with a cough when Hunter glares at him.

Certain he has the situation under control, Hunter snatches my satchel off the concrete sidewalk and rummages through it.

"Hey!"

Hunter's eyes snap to mine, his vehement gaze cutting through me like a knife. I'm tempted to hit him for a second time when he yanks my sleek black iPhone out of my bag before smashing it onto the ground. It shatters on impact, but that's not good enough for Hunter. He has to get his boot in on the action as well. He stomps on it three times, rendering it as useless as he'll be once I rearrange his nose for the second time.

Hugo seizes my elbow, halting my angry strides. It's for the best. If he hadn't stopped me, I would have never witnessed Hunter removing a small flat device from my phone. It looks very much like a bug. After assessing it under a street light, he drops the offending product into a half-empty glass of beer discarded on a table outside the pub.

"How did you know she had a listening device in her phone?"

Hunter shifts on his feet to face Hugo. "The scanner in my pocket was picking up a signal."

*So that's why he was obsessed with checking his phone.*

“It looks similar to the one I removed from Izzy’s phone yesterday morning.”

My eyes snap to Hugo. “You what?”

He coughs to clear his throat. “You had a bug in your cell. We don’t know how long it’s been there, but we believe it may have been how the FBI discovered Isaac’s private residence.”

“We?” Nothing can iron out the hope in my tone.

Air whizzes out Hugo’s nose. “Yes, *we*. Isaac was the one who suggested I scan your apartment for bugs. Unfortunately, blondie didn’t distract you long enough for me to do a thorough search.”

My heart rate quickens. Does that mean Isaac believes I didn’t divulge any of his private life to the FBI? I wonder why his opinion on the matter altered so quickly?

My deliberations stop when Hunter digs his fingers into the glass of beer to remove the bug. He places it into a plastic bag he pulled out of his jeans pocket. Once he has the device secured in the top pocket of his plaid shirt, he moves to stand in front of me. “Who’s been in your apartment since yesterday morning?”

Before my brain can sort through any facts, Hugo answers on my behalf. “Only one person.” His tone is low and dangerous. “Blondie.”

He strides down the street, his steps quick and precise. After snatching my satchel out of Hunter’s grasp, I take off after him. “Hugo, wait!”

Because his strides are so long, I have to sprint to catch up with him. I call his name several times, but he ignores every request I make for him to calm down. My eyes dart back to

Hunter to seek his assistance. He's following us but doesn't offer up any support.

I gasp when Hugo draws his gun from the back of his jeans before kicking open Brandon's hotel room door. As he enters the room, he aims his gun to Brandon, who is sitting on a hideous green floral bedspread, talking on his cell phone.

Brandon swallows bleakly when he notices the fury clouded in Hugo's eyes. "I-I-I'll call you back," he stammers into the phone before disconnecting his call.

When I place myself between Hugo and Brandon, Hugo adjusts his gun so it no longer faces me, although it could still inflict harm to Brandon. "I trust Brandon; he wouldn't do this." I stare into his barren eyes, my voice quaking. "He's my friend. He's been helping me."

I don't turn my head, but I see Brandon rising from the bed in Hugo's dilated eyes. "What's going on?"

"Why don't you tell us, *blondie*?" Hugo spits out Brandon's nickname like it's trash.

After giving him my best 'warning' look, I spin around to face Brandon. His eyes flick between Hugo and me for several heart-thrashing seconds before he shifts them to Hunter, who is leaning in the doorjamb of his hotel room.

His focus returns to me when I divulge, "They found a listening device in my cell phone."

He nods a mere second before reality dawns on his face. "I didn't plant the bug. It wasn't me. Izzy, you know me. I've been helping you—"

"You're the only one who's been with Izzy since I removed the last bug yesterday morning."

Hugo's angry sneer reverberates through me so well, it clears some of the bewilderment in my head. "No, he wasn't." I crank my neck back to face Hugo, my legs shaking. "Theresa Veneto and a male agent came to my apartment yesterday afternoon. She showed me photos of Col Petretti's right-hand man in a hospital bed. She said he was beaten the weekend Isaac and I went to club 57. She was trying to coerce me into unwillingly incriminating Isaac."

Hunter's deep snicker sounds through the room. "That's bullshit. For one, if Isaac had tracked him down that night, he wouldn't have left breathing. And two, Col would never file a police report on the assault, let alone have an FBI agent consider it. He'd have swept it under the rug like he always does."

Hunter squeezes Hugo's shoulder, wordlessly suggesting he stand down. After working his jaw side to side, Hugo does precisely that.

I eye Hunter in suspicion when he moves to stand in front of a quiet and white-faced Brandon. With the veins in his neck pumping, he asks, "Who are you?"

"Brandon James."

When Brandon offers him his hand to shake, Hunter snubs his offer.

"What's your real name?" He crosses his arms in front of his chest. "Because I did a search on a Brandon James after your *date* with Izzy a couple of months ago, nothing came up."

"Just like your search on Izzy failed to yield any real results?"

I'm not the only one shocked by Brandon's brash statement. Hunter and Hugo are also taken aback.

“I buried Izzy’s private life as much as I did mine.” Brandon’s eyes stray to mine. They’re clouded with intrigue and anxiety. “I knew they’d be looking.”

He doesn’t need to say any more. His truthful eyes communicate the entire story. He knows my secret. He knows who my dad is.

“Isaac already knows—”

“I’m not talking about Isaac,” Brandon interrupts, stepping closer. “I’m talking about the Bureau.” After smiling to ease the turmoil swirling in my stomach, he strolls to the other side of the room to secure some papers from a black briefcase. “You’re not the only one who’s been doing some research the past few days.”

When he hands me a printed document, my eyes drop to scan it. The more I read, the closer my brows become. “The Bureau paid for me to fly business class?”

Brandon shakes his head. “Not the Bureau, Izzy. Alex signed off on it.”

“That son of a bitch,” I growl, baring teeth. “Why would he do that?”

When Brandon shrugs, I clench my fists into a tight ball, fighting with all my might not to curse the quiet night air. I shouldn’t be surprised by Brandon’s admission. Alex was adamant from my very first day that I was only brought in as a piece of eye candy for Isaac. I just had no clue how vigorous his attempts were to force me to go undercover until now.

## CHAPTER 21





## ISABELLE

*M*y bleary eyes float over the black shadows dancing on a water-stained ceiling. I've just awoken from another sexually graphic yet unsatisfying dream. My imagination has always been wondrous, but knowing firsthand how impressive Isaac's sexual prowess is has my dreams being the most vivid they've ever been. My body must be punishing me for betraying the man who sparks my every sense with the simplest touch of his fingertip because every time I'm on the cusp of a climax, I wake up.

Although they're only dreams, I'm beyond frustrated. Before I met Isaac, I could go months without sexual stimulation. Now, I can't even last a few measly days. My dreams are so convincing, I swear I can smell Isaac's seductive scent filtering through my nostrils right now. It's so strong, it's overtaking the horrid smell of wet carpet plaguing the badly outdated motel room I'm sleeping in.

After Brandon's revelations about Alex, I went to lie down in an attempt to unjumble some of the confusion clustered in my head. Hugo would only leave me alone on the agreement that the interconnecting door between our rooms was to remain open, and I place my loaded gun on the bedside table. I

didn't expect to fall asleep, but with my sleep lagging the past month, exhaustion must have overtaken me.

I pant, hoping to calm down the erratic beat of my heart. The pulse in my neck intensifies as warm dampness pools between my legs. My body is craving Isaac's touch so much, it's convinced it can sense his closeness.

*Stupid, traitorous body.*

When I turn my eyes to the bedside table to see what ungodly time it is, my heart leaps out of my chest. There's a dark shadow standing near the window of my room. After shooting my hand up to stifle my terrified scream, I scamper up the mattress, my movements so fast, the sheets bunch under my bare legs. While flattening my back on the headboard, my hand creeps to the rickety bedside table, trying in vain to locate my handgun I'd placed there earlier.

My pulse skyrockets when my search comes up empty.

"Looking for this?"

My eyes snap shut as an inappropriate swear word seeps from my mouth. "Jesus, Isaac, you scared the shit out of me."

Every nerve in my body prickles to attention, but now, it's more associated with excitement than fear.

After taking a moment to discharge the panic scorching my body, I flick on the bedside table lamp. Isaac is standing next to the motel window. His impressive body is encased in midnight black running pants, a black sweater, dark sneakers, and a baseball cap is pulled down low, concealing his entrancing eyes.

When he heads my way, my heart beats out a funky tune. Even dressed down, his stature demands my attention. While

peering at me from beneath his cap, he places my unclipped gun and removed magazine onto the bedside table.

“Hugo made me put it there.”

“I know,” he interrupts as his lips curve into a mouthwatering smirk. “He’s trying to protect you, Isabelle. You need to let him do the job he’s paid to do.”

“He drew his gun on my friend, Isaac. That’s beyond his job description.”

“And your *friend* drew his gun on him,” Isaac snaps back. “Doesn’t that now make them even?”

Before I can verbalize a response, my heart leaps into my chest for the second time in under a minute. Hugo barrels into the room with his gun drawn in front of his chest, his pistol only lowering when his eyes collide with Isaac’s halfway across the room.

“I guess it’s lucky it was me sneaking around Isabelle’s room and not Col.”

Hugo’s throat works hard to swallow. “Sorry, boss. I’ll get Hunter.” When my eyes narrow into thin slits, he adds on, “and blondie.”

Because of the low angle of Isaac’s cap, I can’t see his entrancing eyes, but I do feel the heat of his gaze running over my barely-covered body. Wanting to get comfortable, I was resting in my long-sleeve shirt and a pair of panties. My inner vixen cheers when his gaze loiters on my exposed thighs longer than what could be categorized as an acceptable glance.

No longer able to reel in my overwhelming desire to touch him, I crawl across the bed on my hands and knees. Air puffs from Isaac’s lips when I raise onto my knees in front of him. I peer into his shadowed eyes that are murkier today than last

week. “I’m sorry for everything that happened, but I swear to you, I never divulged anything about your personal life to the Bureau. Even if you never want to see me again, I need to know you believe me.”

Several heart-clenching seconds of silence pass between us. Even with unease being the forefront of our gathering, intimacy is also paramount. It zaps in the air, heating my skin and the area between my legs.

“I know you lied to me, Isabelle.”

Moisture burns my eyes as a sob tears at my throat.

“Let me finish,” he requests when he notices my sullen expression. “I know you lied when you said you led the FBI to my private residence.” Because of our closeness, my breaths flutter his mouth. “I just don’t understand why you did it.”

I fist his jacket, tethering him closer to me while also soundlessly signaling that I’m not letting him go without a fight this time around. “That night, you fired Hugo even though he didn’t do anything wrong. With everything that was happening, you needed him by your side. That’s why I lied.”

Isaac remains quiet, his breathing the only audible noise over the rapid beat of my heart. I stare at him, wishing he’d take his cap off so I could see his eyes. I’ve missed them so much the past week.

Sensing my private bidding, he removes his cap to rake his fingers through his luxurious hair that’s a little overdue for a trim. My fingers itch, dying to join the party. Before they can, he puts his hat back on. When I nibble on my lower lip, battling not to yank his hat back off, Isaac saves it from my menacing teeth.

My breaths become delayed when his thumb drags over my parched mouth, lingering on the cupid's bow on my top lip longer than the rest. The air is stifling with an equal amount of lust and testosterone. When my tongue darts out to moisten my dry lips, I accidentally lick Isaac's thumb. Anticipation clusters in my pussy when he sucks in a sharp breath from my frisky tease. Acting on the prompts of my body, I sway nearer to him, craving his closeness. I've missed his touch so much the last two weeks, I'm willing to put everything on the line to feel it again.

A rock settles in my stomach when he grumbles, "No, Isabelle." His intense glare emerging from underneath his cap makes my pussy throb. My horniness doubles when he mutters, "You still lied to me. Not just Friday night, but for the past month, so if I were to touch you right now, I'd spend more time punishing you than pleasing you."

My pulse thrums in anticipation as warmth slicks between my legs. "I'll take any punishment you want to give if it means it will end with you touching me."

I press my thighs together when the most deliciously wicked smile etches onto his sinful mouth, revealing he heard my mumbled comment. I can barely control my breaths when his eyes snap shut so he can inhale a huge whiff of air through his nostrils. "Fuck, you smell good." His growl wets my panties. "I've missed that scent."

My smile is so broad, my cheekbones hurt from their quick incline. When he tilts toward my heaving chest, desire scorches through me. I'm unable to move as the lips I can't stop fantasizing about inch toward mine. Just as his perfectly carved mouth brushes my hungry lips, Hugo re-enters my room with Brandon and Hunter on his tail. Sensing that we

have company, Isaac yanks back, leaving nothing but the smell of his expensive cologne in his wake. I try to conceal my frustration, but the smallest groan still escapes from my lips. I'm beyond frustrated.

“Are we interrupting?” Hugo asks, fully aware he is.

When my eyes snap to him, he grins a full-toothed smile before he continues sauntering into the room. They're halfway to my springless mattress when all three men stop dead in their tracks. Hugo's brows stitch together, Brandon swallows bleakly, and Hunter's beard-covered mouth carves into an illustrious smirk. My eyes bounce between them, striving to work out why they look so petrified.

I discover the cause of their fret when I follow the direction of their gazes. Isaac is staring at them. His infuriating glare is so downright dangerous, it makes my pussy throb.

“We'll meet you in there.” Hugo hooks his thumb to the room they just emerged from before scurrying away even quicker than they arrived.

The hairs on my neck prickle when Isaac presses his lips to my ear. “When you're *adequately* dressed, meet us next door.”

I smile, suddenly aware of the men's wish to flee. Isaac is even more ruthless when he's bombarded with jealousy. My shirt covers my backside, but only just.

When Isaac arches a brow waiting for me to respond, I nod. He appraises my face in devoted, pussy-wetting detail before doing one last brush of my lips with his thumb. “We'll discuss this more once we're alone.”

After pressing his lips to the edge of my mouth, he strides into the room next to mine, not once glancing back my way.

## CHAPTER 22



## ISAAC

Three sets of eyes track my every move as I walk across the room. This isn't uncommon. When I was younger, the attention used to bother me. I couldn't fathom why I always gained watchful stares. Now, it's customary. Wherever I go, I acquire the devotion of others. Some are unwanted, but most are a necessary requirement in my industry. The more attention I receive, the more my business ventures succeed.

After removing my cap and jacket, I place them on the dilapidated two-seater table at the side of the room. This motel hasn't been remodeled in the past three decades, but it was the only motel in Parkerville, so Hugo had no choice but to stay here with Isabelle.

It took me so long to arrive as I had to fly in the wrong direction to elude the surveillance team that's been shadowing me since my arrest. As far as the Bureau is aware, Isaac Holt is currently in deep negotiations in a boardroom in the heart of New York City. No one paid any attention to the busboy leaving the restaurant after his evening shift, not even when he jumped into a car that cost more than ten times his annual salary.



“Where are you on tracking the source of the listening device in Isabelle’s phone?”

Hunter’s eyes pop up from the report he’s perusing. “The serial number corresponds with the one Hugo got out of her phone yesterday, but it’s also untraceable.”

“I know someone who could look into it,” Brandon, who is sitting on a double bed at the side of the room, pipes up. “I just need the serial numbers.”

My gaze drifts from Hunter to Brandon. Victory heats my blood when Brandon returns my intense stare-down for a miserable three seconds before he succumbs to the pressure. Once his gaze drops to his polished shoes, I drift my eyes to Hugo. “Why is he here?”

Hugo’s lips twitch, but before he can speak, a voice that makes my cock turn to stone just from hearing it says, “Because I trust him.”

Isabelle enters the room wearing more clothing than she was mere minutes ago. Although my eyes just assessed every inch of her delectable curves, I can’t help but scan her seductive body again. With a mouth that would bring mortals to their knees, eyes that see through to my soul, and a body made to be pleased, she’s too enticing to only warrant one glance.

There’s no doubt I’m a sucker for punishment. I scrutinized the surveillance video of Isabelle and Brandon kissing in the hallway repeatedly the past week. Although Isabelle didn’t jerk away from Brandon’s embrace, her body didn’t melt either. She didn’t react with half the intensity she does when I kiss her. Call me conceited, but I only need to glance at her, and she responds with more intensity than she did while Brandon kissed her. I only need to rake my eyes over

her body, and evidence of her arousal filters through my nose. Isabelle's seductive scent is the most intoxicating thing I've ever smelled. My cock flexes just thinking about how delicious she smells when she comes.

"Brandon has done nothing but help us, Isaac." When she stops in front of me, her intoxicating smell permeates the air surrounding us. I clench my fists at my side, battling not to mark and claim her in front of the three men whose eyes haven't left her since she joined us. "You can trust him."

When she stares up at me with her big chocolate eyes, my anger wanes. Her eyes are my eternal weakness. Not only can they see my soul, they consume it as well.

I take several long moments to appraise her beautiful face before shifting my focus to Hunter. "Give him the serial numbers." I nudge my head to Brandon.

I don't need to see Isabelle to know she's happy with my reply. I can feel her smile defrosting the ice that formed around my heart the past two weeks—ice only she can thaw.

"Thank you."

When she balances on her tippy toes to place a kiss on my cheek, my cock stiffens. I'd give anything to be in an empty room with her right now—anything at all. Then, once she begged for forgiveness, I'd spend hours becoming reacquainted with her body. It's only been two weeks since she was underneath me, but it feels like months.

My eyes shoot across the room when Hugo asks, "Do you two need a minute to finish, or can we get this show on the road?"

His smile sags when I retort, "You may only need a minute, Hugo, but most men require a lot longer than that to

pleasure their women.”

Hunter and Hugo’s boisterous chuckles bounce around the room. Even Brandon snickers. The only person who stays quiet is Isabelle. Her pert nipples bud against her thin shirt as her beautiful scent infuses the air. My lips thin into a hard line. I’m barely restraining myself from touching her as it is, and she’s making my struggle ten times worse. I wouldn’t hold back if the chuckles booming from the other side of the room didn’t clue her on to the fact we have company. She’s just as proficient about failing to notice anyone else in the room when she’s in my presence as I am with her.

She claps her hands two times, waking herself from her trance. “Okay, let’s get down to business.”

She pads to the other side of the room to gather a bursting-at-the-seams manila folder from underneath her dowdy satchel. When she pivots back around, the smile curving her lips slackens so a rueful frown can take its place. After returning to my side, she gestures for me to sit on the sofa across from the double beds Hugo, Hunter, and Brandon are sprawled on.

When I do, she removes several printouts from the folder, fanning them out on the chipped coffee table wedged between us. “These were taken at Megan’s hotel room in Ravenshoe.”

After scanning the photos, I lift my eyes to hers. “My security team supplied me with similar photos.”

The day before I was arrested, Nick had a run-in with a lady at my nightclub. I immediately had a security detail placed on him. I also updated Cormack on the situation the days following my arrest so Nick would have adequate protection while on the road with his band. The photos Isabelle supplied are nearly identical to the ones Hunter took.

After sitting next to me, Isabelle splits the photos into two separate piles. Although her outward appearance doesn't reveal that she's affected by my closeness, her body gives away her deceit. The hairs on her arms bristle as her breathing shallows. Once she has them sorted, she angles her body to face mine. "These are from today."

She hands me a stack of images printed on plain white paper. When my eyes roam over them, my jaw quivers. This evidence proves Megan's obsession with Nick is more than the random groupie/rock star fascination my security team has been running with the past month.

My gaze floats up when Isabelle places her hand over my fist to give it a reassuring squeeze. The concern relayed through her eyes has me on edge. "When the Bureau first stumbled upon Megan, we were under the assumption she was one of your... *flings*." When she said 'we,' her eyes flicked to Brandon. "It was only when I followed Megan the day before your arrest did I discover her interests centered around Nick."

*She followed Megan?* My furious eyes snap to Hugo. "Where were you? You were supposed to be her shadow!"

"I asked him to collect those documents you required from Regan," Hunter informs me on behalf of Hugo. "We thought Isabelle would be safe as she was scheduled to remain at her workplace for several more hours."

Ignoring the thick stench of awkwardness plaguing our gathering, Isabelle shuffles through the photos on the coffee table. When she finds the picture she's after, her eyes return to mine. "Megan had a baby crib set up in her hotel room, indicating that she may have been pregnant. When I saw this ultrasound photo, it all but confirmed it."

She hands me a picture of a crib and an ultrasound photo. “Megan was pregnant, but it wasn’t Nick’s baby. He had an in-utero paternity test done a few months ago—”

“No. Megan wasn’t pregnant because she’s *never* had the chance to be pregnant.”

Isabelle passes me a stack of documents Brandon just gave her. He gathered them from a portal printer at our right. The papers are the itemized bill Nick’s lawyers sent me after representing him in his paternity case. She flips through a handful of pages. Her teeth catch her bottom lip when she finds the place she’s searching for.

My knuckles popping echo around the room when she points to a vitally imported section in the middle of the medical report. “Are you kidding me?”

Isabelle shakes her head. “No, Megan has never had sexual contact with anyone, let alone Nick.”

I throw the documents onto the coffee table so I can rake my fingers through my hair. My hands twitch in sync with my jaw, my anger so potent, I’m on the verge of cracking. “If she never had sex, why did she have a crib set up in her room?”

“Because she’s extremely unwell.” Isabelle’s voice shudders as she scoots closer to me. “She’s been in and out of mental hospitals since she was a little girl. During her latest stint, the doctors diagnosed her as having pseudocyesis. Even though she isn’t pregnant, she truly believes she is.”

My limbs suddenly feel heavy as anger overtakes every inch of me. “If she’s so unwell, why isn’t she admitted to the hospital now?”

Isabelle coughs to clear her throat. “She was, but she escaped after she struck an orderly with a steel chair.”

I jump up from my seat so abruptly, Isabelle startles. “So, she isn’t just a psychopath, she’s dangerous!” I glare at Hunter, beyond pissed that he failed to pick up any of this during his many reports on Megan the past month.

“We assessed the situation before acting on the information we had on hand at the time, Isaac. That’s why Nick has Peters shadowing him,” Hunter remarks, speaking for the first time since I arrived.

I know what he’s doing. He assigned the talking to Isabelle as he knows I won’t lash out at her as I would him. He’s being a coward, and he’ll be reprimanded for it the instant I fix the monumental fuck-up he created.

My eyes fall to Isabelle when she says, “Brandon, Hugo, and I believe Jenni and her unborn baby are more at threat than Nick.” Her eyes shift to Hunter. They’re full of silent apologies. “Nothing against Hunter and his team, they could only go off the information they had before them, but after we called you, we completed an in-depth search of Megan’s room. The threat to Jenni and her unborn baby is credible.”

Hugo moves to stand next to me. “When I couldn’t reach you earlier tonight, I called in a favor. One of my guys is watching Jenni’s house. He’s been reporting back to me every thirty minutes. The house has remained dark throughout the night. I assure you he’s good, Isaac. He won’t let anything happen to them.”

I scratch my brow while drifting my eyes between the four sets watching me with concern. I wasn’t reachable today as I’ve been at the hospital, and then on a plane. I just had no clue both my distractions today were for the same thing.

“Jenni gave birth this morning.”

A deep sigh spills from Isabelle's lips as the strain marring her beautiful face relaxes. "Oh, thank God," she mutters under her breath. "Is everything okay? Is the baby safe and healthy?"

"They're both fine. He was five weeks early, but he's doing well." I halfheartedly shrug. "Jenni seemed a little rattled, but she's in good spirits."

Isabelle scoots to the edge of her chair, her concern undeniable. "Did she give birth naturally?"

When I nod, her eyes snap shut so fiercely, two tears drip down her pale cheeks. Even irritated over the situation with Megan, my heart stops beating. I fucking hate when she cries, but not any more than I hate how tired she looks. Dark rims are circling her eyes, her face is gaunt like she hasn't eaten a proper meal in days, and her hair is well overdue for a washing.

While she brushes away the tears on her cheeks with a sweep of her finger, I stray my eyes to Hugo. "Can this wait until the morning?"

"Yeah." Hugo nods, understanding me more than I give him credit for. "We searched Megan's residence as thoroughly as we could, but the lighting was poor, so we decided it would be best to return in the morning. We're planning to go back at sunrise." He gestures his head between himself, Isabelle, and Brandon. When his gaze settles on Brandon, he asks, "Since Jenni has had the baby, has the threat been stabilized?"

The tautness on his face eases when Brandon nods.

"My guy will stay on Nick's house until you tell me otherwise. Brandon has a lock on Megan's bank accounts, and he added her to a travel database, so if she makes a move, we'll be the first to know." Hugo drifts his eyes to Isabelle for

the quickest second before returning them to me. “It’s been a big day.”

I nod, acknowledging his wordless distress for Isabelle. Anger is still coursing through my veins, but Nick, Jenni, and their baby boy, Jasper, are safe, so my focus can shift to taking care of Isabelle. It’s been a draining two weeks on all of us, but Isabelle has had shit flung at her from all directions. Although I can’t clear away all the mess just yet, I can soothe her as only I can.

I lock my eyes with Hunter. “Call Peters to give him an update on the situation, and make sure he stays on the hospital grounds. Also, supply those serial numbers to Brandon to run through his database. I want to know where the equipment that was in Isabelle’s apartment came from.” I shift on my feet to face Hugo. “Have your man stay on Nick’s house, but when I return, I’ll want to meet him. I need to ensure he’s a good fit for Nick and Jenni before making him an official part of their security detail.”

He nods, his smile one I haven’t seen before.

“And you...” I drift my eyes to Brandon. He goes from gawking at the shaggy-stained carpet to looking at me. “Thank you for helping... *us*.”

I still have apprehensions about Brandon, but if Isabelle trusts him, I can decompartmentalize my jealousy for her benefit. It’s the least I can do after what I put her through the past two weeks. The biggest grin stretches across Brandon’s face before his twinkling eyes stray to Isabelle. Her mouth is gaped wide, and her pupils are the size of saucers. Anyone would swear I’ve never issued a compliment before from the shocked expressions on Hunter, Hugo, and Isabelle’s faces.

I have, just not verbally.



## CHAPTER 23



## ISABELLE

*B*efore my brain can register the fact that Isaac complimented Brandon, Isaac scoops down to gather me in his arms. His intoxicating scent engulfs my nostrils, activating every one of my hot buttons. He carries me across the room, his speed faster than a bullet. I want to ask where we're going, but not a word escapes my parched lips. I have an inkling as to what is going on in that big head of his. Our undeniable urge to have one another will have a lot of people mistaking our relationship as only being based on lust, but that isn't the case. We have a connection that's hard to explain unless it's dispersed physically. That's why we indulge in our fantasies as often as possible.

I'll never be able to rein in my desires when Isaac is in my vicinity. Even in this complicated situation, I yearn to nurture him. If the massive erection jabbing into my backside is anything to go by, Isaac is craving the same thing.

Once he breaks into the poorly-dated room I was resting in only an hour ago, he kicks the door shut, then paces toward the bathroom. His warm breath tickles my nose when he says, "Shower and then bed."

I nuzzle into his neck, drinking in his delicious scent. "Okay."

His pec muscles flex when my lips brush the pulse in his jaw, but before I can relish in his body's response to my smallest touch, we enter the minuscule bathroom attached to my room. A toilet in one corner has the vanity balancing over the top of it, and an old, pink-tiled shower is in the opposite corner. Its curtain is riddled with soap scum and mold, and there's a giant rip down the middle of it.

“I think we should keep our shoes on.”

Giggling, I nod. “Without a doubt.”

After placing me onto my feet, Isaac tugs his shirt over his head before lowering his sweat pants down his splayed thighs. I strive with all my might to keep my eyes planted on his sculptured face, but the pull to glide them over his body is too great to stop me. I float them over his smooth, hairless pecs, down the six bumps in his midsection, before darting them between the scrumptious V muscle I love tracing with my tongue.

Just when I think the visual can't get any better, Isaac ups the ante by yanking his boxer shorts down. I become wet when his cock springs free from his trunks. It's thick, pulsating, and has a perfect drop of precum beaded at the top. While licking my parched lips, I wrap my hand around his densely veined shaft. Isaac stops kicking his clothes to the other side of the room, his hiss coming out with a moan. As he stares into my eyes, the walls close in on me. They're so intensely beautiful, I could topple into ecstasy without stimulation.

No words are spoken between us. We don't need them to express ourselves. Everything is reflected in his beautiful eyes. His forgiveness for my betrayal. His sorrow for his harsh words. It's all said without a word needing to escape his lips. This is us. This is how we show our affection to each other.

We communicate our feelings through touch, not words. Besides, nothing he could say would change how I feel about him, so why waste time rehashing old issues?

When Isaac steps closer to me, I'm rendered motionless, mesmerized by the perfect specimen of a man displayed in front of me. His eyes stay locked on mine, only breaking for the quickest second when he lifts my shirt over my head to discard it on the floor. His cock twitches when he unclasps the button of my jeans before sliding down the zipper. Tingles spasm my spine when he crouches down to guide the stiff material down my quivering thighs before steering them over the ballet flats I'm wearing.

My knees curve inward when he places a kiss above my right ankle. A gentle bite closely follows it. Then another kiss, before another bite. He presses a trail of kisses and nips from my right ankle to my thigh, making my left leg jealous. After every bite, his tongue soothes the sting his teeth made, his eyes never leaving mine.

Pleasure rockets through me when his teeth graze my throbbing panty-covered clit on his way to pay the same dedication to my left leg. He gives it just as much devotion as he did my right leg, except this time, he goes from my hip to my ankle.

By the time his thorough dedication is complete, my panties are drenched, and my nipples are capable of cutting diamonds. I'm not the only one getting carried away. When Isaac stands to his full height, his cock digs into my stomach. He's the thickest I've ever seen him, and I can't wait to taste him.

"I need hours, Isabelle." His voice is hoarse with lust. It makes me even wetter. "But you need to rest."

While my inner vixen screams vulgarities at the top of her lungs, I pout. Isaac smirks, loving my unashamed response. I'd make him pay for his ill-timed smile if his next set of words didn't steal the air from my lungs.

"I'm still going to fuck you, Isabelle." His cocky confirmation sends a thrill of excitement to my core where it clusters and tightens. "It'll just be hard and fast against that wall." His commanding eyes flick to the only wall in the bathroom that doesn't have some sort of contraption attached to it. "Then you'll sleep, and I'll have the remainder of the weekend to devour you."

The scent of my arousal lingers in the air, revealing how close I am to the edge. One touch, one brush, one pound of his cock, and I'll be toppling into orgasmic bliss. I should be ashamed of how aroused I am, but I'm not. After two weeks of turmoil, I'm going to soak up every little drop of attention he's giving me, starting with his cock.

As I fall to my knees, I grasp his densely-veined shaft in my hand. Air whistles between his teeth when my tongue darts out to lap up the bead of precum pooling on his swollen knob.

"Fuck, Isabelle." He rocks his hips forward, ramming inches of his delicious cock into my mouth. I take as much of him as I can, my lips burning from their wide stretch.

The grunted moans spilling from his lips make the burn worthwhile. He's loving this as much as I am, appreciating that I'm just as incapable of harnessing my desires as he is. While sucking him down deep, I relish his musky scent. He smells so manly, so scrumptious, so toe-curling delectable. When I fail to get half of his impressive cock into my mouth, my hand works on the sections missing out. I drag it up and

down his shaft in sync to my lips, taking him a little deeper with each suck I do.

My strokes become needy when his dirty mouth spurs on my pursuit to unravel him. I want him incapable of rational thoughts, to make him speechless like he forever makes me.

“God, Isabelle. Even in my dreams, it didn’t feel this good. Those lips, that mouth, your velvety tongue... I’ll never get enough.” His cock hardens with every word he speaks as does his grip on my hair. “I’m going to come in your mouth before coming in your tight pussy. Are you ready for that, Isabelle? Are you going to swallow my cum like you were born to do it?”

Our combined purrs of ecstasy bounce around the small bathroom. I stroke him harder, faster. I draw him into my mouth so deeply, I gag. It adds to the heat teeming between us. He loves nothing more than dominating me, and gagging on his big dick does precisely that. He feeds his cock in and out of my mouth, groaning when he hits the back of my throat.

When my tongue swirls around his knob, eagerly lapping up every delicious drop of liquid formed there, he begins to pant. The veins on his glorious cock throb, revealing he’s seconds from coming before the first spurts of seed violently erupt from his cock’s head. My name tumbles from his mouth in a grunt as his clutch on my hair tightens. I milk him greedily, pumping him furiously with my hand as my throat works hard to swallow down every delicious drop of his cum.

Once his violent shudders dissipate, I release his cock from my lips with a pop, place a kiss on his God-crafted V muscle, then stand to my feet. I sway in an invisible breeze, my legs quivering so fiercely, I can barely stand. It would be easier if Isaac’s knee-buckling eyes weren’t staring straight at me. Add

that to the delicious smirk etched on his handsome face, and you've got more than a panty-wetting situation.

Several heart-clenching seconds pass in silence as we participate in a lust-filled stare-down. My breaths are so ragged, my bra-covered chest thrusts up and down with every inhalation I take. When Isaac cups my cheek in his spare hand, I nuzzle into his embrace. After tracing the dip in my top lip, he arrows his mouth toward mine. Stars form in front of my eyes when the mouth that keeps me up for hours every night seals over mine. His kiss bursts with intensity, love, and devotion. Every lash of his tongue and nip of his teeth increases the dampness between my legs. It takes my breath away, making me feel weightless.

When my legs wrap around his waist, I capture his rough moan in my mouth. Without relinquishing my lips from his, Isaac carries me to the discolored, paint-peeled wall he gestured to earlier. With a flick of his fingers, my bra is unclasped and dumped onto the once white-tiled floor. With one hand cupping my ass, holding me in place, the other one slithers up my body, only stopping when he reaches my breast. He kneads and caresses it, stiffening my nipples to the point it's almost painful.

After a final nip to my bottom lip, Isaac inches back from my tingling mouth. His pupils are so large, I can see my reflection in them, and his plump lips are swollen from our kiss. "Lean back, baby. Let me see you."

Flashbacks of the first time we had sex in the private jet rush to the forefront of my mind. He loves seeing me. If he could fondle me and watch me at the same time, I'm certain he would. When my back braces against the wall, my breasts are propelled into his face. He traps one of my erect nipples into

his mouth before swiveling his tongue around the peaked bud. As his talented mouth speeds up my sprint to orgasm, I snap my eyes shut.

“Oh God... that feels so good.”

After paying dutiful attention to each of my breasts, he presses a trail of kisses up my chest, past my neck, and along my chin. My core tightens from his tantalizing tease, bringing me so close to ecstasy, my mind is nothing but a hazy blur of lust.

“More. Please. I can’t wait any longer.”

“Not yet.” He tugs on my earlobe with his teeth before sucking it into his mouth. “I want to be inside you when you come. I want to feel your drenching wet pussy convulsing around me as you greedily milk me for my spawn, but more than anything, I want to hear my name torn from your pretty little throat like it did earlier tonight in your dreams.”

My eyes pop open before drifting to his. I stare at him in shock, unaware he heard my dream. When he takes in my bewilderment, the most delicious, roguish grin stretches across his sinful mouth. “I heard every perfect little moan. You were so close, I was tempted to strum your clit to get you over the line, but I was greedy. I wanted to feel you come, not just see it.”

The sexy, ruggedness of his voice nearly topples me into ecstasy. “If you still want to feel it, you better hurry because I’m dangerously close to the edge.”

In the blink of an eye, my panties are shredded off my body, and the crown of Isaac’s cock is braced at the entrance of my pussy. His intense, unique-colored eyes rake my torso



before assessing my face, swelling my heart with the possessiveness beaming out of them.

He leans his forehead against mine, saying my name in a raspy groan when he slowly inches inside of me. A shiver surges through my body once he's fully seated. After adjusting my hips to a better angle, his fingers digging into the fleshy meat on my sides, he withdraws to the tip. A groan shudders from my lips when he slams back in one fluid motion. My sex convulses around him, milking him as my mouth did his cock earlier.

“So silky and tight. Your pussy was built to be fucked by me, Isabelle.”

His dirty words and each precise stroke of his thick cock has the fiery warmth in my stomach amplifying. Even in the crisp, near-winter morning, my body is so overheated, and a fine layer of sweat is slicking my skin. My rush to climax is so frantic, my body tightens in fear, scared of spiraling out of control. It's genuinely terrifying how much my body relinquishes its power to Isaac.

Sensing my hesitation, Isaac says, “Let it go, baby,” while not once diminishing his relentless, mouth-watering pounds. He knows the hold he has on me. With his power and dominance, he knows my body solely belongs to him.

As shivers wreak havoc with my body, I lift and lock my eyes with his. When our gazes collide, I fall into the most violent, earth-shattering orgasm I've ever had. Shockwaves tremble through my body, and my vision blurs when a climax shreds through me so hard and fast, I can't withhold the screams of ecstasy tearing from my throat.

“Fuck, Isabelle,” Isaac groans before sealing his mouth over mine.

He kisses me like he's never kissed me before, like a man starved for my taste. Like he'll never get enough. Our tongues frantically collide, desperately exploring each other's mouths. It's a hot and heavy embrace that's full of intensity and mutual understanding. I return his kiss with as much passion, expressing to him that I'll never give him up. I'll fight for him—*for us*—until my very last breath.

As Isaac pulls his torturous lips away from mine, he slows the pace of his frantic pumps. He coerces my eyes to his without a word spilling from his lips. When he gets them, a familiar tightening sensation builds again in my womb, my next orgasm spurred on by the dominant gleam in his beautiful eyes.

“I’m yours. I’ve always been yours. I’ll always be yours.”

His sexy-as-sin growl vibrates through my body, heightening my senses to never-before-reached levels. As his pupils dilate in the most knee-clanging way, a seductive smile stretches across his face. It isn't a smirk, it's a genuine smile that wipes away every bad thing that's happened between us the past two weeks.

When a second climax rockets through my body like fireworks exploding in the sky, it is the fight of my life to keep my eyes open, but I do it just because there's nothing more captivating in the world than the strikingly gorgeous face of Isaac Holt in the midst of ecstasy.

## CHAPTER 24



## ISAAC

“*I* don’t care what you have to do, Regan, I want it squashed.”

Regan sighs down the line. “Okay, I’ll do my best.”

“Good. I won’t be back in town until Monday afternoon, and no cell service from midday, so if you need me, you’ll need to contact Hunter or Hugo.”

“I won’t need to see you before then. Unlike you, some of us have an occasional weekend off,” Regan replies brashly. “I’ll meet you at your office Tuesday morning with my findings.”

After finalizing my call, I place my burner cell into the breast pocket of my suit jacket. I’m grateful Catherine insisted she pack me an overnight bag before I left the hospital yesterday afternoon. Otherwise, I would have been left wearing that hideous getup I was prancing around in last night. There’s nothing wrong with gym clothes when you’re at the gym. If you’re not, you have no reason to wear them.

As I pace closer to the open window of Isabelle’s dirty motel room, my gaze catches sight of the sun rising over the flat, barren horizon. The town of Parkerville would be best described as a dump. It’s one main street has more closed

shops than open, the land is unusable, and the facilities in the township are less than stellar. I can't wait to pack up Isabelle and leave this wretched town for good. But first, I need to return with Hugo and Hunter to Megan's family residence. I don't know what it is, perhaps intuition, but I can't shake the feeling there's something more to Megan's story than what's been unearthed so far.

My lips curl when the husky mumble of, "What time is it?" comes tumbling out of a mouth that took me to the brink three times last night.

I did have every intention of fucking Isabelle hard and fast so she could get some rest, but she altered the course of my moral compass when she dropped to her knees to devour my cock like she's never been fed. All my good intentions were left for dead when her velvety tongue licked up the beady drop on my crown.

When I spin around, my eyes widen when they're rewarded with the visual of Isabelle stretching her arms well above her head. Her dynamic stretch has the shirt I discarded on the bathroom floor last night riding up high, exposing inches upon inches of the luscious skin on her smooth thighs. Her hair is a tangled mess, her face is void of makeup, and she looks exhausted, but she's still the most ravishing woman I've ever laid my eyes on.

Her eyes wander over my body before flicking to the alarm clock that displays it's a little after seven o'clock. "Life isn't fair," she harrumphs before flopping onto the lumpy mattress that kept me awake half the night. "How come you get to wake up looking like that..." she throws an arm my way, "... and I wake up looking like this?" She gestures her spare hand down her luscious body.

Smirking, I stride toward her. Since the room is so small, it only takes a few lengthened steps to reach her. She's lying flat on her back with her arm covering her exquisite eyes. The hairs on her arm bristle when I glide my index finger along it. Her mouth curves into a grin before she peers at me from behind her arm.

“Three times in one night still not enough to satisfy your appetite?”

A broad smirk stretches across my face, but I don't formulate a response to her question. She's acutely aware of my answer as her eyes are locked on the crotch in my trousers, which is struggling to contain my erection. As her teeth munch on her bottom lip, she glances into my eyes.

“Don't look at me like that, Isabelle.” My tone is low and dangerous, revealing how close to the edge I am.

After relinquishing her lip from her gentle nibbles, her tongue darts out to replenish her dry lips. She knows her lips are my eternal weakness, so she's using them to her advantage. Her breathing shallows when I tilt my head closer to her. Her beautiful scent infuses the air, making what I'm about to say ten times harder. “If Hugo weren't outside that door waiting for us, I'd make you pay for that tease.”

When I lick the shell of her ear, a jolt shivers through her body. She sighs when her eyes snap to the open interconnecting door between our room and Hugo's. I face my second fight this morning when her lower lip drops into a pout. I want to suck it. Taste it. *Bite it.*

Before I can, Isabelle jumps out of bed and scurries toward the tiny bathroom. “Give me five minutes, then I'll be ready to go.”

Halfway there, she stops, then pivots around to face me. The biggest smile stretches across her adorable face as she rushes back to me. After slapping my cheeks, she stares lovingly into my eyes. “Good morning.”

Any response planning to seep from my lips is halted when she presses her mouth to mine. A warning growl rumbles up my throat when she fails to open her lips at the request of my lashing tongue.

“No,” she murmurs over my mouth. “Or we’ll never leave.”

With that, she spins on her heels and skips to the bathroom.

“Isabelle...” My grumble is rough and sharp, freezing her halfway between me and the bathroom door.

With quaking thighs, she turns around to face me. My lips crimp at her submissiveness. She’s a strong and independent woman, but the instant we step into the bedroom, she surrenders all her power to me. Nothing in the world has made me feel more influential than that. Not takeovers, not business ventures, and not how much capital I have in my bank accounts. Nothing compares to the feeling I get knowing she trusts me enough to relinquish control of her body to me.

I stride toward her, my shoulders sitting higher than they were this morning, my walk cocky. I grip the back of her slender thighs, coercing her legs to wrap around my waist. When they do, her sweet-smelling pussy heats my cock. I rock my hips upward, dragging my erection through the material clinging to the folds of her wet pussy. When her mouth falls open, I slip my tongue between her pouty lips. I nip, lick, and explore her succulent mouth like it’s the first time I’ve sampled it.

We kiss for several minutes, the heat in our exchange enough to keep the country warm through a prolonged winter. Once I'm happy I've inspected every scrumptious portion of her mouth, I inch back until my forehead rests against her, and her beautiful chocolate eyes are peering down at me.

“That’s a proper good morning,” I greet her with a wolfish smirk. “And it’s how I plan to greet you every day from here on out.”

My smirk enlarges to a full grin when I place her back onto her feet. Her wobbly strides as she makes her way into the bathroom has me wishing I hadn't made the promise I did years ago. Alas, I am a man of my word. I told my brother I'd forever have his back. I plan to keep my promise.

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Isabelle's nervous fidgeting becomes more apparent the closer we get to Megan's family residence. Hugo is driving my car with Isabelle and I sitting in the back seat. Hunter and Brandon are following behind us in Hunter's van that's stacked with the best computer equipment and surveillance devices money can buy.

When Hugo pulls my car into a long dirt driveway, Isabelle's panicked eyes rocket to me. “When we show you the information we gathered yesterday, I need you to remember Jenni and Jasper are safe and unharmed.” Her voice is surprisingly smooth considering how hard her hands are shaking.

My eyes shift to Hugo, who's eyeing me with caution through the rearview mirror. “Did you discover anything that would warrant the authorities being called in?”



Hugo nods. “Yes, but Isabelle and Brandon agreed they wouldn’t call it in until your security team was first given access to it.”

I run my hand along my jaw, tracking the tremor there. “This won’t keep your hands sparkling clean, Isabelle.”

“I know, but I love you,” she replies without pause. “Wouldn’t you get your hands a little dirty for someone you love?”

Her words impact me more today than they did the first time I heard them. Because this time, they weren’t said during intimacy. She said it because she truly means it.

When the car comes to a stop at the front of a derelict farmhouse, Isabelle scoots across the leather seat to clasp my hand within hers. “I trust that the man I’ve fallen in love with will handle this in an appropriate and *legal* manner.” Her eyes dance between mine. The moisture in them sets my nerves on edge. “You’re not the man your FBI file says you are, Isaac, so I’ll trust that you’ll uphold my beliefs on that.”

I take a moment to ponder her statement. Like any good myth, the reality barely corresponds with the fabricated fiction, so I’m confident my police record is full of half-truths and misrepresentations of who I am, but, even so, I’m a protector. It’s who I am. Nick is my responsibility. He’s my blood. He gave me the gift of life, so it’s my job to protect him from any potential threats just as I’ll protect Isabelle from Col and Theresa. To me, there is no difference.

“I protect what’s mine, Isabelle.” My tone is as surly as my mood is becoming.

Isabelle’s shoulders hunch forward as a sigh spills from her lips. “I know that, Isaac, but there are *legal* ways to handle

this. The Bureau or even the local sheriff's office could assist with this."

"Like how they handled my arrest?" A vicious snarl forms on my face as my anger transcends. "They *illegally* detained me for hours while they barbarically destroyed my house under the legality of a warranted search the Judge signed off on under false pretenses. Are they really the people I should seek out during a crisis?"

When Isabelle shifts her focus to the passenger window, I force her eyes back to mine via her chin. "Answer me, Isabelle! Are they truly the people I should trust?"

"Those people are me, Isaac! I'm *those* people." As her eyes bounce between mine, they're dangerously close to spilling the moisture flooding them. "Are you saying you don't trust me?"

Needing to escape before I say something I'll regret, I swing open the door and curl out. "Please stay in the car. You'll be safer here." My tone is firm, but my suggestion still comes out as a plea.

My jaw muscle tenses when Isabelle snubs my suggestion by pushing open the back passenger door to step onto the dirt driveway, mumbling something about not being a child.

"One thing at a time, Isaac," I murmur to myself while joining Hugo at the front stairs of a rundown house.

The pain weighing down my chest intensifies when Isabelle twists her body, so her back is facing us before her hands dart up to scrub across her cheeks with a sense of urgency.

"Boss..."

I shoot Hugo a wry look, stopping him mid-sentence. “I’ll fix *that* after I handle this.”

During the ‘that’ part of my statement, I nudge my head to Isabelle. I hate the way I’m acting, but I need to focus on one task at a time. I’m juggling so many things at the moment, mistakes are bound to happen if I don’t start being more cautious.

Hugo’s thinning lips reveal his annoyance, but he nods all the same. He’s aware of the mammoth tasks I’m undertaking as he’s part of most of them. As I shadow him up the farmhouse steps, I absorb each unique feature. It reminds me of my dad’s house before he renovated it. He’s very much like Nick—stubborn to the point of being annoying. No matter how many times I offer to buy him a more suitable house, or to pay for his renovations, he always refuses my proposals. “You don’t spend anything you haven’t earned yourself,” he commonly quotes.

“Give Brandon and me ten minutes to clear the premises before you and Hunter enter,” Hugo requests when Hunter’s van pulls in next to my town car.

I nod. “You have five minutes.” The longer I’m here dealing with this, the longer it’ll be before I can repair the mistakes I made with Isabelle.

The house is cleared by Hugo and Brandon in under three minutes. A lack of floor space aided with their staunch search. The inside of the house needs even more repair than the outside. It’s rundown and old, smelling like a garbage truck that’s on the brink of retirement.

Hugo gestures his head to a rickety stairwell on the left. We climb them shoulder to shoulder, which isn’t the smartest

thing we've done this week. It barely looks capable of holding my weight, much less Hugo's.

"My boot," Hugo murmurs when my curious gaze takes in a hole halfway up. "Last door on the right."

The hallway reeks of stale water and mold, but compared to downstairs, the space is spotlessly clean. Fear tears me in two when I enter the room at the end of the hallway. Understanding Megan's obsession with Nick via pictures has nothing on seeing it firsthand. Every inch of her room, including the ceiling, is covered with photos of him. They range in dates from when his band was hardly known in its heydays at Mavericks, to pictures of him on a stage during a morning breakfast show a couple of weeks ago.

"How could you fathom the threat was to Jenni and Jasper? This room makes it pretty fucking obvious who the threat pertains to—"

"Not everything is black and white, Isaac. You need to look for the gray." Isabelle floats across the room, whisking up her beautiful scent that lessens the fury burning me at the stake. I wish I could take away the moisture brimming in her eyes just as quickly. "Remember, they are safe and protected. She can't hurt them anymore."

Pain rises in my heart knowing I caused her tears when all she has done is support me. As I run my hand down her cheek, breathing a sigh of relief when I discover it's dry, I nod. A smile tugs on her lips before she heads for a set of double doors in the far corner of the room. She wants this over as quickly as me, aware I need more than ten seconds to fix the mistakes I made.

When I join her at the side of the room, she grips a white door handle that's only just visible between the posters of

Nick's band, Rise Up. The scent of bleach and disinfectant filters through my nostrils when she pushes the door open. Unlike Megan's bedroom, the white walls of this room are untouched and immaculately clean.

As I step into the sanitary-smelling space, my eyes dart in all directions. There isn't much to see. Other than a melamine table with a stainless-steel chair underneath it, the room is barren.

My jaw tenses when my eyes roam over the open textbooks on the desk. There's a range of articles and documents highlighted on how to complete an illegal cesarean. The images are so graphic, even with having a cast-iron stomach, I still feel squeamish.

"Don't touch anything."

Isabelle's command freezes my hand halfway to a white sheet draped over the desk. When she raises it with a pen on my behalf, a knot twists in my stomach. Medical equipment that includes forceps, umbilical clamps, scissors, and a razor-sharp scalpel are stored inside a stainless-steel kidney-shaped bowl.

My nostrils flare when I drift my eyes to Hunter. He's the most deserving of my wrath considering it was his job to unearth everything he could about Megan after she attacked Nick at my nightclub.

Hunter holds his hands out in front of his body, mindful I'm two seconds from snapping. "Nothing like this was in her hotel room, or in *any* of the searches I completed."

I clench my fists so fast, the air ripples.

"Megan doesn't use a computer. Her cell phone is a burner, and she mainly relies on cash." Isabelle places herself in the

firing line by standing between Hunter and me. “Her books were borrowed from the library or purchased at flea markets.” She stares at me, begging for me to hear the truth in her words. “This isn’t Hunter’s fault, Isaac. Megan is unstable. She needs more help than any of us could have fathomed.”

The genuine remorse in her beautiful, rich eyes subdues my anger. I do believe her. I also trust her. While replenishing my lungs with oxygen, I study the space, contemplating my next move. Any decisions made while angry will most likely result in an irrational reaction, so I need to quell my fury to ensure I think sensibly.

After a few moments of pondering, I turn to face Brandon. “Give Hunter an hour to document everything in this room, then call in local authorities.” Isabelle looks at me with loving eyes as Brandon nods. “Hunter, I need you to hack every local CTV camera in Ravenshoe and two towns each side of it. If Megan gets within a foot of my town, I want to be the first to know.”

“Already done. After Hugo updated me on the situation last night, I knew you’d suggest it. I also updated Ryan. I kept the details vague, but he’s passing Megan’s photo onto his reputable officers,” Hunter informs me.

“Good.” My gaze shifts to Hugo. “Have your man sitting at Nick’s house switch with Peters. I need Peters on the first flight to New York.”

Hugo nods while pulling his dated cell out of his pocket.

“Get this wrapped up quickly and effectively. We don’t have any time to waste.”

While briskly strolling out of the room, I remove my untraceable cell from my pocket. I move to a room at the

opposite end of the hall. Although I trust Isabelle, I can't put her at risk of prosecution, so this call must take place in private.

After dialing a number I know by heart, I squish my phone to my ear. Henry answers on the very first ring. "Isaac, you haven't rung me on this number in years. What do you need?"

"I need to call in that favor."

Henry's chuckle sounds down the line. "If my son can't find a loophole for your fighter, I won't be any more help."

"It's not for my fighter. There's a family situation I need your help with."

---

After talking to Henry and my lawyer for thirty minutes, I re-enter Megan's bedroom. Brandon is taking a call in the corner of the room, and Hunter is digitally categorizing the space.

"Where's Isabelle?"

Hunter jumps off a step ladder in the middle of the room. It has a circular camera mounted on a tripod. It will record the area in 3D format.

"She and Hugo went to check on the outbuildings."

Nodding, I pace to a cracked window that looks out at the overgrown fields below. Because of Hugo's large size, it doesn't take me long to spot him standing next to a black truck at the front of a wooden shed. The vehicle must be locked as he's ramming a flat steel bar down the driver's side window to jimmy the lock.

I stray my eyes away when Brandon stops to stand next to me. “Boss.... umm... Isa...”

A grin spreads across my face. I shouldn't relish in his nervous response, but I do. He has a gun and badge on his hip, yet he still fears me. My ego has never been stroked so well.

“You can call me Isaac. I'm not your boss.”

Brandon nods as a smile curls his lips. “I called in a favor with a girl I know. The owner of this property is Carlyle Shroud. He's fifty-eight years old, and has been receiving disability checks since a workplace injury nearly two decades ago.” He drops his eyes to the notepad in his hand. “His disability checks have been deposited each month, but none of his bank accounts have been utilized in months, which is surprising. Carlyle is what you might call the local drunk. More than eighty percent of his support payments are spent at the liquor store in town.”

The heaviness that's been weighing down my chest the past two weeks amplifies. “Does he have any vehicles registered in his name?”

Brandon flicks through his notepad. “Yes, one. A black Dodge truck, license plate number 44W—”

“2285?” I interrupt, reading the plate on the black truck Hugo has just entered.

When Brandon nods again, dread overwhelms me. Why would Carlyle's only source of transportation be parked in the front of his barn when he lives in the middle of nowhere, miles from the nearest town?

*He must still be here.*

In urgency, I yank on the cracked window. It doesn't budge. It's locked, held in place by rusty nails hammered into



the frame. My heart thrashes against my chest as my suit-covered elbow smashes through the thin glass. Shards of glass jab into my skin, but my brain doesn't register the pain. It's too panicked to register anything.

Hearing the shattering of glass, Hugo emerges from the black truck and glances up at me. "Where's Isabelle?" My voice rumbles in the crisp morning.

He cranks his head to the left before pointing to the far corner of the property. Isabelle is walking toward a white barn on the very edge of the horizon. Compared to the filthy paint-peeling barn Hugo is standing next to, the one she's approaching is spotlessly clean, glimmering in the morning sunlight—just like Megan's secret room.

Panic scorches through my veins. "Get Isabelle!"

Hugo freezes for all of two seconds before he takes off in her direction, the urgency in my tone undeniable.

When the seriousness of the situation dawns on Brandon, he shadows my rush down the rickety stairs. My body doesn't appreciate the cooling effects of the crisp morning on its overheated skin when I sprint out of the house. Nothing but reaching Isabelle is on my mind.

Due to the overgrown fields, only the roof of the barn is visible as I sprint to Isabelle. Terror thickens my veins as horrid thought after horrid thought filters through my brain. My lungs burn from a lack of oxygen, but I continue. I'll never breathe unaided again if Isabelle gets hurt on my watch.

"My name is Brandon James. I'm an FBI field agent. My number is 443567. I need an ambulance, and a police unit brought to 15634 Snow Mountain Road, Parkerville," Brandon pants heavily into his phone.

My concern for Isabelle outweighs the fact he's calling in the authorities. He can call anyone he wants as long as it means Isabelle is safe.

When I reach the clearing on which the barn is located, I spot a cracked open door at the side. I race for it, my legs pumping as fast as my heart. When I break through the partially opened barn door, my stomach launches into my throat. A horrific smell is lingering in the air. It smells like death and hell all rolled into one.

"Holy fuck," Brandon mumbles when he too discovers the horrifying image in front of us.

I shoot my eyes sideways when a sob sounds through my ears. Huddled in the barn is Hugo. He's sitting on the hay-covered ground with Isabelle cradled in his lap. Her face is buried into his chest, and his hand is covering her eyes.

With my heart in my throat, I rush for her. She jumps out of her skin when I remove her from Hugo's lap. "It's okay, Isabelle." My eyes rake her body to ensure she's uninjured. The wild beat of my heart weakens when I discover she's unharmed. "I've got you."

When she burrows her nose into my neck with the assistance of Hugo, I remove my jacket to place it over her shuddering shoulders. Once she's secure in my lap, my eyes shift to the man hanging from the beam. The unnatural color of his skin reveals why the smell is so potent. He's been deceased so long, his skin is no longer covering his body.

"We need to move quickly. The authorities have been called in." Although I'd love nothing more to comfort Isabelle for a few more minutes, here is not the place to do it. I also don't want it done in an interrogation room at the Parkerville

Sheriff's Office. "Go help Hunter pack up his equipment, then we'll head to my cabin..."

I stop talking when Isabelle suddenly leaps out of my arms. She makes a beeline for the barn door, barging past Brandon a mere second before her heaving petite body breaks through the eerily quiet morning.

## CHAPTER 25



## ISAAC

“*T*ake her to the cabin as originally planned. We have every angle covered. Megan won’t get close to Nick or his family without us first knowing about it. You need to concentrate on Isabelle.”

Hunter’s eyes drift to Isabelle, who is sitting in the back passenger seat of my town car. She’s far away in thought. Her beautiful tear-stained eyes are peering up at the brilliant blue sky. After she was sick, I carried her to the car in my arms. Her body felt warm, but shivers still racked through her during our short trip.

Hunter gathers a satellite phone and a charger from his van to hand them to me. “I’ll call you if anything comes up.”

“I’ll drive you out to the cabin, then I’ll head back to Ravenshoe to update my guy.” Hugo shifts his focus to Brandon, who is standing at his right. “Brandon will stay here until the authorities arrive. He has assured me he won’t mention that we were here.”

Brandon nods. “I’ll tell them I was conducting further investigations on Megan as part of your case.” Nervousness is heard in his tone. I don’t know if he’s scared or worried. Considering he’s peering at Isabelle, I’d say it is the latter. “I’ll take care of everything here as long as you promise to look

after her. I still recall the first time I saw a dead body. I'll never forget it, and my discovery wasn't as gruesome as that."

I tilt my head to Isabelle. She's no longer looking up at the sky. Her beautiful eyes are locked on me. When she notices she's captured my attention, her lips curve into an uneasy smile.

"I'll take care of her." Eager to get things wrapped up, I devote my focus back to Hunter. "Call Ryan to give him the latest. It's out of his jurisdiction, and most likely a suicide, but I don't want him in the dark. He has resources the rest of us don't, and he owes me, so if the need arises, I'll call in a favor."

"All right." Hunter jerks up his chin before straying his eyes to the horizon. "But we should get moving before we lose the opportunity."

I nod. Sirens are growing louder with every second that passes. Hugo and Hunter shake hands before sliding into their transportation of choice, leaving me standing across from a man who falsely believes he cares for Isabelle as much as I do. He's wrong because nothing could compare to the feelings I have for her. They're irrepressible and unexplainable.

"I'll ensure you're compensated for your assistance with this matter."

Brandon's lips crimp. "Thanks, but payment isn't necessary. I don't do this for money."

I halfheartedly nod. "Then, I guess I'll owe you."

"That's got to be more valuable than any monetary amount, surely." Even though his comment could be construed as witty, his tone doesn't allude to that. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Isaac."

When I accept the hand he's holding out, I'm shocked by how firm his handshake is. He seems a little too timid to pull off such a firm shake. "Likewise."

After a final glance at Megan's house, I slide into the back seat of my town car. My mind is jumbled with the diverse range of situations I've been hammering with it the past two months. So much is happening in my private life right now. If I don't stop and assess each task, mistakes are bound to happen. By sticking with my original plan of taking Isabelle to my cabin in the foothills of the mountain, it'll give me a chance to evaluate everything while also taking care of her. It will also bide some time for Hunter and his team to trace who placed the equipment in Isabelle's apartment before she returns there.

As Hugo glides my car down the dusty driveway, I seize Isabelle's wrist and carefully pull her over to sit side-straddled on my lap. She plasters her body as close to mine as possible before burrowing her nose into my neck.

The pulse beeping through her body is heard in her words when she murmurs, "The academy tries to prepare you for stuff like this, but nothing can prepare you for the smell. It was..." A shiver runs through her body before her tears wet the collar of my shirt. "I can still smell it on my skin."

Hugo's eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. After a swift lift of my chin, he raises the privacy partition without a word spilling from my lips. Once the barrier is in place, I undo the top three buttons of my business shirt before tugging it out of my trousers.

Isabelle's tear-filled eyes stare into mine. "I... can't."

"I'm only going to hold you, baby," I promise, staring into her glistening eyes. "I'll remove the smell from your skin with

my own. Then, once we arrive at the cabin, I'll wash it all away."

After sucking in a shaky breath, she nods. Because of the confines of the backseat, she has to assist in yanking her tight jeans down her shaking thighs. Once they're dumped onto the floor, I raise her long-sleeve shirt over her head. Her hair flicks out a mere second before it falls down her back in dark, shiny waves.

Once she's in nothing but her bra and panties, I draw her back into my chest. She splays her body into mine, every soft curve melting against me. When she trembles as if she is cold, I snag my jacket from the floor to cover her shoulders and back. She's shaking more from shock than the temperature. Hugo turned the heat up the instant he raised the barrier, but I'm happy to pretend she's cold if it keeps her tears at bay.

In silence, I glide my hand up and down her back, offering her wordless comfort. The scene she just witnessed was horrific, and the smell was unlike anything I've ever sampled before, so I can comprehend her shocked reaction. Yes, she's a federal agent, but she's still a human being. I'd be more concerned if she weren't reacting the way she is. Only a woman without a heart would witness something so horrific and not react.

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By the time we arrive at my cabin, Isabelle has stopped shuddering, and she managed a few hours of restless sleep in my arms. My eyes float to the privacy partition when Hugo lowers it down an inch. "Give me a few minutes to scope the premises."



I nod, acknowledging his request. “Make it quick.”

The deep rumble of my voice causes Isabelle to stir, but when Hugo closes his door with more force than needed, her head rises off my chest. She scans our location for a few seconds before the faintest smile creeps onto her lips.

Noticing angry black marks careening down her cheeks, I lick my thumb before rubbing it under her eyes, clearing away the smears of mascara formed there. Once all the evidence of her tears has been removed, my thumb lowers to the cupid’s bow in her lip. My touch is as soft as a feather, but a shiver still darts through Isabelle’s body. A smirk etches on my mouth, loving that even in the most distressing circumstances, she can’t help but react to my touch.

When three brief taps hit the driver’s side back window, Hugo’s way of indicating the cabin is clear of any threats, I place Isabelle onto the seat next to me. After adjusting my jacket to ensure she’s covered, I fling open the car door. Pine trees and varnished wood infiltrate my senses the instant I step outside. Out of respect for Isabelle, Hugo has made himself scarce, but just in case, Isabelle holds down the hem of my jacket to maintain her modesty.

As we pace toward the log cabin, her freshly-woken eyes eagerly absorb all its quirk features. This is where I come when I need to get away. I came here the weekend I was arrested. I had to put distance between Isabelle and me, or I would have ended up at her apartment, seeking answers to the hundreds of questions filtering through my mind after she left Friday night.

There’s no cell phone reception or internet connection in this part of the forest. Power is supplied by a generator in a shed attached to the back of the property, and an open wood

fireplace heats the living room. Catherine organized for the cabin's caretakers to crank the generator, ignite the fire, and replenish the fridge when I called her on the drive to Parkerville last night, so we have everything we need for a two-day stay.

Freshly picked wildflowers infuse the air when we walk into the living room of the cabin. The caretakers are a retired couple who live next door. Catherine must have told them I was bringing Isabelle as this is the first time they've left flowers.

After placing my keys onto the side table, I shift on my feet to face Isabelle. "Do you want something to eat before you shower?" She hasn't eaten anything but the sugar-coated donuts Hugo arrived at our room with this morning. It's now a little after noon, so she may be hungry.

She shakes her head. "No, I'd rather shower first." Her voice is low, but it isn't as shaky as it was earlier.

"Okay. Give me a minute to see Hugo off, then I'll come shower you."

Her pupils widen before she nods. She heard my comment as I had intended. I'm going to take care of her as I've craved from the moment she crashed into me at the airport.

"The main bedroom is just through that door."

When I point to the wooden door on her left, she cranks her neck back to peer at it. "Okay, I'll wait for you in there." She paces toward the door, spinning back around just before she enters. "Can you thank Hugo for helping me today?" Her brows pull together tightly as her teeth get friendly with her lower lip. "My screams will be ringing in his ears for weeks to come."

“It’s his job to protect you, Isabelle, so you don’t need to commend him for doing the job he’s paid to do.”

“I know, but I still want him to know I’m grateful.” She stares at me with begging, tear-filled eyes. “Please tell him.”

She waits for me to nod before entering the main bedroom. Once she closes the door, I walk back out onto the veranda. After scanning the densely treed property, I find Hugo near the driveway talking on the satellite phone Hunter gave me earlier.

“We’ll go over more specifics when I return... all right... I’ll speak to you tonight. Bye, Hawke.” After disconnecting his call and handing me his phone, Hugo gestures his head to the cabin. “How is she?”

“She’s all right, a little rattled, but proving to be stronger than I thought.”

Hugo grins, the twist of his lips amusing. “Yeah, I’ve seen a different side to her the past week. She’s a powerhouse when she wants to be. At least I was left uninjured after our run-in. Hunter learned the hard way that she isn’t to be messed with.”

My brow arches. This is the first I’m hearing about any confrontation between Isabelle and Hunter.

Hugo chuckles. “Hey, I’m no snitch. If you want to know all the deets, you’ll have to pry it out of Hunter or Izzy.”

I shove my hands in the pockets of my suit before glaring at him. Hugo is the first man I’ve come across who doesn’t quake in his boots from my furious glare. *Stupid bastard.*

As my brain tries to devise acceptable praise for Hugo, I remain quiet. It isn’t that I don’t like issuing praise, but my staff’s acclamations usually come in a monetary form. Hugo will be rewarded for aiding Isabelle today with a hefty bonus

check, but I told Isabelle I'd thank him on her behalf, so I'll follow through on my agreement.

“Isabelle wanted me to thank—”

“Don't thank me, Isaac.” Hugo swipes his hand in front of himself. “I should have never let her out of my sight.”

I don't refute his statement since everything he said is true.

Happy to avoid an awkward conversation, Hugo heads back to my town car. “Do you want me to collect you tomorrow afternoon?”

A switch inside me flicks on as excitement heats my blood. “No, I'll take the DB out for a spin.”

Hugo waggles his brows before securing the charger for the satellite phone off the passenger seat. “Just in case you need it.”

After handing the equipment to me, he thrusts out his hand in offering. With a wry grin, I shift the satellite phone to my left hand before accepting his gesture. He uses my imbalance to his advantage. He pulls me in for a man-hug, his hand slapping my back as if he's more a friend than an employee. “Call if you need me.”

“Thanks. I will.” I spin on my heels and walk back into the cabin without a backward glance, hating the mirth his tone was dripped in.

## CHAPTER 26



## ISABELLE

I've always trusted my intuition. From now on, I'm going to listen to it. Something was drawing me to the barn, but every step I took had my legs quivering more. It wasn't just the horrifying visual that caused my distress, it was the unimaginable smell.

I never want to smell anything like that ever again.

When I joined the Bureau, I envisioned that I'd help people like my Uncle Tobias helped me, but I haven't done anything helpful since I started my position six months ago. If anything, I've hindered more people than I've aided. And even more concerning than that is the fact I've hurt the people I care about the most. Maybe I'm not cut out to be an agent. Perhaps I'm not strong enough to handle this type of career.

My somber thoughts are interrupted by a door creaking open. My eyes float up from the brown shag rug to where the noise came from. When my eyes lock in on Isaac leaning in the doorjamb, watching me cautiously, my heart skips a beat. His white dress shirt is rolled up at the sleeves, and its collar is stained with the mascara that ran down my face when he carried me to the car.

After his eyes finish their lengthy appraisal of my body, he pushes off his feet and heads my way. Every step he takes

makes my pulse intensify. My heart grew so large it barely fits in my chest from the attentiveness he displayed during our drive to the cabin. I've never felt safer and protected than I do now.

Without a syllable seeping from his lips, he scoops me into his arms, then carries me to the other side of the master suite. His manly scent invades my every waking sense. It's the only smell capable of removing the putrid odor embedded on my skin.

My breath hitches halfway between my lungs and my throat when the white-washed door is pushed open. The first thing my gaze locks in on is a canopy of trees swaying in the breeze above the glass ceiling. Potted plants and hanging pots cover nearly every free surface, and a double-headed shower sits on the right-hand side wall. The backsplash has been done with smooth pebble rocks, adding a touch of allure to the rustic design of the space. Bamboo walls cover three sides of the room, leaving one remaining wall, which is made entirely out of glass, providing endless views of the dense forest the cabin backs on to.

When I notice a copper clawfoot tub sitting in front of a glass wall, my eyes shoot to Isaac in silent questioning. A devilish smirk tugs his lips high before he nods. After placing me onto the speckled white stone countertop, he turns the bathtub faucets on full blast. Jasmine and lilies filter in the air when he places fragrant bath products into the massive flow of water.

Once the tub is full, he toes off his shoes, kicks them to the side, then pivots around to face me. Tears once again well in my eyes, but this time they're from the tender possessiveness in his unique eyes.

“Isabelle... don’t. Please don’t cry.”

Isaac crosses the room with a sense of urgency, reaching me in less than a breath. His thumbs brush away the tears before they fall on my face as his eyes nurture me as only they can. The steam from the water flowing into the bathtub and the heat radiating off him soon have my cheeks flushing.

The longer I stare into his mesmerizing eyes, the more my mind is freed of the horrific incident I witnessed. In no time at all, it’s just the man who wakes my every sense with nothing but the brush of his fingertip and me.

The air shifts when he glides the back of his hand down my cheeks. He knows what has caused their change in coloring. He knows what he does to me. When his index finger traces my lips, his touch is so tender, it can barely be classified as a touch. It’s like a cloud floating by my face—soft and gentle.

When my teeth graze the pad of his finger, the ache gnawing my chest lowers to my soaked sex. He tastes delicious. Manly, yet oh-so-perfect. A needy, animalistic groan rips from Isaac’s throat when I suck his finger into my mouth. He stares down at me with lusty eyes before taking a step back, freeing his finger from my mouth.

“I need to take care of you.”

“You are.” My voice is a husky whisper, full of unmissable yearnings. “In the best way you know how.”

For the first time, a wash of hesitation crosses Isaac’s face.

“I want this,” I whisper breathlessly as my eyes dance between his. “I want you.”

As I undo the buttons on his suit jacket, I keep my eyes planted on him. He maintains my eye contact until the very



last button is unclasped. When I shimmy his coat off my shoulders, air hisses between his teeth. His gaze is hungry and wanton, and one hundred percent focused on me.

After flicking off my ballet flats, I pop down from the counter. I pace toward him with my hips swinging and my eyes wide, not the least bit confronted that I'm standing before him in mismatched panties and a push-up bra. I didn't expect to see him this weekend, so I didn't pack for the occasion. If the unbridled look of lust in his eyes and the massive bulge in the crotch of his pants is anything to go by, I don't think he's noticed my silk bra doesn't match my cotton panties.

I sway when I stand in front of him. The sheer sight of his handsome face takes my breath away. "Take it all away. Mark me with your mouth. Your body. Your scent—"

Before the final word escapes my mouth, Isaac pounces. A knee-knocking blur of teeth, lips, and tongue soon have me purring like a kitten. His kiss reflects his hunger. It tells me he's starved of my taste, and that he'll never get enough.

The coolness of the countertop gives relief to my overheated skin when he plants my backside where he placed it when we entered the bathroom. Not relinquishing my mouth from his, his hand slithers up my damp, slick skin, only stopping to cup my aching breast. He rolls my nipple between his index finger and thumb, his talented hand turning my breaths ragged in under a minute.

When he slides a second hand beneath the waistband of my panties, the muscles in my stomach bunch. His thumb circles my clit, forcing my back to arch.

"Isaac..." I moan in a breathless pant.

His mouth steals every wispy moan and grunt erupting from my throat. He laps them up as effectively as he toys with my clit, bringing me to the edge so quickly, giddiness clusters in my head. My sprint to release gains momentum like a tsunami. It's a blinding, soul-stealing pace.

Isaac tugs on my bottom lip one last time before his dedication moves to my neck. My core tightens when he marks my skin with his teeth and lips. I love being claimed by him. Being devoured. Taken.

As his relentless circular pattern on my clit continues, my hips instinctively gyrate. I'm close to toppling over the brink, but my body is yearning for more. It wants more of him—his touch, his smell.

Just him.

Intuiting my needs, Isaac pushes two fingers into my soaked pussy. When he flicks the bud of nerves inside me, my head crashes into the vanity mirror. My body doesn't register the pain. All it can feel is pleasure. It's shivering in delight.

Storm clouds form in the sky just as fast as my looming release gathers intensity. It hisses and cracks as effectively as me when Isaac clamps his teeth on my erect nipple. His bite sends me freefalling over the edge.

As his name is torn from my throat, my hands dart out in search of something I can tether to, to lessen the spasms rocketing through my body. After one hand clasps the copper faucet and the other secures a firm hold on Isaac's shoulder, my pussy clenches around his fingers as I ride the intensity of my awe-inspiring orgasm.

“Eyes, Isabelle. Give me your eyes.”

When I do, he watches me unravel beneath him, loving that my body submitted to him without him removing an article of clothing.

Several fierce, tremoring minutes later, I loosen my grip on his shoulder to tackle with the pearl buttons of his shirt. My movements are frantic and rushed. I'm incapable of thinking rationally when he's nearby. Pleasure shoots through my core when his trousers and black boxers closely follow the removal of his shirt. As my eyes scan his chiseled body, my mouth dries. It's too perfect to describe. Athletic, yet with a heart-cracking scattering of muscles in all the right places. I swear there's not an ounce of fat on him, except in much-needed regions. His cock is so magnificent, it almost hurts to look at it—thick, long, and mouthwateringly delicious.

After curling his arm around my back, he carries me to the double-headed shower. While he twists on the shower knobs, I nibble on the day-old stubble on his jaw. Once the water is heated to a comfortable temperature, Isaac positions us until we're under the spout of liquid flowing from the copper showerhead.

Warm water drenches my hair before sliding down my face to cling to the curve in my top lip. Isaac laps up every drop that fails to escape the bow of my mouth before adjusting my position. He tilts my back to a forty-five-degree angle, encouraging my feet to dig into his spectacular backside. He grips my neck with one hand before securing a firm hold on my right hip with the other. Even being slippery standing in the shower with no walls to support my weight, I'm not the least bit concerned that he'll drop me. His secure hold makes it seem as if I'm as light as a feather.

The muscles in his abdomen constrict when he lines up his cock with the entrance of my pussy. His eyes collide with mine for the quickest second before he hilts me in one swift, fluid motion. An aching zing fires through to my core from being stretched so wide, but it isn't a painful ache. It's so pleasurable, passion dashes through my body.

His hold aids him in gliding me up and down his rigid cock. He fucks me at a pace that has me eagerly chasing the next wave. The water tumbling down my chest, past my breasts, and over my throbbing clit adds to our combustible lovemaking. It makes me hot all over while giving relief to the brutal pounds my pussy is being hit with.

“Pinch your nipples, Isabelle.” Isaac's deep timbre vibrates right through to my drenched pussy. “Show me how horny you are, baby. I want to watch you touch yourself.”

*Oh, God.*

Confident he'd never drop me, I remove my arms from around his shoulders and cup my breasts. I squeeze them together before tweaking my nipples like he always does. It should feel stupid fondling myself while being fucked beyond recognition, but it doesn't. The wild grunts Isaac releases as I toy with my breasts have my core contracting so fast, my next climax is mere seconds away.

“Eyes, Isabelle,” he demands, intuiting me as only he can. “I want to watch you unravel, to see your pupils dilate and your eyes spark before pretty little moans tear from your throat.”

His pumps become more frantic, more precise. Every stroke hits that spot deep inside me making my core clench tighter and my pussy get wetter.

“Oh... ah... oh my God.”

When Isaac shifts his head to the side, his nostrils flare, and his grip on my neck tightens. Its firmness sends bolts of pleasure down my spine. Immensely interested in discovering what he’s glaring at, I stray my eyes in the direction he’s looking. My pussy milks his cock when a visual too risqué for words enters my vision. Because storm clouds are hovering above our heads, and the bathroom light is switched off, our reflection is bouncing back from the darkened glass wall. It isn’t as bright as a mirror, but it’s clear enough I can see every muscle in Isaac’s flawless body contracting as he pounds into me without restraint. The image reflecting back is so primal, so raw, so... *Oh!*

“Eyes, Isabelle!” His rough command adds to the violent shakes hammering me as another orgasm scorches through my veins. “You’re so gorgeous when you come. So sexy. So fucking beautiful.”

Isaac waits for my shudders to lessen before stepping us out of the spray. When he withdraws his still-throbbing cock, I feel instantly hollow. The empty feeling doesn’t linger for long. The image of Isaac stroking himself sends fiery warmth spreading across every inch of my body.

He drags his hand to the base before returning it to the crown, his pumps quick, almost brutal. When his hooded eyes collide with mine, my name comes tearing out of his throat in sync with hot cum shooting out of his swollen knob. It splashes over my stomach and halfway up my chest, coating me as effectively as my arousal drenched his cock.

He continues his seamless pumps until every drop of his spawn is expelled, then he lifts his hand to rub it into my skin. My heart swells when he smears his still-warm semen over my

chest, my stomach, around my neck, and down my arms. He's keeping his word on washing away the horrid scent embedded on my skin by replacing it with his own intoxicating smell. And, at the same time, he's once again claiming me as his.

## CHAPTER 27



## ISABELLE

“*I*sabelle,” says a deep voice to my left. “Wake up!”

Jolting, my torso shoots off the bed as my bewildered eyes bounce around an unknown room. It takes me several terrifying seconds to realize I’m in the suite of Isaac’s cabin. My shirt is damp from sweat, and my heart is wildly beating.

I suffocate a scream when Isaac’s hand unexpectedly brushes my shoulder. “You’re okay. You’re safe,” he croons, his voice low and nurturing.

Bedsheets shuffling sounds through my ears when he molds the front of his body to my heavily panting back. He cocoons his body around mine, making me feel safe and protected. No words filter from his mouth. He just patiently waits for me to regather the composure I lost in the midst of a nightmare. Yesterday morning’s unfathomable event just replayed in explicit detail in my dreams. It felt so real, I thought I was back in the barn watching Carlyle’s skin drip from his body.

When a brutal shudder tremors through me, Isaac tugs me in closer. My chest puffs out to accommodate my enlarging heart when he presses his lips to my hairline before gliding his hand up and down my arm. His body heat eases the shivers



rattling my bones, but it's his protective hold that's greater than any inferno. Now everything he said yesterday makes sense. He's a protector. It's how he keeps those he loves safe while also displaying how much he loves them.

Two-day-old stubble scratches my cheek when I crank my neck back to peer at him. "I love you, Isaac." My voice is still harsh from recently waking up, but it's also filled with emotions.

Isaac's chest swells when he sucks in a big breath. After releasing it, he lowers his eyes to mine. The admiration in them has fresh tears pricking in mine. These tears are more noble than the ones I shed while sleeping.

After kicking off the bedsheets covering my legs, I shift my position until my bottom rests on the balls of my feet, and my face is directly in front of his. He assesses my body with precise detail before the most deliciously wicked smirk curls his plump lips. Not waiting for permission, I seal my mouth over his. His lips are warm and taste like cinnamon and coffee. He must have eaten before rejoining me back in bed.

Our kiss is slow and tender, a sensual mix of gentle nips, plunging tongues, and soft moans. In the process of our heart-stuttering embrace, I somehow go from kneeling on the bed to straddling Isaac's lap. I grind down against him three times, loving that his cock lengthens with every grind I do.

Just as I'm about to rub against him for the fourth time, he slips off the bed, taking me with him. "I want to taste you, Isabelle." His needy words vibrate on my lips. "But first, I have to feed you."

His efficient strides have us reaching the wooden kitchen more quickly than a heartbeat. I huff when he places me on the

granite countertop. His kiss awoke my libido, and it was hoping he was on the menu.

Hearing my shameful protest, Isaac pivots around to face me. I'm only wearing one of his short-sleeve t-shirts and a pair of modest panties, but he looks at me as if I'm the most precious jewel in the world. "Food first. Then you'll be dessert."

Several core-clenching seconds pass in silence. Isaac is the first to break our intense stare-down. He drops his eyes to watch my tongue leisurely slide across my top lip. Happy I have him right where I want him, I return my tongue to its rightful spot, then lock my eyes with Isaac.

Excitement shoots through me when he mutters, "You'll pay for that."

Stealing my chance to reply, he removes eggs, bacon, and a loaf of bread from the fridge. He doesn't ask what I'd like to eat. That isn't how he operates. He's so confident he can read me, he doesn't feel the need to seek assurance. I'm starving, so I'll happily eat anything he presents without protest. I did the same thing yesterday when he took care of me.

Isaac was attentive and gentle while also being firm when needed. He stressed that nothing I could have done would have made a difference because the gentleman hanging in the barn was most likely deceased before I became an agent. He gave me space to gather my thoughts in peace before offering a shoulder to cry on when the vivid images became too much to bear. He's been perfect in every single way, and my love for him has grown even more substantial the past twenty-four hours.

With loved-up eyes, I hop off the kitchen counter. "Did you need any help?"

Isaac stares at me, dumbfounded. He discovered the hard way that I'm not a skilled cook. One morning, I set the toaster on fire. It wasn't my fault. I wanted my toast a little browner, but when Isaac distracted me with his skillful tongue, I forgot I had pressed the toast button down for the second time.

I twist my lips. "I can make coffee?"

Isaac smiles before pointing to an overhead cabinet above my head. "Coffee and sugar are in there."

For the next twenty minutes, Isaac prepares scrambled eggs, maple syrup bacon, and French toast. The smell filtering through the cabin is nearly as intoxicating as him. I aid him the best I can. I gather the eggshells from the counter and place them in the waste bin before setting the small two-seater table in the living area with cutlery, placemats, and glasses. It's early in the morning, but the setting looks like a romantic date since it's next to an open fireplace.

When Isaac gathers two plates overflowing with scrumptious breakfast treats, I grab the pot of coffee and carton of orange juice. The only audible noise heard for the next several minutes are the moans erupting from my mouth as I sample each delicious item on my plate. Isaac remains quiet, but I can feel him watching me which, in turn, makes my moans more dramatic than necessary. I can't help but tease him.

Satisfied, and full to the brim, I push my plate away before leaning back in my chair. As I rub my almost bulging stomach, I scan the room. It's a decent size, nearly the size of the living room in my apartment, but exposed vaulted ceilings give it a homey feel. The roof is curved just like the half circle window in Isaac's bedroom, and it is varnished in the same color. A

framed oil painting of a country setting hangs above the open fireplace, and a selection of framed photos are below it.

My inner monologue trails off when my eyes zoom in on a picture in the center of the mantelpiece. It's of me—sleeping.

I shoot my eyes to Isaac. “When did you take that?”

His lips lift against his mug. “The night you slept at my apartment. That was after you gave me your panties.”

When my mouth falls open, he cockily winks. After standing from his seat, he gathers the picture I'm referring to. It's a close-up photo of my face. My eyes are shut, my mouth is ajar, and smears of mascara are under my eyes.

I gag. “Why would you frame that? I look wretched.”

Isaac's grin slackens as he murmurs, “It's the only photo I have of you.”

A dull ache hits my chest. Because we were forced to keep our relationship a secret, we never got to be an average couple. We didn't go on fancy dates or meet each other's friends and family. We kept our life hidden away, not just from the world, but ourselves as well. Our relationship was never given a chance to get out of the gates since it was shrouded in secrecy from the beginning.

“I'm going to resign from my position at the FBI.”

Isaac places my photo back onto the mantel before pivoting around to face me. “I don't—”

“I'm not just doing it for you, Isaac.” I join him near the fireplace. “I'm also doing it for me. I can't live without you, but I can't have both you and my career, so I'm choosing you above anything else.”

He cups my cheek, his thumb rubbing the invisible tears he thinks he sees in my eyes. “If Theresa’s investigation is rattling you, don’t worry about it. My lawyer is working on having her investigation squashed. She has no credible evidence against you. Once it’s cleared, we can be together.”

“It isn’t IA or Theresa I’m worried about. It’s me. I literally can’t breathe without you in my life. The past two weeks, everything was numb. Not just my heart, but my entire body.” Tears loom in my eyes. “Furthermore, the Bureau could transfer me to anywhere in the country on a whim. I don’t want that.”

He clasps my hand in his, then lifts it to his mouth. Anticipation sparks through me when he kisses my palm. He doesn’t need to speak any words to reflect that he cares for me. His actions show it. His dominance. The way he protects me. Every little thing he does demonstrates that he cares for me more than words ever could. Some people may call me naïve, especially since it’s so early in our relationship, but I’d give up everything I have to ensure Isaac remains a part of my life.

“I don’t care about anything that’s happened in your past, Isaac. The vendetta with Col, your fighting career, I don’t care about any of it. It’s in the past, and it can stay in the past. I want to concentrate on our future. Right here and now. Nothing else matters.”

His brows fetter. “So you want to sweep it under the rug, pretend it never happened?”

I shake my head. “No. You’ll always remember what happened. Just like you’ll always love Ophelia.” His shoulders square at my comment, but he remains quiet. “I can live with that, Isaac. As long as I have you in my life, I can handle anything.”

He takes a few moments to consider my statement before seeking my gaze. “And what happens if this doesn’t work?” He gestures his hand between us. “What happens to you then?”

A painful knot twists in my stomach, but I’m confident enough in what we have to shut it down just as quickly as his worries. “That will *never* happen. I’m yours, Isaac, and you’re mine.”

Pride flashes in his eyes pleased I responded how he’d hoped. That’s not the only thing they’re displaying, though. Cockiness is also beaming out of him. I wonder if I can shut it down just as swiftly?

“But if it did...” His grin slackens as he glares at me. “... I’ll just find another sugar daddy to take care of me.”

My knees buckle when a sexy-as-sin growl emits from his mouth. He yanks me closer to him by gripping my ass cheeks, plastering my body to his. When his mouth seals over mine, I inwardly cheer at the success of my tease. His kiss is dominating, greedy, and toe-curling good. It promises his next set of words is nothing but a guarantee.

“I’ll ruin you, so you’ll never want another man.”

I stare into his heavy-lidded gaze. “You already have.”

Plates shatter when Isaac clears the dining room table with his arm. Once the plates, cups, and cutlery are scattered onto the floor, he plants my backside onto the tabletop before inching his hand toward my shirt. A cool breeze buds my nipples when he shreds the rigid material straight off my chest. It falls to the ground like tissue paper, no match for his brutal force. The dominance radiating out of him steals the air from my lungs. I’ve never seen him so unhinged before.

He shoves my shoulder until my back is splayed on the table, and my legs are dangling over the edge. I eye him curiously when he glides my panties down my thighs. He's always been more a panties-shredder than a remover.

"I'm adding these to my private collection." Dampness pools between my legs when he raises them to his nose to take in a huge whiff. "You always smell so fucking good."

*Oh, God. I think I just had a mini-orgasm.*

After slipping the damp material into his pocket, he yanks his trousers to his knees. My eyes widen when his cock springs free from his trunks. It is so big, so thick, so drool-worthy.

"I'm dying to taste you, Isabelle, but you need to be taught a lesson, so it must wait."

A long, salivating groan rolls up my throat when he lunges forward, stuffing his densely-veined cock into my ravenous pussy. Because I wasn't prepared for his onslaught, it takes many frantic pumps for lust to overtake the pain associated with taking a man as large as him without foreplay, but when it does, our exchange is pure brilliance. His manly scent infuses the air as his big cock pounds me toward hysteria.

"Do you like teasing me, Isabelle?" A bead of sweat rolls down his cheek before splashing onto my stomach. The heat bristling between us is not caused by the fire roaring on our left—it is from him, the man who invades my every thought even when I'm asleep. "Answer me, Isabelle."

The rough arrogance of his voice sends tingles darting down my spine. My climax is teetering, dangerously close to freefalling, but it won't happen without Isaac, especially if I refuse to answer his question. So, with that in mind, I chew on

my bottom lip before nodding. I love forcing his dominant side to be unleashed. Knowing I have the power to unhinge a man with authority like Isaac is euphoric. Nothing rattles him except his jealousy.

“Wrong answer,” Isaac mutters before increasing the tempo of his hips, screwing me until I’m screaming like a madwoman.



## CHAPTER 28



## ISAAC

Isabelle learned a valuable lesson today. I do not like being teased, especially when it entails her being touched by another man. I may have sustained her orgasm until she begged for forgiveness. She's a stubborn little thing. Her pleas took longer to spill from her mouth than they did when I made her plead for clemency in my apartment. But, in some ways, I'm just as stubborn, so her begs for forgiveness soon filtered through my ears.

Isabelle rolls her shoulders before leaning deeper into my embrace. "Mmm."

"Does it feel good?" I add an extra squirt of shampoo to her hair before rubbing it into her scalp in a circular motion.

"Uh-huh. Sooo good."

We're lounging in the bath we planned to bathe in yesterday. I'm hoping it will relax my bunched muscles while also taking care of Isabelle. My muscles aren't tense from the vigorous activities we undertook on my dining room table, but because they're aware of the cruel world we must emerge back into this evening. It would be nice to stay out of the rat-race for a few more days, but unfortunately, that's not attainable for a man with my responsibilities.

The only time I turn off my thoughts is when Isabelle is beneath me, but since she can't be attached to my cock twenty-four-seven, we have no choice, we must face reality. Hopefully, someone there will be able to help Isabelle with the terrible nightmares she's having.

After our antics on the dining room table, I carried Isabelle back to our bed. Since she was nearly unconscious, I was confident she'd drift into a peaceful, undisturbed sleep, so you can imagine my shock when she woke up screaming, not even an hour later. When she realized it was just a dream, she tried to put on a brave front, but the fear in her beautiful eyes gave away her deceit.

That's when I carried her into the bathroom to have a bath. I've never been the nurturing type, but Isabelle brings out sides of me I didn't know existed. Caring for her is as natural as breathing to me.

Once the suds have been removed from her hair, I stand from the tub, taking Isabelle with me. Goosebumps prickle her skin when I stride across the room to gather a towel. Winter is approaching, impinging the cabin with a nippy chill—even more so since I didn't re-stoke the fire, knowing we'd be leaving shortly.

“Thank you,” Isabelle whispers once I've dried her from the luxurious strands of her hair to the tips of her toes.

I dump the towel on the rail. “Get dressed, then pack your belongings. We should probably head out before the next storm rolls in.”

When I peer up at the glass roof, Isabelle follows my gaze. Numerous dark clouds formed the hour we were in the tub. “Good idea.” She presses a kiss to my mouth before scurrying into the main bedroom.

I pull on my black slacks and white business shirt left discarded on the floor before gathering my satellite phone off the bedside table. “I have a couple of calls to make before we head off, so I’ll wait for you outside.”

Isabelle stops yanking her jeans up her legs to turn her worried eyes to mine. “You don’t have to hide away to make phone calls, Isaac. You can trust me.”

“This isn’t about trust, Isabelle. There are just some things I can’t disclose to you yet.” When she sighs, I bridge the gap between us, my steps fast and efficient. “When I can tell you what’s going on, I will, but until then, you need to trust me.” I lift my hand to cradle her cheek. “You trust me, don’t you?”

She nods. “Yes, because without trust, we’ll have nothing.”

“Exactly. That’s why you need to trust that I wouldn’t keep anything from you unless it were important. I wish I could share everything with you now, but I can’t... not yet. But when I can, I will. I promise. Okay?”

A smile curls on her lips. “Okay. I can work with that.” After straying her eyes over her clothing discarded chaotically throughout our room, she returns them to me. “I should be ready to leave in around twenty minutes. Will that give you enough time to make your calls?”

When I nod, she stares lovingly into my eyes. “Okay, I’ll meet you outside in twenty.”

“Stop looking at me like that, Isabelle, or we’ll never leave this cabin.”

“Please.”

When my brow arches, a pink hue flushes her cheeks.

“I said that out loud, didn’t I?”

My cheeks groan when they rise high. “Do you need me to scratch your itch before I make my calls?” When I step closer to her, I rake my eyes down her seductive body, ensuring she didn’t miss the innuendo in my tone.

Her eyes shift to the window at the same time a crack of lightning brightens the late afternoon sky. “Does your car have a hard-top roof?” Her bottom lip drops when I shake my head. “Then I’ll meet you outside in twenty minutes.”

She’s as scared of storms as she is of flying. She must have a vendetta against the sky.

After assuring her I’ll keep her safe, I head outside to make my calls. Parker answers his phone on the very first ring.

“Boss.”

I drift my eyes back to the cabin to ensure Isabelle isn’t within earshot. This is one conversation I never want her to overhear.

Confident the coast is clear, I ask, “Any updates?”

“Two point four million dollars is scheduled to be transferred Thursday morning at nine. The withdrawal will be distributed from your Cayman account.”

“Will the funds be traceable?”

Parker barks out a laugh. “No. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

“Good. Let me know the particulars once it’s been processed.”

“Will do.” His tone is as flat as his personality.

“Parker...”

I hear his phone hit his ear, before, “Yes, boss.”

“I want to be there when it’s done. I want to make sure it’s handled right.”

My request is met with a length of silence. I’m so convinced he has hung up on me, I lower my phone from my ear to check our call is still connected. It is. He’s just quiet.

I discover why when he growls, “Boss—”

He only says one word, but his tone speaks volumes. “No, Parker. It wasn’t a request. I’ll be there.” I disconnect our call, refusing to answer to a member of my staff. I am the boss. I pay his salary. That means he does as I tell him, not the other way around.

The hairs on my arm bristle when I gallop down the three stairs at the front of the cabin. While heading to the attached garage, I dial a memorized number into my satellite phone.

“Everything all right?” Hugo questions not even three rings later.

“Yes. We’ll be leaving the cabin shortly. I want Roger to scan her apartment again before we arrive.”

I hear him scrub his chin. “Shouldn’t you be instructing Hunter that, since he’s your head of security?”

“*Was*. That title is negotiable at the moment. Have Isabelle’s apartment scanned and update the security personnel in her building. Tell them no one, not even if they have police credentials, is allowed access to her floor without first running it through me.”

“All right.” Hugo’s reply is reserved like he’s dying to say something, but unsure if he will. “What time are you arriving?”

My gaze lifts to the sky. “If the rain holds off, we should be there around four o’clock. I’ll drop Isabelle off in the underground garage of her building. Until Regan gets the IA’s case dropped, we can’t be seen together.”

“All right. I’ll wait for her in the hallway of her apartment at four.”

I cough, warning my throat it better not rattle with nerves before saying, “Isabelle is unaware of the surveillance camera that was in her apartment. I want it to remain that way. She’s dealing with enough issues at the moment, we don’t need to add more.”

“I understand,” Hugo replies coolly. “Won’t say a peep.”

“Because I don’t want her left alone, I’ll have you stay with her during the day, and I’ll stay with her at night. She’s still rattled about what she witnessed yesterday.”

“Okay, that’s understandable; it was pretty horrific.” Hugo nervously coughs before asking, “Is Izzy aware of the circumstances that led to your arrest yet?”

My jaw tenses. “No, and I trust since I made you privy to that information, it’ll remain that way until I decide otherwise.”

“I’d never say anything, Isaac. I just know she’d prefer to hear it from you than another source.”

“I plan on telling her when the timing is right. *Now* is not the right time.” My tone indicates this isn’t up for further discussion. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

I’m lowering the satellite phone from my ear when I hear Hugo say, “Before you go.”

“Yes,” I snap, my agitation over his line of questioning clear.

“Hunter hasn’t stopped since he arrived at Parkerville. Cut him some slack.”

My back molars grind together when he hangs up on me. I understand what he’s saying. Hunter is a loyal employee, and he’s a hard worker, but he missed critical information about Nick’s stalker, stuff that could have been fatal for Nick and his unborn son. If a mistake affects those I love, I refuse to let it go unpunished. Col’s righthand man learned that the hard way.



## CHAPTER 29



## ISABELLE

*I*flop back with a huff. It only took me two minutes to pack, but since I told Isaac I'd give him twenty to finalize his calls, I have to spend the next eighteen minutes sprawled on a ruffled bed that smells like Isaac and sex mixed together. It's a scent that could be bottled up and sold for millions, but it's making me more restless than calm. I don't even have a phone to occupy my time since Hunter smashed it. A few rounds of Candy Crush would have killed more boredom than brain cells right now.

As my head lolls to the side, I spot Isaac passing the bedroom window. He has a large phone attached to his ear, and his lips are moving. As much as my heart ached that he didn't want to make personal calls in front of me, I understand his hesitation. I deceived him for months, so it'll take even longer than that to regain his trust.

With that in mind, I roll onto my opposite hip, so I can count the petals of the wildflowers in a vase on the bedside table.

That takes all of ten minutes—a very dull and boring ten minutes. With my boredom paramount, I snatch my satchel off the bedside table and dawdle toward the front door of the cabin. Ten minutes is close to twenty, right?

When cold winds blast through me, I drop my satchel to the ground to fasten the buttons on my Burberry trench coat. No, I didn't pay thousands of dollars for the jacket. Just like my Juicy Couture sweatpants, my coat was another San Francisco thrift shop diamond in the rough. It's amazing what people give to charities when it's no longer in season.

"Dammit!" I murmur when my satchel snags on a nail in the wooden deck, causing a hole approximately the size of a quarter in the bottom right-hand corner.

Wanting to ensure there isn't anything small enough to fall through the hole, I search my satchel. Considering how much it usually houses, it's reasonably empty. There are chocolate wrappers, my Kindle that hasn't been charged in months, my purse, and my FBI-issued pistol.

I stuff the chocolate wrappers into the front pocket of my jeans to ensure they don't slip out before securing the zipper on my satchel. When I take the last three stairs of the porch, in the quietness of the forest, I hear Isaac's deep voice penetrating from around the corner. After hooking my satchel onto my shoulder, I quicken my pace, eager to be near him again. His tone is flat, revealing his mood has somewhat dampened the past twenty minutes.

Panicked it could be something to do with his brother, I walk even quicker. He notices my approach in an instant, encouraging it with a summoning wiggle of his fingers. When I reach him, I wrap my arms around his midsection before nuzzling my head into his chest. His seductive scent overtakes the dampness in the air compliments to the rapidly-forming clouds. He tugs me in closer before returning his attention to his caller.

“Henry, I have to go. I’ll call you again tomorrow morning,” he says into a phone that looks as heavy as a brick. “Yes... okay. Bye.”

“You and Henry have grown friendly since our weekend away.” When he stiffens, I lift my head off his chest to peer into his eyes. “That was Henry, wasn’t it?”

Dread rains down on me when he shakes his head. “No, it wasn’t.”

I just heard him say Henry as clear as day, didn’t I?

*Oh no.*

“Was that Henry’s father?” *The suspected mob boss of New York City.*

Isaac hears the accusation in my tone I didn’t mean to express. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to, Isabelle. I don’t want to lie to you—”

“Then don’t. Tell the truth.”

Over my interrogation, he pulls away from me so swiftly, air blasts my face. When he strides to a vehicle housed under a white cover in a wooden garage attached to the cabin, I quickly follow after him.

“Who were you talking to?”

The low-hanging sun catches the dust filtering in the air, making it look like fireworks exploding in the darkening sky when he yanks off the car cover. “It was Henry Gottle *Senior.*”

The distress that’s been plaguing my stomach the two weeks returns stronger than ever. “Why were you talking to him?”

Anger flashes across Isaac's face. "Stop interrogating me, Isabelle. You're not on the job."

"I'm not asking for my job. I'm trying to protect you—"

"You don't need to protect me! It's not your job to protect me!"

"Yes, it is!" My angry voice reverberates through the dense forest. "It's my job to defend you as honorably as you'll defend me." I step closer to him until our heaving chests battle for space. "You said you protect the people you love. It's no different for me. I love you, Isaac, so I'll protect you with everything I have until I take my last breath—"

Before I can comprehend what is happening, a set of delicious lips seal over mine. He attacks my mouth so savagely, my feet lift from the ground. They curl around his waist when he pins to his car by his crotch. He kisses me senseless, holding nothing back until I'm struggling to remember my name, much less what we were arguing about.

After inching back, he rests his forehead against mine. The uniqueness of his eyes hits me full force from his closeness. They're so beautiful, yet trouble. "Trust me, Isabelle." His low tone indicates his statement is more a plea than a demand. "I'll tell you everything when I can, not when I'm forced."

When I nod, the vibe immediately changes from my submissive response. I'm not meaning to be a brainless bimbo. I'm just not up for more fighting. Furthermore, he asked me to trust him. I can't do that and interrogate him at the same time. I also can't think straight when he kisses me as he did.

"You do realize, one day, I'll be strong enough to fight my attraction to you."

“No, you won’t.” His brow curls high as he shakes his head all cocky like. “Just like me hearing you say those three little words. It will forever take my breath away. It will never get old.”

I think my heart just burst.

After cupping his jaw, I kiss him gently, relaying how much his words impacted me. My heart swells even more when he allows me to guide the pace of our kiss. That’s a huge step for a man as dominant as him

By the time I pull back, I’m breathless and giddy, emotionally high from the raw passion displayed in our kiss. “I love you.”

Smiling, Isaac gathers my hands in his jawline, kisses each palm, then places them over his heart.

Now I’m certain my heart has burst.

We stand across from each other in silence, no words needed to express our strange kinship. I never believed in soul mates, but as I stand across from Isaac now, I’ve never believed in something more. He completes me, he’s my other half, and as I said earlier, I’ll do anything to keep him safe.

A loud clap of thunder interrupts our love-filled stare-down. It came from the clouds above our heads that have made the sky so dark—it seems a lot later than it is. When my eyes float over the classic-looking convertible Isaac pinned me to earlier, I shake like a leaf. It reminds me of a car James Bond would drive, and it’s sexy with its top off, but I’m petrified of storms.

I dart my eyes back to Isaac. “Can we put the top on before we leave?”

He smirks a delicious smile before shaking his head. “You can’t drive a classic with the top on.”

His eyes hold the same glimmer Hugo’s did when he told me all about his *baby*.

“Is this your *baby*?”

He nods again, his smile picking up. “A 1963 Aston Martin DB5.” His voice is higher than usual since his fondness for his car is filtering through his tone.

When he runs his hand along the curved front fender, jealousy makes itself known with my gut. I have no reason to be jealous when he murmurs, “She rides me *nearly* as good as you do.” He snickers at my reaction, loving the quick clench of my thighs. “Come on. Let me take you for a ride.” He opens the passenger door before dropping his eyes to mine. “Then perhaps you can take me for one.”

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Wind whips up my hair when Isaac maneuvers his car through the winding roads at the foothills of the mountain. For the past forty minutes, his concentration remained focused on the road, but I’ve caught the occasional glance he directed my way. He’s loving me sitting shotgun in his baby as much as I’m loving the chance to witness all sides of his personality. He’s in his element, and the sexiest I’ve ever seen him.

Leaning over, I give his trouser-covered thigh a gentle squeeze. When his muscles bunch from my meager touch, I smile, pleased to have sparked a reaction out of him.

The reactions keep coming when I tiptoe my fingers three inches higher. Isaac peers at me beneath lowered lashes, the

material of his trousers bunching around his stiff cock. “As much as I’d love nothing more than to feel your lips sliding down my shaft, I need hours, Isabelle. We don’t have hours. We only have minutes.”

“I could make it quick?”

He smirks, loving my confidence. “Things will never be quick between us.” He flashes me his eyes. They’re full of honest truths. “Furthermore, what kind of man would I be if I let you please me without returning the favor?”

“Pleasing you pleases me, Isaac.”

He growls. It’s a sexy as hell, but it ends our conversation.

When we arrive at the street my building is located on, my hair is blown out, and my cheeks are flushed from the fresh wind, but nothing can dampen the grin stretched across my face. Sitting in a classic car with a handsome specimen behind the wheel made me feel like Hollywood royalty. Like Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner undertaking a leisurely Monday afternoon drive.

After lowering his speed, Isaac narrows a baseball cap onto his head before hiding his highly recognizable eyes with a pair of aviator sunglasses. “Hugo will be waiting for you in your apartment. I’ll be back tonight.”

He pulls into the manager’s parking space at the front of the elevator banks. Even though I can’t see his eyes through his mirrored glasses, I can feel their heat studying my face.

“Okay. I’ll see you tonight.” I press a kiss to his lips, lingering a little longer when his aftershave stirs up excitement. “I love you.”

After kissing my palm, he places it on his chest, swelling my heart to a point of no return.



With reluctance, I climb out of his car and pace to the elevator banks. The flash of a sexy-as-sin smirk is the last thing I see when the elevator doors snap shut with me inside. When I catch my gaze in the mirrored wall, I do a little gig. My pupils are wide, making my brown eyes appear darker than normal, my cheeks are flushed, giving me an illuminating glow, and my lips are swollen from all the kisses we've shared the past two days. Signs of a person in love is all over my face, and for the first time ever, I agree with my body's judgment of the situation. I am in love. Wholly. Deeply. Will never be the same again.

I peer out the elevator when the doors pop open. It hasn't arrived at my floor. It's just conducting a brief stop at the lobby. My heart beats out a funky tune when I spot Brandon a mere second before the doors close. He's talking to a security officer near the reception desk. Things look heated.

"Brandon!"

I dash out of the elevator, scooting past an elderly lady hoping to catch it before it ascends. When Brandon tilts his head to see who is accosting him, my steps slow to a snail pace. Anger is bouncing off him in invisible waves. Not wanting to intrude on his private conversation, I linger to the side.

A short time later, Brandon joins me. He's frowning, his mood still low. "Are you aware no one can gain access to your floor without it first being approved by Isaac?"

"No, I wasn't aware of that." *But it does sound like something Isaac would do.*

"Not even an agent, for fuck's sake."

His surly mood is off-putting. He's usually the cheerful, friendly one who doesn't let anything get him down.

“What’s going on, Brandon? You seem a bit... *stressed*? Is it because I bailed on you at Parkerville? I’m sorry about that, I just wasn’t—”

“Don’t apologize, Izzy. You have nothing to be sorry for.” His tone is lower and sincerer than previously.

After clasping my hand in his, he guides me to a bank of chairs on the far side of the lobby. The security officer he was grappling with watches our every move, but he doesn’t encroach enough for me to feel threatened by him.

Brandon plops into a chair before scrubbing a hand over his tired eyes. His unnerving composure has my knees shaking so much, I have no choice but to sit next to him. “What’s going on?”

He licks his dry lips before forcing out, “Carlyle Shroud’s death came back as a homicide.”

I swallow bitterly, my eyes widening. “But he was... *hanging*.”

“I know, but the coroner determined he died before then.” He leans across to secure my hand in his. His wish to be close to me makes sense when he says, “They found poison in the food scraps in the kitchen. It looks like whoever killed him did it slowly in the hope it wouldn’t be noticed by the authorities.”

My stomach lurches as my chest grows heavy.

“It gets worse...” My eyes snap to his, certain things can’t get any worse. I’m proven wrong when he adds on, “Megan Shroud is in Ravenshoe. She has been for the past week.”

“How? We had protocols in place to ensure we knew her whereabouts.”

“We did. Every database in the country was fixated on her. She must not have used public transportation or hired a car.”

“Where is she?” My hammering heart is heard in my tone.

“She’s paying cash for a motel on the outskirts of town.” He nudges his head like the motel he is referring to is outside the revolving door of my building.

“Does Isaac know?”

Brandon shakes his head. “Not yet, but he soon will.”

I eye him curiously, seeking more information. He said his statement with too much confidence for it to be hearsay.

He exhales deeply as the vein in his neck works overtime. “The hospital Nick’s fiancée is staying at requested a police presence this afternoon. I hacked the hospital’s mainframe. Jenni’s blood workup showed she had a high dosage of Misoprostol in her system when she gave birth. It’s an illegal abortion drug only sold on the black market.”

*Oh, God.* I think I’m going to be sick.

I talk through the hand clamped over my mouth. “Do you believe Megan drugged her?”

Brandon sucks in a sharp breath before nodding. “The drug is found stateside in New York City. Small minority groups use it for terminations when they can’t afford a doctor.”

“Isaac will... he won’t handle this, Brandon... he loves his brother,” I murmur through panicked breaths.

“I know. That’s why I haven’t passed on any of the information to Hugo or Hunter yet. I wanted to get your

opinion first.” He stares intensely into my eyes, his admiration unexpected but highly craved. “You’re the only person I trust, Izzy.”

I jump in fright when someone unexpectedly touches my shoulder. Once I’ve gathered my heart from the floor, I swing my eyes to the person who just scared me half to death. It’s the security officer who’s been watching our exchange for the past ten minutes. “I’m sorry, Ms. Brahn, but there’s a gentleman by the name of Hugo requesting to be informed if you’re in the lobby.”

I nearly nod until the entirety of my exchange with Brandon trickles through my tired brain. Isaac won’t even let my work colleagues see me, so what are the chances he’ll let me investigate Megan’s reappearance in Ravenshoe?

With my heart in my throat, I shoot my eyes to Brandon. “Do you have your car here?”

Suspicion crosses his face, but he nods all the same.

“I need one final favor—”

“Anything, Izzy,” he assures without a snippet of hesitation.

After exhaling a big breath, I devote my attention back to the security officer. “Please inform Hugo that you have not seen me this afternoon.”

Ignoring his shocked expression, I clasp Brandon’s hand in mine before dashing toward the glass revolving door of my building. With my mind shut down and my heart wildly beating, I can only pray this won’t be the last time I break through the doors of this building.

## CHAPTER 30



## ISAAC

Due to traffic, I pull into the lot of my nightclub a little after five o'clock. The drive from my cabin took longer than predicted. I took the scenic route so I could enjoy the vision of Isabelle in the passenger seat of my car. She was dressed in her regular jeans and a beige jacket, but her smile made her dazzle like a diamond in the sun.

Last night was starkly contradicting.

We hardly slept a wink. It wasn't Isabelle's sexual prowess keeping us awake. It was her nightmares. Usually, her dreams are filled with sweet little moans and sighs that make my cock as hard as stone, but last night, she whimpered in her sleep. The ghastly image she witnessed yesterday morning must be playing havoc with her mind. I'll give it a few nights to see if I can settle her dreams by reverting them back to pleasurable fantasies. If not, I'll seek professional advice on helping her through this traumatic time. A shiver runs down my spine when I recall the visual of yesterday morning, so I can imagine how much it plagues Isabelle's thoughts.

After pulling into the manager's spot, I grab the framed photo of Isabelle from my cabin out of the glove compartment. I'm no longer willing to hide my relationship, so I plan to place her photo on my desk for the world to see. She's mine,

and I want everyone to be acutely aware of that—including Col Petretti. I'm ready if he makes a move. He won't know what hit him if he threatens Isabelle again.

Tina stops replenishing the glassware under the counter when she hears the back door of the club opening. "Hey, you're back. How did the negotiations go in New York?"

I smirk, pleased my ruse worked. "Good. Everything is great."

As I stride into my office, I shrug off my suit jacket before slinging it over the coat rack. When I glance at my desk, I catch sight of the documents Isabelle presented to me at the dingy hotel. I still can't fathom how Nick was so foolish he didn't read the document his lawyer supplied him. I paid his bill, assuming he had read the full report. I shouldn't be surprised. Nick has always been the goofball who cruises through life, happy to see where things take him. He was the very definition of a 'player.' Which isn't surprising, considering he learned most of his traits from me. That's all changed now, though. His fiancée, Jenni, was his game-changer. Just like Isabelle is mine.

After gathering the documents off my desk, I place them into the top drawer. I've just stored them away when a cell phone rings. My heart gallops when I realize it's my burner phone. I quickly pace across the room to dig it out of the breast pocket of my jacket. There's no name attached to the call—that's not unusual, we like to keep things simple—but I know who is calling me.

"I found Megan," Hunter informs before I can greet him. "I got her on a CTV image at a local deli this morning. I'm backtracking the video footage so I can follow her through town."

“How long will it take to find her?”

A keyboard being tapped sounds down the line. “Ten, twenty minutes, max.”

I’m about to reply, but a figure outside of my office steals my attention. Nick is standing in the middle of the nearly empty dance floor. My club won’t fill with patrons for a few more hours. Even being a Monday won’t stop hundreds of people from milling through my doors before midnight.

I divert my attention back to my phone. “Let me know as soon as you’ve found her.”

“Will do.”

Snapping the phone shut, I stride toward my office door to prop my shoulder on the doorframe. “You know how to fucking pick them.” My tone is harsh, still pissed at Nick’s stupidity on how he handled the entire Megan incident. He’s only twenty-two, but he’s an adult, and now a father, so he needs to take care of his responsibilities.

Nick’s head shoots sideways as his eyes widen. “Do you know where she is?”

“I’m taking care of it.”

When I walk back into my office, Nick quickly follows after me. “What do you mean you’re taking care of it?”

I sink into my leather chair before requesting for him to sit in the chair across from me. When he denies my request with a brisk shake of his head, I gesture more firmly. If I know my brother as well as I think I do, he will want to be seated when I show him the information Isabelle unearthed.

Nick sits across from me, his knee bobbing up and down as his nerves get the better of him. I wait for him to hide his



nervous twitch before asking, “Why didn’t you read the documents your lawyer gave you?”

“What are you talking about?” His high tone exposes his bewilderment. He’s genuinely shocked.

I snatch up the original envelope from his lawyer to throw it into his chest. When he realizes what it is, his lips furl. “She told me everything I needed to know—”

“No, she fucking didn’t!”

When he continues glaring at me in confusion, I snatch the envelope out of his hand to pull out the documents inside. I flick through the pages until I reach the page Isabelle displayed to me at the motel before returning it to Nick’s chest with a shove. “Read it!”

His throat works hard to swallow as he absorbs the information in front of him. “She was never pregnant?”

“She’s a fucking virgin.”

He stares up at me, disbelief etched all over his pale face.

“When the gynecologist’s scan didn’t find a fetus, he did a little more research. Her hymen was still intact. You went and got yourself a fucking psycho.” My angry roar bounces around my office. “She’s been in and out of the psychiatric ward the past year. She fled a few months ago after knocking the orderly out cold.”

Nick’s face goes white before he jumps out of his chair to pace back and forth in my office. “I fucking knew she wasn’t quite right.”

His bugged eyes lift to me when my outdated cell phone skates across my desk. I answer it while gathering photos out of my drawer to hand to Nick.

“Yes,” I snap down the phone, my mood surly.

“She’s staying in a rundown motel on the outskirts of town,” Hunter informs me.

My heart rate kicks into overdrive. “Get one of my men to that motel immediately.”

“What do you want him to do once he arrives?”

My eyes shift to the photo of Isabelle I just placed on my desk. Several seconds pass in silence as I recall what she said in my town car when we arrived at Megan’s family residence. I want to be the man she believes I am, but I also need to protect the people I love.

“Tell him to await further instructions.” I’m trying to bide some time so I can properly assess the situation, so careless mistakes aren’t made.

“Okay.”

When Hunter disconnects our call, heaving echoes through my office. The graphic images on how to complete an illegal cesarean were obviously too much for Nick’s stomach to handle. As he wipes away vomit from his bottom lip with the sleeve of his shirt, his pale, sweat-drenched face rises from the waste bin to me.

“How are you taking care of this?” His voice is hoarse from being sick, but there’s no denying it’s plea. He’s begging for me to ensure Megan will never have the chance to hurt him or his family again.

I’m going to uphold my pledge.

“You don’t want to know.” *And neither do I.*

When I help him off the floor, I stiffen when he mutters, “She could have killed them both.”

My eyes seek his gaze, demanding additional details. What does he mean she could have killed them?

My question is answered in the most sickening way. “We found out today that Jenni ingested an abortion drug. That’s why she bled out during delivery. It made her placenta erupt... or something like that.”

Fury overwhelms me. “Jesus Christ.”

I’m about to demand further information, but Nick shuts down my interrogation by stumbling out of my office. “I have to go, I have to get back to Jenni. Ryan is coming to interview her later today.”

Just before he breaks through my office door, I call his name. It feels like I’ve been sucker-punched when his eyes lock with mine. They’re brimming with unshed tears, but they’re the same pair of eyes that looked up at me in awe when he gave me the gift of life. The same pair of eyes I promised to protect no matter what.

“I’ll take care of this. You don’t have to worry. Megan will never hurt them again.”

The strain tainting Nick’s face eases from my statement. After dipping his chin, he walks out of my office.

I suck in much-needed air before pressing my cell to my ear.

“Boss.”

My palms slick with sweat when I say seven words I never thought I’d speak. “Take her to my warehouse in Hopeton.”

Hunter’s deep timbre is rickety when he replies, “My guy is still en route to the motel. I’ll let you know when he gets there.”

“Good.”

I snap my phone shut, not waiting for his response. As my eyes drift to the photo of Isabelle I placed on my desk, I gather my jacket from the coat rack. Once the final button is done up, my cell phone rings. Mercifully, this time around, it's my sleek black iPhone.

The screen displays it's a call from Hugo, so I answer it promptly. “Yes, Hugo.”

“Hey, are you guys taking the long route home?”

My brows furrow, but I remain quiet, unsure what he means.

He endeavors to soothe the groove scoured between my brows. “It's nearly five-thirty, and you haven't shown up yet. I thought maybe you went parking.”

I freeze as sick fear melds through my veins. “I dropped Isabelle off at her apartment over forty-five minutes ago.”

I hear his throat work hard to swallow. “She never arrived at her floor. I've been waiting by the elevator.”

A small stint of silence crosses between us as dread overwhelms me. “Find her, Hugo,” I demand. “Find her now!”

My hand shakes when I lower my phone from my ear to dial another number. Hunter answers as quickly as he has the past two weeks. “He's still en route.”

“I need your help on another task. I need you to find Isabelle. I dropped her off at her apartment over forty-five minutes ago, and she hasn't been seen since.” Nothing but sheer panic resonates in my tone.

“Hold on, I'll log into the security system of her apartment building.”

When I pick up the framed photo of Isabelle on my desk, my grip is so staunch, it nearly shatters the glass. My stomach is twisted up in knots, my body's way of advising me something isn't right.

My attention diverts back to my phone when Hunter asks, "What time did you drop her off?"

"Around a quarter to five."

He doesn't respond, but I hear him tapping on a keyboard. "Okay, I have her entering the elevator at the underground garage at 4:43 p.m." He sucks in a breath, killing me with the delay. "She exited at the lobby a minute later."

"She was supposed to go straight to her floor. Why would she stop in the lobby?"

"Hold on, I have to switch from the elevator camera to the lobby." His hearty breaths whistle down the line. "Brandon was in the lobby. She left with him five minutes later."

I lose focus on the last half of his comment when a commotion outside of my office gains my attention. Anger thickens my blood when I see Brandon yanking himself out of my front-door bouncer's firm grip.

"She's here. I found her," I advise into the phone before shutting it down.

My quick strides have me crossing the nightclub floor faster than a heartbeat, only slowing when I fail to find any signs of Isabelle. I thought she was with Brandon.

"Where is she?"

When he spins around to face me, my heart drums my ribcage. His pupils are wide as if he's just seen a ghost, and his

lower lip is quivering. His rattled composure sets me on edge, which adds to the crippling weight on my chest.

“Where is she?”

With my panic as high as my anger, I slam Brandon against the wall before securing a firm clutch on his throat. His hands shoot up to my wrist, trying in vain to loosen my grip, but I don't back down. If anything, his wish to fight me has me firming my clutch even more.

I don't restrict his airways enough to kill him, but enough to ensure he'll answer all my questions.

“You have five seconds to tell me where she is, before I—”

“She's at the police station.” His words are squeaked through the firm hold I have on his throat. “If you let me go, I'll tell you everything I know.”

My nostrils flare as my jaw tenses. I hate being strong-armed, but this is different, isn't it? Nothing is forced when you're protecting the ones you love.

Brandon drops to his knees to suck in numerous big breaths when I release him from my hold. As he replenishes his lungs with oxygen, I clench and unclench my fists, struggling to rein in the anger that's spiraling me out of control.

Once he's satisfied he has normal oxygen levels, Brandon locks his eyes with me. “They arrested Isabelle.”

Blood roars through my veins like an out-of-control wildfire. “IA?”

He shakes his head, his eyes filling with tears. “She was arrested for the murder of Megan Shroud.”

To be continued...

*Book three—Enigma: The Mystery Unmasked* is already available for purchase! Find it here: [Enigma: The Mystery Unmasked](#)

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Hunter's, Hugo's, Hawke's, Ryan's, Cormack's, Rico & Brax's stories have already been released, but Brandon, Regan and all the other great characters of Ravenshoe will get their own stories at some point during 2019.

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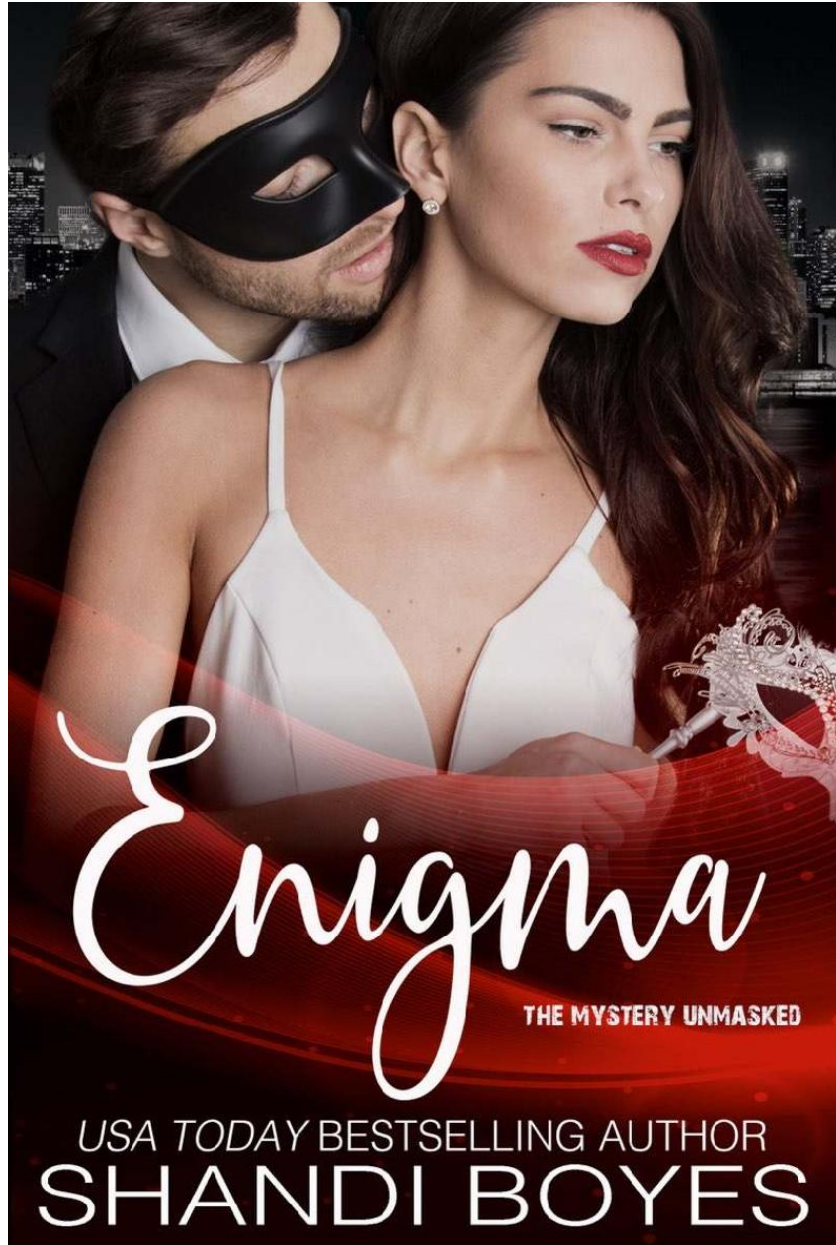
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ENIGMA: THE MYSTERY  
UNMASKED







# Enigma

THE MYSTERY UNMASKED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**SHANDI BOYES**

*To the man who inspires all my male characters.*

*I love you, Chris.*

*Shandi xx*

# CHAPTER 1



## ISAAC

The blood roaring through my veins is nearly as compelling as the fuel surging through the cylinders of my car's robust engine. My pride and joy, my classic 1963 Aston Martin DB5, is being pushed to its absolute limit as it winds down the grueling St. Thomas Street hill in my hometown of Ravenshoe. My grip on the steering wheel is as tight as the hold I had on Brandon's neck when he failed to tell me where Isabelle was. I knew something was amiss when the heaviness that's been plaguing my chest the past week amplified. I just never anticipated for it to be something so mammoth.

The beautiful, kind-hearted, never-says-a-bad-word-about-anyone Isabelle has been arrested for murder.

You'd think I would have recognized the signs. The protectiveness she displayed earlier today, her statement about not being able to breathe without me in her life, and staining her hands to help my family were signs I should have been looking for. Isabelle's possessiveness of me is as paramount as my protectiveness of her. I'll do everything in my power to protect her—nothing is above me when it comes to keeping her safe. Clearly, she feels the same way.

One factor leaves me utterly baffled, though. What the fuck happened in the last hour to adjust the perception of reality so immensely? Isabelle went from glistening like a diamond in the afternoon sun to being arrested for murder in under an hour. Mistakes are made when you don't take the time to evaluate a situation accurately. Hell, I've had lapses in judgment myself. Still, Isabelle's spur-of-the-moment decisions are more based on love and lust, not murder and mystery.

As my car glides over the St. Thomas Street horizon, its tires lifting from the road surface due to my high speed, clarity forms. This is Brandon's fault. He's the only person who has seen Isabelle since we left the cabin, so he must have enlightened her with information that caused the change in her demeanor. That's why he looked so gaunt when he arrived in my office. It wasn't just remorse tainting his face. It was regret.

Regret he'll pay for once I have Isabelle back safe in my arms.

A motorist toots when I cut him off to take the entrance ramp of the highway in front of him, but it has nothing on the aggression I disperse when my car comes to a grinding halt a half-mile down. Because of the hour, commuter traffic is at its worst. Regrettably, there's no alternative route for me to take, so I stick with my original plans.

After beeping my horn at the car in front of me, demanding for it to move, I pull into the emergency lane, narrowly missing a motorcyclist who is also using the lane as his personal road. My speed is reduced to twenty-five miles per hour, but it's faster than the snail's pace the other cars are traveling in the bumper-to-bumper traffic.

With my eyes darting between the road and my suit, I dig my phone out of the breast pocket of my jacket. I hit the speed dial for Hugo before squashing it to my ear. It rings numerous times before he picks up. “Hey, Hunter said you found Izzy.”

*I did but not where I anticipated.* “I need you to go to the Ravenshoe Police Station.”

My request is met with so much silence. If Hugo’s deep breaths weren’t thundering down the line, I would have assumed he’d hung up. I understand his apprehension, but if he’s still in Isabelle’s apartment, he’s closer to Ravenshoe PD than me. Although the tightness around my chest won’t ease until I see Isabelle is safe with my own two eyes, I’ll get a small amount of reprieve hearing it from Hugo.

Sensing his reluctance, I inform him, “It’s Isabelle... she’s been arrested.”

A deep sigh barrels down the line. “I’m on my way.”

As I lower my phone from my ear, it vibrates in my hand. The screen displays it’s a call from Hunter. I press the call button before pushing it back against my ear.

“We can’t get close to Megan. Cops are swarming the motel.” He sucks in a quick breath, remembering he needs to breathe to talk. “There are over a dozen of them, so we’ll scope the premises, talk to some locals, see if we can squeeze any info out of them on what the fuck is going on.”

My jaw tenses as my grip on the steering wheel firms. “I want every detail you unearth relayed directly to me. I don’t care how minute it seems, I want to know everything.”

The sharpness in my voice places Hunter on edge, causing him to rattle when he says, “I’ll gather everything I can find.”

After disconnecting our call, I throw my cell into the console before scrubbing my hand down my face. When my hand glides across the two-day-old stubble on my chin, my jaw ticks. Isabelle squirmed even more than usual when my prickles grazed her sensitive clit on the dining room table this morning. Her excitement has me reconsidering my stance on shaving every day. Not only would Isabelle have an additional thrill added to our already combustible encounters, but I'd also smell her seductive scent hours later.

That alone is enough incentive to grow a full, scruffy beard like Hunter's.

By the time I make it to the Ravenshoe PD, another thirty minutes has passed. My panic didn't diminish during the delay. If anything, it's more noticeable.

After illegally parking in the emergency vehicles' only bay located in front of the entrance, I fling open my door, then hotfoot it up the steps, taking them two at a time. The lobby falls into silence when I step inside. Even the phones stop ringing. I'd have given it more than a second thought if I hadn't located Hugo. He's standing near the reception desk in an angry confrontation with a male officer.

When he notices my gawk, he quickly closes the distance between us, his steps more stomps than strides. "She's here, but they won't let me see her."

As I head to the inquiries counter, I trek my finger over my sweaty brow. An overweight, middle-aged lady whose uniform is bursting at the seams greets me with a wonky smile. She has a lazy eye, so I can't tell if she's looking at me or Hugo, who's standing behind my right shoulder.

Her good eye must be her right as it faces me when she asks, "How can I help you, Mr. Holt?"

I want to say my infamous reputation even surpassed my expectations, but that would be a lie. Everyone in Ravenshoe knows who I am, including local law enforcement officers. You don't take years building a reputation as prestigious as mine and not have it gain you the attention of others.

"I want to speak to a lady you have in custody." I add a touch of seductiveness to my voice, hoping it will make her too weak at the knees to deny my request.

She arches her brow, acting nonchalant about the throaty purr of my words, but the hue on her cheeks gives away her deceit. "Are you her lawyer?"

"No—"

"Then you can't see her."

When her good eye shifts to Hugo, her cheeks flush even more. He's decked out in his standard work uniform consisting of a black suit with a crisp, white dress shirt underneath. He doesn't wear a vest or a tie like me, but his pricy suit enhances his rugged appearance. The two buttons left undone on his shirt gives a sneak peek to his vast collection of tattoos, and his crew-cut hairstyle makes it seem as if his blue eyes pop off his face. I can understand the desk sergeant's interest. She looks like she hasn't had a hard fuck in years, and Hugo's size and build assures her he's more than capable of pinning her to the wall to give her the fuck she's seeking.

*Hmm, I wonder how far Hugo will go to keep his job?*

"Don't even think about it." Hugo's slit eyes float up from the ground to glare at me. "Unlike *some* people, I have standards." The way he growls 'some' reveals to whom he is referring—me.



His attitude gets sliced in half when I ask, “Not even for Isabelle?”

His pupils widen as his mouth gapes. Just like me, Hugo will do anything to protect Isabelle. He cares greatly for her. That isn't surprising. Anyone who meets her is immediately besotted with her. Hugo cares for her differently than me. He treats her more like a sister than a love interest.

Before Hugo can form a response, from the corner of my eye, I catch the quickest glimpse of a profile I've seen many times before.

“Ryan!” I call out.

He stops midway through the door, his head turning to see who called his name. I jerk up my chin, requesting a minute. He gives me exactly that after ushering a female detective into the hub he was entering before I spotted him.

When he strolls toward me, his smile enlarges with every step he takes. “I never thought I'd see the day Isaac Holt in a police station, and even more shocking than that is the fact he doesn't have cuffs on.”

If my visit were for any reason other than Isabelle being arrested, I'd laugh at his banter. Ryan and I could be classified as friends. I use the word loosely as I'm confident if he ever had the opportunity to arrest me, he'd happily oblige. Despite the badge on his hip, he's one of the rare good guys in this town who don't line their pockets with the dirty money my competitors offer. He knows the grit it takes to become successful like me as he too dug himself out of the trench I climbed six years ago, and he did it in a fair and just way.

Ravenshoe PD is littered with dirty, scheming cops. But, unlike his peers, Ryan doesn't formulate an opinion on a

suspect without evaluating his own motive. Because of this, I class him as a friend. He's not a close confidant like Cormack, but he can count on me if he needs anything as I can in return.

With that in mind, I curve my lips high before accepting the hand he's holding out in greeting. He uses our handshake to pull me in for a quick man hug. "How the fuck are you?" His friendliness gains me even more suspicious eyes than I had upon arrival.

"I'm good." My clipped tone advises how short my tether is. Usually, I'm calm, cool, and calculated. That's null and void when it comes to Isabelle. "I need a favor."

Ryan runs his hand along his jaw, tracking the quiver there. "You called in your favor when I let you see Jacob Walters after he was arrested."

When Nick's friend, Jacob, was arrested for assault, I bartered with Ryan to see him. He granted me fifteen minutes alone with Jacob before a public prosecutor was brought in to represent him since he couldn't afford counsel on the covenant that the favor Ryan owed me from years ago would be cashed in. I stupidly agreed, having no clue someone as mesmerizing as Isabelle was about to enter my life.

If Jacob and Nick were close friends, I would have never dragged Jacob into the ruthless world of underground fighting, but from what Nick told me, he was a brilliant fighter. He practically beat a man to death with his bare hands. He had both size and speed, which is a rare combination. He was so impressive, even Hugo had heard of him.

On the agreement I'd supply Jacob the best lawyer money could buy, he signed on to be my fighter for twelve months. Jacob was ordered two years of probation, which was impressive considering he was looking at a minimum of three

years in jail before I arrived on the scene. Jacob chose wisely when he accepted my agreement nearly two years ago, just like Ryan will if he agrees to assist me today. His assistance will be immensely awarded.

I stare into Ryan's glacier blue eyes. "We'll flip the coin. I'll owe you a favor."

A huff rustles his hard-lined lips. "Unlike my colleagues, I don't accept bribery."

"This isn't for me. It's for Isabelle."

His brows pull together as his bewildered eyes shift between Hugo and me. "What does she need?"

His lack of empathy now makes sense. He is as in the dark about Isabelle's arrest as I am.

I step closer to him, hoping the dozen pairs of eyes gawking at us can't lip read. "Isabelle was arrested this afternoon. A reliable source has informed me that she's being held in your interrogation room."

Ryan's pupils dilate more with every word I speak, but I hear his brain ticking over as he works through the facts.

After a few more seconds of silent deliberations, he strays his eyes to Hugo, who's standing behind my left shoulder. "Is he carrying a weapon?"

My neck cranks back in just enough time to witness Hugo shaking his head. I smirk, pleased he remembered to remove his semi-automatic pistol before entering a police station.

Happy to take Hugo's non-verbal reply as factual, Ryan unlatches the half-partition door between us. "I can only give you fifteen minutes."

“That’s all I need,” I reply while following him into the heart of the Ravenshoe PD with an apprehensive Hugo trailing closely behind.

## CHAPTER 2



## ISAAC

Isabelle's pale face lifts from the stainless-steel table I was sitting at mere weeks ago when she hears the door creak open. Her big chocolate eyes are clouded with distrust, and her pupils are massive. When our eyes collide, her breath traps in her throat, stifling the sob rumbling in her heaving chest. Horror shreds through me as the weight on my chest turns crippling. Not even the curtain of hair hanging in front of her face can conceal the defeated look tainting her beautiful face.

The tears glistening in her eyes threaten to spill when her attempts to stand from her chair are thwarted by the shackles circling her delicate wrists and feet. Blood surges through my veins, heating my body with fiery warmth. They have her detained as if she's a wild animal.

With my jaw clenched as firmly as my fist, I swing my eyes to Ryan. His jaw muscle spasms when he too notices they have Isabelle shackled to the table like a deranged criminal. After silently requesting for me to remain calm, he shifts his focus to the young male officer commanding in the room. He's standing tall with his arms clamped to his side, and his gaze fixated on a microdot on the wall across from him.

His stance replicates a toy soldier about to go into battle, but the unrelenting quiver of his thighs weakens his impressive stance. He hasn't stopped shaking since I entered the room. I'm not surprised. I can smell the fear vapping off him. Rightfully so. He should be petrified because if Ryan weren't here, he'd discover the hard way of what I think about him shackling any woman to a table, much less *my* woman.

“Get those cuffs off her immediately.” Ryan's surly tone rumbles through the room like a loud crack of thunder.

The young officer's wide eyes float to Ryan. “T-t-they said she had to stay shackled. She's an FBI agent, she's dangerous —”

“She's a fucking human being!” Ryan steps closer to the officer. Because they're similar heights, Ryan can stare straight into the eyes while growling, “Get them off her now before I shackle you in her place.”

The officer's head bobs up and down like a bobble-head toy. He fumbles his way to Isabelle, removing steel keys latched to his belt on the way. When his shakes cause him to drop the keys next to her shoeless feet, he unshackles her ankles first. They come away without too much force, but the indentations on Isabelle's ankles reveal the fit was snug.

When he moves to open the cuff encasing her delicate wrists, I shift to the right, so we maintain eye contact. It will expose the anger clouding my face, but I'll deal with that later. Right now, nothing but Isabelle's well-being matters.

Once the final cuff is removed, Isabelle darts my way. Her beautiful scent permeates the air when I draw her into my chest before pressing a kiss to her sweat-slicked temple. “It's okay. I've got you.”

“You have fifteen minutes.” After jerking his head to the rookie officer, giving him his marching orders, Ryan shadows him out of the room.

I wait for the red light flashing above my head to switch off before moving to the only chair in the room. It’s the one Isabelle was shackled to. Once I sit, I remove the hairs stuck to her face before lifting her head via her chin. The wind knocks from my lungs when the first thing my eyes zoom in on is a large bruise on her cheek. It’s around the size of a baseball, and small red scratches are embedded in it.

After sucking in some big breaths to cool the fire burning me inside out, I drop my eyes to Isabelle’s. Hers are bloodshot and brimming with tears. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” she murmurs, her three words cracking out of her plump lips like gunfire.

When a blob of moisture careens down her cheek, my heart stops beating. I scrub it away with my thumb, genuinely terrorized by her tears. Color rushes back into my cheeks in a hurry when she nuzzles into my palm. Even during a crisis, she still yearns my touch.

I get comfort in that—more than I’d care to admit.

As my thumb swipes at the cupid bow in her top lip, I ask, “Have you talked to anyone yet? Have they officially questioned you?”

Fresh tears nearly roll when she shakes her head. “No, they arrested me before shackling me to the table.”

When her eyes flick to the shackles sprawled on the floor, I grip her chin to return her focus to me. “You can’t talk to anyone without my lawyer present. Do you understand?”



The urgency in my tone adds to her confusion, but she nods her head all the same.

“Not anyone, Isabelle. Not Brandon, not Theresa, not even Ryan.”

My eyes drift to the two-way mirror during the last half of my statement. I don't need to see Ryan to know he's watching. I can feel it in my bones.

After following my squinted gaze, Isabelle nods. She knows there's more to this than either of us realize. “Is Megan dead?” she questions in a hushed whisper.

“I don't know.”

I wish I could give her more confirmation, but I'm in the dark as much as she is.

Unease pummels into me when she returns her eyes to mine. They're still filled with moisture, but it is the apprehension behind them causing my greatest worry.

I discover what has her all twisted up in knots when she asks, “Did you do this?” She balances her forehead on mine, ensuring Ryan will neither hear nor see her words. “Because if you did, I'll accept the plea they're offering. I'll do anything to save you—”

I cut her off by swiping my hand through the air. What she's saying doesn't make any sense. Why would she offer to admit guilt for a crime she supposedly committed? Unless...

“Did you go to Megan's motel this afternoon?”

The shock in my tone reverberates through her but not enough to stop her from shaking her head.

“Did you see Megan at all today?”

She once again shakes her head. “I was arrested in the alleyway of my apartment building.” She stares at me in shocked silence for a minute. “I assumed you organized for Henry’s *assistance* with Megan when you spoke to him earlier today.” She chokes on the word ‘assistance.’

“No, Isabelle.” I rub my chest, relieved by how less pained it is. “I didn’t arrange anything.” *Yet.*

I thought she had beat me to the punch. I did contact Henry for a matter pertaining to Megan, but it wasn’t in regard to having her killed. I was seeking her current location. Henry Gottle *is* the mob boss of New York City, so if Megan were in his stomping ground, his men would be the best crew to find her.

Henry assured me I’d be the first to know when Megan was found, but now I’m wondering if he took my request for assistance further than demanded. His offer of retribution has been dangling between us for over seven years. Perhaps he thought the length of time that passed between favors required more diligence.

“When I left your building, I drove straight to my office. I only left when Brandon informed me of your arrest.”

The apprehension tainting her beautiful face relaxes. “Then, why am I here—?”

Before all of her question leaves her mouth, the interrogation room door swings open. Ryan stands just outside of it, his face deadpan. “You need to leave now.” His deep tone relays the urgency of his request.

I return my focus to Isabelle, saving her lower lip from being gnawed by her teeth in the process. “I don’t know why

you're here, but I *will* find out. Just remember what I said. Don't talk to anyone until my lawyer, Regan, arrives."

Her lips purse. They're extra plump since she was grazing her teeth over them. "Is Regan a man or a woman?"

"Does it matter?"

Her head shake is unconvincing, much less her murmured, "It does to me."

I lose the chance to reply to her babbling when Ryan walks two paces into the room. "If you want to help Izzy, Isaac, you need to move now."

Incapable of ignoring the anxiety in his voice, I cup Isabelle's cheeks with my hands, being extra attentive not to touch her bruise, before pressing my mouth to hers. Even though her lips are dry and quivering, intimacy still passes through us from our embrace. I kiss her with everything I have, tasting her tears and her worry while also assuring her I'll be by her side throughout this. I won't stop until she walks out of this station at my side.

When her eyes pop back open, the harshness tainting them has softened. My kiss did what I had intended. It calmed her as only I can.

"I'm not going *anywhere* without you." I point to the mirror Ryan was standing behind earlier. "I'll be right behind that mirror. Okay?"

When she nods, fresh tears almost spring down her cheeks, but she manages to reel them back in—just. "Okay."

It feels like a knife is stabbed into my chest when I rise from the chair, taking her with me. Then I'm almost certain an artery has been nicked when I place her back into the chair alone. After a final swipe of her moisture-free cheeks, I spin

on my heels and stride to the other side of the room. My heart thrashes against my chest more with every apprehensive step I take. This is almost as hard as when I left Ophelia crying over her unconscious brother on the blood-soiled boxing mat. I can only pray the results today will be starkly contradicting.

When I enter the corridor, I turn back to face Isabelle. Her teeth have once again caught her bottom lip, but she's giving it the fight of her life to maintain her dignity. I keep my eyes locked on hers until the reinforced door slams shut, trapping her in a nightmare as violent as the storm brewing inside of me.

"This way." Ryan nudges his head to a door next to the interrogation room. "We need to move quickly."

When he pivots on his heels and stalks toward the door, I closely shadow him. The anger I'm struggling to maintain roars to the forefront of my mind when we enter the room. Speakers hanging from the ceiling amplify Isabelle's barely audible sniffles. The volume control on the panel near the two-way glass cranked to the highest setting is to blame for this.

After cocking my head to the side, I glare at Ryan. He coughs to clear his throat of annoying nerves before trying to downplay his snooping. "I was merely doing the job I am paid to do." He foolishly steps closer to me, unaware I'm seconds from blowing my top. "From what I heard, Isabelle needs the best lawyer money can buy."

"If you heard her right, you'd know she didn't do anything wrong!" My tone is as dangerous as my anger. I'm mere seconds from going on a rampage. Usually, I keep a cool, rational head. That's not the case when Isabelle is involved. If you endanger her, you endanger yourself. I can't say it any simpler than that.

“It wasn’t what I heard Isabelle say.” Ryan’s hand comes to rest on my shoulder, his tone surprising even for how tense things are between us. “It was what I heard *them* say.”

When he nods his head to the two-way mirror across the room, a growl emits from my lips. Standing across from Isabelle is Theresa Veneto and her unnamed male partner. Theresa’s stance is hostile with her arms folded in front of her chest, and her blazer removed to show Isabelle she’s carrying a weapon. The male agent is more laid-back. He’s too busy staring at Isabelle’s tits to authenticate Theresa’s good-cop-bad-cop ruse.

If Theresa is aiming to scare Isabelle, she needs to devise a new tactic. Without the slightest quiver to her words, Isabelle strengthens her stance before looking Theresa dead-set in the eyes to snarl, “I’m not speaking to you without my lawyer present.”

My breath hitches halfway to my lungs when she swings her eyes my way. She appears to be staring straight at me. I shouldn’t be surprised. Not even a Mack truck could come between us, let alone a flimsy piece of glass.

Our connection is lost when Theresa demands Isabelle to take a seat at the same time Ryan suggests for me to get her the best lawyer I can afford. While yanking my cell out of the breast pocket of my suit, Isabelle retakes the chair she was sitting in earlier. Her lips are furled into an angry snarl, and her tears are long forgotten since the anger searing through her body has dried them.

I hit the speed dial for Regan. She answers on the very first ring. “The IA’s case against Isabelle is being squashed as we speak. They had not a leg to stand on,” she informs me, not bothering to issue a greeting.

Although she can't see me, I nod. I knew she wouldn't have any problems getting the IA's investigation into Isabelle dropped. She's the best lawyer in the country, but even better than that is the fact she works solely for me.

"I need you at Ravenshoe Police Station now."

Her sigh makes me smirk. "What did you do this time?"

"For once, it isn't me." When my eyes float back to Isabelle, all the humor in my voice vanishes. "But I need you to treat this case as if it were me, Regan. I need you at your very best. This case is more imperative than any you've worked before."

"Come on, Isaac, you know me. I always bring my bat to the game." She tries to keep her tone pompous and conceited despite her uneased breaths. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

The weight on my chest slackens from her confidence. She does always bring her bat to the game. She's saved my ass on numerous occasions, but this is an entirely new ball game we're playing, one filled with corrupt cops who won't stop until someone strikes out, and all their curveballs are aimed at Isabelle.

## CHAPTER 3



## ISABELLE

“*W*hat part of ‘I’m not talking to you without my lawyer present’ did you have a hard time understanding?”

When my slit eyes drift from Theresa to the direction the soulful voice came from, my jaw drops. Standing just inside the door of the interrogation room is a beautiful blonde wearing a pricy outfit and gravity-defying stilettos. I’m not known for perving on girls, but she’s so stunningly beautiful, I can’t tear my eyes away. It’s like looking at an eclipse. You risk damage if you stare too long, but you can’t help it.

The intruder’s wavy platinum-blond locks fall in front of her petite shoulders when she tilts her head so the daggers her steel-green eyes are shooting at Theresa can hit their mark. Even with only a slight amount of sheen on her lips, her face is flawless. She seems familiar, although I’m reasonably sure we’ve never met. I’d remember someone with the face of an angel.

As I absorb her tight, black-pleated pencil skirt, silk blouse, and a well-tailored black jacket, horrible notion after horrible notion fills my head. I really hope this isn’t Regan, Isaac’s lawyer. Compared to her expensive designer clothing, my jeans and beige jacket are stained with oily soot from the



two male officers arresting me in the alley of my apartment building. The bruise on my cheek is a result of them rough handling me during my arrest.

I had just rounded the corner of my building, rushing to Brandon's car parked in the alleyway, when my elbow was seized in a tight grip. Since I was cautious of Col's vendetta against Isaac and being tailed the prior week, my first instinct was to protect myself. It was only after striking the gentleman who was roughly gripping my arm did I realize he was a police officer.

I instantly halted my resistance before raising my hands into the air to signal I meant no harm. When two male officers, who were easily double my weight, threw me onto the ground, Brandon lunged for them. His fist connected with one of the officer's nose, knocking him to the ground with a loud thud, before he restrained another one in a headlock.

His attack only slackened when a third officer drew his gun on him. Every knee and elbow inflicted on my body during my arrest fueled Brandon's anger, but with a gun pinching his temple, there wasn't anything he could do.

When a female officer read me my rights, revealing I was under arrest for the murder of Megan Shroud, my stomach lurched into my throat. "Get Isaac," was the last thing I said to Brandon before I was ushered to Ravenshoe PD in the back of a police cruiser.

For the past hour, while shackled to the stainless-steel table, my hazy mind worked through each event that had happened the past forty-eight hours. Discovering Megan's secret room, her plot to steal Nick and Jenni's newborn son from the womb he was safely nestled in, and the murder of her dad, it all came rushing back to the forefront of my mind.

Then I recalled Isaac talking to Henry Gottle, Sr. on the satellite phone earlier this morning. Aware the whole Megan incident could be the very thing to push him into doing something unlawful was the reason I hesitated when Hugo requested I let Isaac's security team into Megan's bedroom before local authorities.

It's also why I was planning to plead guilty to my charges.

Any decisions made in haste can conjure poor results, but I'd do anything to protect Isaac—anything at all. Even going to jail for a crime I didn't commit. If Isaac were responsible for Megan's death, I would have taken the blame. I would have falsely testified to protect him, but I believe him when he said he had nothing to do with harming Megan. His eyes are a gateway to his soul. They tell his true story. Although he's frustrated by the entire Megan incident, he didn't have her killed. I should have known better. He's not that type of person. He isn't a monster like Col and Vladimir. He's just misunderstood like all good enigmas are.

With newfound knowledge and a heart not as heavy as it was thirty minutes ago, my decisions veered in an entirely new direction. I will not stop fighting until both Isaac and I are vindicated from Megan's case. Once that happens, my focus will shift to us—as a couple. I refuse to put our relationship second-best anymore. We've been dragged down by so much controversy, yet my love for him continues to blossom, so it's time to stand up for what I believe in. That includes Isaac, me, and our relationship.

My bones jump out of my skin when a stern, "Get out!" roars through my ears. The blonde swings her rake-thin arm to the door she just walked through. "If I'm forced to repeat myself, you'll find yourself relinquished of your position

before sunrise tomorrow. A loss of hearing will be an easy dismissal case for me to win.”

As a vein in Theresa’s neck works overtime, she stands from her chair. “Like *you* could have me fired.”

The unique scent of vanilla frosting filters through my nose when the blonde steps closer to our gathering. “Please, feel free to test me.” She flashes a wicked smile that says she doesn’t just have looks. She has smarts as well. “As I’d love the opportunity to prove you wrong... *again*.”

Her defensive pose frustrates Theresa further, but instead of responding as I am anticipating, she storms out of the room, barging past the unnamed blonde grinning like she just won a gold medal.

Once the door slams shut as abruptly as it did when Isaac left, the blonde’s humored-filled eyes shift to the two-way mirror. She appears to wink at her reflection, but I know who has her affection. I can’t see Isaac, but I can feel his eyes on me. My cheeks only cooled when the blonde silently demanded his attention.

When the intruder’s green eyes return to me, she assesses my face in precise detail before taking in the rest of my package—aka my body. My cheeks flush from her avid inspection, but I don’t feel threatened. Her confrontation with Theresa was brutal, but she hasn’t given off anything but friendly vibes since Theresa’s dramatic storm out.

With my hands sweatier than I’m happy about, I stand from my chair, so I can offer the stranger my hand to shake. She snugs my offer by angling her head back to the two-way mirror. “You’ve always had a fondness for blushers.” She winks again, this one arriving with a dainty laugh. “I can’t say

I don't understand your fascination. Blushers keep things interesting."

Her smile enlarges when she spots my puzzled expression. I really wish she quit smiling. She's already beautiful, but when she smiles, my god, it's like heaven opened its gates, and an angel fell from the sky. I can't compete with that on my best day, let alone my worst.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Isabelle." The stranger accepts the handshake she left hanging before gesturing for me to retake my seat. I do, albeit hesitantly. "For how often Isaac talks about you, I feel as if I already know you."

"Thank you..." I stop talking since I have no clue how to address her.

She fills in the blank reasonably quick. "Regan."

My heart plummets into my stomach. *Of course, the most stunning woman on the planet has to be Isaac's lawyer.*

A touch of laughter crackles Regan's voice when she murmurs, "You're not too bad yourself." I want to crawl under a cushion and die when she adds on, "Isaac said you like to babble under your breath. I'm glad I had the pleasure of witnessing it firsthand."

Embarrassment seeps deep in my veins. I've never been more mortified in my life. "I'm sorry. I..." I stop again, having no plausible excuse for my idiocracies.

Regan once again opens the gates of heaven when she smiles. "Okay, I get it, but how about we settle everything from the get-go. This..." she gestures her hand between herself and the two-way mirror, "... has never happened." Her stare leaves nothing on the table. It's brimming with honest truths and a dash of amusement. "It will *never* happen."

“Why?” I slap my hand over my mouth, mortified I asked my question out loud instead of in my head. My curiosity can’t be helped. If Regan isn’t interested in Isaac, she’s either gay or mentally unstable. Considering she’s here to represent me, and the fact she’s drop-dead gorgeous, I’m praying for the former.

Regan balances her elbows on the table, building the suspense. “For one, I too have a fondness for blushers.” She winks again, loving that it sets my cheeks on fire. “Two, I don’t sleep with the men I work for. Considering Isaac is my only source of income ensures I wouldn’t sleep with him even if he paid me to.” She screws up her nose like a nasty taste just hit the back of her throat. “And last, but certainly not least, there’s only one alpha allowed in my bedroom at a time. I don’t know about you, but I don’t see Isaac relinquishing his title anytime soon.”

Like a freight train smacking into me, the truth finally dawns. I know why I felt like we’ve met before. From the strands of her perfectly flawless hair right down to her red Milano Bianco pumps, she’s the female version of Isaac. The expensive, tailor-made suit and unique-colored eyes should have given it away, let alone her commanding personality and striking features.

I don’t need affirmation to my claims, but if I did, Regan stacks them up by saying, “I also believe in the whole opposites attract notion. When I look at Isaac, I see my brother.”

When she gags, I laugh. Not just because she has no sexual partialities for Isaac but because Theresa’s bogus charges won’t have a chance in hell of remaining when put against two powerhouse personalities like Isaac and Regan.

“Wowzers.” Regan’s eyes bulge as she drinks in my smile. “That smile alone is worth every goddamn penny you spent, Isaac.”

My smile slackens. “What money did he spend?”

She snickers before fiddling with some papers she removed from a leather briefcase at her side. After clearing her throat, her eyes lift and lock with mine. “Okay, let’s get down to business.”

*Yep! She’s one hundred percent a female version of Isaac—skirting questions and all.*

“Were you officially charged with murder, or were you brought in for questioning?”

I lick my parched lips, hoping a bit of moisture will ease out my next set of words. “They charged me with murder.” My fingers are still stained with ink from when they took my fingerprints and mugshot earlier. “They said a bullet from my Bureau-issued gun killed Megan.”

## CHAPTER 4



## ISAAC

*R*estless, I suck in big breaths, trying to find the calm I need to assess Isabelle's confession with more diligence. Up until ten seconds ago, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. Everything Regan said to Isabelle is true. I also look at Regan as if she is the sister I never had. She's most definitely a female version of me. That's why she's the best person to defend Isabelle. She's cocky and arrogant, yet brilliant at anything she does, but even she will have a hard time getting this type of evidence squashed.

I shoot my eyes to Ryan, wondering if he knew about the bullet they located. If he did, he's a damn good actor. He only left my side for five minutes to call Regina, the now-retired police officer, to inform her of Isabelle's arrest. Other than that, he stood at my side, watching over Isabelle as if he too is as panicked as me.

He's not—but once again, he's a brilliant actor.

Ryan shakes his head to my silent interrogation. "I don't know anything about the case other than what I overheard."

"Can you get on this case?"

He winces. "I don't know, Isaac. It could be a conflict of interest. Not just me knowing you, but I dated the accused."



My jaw flexes as quickly as my fists. “My relationship was never made public, so as far as the police department is concerned, there’s no connection between any of us.” I gesture my hand between Isabelle, him, and me. “And as for that *one* date you and Isabelle had, it wasn’t impressive enough for *anyone* to pay *any* attention to it.”

My arrogant tone matches the angry glimmer in my eyes—a glimmer that only grows more rampant when Ryan remarks, “It may not have been memorable for you, Isaac, but I’ll always remember the taste of those lips.” When I step closer to him, prepared to rip his fucking nuts off with my bare hands, he holds his out in front of himself. “I was joking, Isaac. Come on, we’ve been playing this game for years.”

“This isn’t a game.” I point to Isabelle sitting in the middle of an interrogation room. “She’s not a fucking game.”

Guilt darkens Ryan’s eyes, then regret highlights his tone. “I’m sorry. You’re right. That was highly inappropriate.”

I don’t refute his accurate statement, but his remorseful words slide through me like water, drowning my anger to a more manageable level.

After working my jaw side to side, I use his guilt to my advantage. “I need you on this case, Ryan. You know as well as I do the corruption that plagues this precinct. I am not calling in a favor or asking for special treatment, I’m merely requesting you to do the job you’re paid to do. The job you say you’re brilliant at. Prove to me how good you are by getting on this case, so you can catch the *real* perp.”

Yes, I’m goading him into proving his worth, but I’ll do anything if it gets him on Isabelle’s case because he’s as good as he proudly states he is. If taunting doesn’t work, I’ll stroke his ego before backing it up with an offer he won’t be able to

turn down. I'll try every dirty tactic in the book until he agrees to lead this investigation.

After a few seconds of silent contemplation, Ryan shifts his eyes from Isabelle to me. "I'll call in a favor and get on her case." I almost fist punch the air until his next set of words steals my thunder. "But I'm not doing this for you. Isabelle. I'm doing it for her..." He nudges his head to Isabelle. "... and Regina."

I nod, successfully concealing the tick my jaw got from his statement. Now is not the time for jealousy to erupt. Call me vain, but I don't have many weaknesses—except when it comes to other people showing an interest in Isabelle. That flaw is virulent. Isabelle is mine, and I want the world to know that.

Not long later, two police officers enter the interrogation room to re-shackle Isabelle. Dread burrows in my chest when her frightened eyes turn to mine a mere second before she's ushered out of the room.

After demanding for Isabelle to remain quiet, Regan shifts on her feet to face the two-way mirror. Unlike Isabelle, she isn't staring straight at me. "She's all right. Stay where you are. I'll return to update you the instant I get her settled."

Even though she can't see me, I nod. Within seconds of me doing so, she chases down Isabelle. When chains being dragged over a tiled-floor boom into my ears, I clench and unclench my fists, striving to keep my focus on the grime-covered light switch at the side of the room, instead of rushing to Isabelle's defense. Brutalizing the men arresting Isabelle won't do anyone any good, but I'm itching to jump in and defend her.

Sensing my slip in composure, Ryan gives my shoulder a reaffirming squeeze. “I’ll go find out what’s going on. While I do that, remain calm and stay out of sight.”

It frustrates the hell out of me, but I once again nod. I’ve never felt as useless as I do right now. Isabelle needs all the support she can get, yet I’m in an observation room, twiddling my thumbs while everyone else aids her.

As I drag my hand over my head, my mind struggles to compile all the mammoth events that have happened the past forty-eight hours. It’s a clusterfuck of confusion. Nothing makes sense, but I’m confident Isabelle didn’t kill Megan. Her truthful eyes would have exposed her deceit. She didn’t do what they’re accusing her of. She’s innocent, so I’ll do everything in my power to see her walk free without charges, and I know the best place to start my campaign.

After pulling my cell out of my pocket, I dial a memorized number. After a few seconds, Hunter answers. “Boss.”

“What’s the latest?”

“Megan’s hotel room has been cordoned off, and a CSI team has been brought in from Hopeton. Locals are saying it’s a homicide.” His tone doesn’t give anything away. He’s an expert at keeping his thoughts guarded.

“Has anyone said how she was killed?”

“No.” He goes quiet, but I can hear his brain ticking over, no doubt struggling to work out how to ask his next question without it sounding bad. He should have deliberated a little longer. “Did you call in a *favor*?”

My teeth grit. “No.”

In my industry, the sacrifices I’d have to evoke for entreating a favor like that would be immense. That’s why it

was never considered while devising a way to handle Megan's obsession with my brother. She was going to be handled in-house. I just hadn't worked out exactly what that would entail before a much more urgent situation arose.

Hunter's boots clomping along the pavement thuds down the line a mere second before a door sliding open overtakes his deep pants of breaths. "Something about this doesn't seem right." The same sliding noise shrills into my ears for the second time, but more as if a door is being shut with force than being opened. He must have climbed into his van to ensure we have privacy. "This looks mob-related."

My pulse spikes as I freeze like a statue. "What makes you say that?"

His voice echoes in the tight confines of his security van. "I was talking to a homeless guy who sleeps by a dumpster near the motel. He kept rambling on about a girl in the yellow car and how she went to sleep after they put a cloth on her mouth. He hardly made any sense, but he repeated that statement over and over again."

"What type of car does Megan drive?"

I hear him scrub his hand over his beard as he replies, "A yellow Chevrolet Sonic. And before you ask, no, it isn't in the parking lot of her motel."

"Is there a body?"

Hunter sharply inhales as shocked by my bluntness as me. I'm always forthright, but I'm not usually so callous when asking for details on someone's murder. "I don't know. Why?"

"Because if her death is related to Col Petretti, his crew wouldn't have left a body." The anger shredding my veins of normality is heard in my reply.

“I don’t even want to know how you even know that.” Hunter’s breathing lengthens as the sound of an engine kicking over breaks up his words. “Are you at your office? I need to access your servers.”

“No, I’m at Ravenshoe PD. I’ll send Hugo there to give you the access you need.”

Talking about Hugo, where the fuck is he? I haven’t seen him since I shadowed Ryan to the block of interrogation rooms at the back of Ravenshoe PD headquarters over an hour ago.

“Is there something you need to tell me?” Hunter’s voice is rife with suspicion.

As my eyes shift to the shackles piled in the interrogation room, I attempt to swallow the brick in my throat. “They arrested Isabelle for the murder of Megan.” I have to strangle my words out since they’re trapped in my throat by the brick I’m trying to dislodge.

“Fuck,” Hunter’s groan is long and breathlessly.

“Do you still have those back doors open from last week? The ones that included the low-security issues?” I keep my volume on the down-low, unconvinced there aren’t any ears listening to my private conversation. My trust is very low at the moment, hopefully as low as my voice.

“Uh-huh, Why?”

“I need you to monitor the threat in case any *new* issues surface from it...” I stop talking when the creak of a door sounds into the room. When I discover the intruder is Regan, I twist to face the mirrored wall before devoting my attention back to Hunter. “Everything is to come straight to me. I’ll send Hugo to assist you.”

“I understand.” Hunter is good like this. He doesn’t need me to spell everything out for him. He sees the gray hiding between the black and white everyone else only sees. It’s why I chose him to helm my security team. “I won’t let you down.”

When he disconnects our call, I speed dial Hugo’s number.

“Boss.” His voice is low, but the unasked questions relayed through his tone are the loudest of them all.

“Isabelle is okay, a little rattled, but she’s strong.”

Hugo huffs, relieved.

“Where are you?”

I haven’t laid eyes on him since we followed Ryan into the hub of the police department over an hour ago.

“Sitting in a tea room with a dozen cops gawking at me.”

A grin etches onto my mouth when “Boo!” comes shrieking down the line—no doubt, Hugo taunting the officers staring peculiarly at him. He’s not a fan of cops. His aversion wasn’t something he’s always felt. It just steadily built after the death of his sister, Marjorie, and unborn nephew.

I wait for his chuckles to die down before giving him my orders. “I need you to go to the Dungeon to give Hunter access to my servers. He has a few things he requires your assistance with.”

“All right.” Heavy footsteps bellow down the line. “I’ll head there now. I’ll update you the instant I know anything.”

“Thanks.”

After disconnecting our call, I tuck my phone into the breast pocket of my jacket. When I pivot around to face Regan, I catch the quickest glimpse of the apprehension

tainting her face before she can shut it down. This is the first time I've ever seen her lack confidence. Generally, it oozes out of her. That's the most significant difference between Isabelle and Regan. Regan knows how gorgeous she is. Isabelle doesn't have a clue about the vast appeal her captivating features and alluring body have with the opposite sex. That, in turn, makes her even more beautiful.

When Regan notices I've noticed her uneasy gaze, her lips curve into an anxious smirk. Her unnerving composure sets me on edge, increasing the pressure on my chest.

“Where's Isabelle?”

She steps closer to me. Not even her strides are as cocky. “They're taking her to a holding cell so they can free up the interrogation room for another suspect being brought in.” Excitement bristles the fine hairs on my body. The sensation doesn't linger for long. “No, it doesn't relate to Megan's case.”

“Are there any other prisoners in her holding cell?”

Regan spreads her hands across her cocked hip. “Give me some credit, Isaac. She wouldn't have lasted an hour in a holding cell with other prisoners if they discovered she's an FBI agent.”

“I know. That's why she shouldn't be in there.” Ignoring the massive knot in my stomach, I lock my eyes with Regan before spelling out my demands. “I want to take her home.”

Apprehension flashes through her usually expressionless eyes. “I'm sorry, you can't. The courts are closed until nine tomorrow morning, but even if they were open, Isabelle won't be summoned for at least three days. With the evidence they have—”

“What evidence?” My angry snarl echoes off the paint-peeled gray walls. “They can’t have any fucking evidence because she didn’t do anything wrong!”

Her lips thin into a straight line. “You need to calm down. You won’t help anyone by acting all gung ho.” Her demeanor is surprisingly calm for how hard-lined her face is.

I suck in many big breaths, praying it will dampen the anger surging through my body so fast. My veins feel like they’re about to explode.

“I’m only going to ask this once.” Regan’s tone is flat and reserved, nearly as bleak as my mood is becoming. “Do you believe Isabelle killed Megan?”

Fury burns through my body like an out-of-control fire, my anger so paramount, my face reddens from its furious burn.

“I’m only asking because of the evidence they have on her, Isaac. I’m worried she doesn’t fully recall the events that happened today. That would be understandable after the dramatic events she’s encountered the past week. She may have post-traumatic stress disorder, so she’s unable to comprehend what is happening.”

I glare at Regan, my chest thrusting up and down with every breath I take. “Look into her eyes while asking her that same question you just asked me. She’s telling the truth, Regan. I can see it in her eyes.”

Regan nods, believing me. “Okay. Then I’ll defend her to the best of my ability, but this will be a tough case to win. They have a lot of evidence against her.”

“What do they have?” I ask, unable to grasp how they could gain any evidence against her for a crime she didn’t commit.



“A bullet that’s a match to the bullets in Isabelle’s gun was found at the crime scene. It has blood on it. They’re testing the DNA to see if it’s a match to Megan.” Her face is paler than I’ve seen it before, more gaunt too. “They also found Isabelle’s fingerprints and a strand of her hair in Megan’s motel room.”

*Fuck!* Before I can articulate a better response, my narrowed gaze shifts to the door Ryan is walking through. His eyes gleam when he scans Regan’s body, but the interested sparkle in them isn’t as bright as it was when he arrived at the restaurant with Isabelle on his arm for our combined date.

Once he finishes his avid assessment of Regan’s body, which is remarkably minus the tongue- hanging-out-of-their- mouths response most men give her, his blue eyes drift to mine. I nod at his silent question. He is cautious about speaking in front of Regan. He doesn’t need to be. She never discloses anything she isn’t first permitted to divulge.

“I’m on the case.” He moves deeper into the room, his stride as unsteady as his facial expression. “The evidence they have on Isabelle has me a little concerned.”

“Regan was just filling me in. You need to dig deeper into where this evidence surfaced from because you know as well as I do that Isabelle didn’t do this. Someone is framing her for Megan’s murder.” *And when I find out who it is, they’ll pay harshly for their error.*

Ryan nods. “I’ve always trusted my gut, and it’s warning me that something about this case isn’t right. The evidence was gathered too quickly, and it has the FBI’s murky fingerprints all over it.”

Regan’s eyes snap to Ryan’s faster than a bullet fired out of a gun. “Then pull rank. Get the FBI off this case. If there

are too many hands in the cookie jar, things will get messy.”

Ryan’s lips thin. “Thanks for the suggestion, but one, I don’t work for you. And two, I don’t work for you.” Ignoring Regan’s scolding glare burning a hole in his head, Ryan shifts on his feet to face me. “I had a run-in with the head of the FBI division in Ravenshoe when you called me about Megan weeks ago, so it’ll be my pleasure to ‘piss on his turf’ again as he quoted numerous times during our meeting.”

A smirk carves on my mouth, grateful Ryan is bringing his bat to the game, but I can’t get ahead of myself. There are still many matters we need to work through before I can celebrate. Such as “Did they find Megan’s body?”

A pang of hesitation crosses over his face before he shakes his head. As he scrubs at the day-old stubble on his chin, his glacier-blue eyes lock with mine. “Did you call in any... *favors?*”

A growl emits from my lips. What’s it with everyone asking me that today? “If I did, Isabelle wouldn’t be sitting in a holding cell right now. This isn’t me. And it also wasn’t her.”

Ryan lifts his hands in defeat. “All right. I get it, but I had to ask. I know you’ve tried to stay out of that lifestyle, Isaac, but...” He stops talking as his shoulders lift into a questioning hunch.

I let his underhanded snipe at my reputation roll off my back. I’ve become accustomed to the false accusations that plague my empire and me. Don’t get me wrong, some of the gossip circulating is accurate. I’m well-known for my infamous connections with certain members of the public, but I run my empire differently than my counterparts. I don’t launder money, hire prostitutes, or run drugs and guns for the cartel. None of those business ventures have or will ever run

through my empire, but I also don't lie down and take life's punches like a coward.

Does that make me a mobster? No, it doesn't. It makes me a smart businessman. I fought to get my empire off the ground, and I fight every day to maintain its success. I just have more people supporting my battle than I did when it started. I also have a shit ton more money.

"I need you to release Isabelle into my custody."

Ryan glares at me as if I'm crazy. "You know I can't do that. That's not how it works."

"I don't care how it works. She can't stay here. She's having nightmares. She wakes up crying in her sleep. She can't be left alone. You need to release her." My tone indicates this is not a request. I'm demanding he does this.

Ryan's brows draw together as remorse settles on his face, but he remains quiet. He's not convinced. I'm sure I can get him over the fence.

"You know that suicide Hunter updated you on from Parkerville?"

He nods, his face screwing up. "Just the photos from the case gave me the heebie-jeebies."

He stops shuddering when I say, "Isabelle discovered the body. She was the one who found him hanging."

His pupils widen as he mumbles a curse word under his breath, but my disclosure doesn't drag him fully over the fence. "With the evidence they have on her, I can't release her. I wish I could, but I can't." His words are smothered with remorse, but it does little to ease my agitation, even more so when he adds on, "But I can stay with her." Now my jaw is the tightest it's ever been. "It's the only option you have, Isaac.

Isabelle is remanded in custody overnight, so you either have me watch her or let her face incarceration alone. Which would you prefer?”

“I’d prefer to take her home!”

Ryan doesn’t flinch at my outburst. Stupid bastard. “That’s not going to happen. I understand you’re frustrated, and I get that you’re pissed, but nothing will alter the facts. Isabelle is here until tomorrow morning, at the very least.”

“Only tomorrow morning?” Nothing can douse the hope in my tone.

“Yes.” Ryan slaps my shoulder, a gesture usual for two entities on opposite sides of the law. It reminds me of how we met, except he’s no longer a scrawny kid pining over a girl he couldn’t have. “Isabelle may not be a police officer, but she is a member of law enforcement, so a handful of officers from this precinct called in some courtesies, meaning Izzy will stand in front of a judge first thing tomorrow morning.” His confident smirk falters as his voice lowers a few decibels. “But from what I’m hearing, you’ll need to bring a substantial checkbook because *if* she gets bail, the amount will be sizable.”

I nod without hesitation. They can have it all. I’ll give them every fucking cent I have if it guarantees Isabelle’s safety—both mentally and physically.

## CHAPTER 5



## ISABELLE

“*I*t isn't as fancy as the last restaurant we dined at, but you take what you can get.”

A grin curls my lips when I swing my eyes in the direction the voice came from. Ryan is standing in the doorway of the holding cell I'm restrained in. He's wearing a similar suit to the one he wore when we went on our combined date with Isaac two months ago. Actually, on closer inspection, I think it's the suit he wore that night.

His smile competes with the moonlight when he notices my prolonged gawk of his fitted trousers, dress shirt, and tailored jacket combination. “I only just finished working on a case when I picked you up. I didn't have time to change.”

*So, it is the same suit!*

Once the officer guarding the door unlocks it, Ryan enters to hand me the packaged sandwich and bottle of water he's grasping instead of shoving it through the slot. While undoing the top button on his jacket, his eyes dart around at the bare confines I'm calling home for the night. Ravenshoe PD remand chambers remind me of padded cells, except there's no padding on the white brick walls. A half-wall partially blocks the stainless toilet from the bustling corridor. The toilet has no seat, and the vanity hangs directly above it, meaning I'll never

use the cup chained to the wall to replenish my parched mouth. I'd rather go thirsty than drink from anything housed next to an exposed toilet bowl.

It could be worse. Holding cells are designed to house two dozen inmates. Mercifully, unlike the bustling one across from me, this one only has one occupant—me. I'm huddled in the corner of a bench that stretches three walls. Since the blanket the arresting officer gave me is as thin as my hope, I've wrapped my arms around my legs and have my non-bruised cheek resting on my knees.

Once Ryan has finished his brief assessment of the unhomely conditions, he plants his backside on the bench next to me. When bottled cologne and pine trees filter through my nose, I angle my body closer to him, preferring his fresh scent over the nauseating one I've been sniffing the past few hours. Ravenshoe PD's holding cells smell like urinals.

With furrowed brows, Ryan tracks his index finger down my cheek. His touch is so gentle, it can barely be classified as a touch. "What happened to your cheek?"

I screw my face up like a witch about to boil some children. Although I could place the blame for my bruise on the arresting officers' brutality, at the end of the day, I'm partially to blame for it as well. I was resisting arrest, but only because I was unaware that I was under arrest.

Undeterred by his one-sided conversation, Ryan removes the sandwich from my grasp to remove one half of a cheese and tomato sandwich inside. When he hands it to me, my mouth salivates in anticipation, but it has nothing on the growl my stomach does when he digs a super-size Snickers bar out of his trouser pocket.

"Isaac said it was your favorite chocolate bar."

I nod, praying the quick bob of my head doesn't release any of the moisture brimming in my eyes. Even though it isn't a grand gesture, it shows thoughtfulness on Isaac's behalf.

"Go on." Ryan nudges his head to the sandwich, encouraging me to eat it.

I swallow down one-half of the portion with a few swigs of water, but since my stomach is swirling, my usually robust appetite is lacking. When I place the uneaten half back into its packaging, Ryan adjusts his position while grumbling about the bench seat already giving him a dead ass. I can't help but giggle over his comment. I shoved the rock-hard pillow the arresting officer gave me under my bottom within the first two minutes. Even being as hard as a stone, it has more padding than the bench.

"Ah... the banana split led me astray. I thought the way to your heart was via your stomach. I'm an idiot. I should have dusted off my funny bone instead of scrounging for loose coins at the bottom of my briefcase for a day-old sandwich."

Ryan's comment makes me smile, but it doesn't loosen my lips. He's not deterred, though. Not in the slightest. He seems like a man who enjoys a challenge—hence, our extremely dangerous one two months ago.

After scratching his chin, his eyes shift to me. "I'm going to be frank. I know Isaac instructed you not to speak to anyone without a lawyer present, but you need to trust me. Isaac requested for me to be placed on this case, but I didn't do it because he asked. I did it because I don't believe you're capable of doing what you've been accused of."

I wait, knowing there's more.



My intuition is proven right when he says, “But... if you don’t help me, we’re never going to get any further than we are.”

The expression on his face appears neutral, but it’s the concern reflecting in his eyes that causes my greatest concern. He either genuinely needs my help or he’s panicked he went on a date with a cold-blooded killer.

“Are you prosecuting me or defending me?”

“Neither,” he replies immediately. “I’m trying to unearth what happened to Megan. Regardless of her background or what charges may have been brought against her if she hadn’t been killed, she’s still a victim, so she deserves a voice.”

“I agree. I also want to know what happened to her.”

“Then help me, Izzy. Answer some basic questions any regular Joe could answer without a lawyer present. I swear, I’m not here to railroad you. I’m just seeking answers to questions no one is asking.”

I return his prudent stare while contemplating. Although we’ve only interacted once, Regina’s fondness when she divulged his life history before our date assures me he’s a good man. My Uncle Tobias’s knack for spotting trustworthy people a mile away was passed onto Regina, so if she thinks Ryan is a good man, I have no hesitation believing the same thing.

“What do you want to know?”

Ryan looks two seconds from kissing me—*again*. Instead, he squeezes my shoulder before standing from his seat to yank a notepad out of his jacket. A smile curves my lips high when the removal of his notepad is quickly followed by the removal of his jacket. I peer up at him with shock all over my face when he drapes his jacket around my shoulders.

“You look cold,” he replies to my surprised expression like it’s perfectly normal for him to read me like a book.

Although uneasy, I tug his jacket in closer. I’m not just relishing in the unique scent seeping from his coat, I’m loving his body heat. It’s freezing in here.

Once his backside is reattached to the rock-hard bench seat, his gaze lifts from the notepad to me. “When did you last fire your gun?”

I give him a look, one that says it isn’t a standard question a detective would ask an everyday perp. Ryan tries to act innocent. It isn’t an act he can pull off. Although our interview jumped from the gates in the wrong manner, I’ll still answer his question because I have nothing to hide, so I have no reason to fear prosecution.

“Two days ago. I had a tail following me, so I took what I thought at the time was a necessary action to protect myself.” When Ryan’s brows rocket up his face, I slap his arm. “Not that type of action. I wanted them to stop following me. When I shot out their back tires, the chances of that happening greatly increased.” I lower my voice a few decibels, halving my conceitedness running rife in my tone. “I wasn’t aware Isaac had Hugo following me. If I did, I would have chosen a different set of actions.”

Ryan’s grin is so bright, I’m tempted to protect my eyes from its blinding rays. “Does Isaac know you fired at Hugo?”

“I didn’t fire *at* Hugo. I fired at his tires. That’s different.”

When Ryan throws his head back and laughs, I’m two seconds away from adding additional charges to the long list I’m already facing. These charges will include assaulting an unarmed detective.

I'm saved from further prosecution when he settles his laughter by getting back to the task at hand. "Initial forensics on the pistol they recovered from your possession this afternoon indicated that it had recently been fired. This gives credit to the CSI findings." After checking hand-scribbled notes in his notepad, he asks, "Can you explain how they discovered your fingerprints in Megan's motel room?"

"I followed Megan after an incident at Isaac's nightclub two weeks ago. It was before I was placed on suspension. I did a full write-up about my findings and issued my report to my superior officer the same day. It should all be in my record."

Ryan appears surprised by my admission. I assume it's because of my attempts to keep our conversation on a professional playing field, but he proves me wrong when he asks, "Why are you on suspension?"

I exhale a shaky breath, still peeved that Theresa's unfounded evidence was enough to get me ousted. "IA is investigating me for colluding with Isaac. They're scrutinizing my position on the belief that I gave him confidential documents in exchange for beneficial gain."

Ryan shifts his position until his handsome face is a mere inch from mine. "Is the IA agent investigating you the same lady who came into the interrogation room after Isaac and I left?" His breaths flutter my cheeks when I nod. "Did Isaac tell you about his *involvement* with Theresa?" My sandwich threatens to resurface from the way he says 'involvement.'

Unable to speak, I shake my head.

He shifts his eyes to the corridor to make sure we're alone before scooting even closer to me—like there's any bench left between us. "I'm only telling you this because I believe it's a reason as to why you're spending your night in a holding cell

instead of in the comfort of your bed... *or Isaac's.*" His last two words are barely whispered.

I nod, not only appreciating his honesty but respecting it. He could have kept me in the dark as every other officer has today. He didn't. That awards him more than a few brownie points.

"Theresa Veneto was a detective at Ravenshoe PD before she joined the Bureau." His eyes once again bounce around our surroundings. "It was never proven, but she was suspected of corruption on many occasions. Details are sketchy, but from what I gathered, Isaac's lawyer had her removed from her position."

"For corruption?" Nothing but suspicion is heard in my tone. I'm both shocked and intrigued.

Ryan shakes his head. "No. Her removal from her position had nothing to do with corruption. Personal matters were cited during her exit interview."

"Do you believe Theresa is dragging me into her vendetta against Isaac?" I already know Ryan's answer, but I'd rather him give me the basket of eggs in one go instead of scattering them around for me to gather.

Ryan shrugs. "I don't know for sure. It's just speculation."

He tries to tuck away a flare of emotion that taints his face, but he isn't quick enough for me to miss it. After lowering my legs from the bench, I swivel my torso until I'm facing him head-on. "Do you think I killed Megan?"

"No, Isabelle," he replies without hesitation. "But the jurors won't care about my opinion. All they'll see is the evidence presented to them."

“Evidence that makes it seem as if I am guilty of the charges I’ve been accused of?”

“Yes.” His bluntness amplifies the twisting of my stomach, but I’d rather him be honest than lie to me.

“What evidence could they possibly have against me? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

The high pitch of my voice adequately communicates my confusion. Theresa is many things, but not even she can summon evidence from thin air, but they must have something to remand me until my arraignment. I just have no clue what it is.

I wish I weren’t so damn inquisitive when Ryan eases my confusion in the most horrid way. “The bullet found in Megan’s motel room positively matched the weapon in your possession when you were arrested. The DNA recovered from the bullet matches Megan’s blood type. Even without a body, the amount of blood in her motel room means they plan to charge you with first-degree murder, Izzy.”

No longer capable of holding in the slosh at the bottom of my stomach, I rush to the stainless-steel toilet bowl. As I expel the three bites of sandwich I scoffed down earlier, I wish I could sidestep prosecution just as easily. I’m innocent, but there’s no such thing as being innocent until proven guilty when forensic evidence says otherwise.

## CHAPTER 6



## ISABELLE

*M*y knees knock when I take a hesitant step into the courtroom. As my eyes dart around the bland and uninviting space, I strive to ignore the swishing of my stomach. I honestly feel seconds from being sick. I guess nerves can be excused when your first brush with the law is on the defense's side of the galley instead of the plaintiff's.

The first person my fretful gaze locks in on is Ryan. His piercing blue eyes are peeking out from behind the male District Attorney's head. I don't feel deceived that he's sitting on the opposing team's side. My arraignment is only being held this morning because he called in a few favors with his colleagues.

As I shuffle to the table Regan is standing behind, I take in the dark circles plaguing Ryan's eyes. He looks exhausted as I feel. That's understandable. I caught glimpses of him walking past my holding cell every ten to twenty minutes last night. If he got any sleep, it was extremely broken.

A sharp yank on my elbow stops my shaky steps near the table Regan is standing at. Compared to the ghastly orange jumpsuit I was required to change into this morning, Regan looks stunning in a red Chanel suit. Her hair is pulled back in a chignon bun, and unlike yesterday, her beautiful features are

complemented by a light application of makeup, enhancing her already flawless face.

“Hands.”

The court officer yanks up my chained wrists, not waiting for me to respond. Once the tight cuffs circling them are undone, I wipe at the sweat on my brow. Mercifully, this time around, they slapped my hands together at the front of my body, meaning my ride to the courthouse didn't cause more injuries to my already aching body. When I was arrested yesterday, they fixed the cuffs so tightly they pinched my skin, so not only do I have bruises as wristbands, I also have indents from the rigid material digging into my skin.

As my hand falls from my face, the DA pivots around to face me. He's a distinguished-looking man with a wonky smile and bright eyes. His suit looks almost as expensive as the ones Isaac dons, and his watch seems pricey, no doubt costing more than I earn a year. He's supposed to be one of the good guys, but his vibe doesn't indicate that. I see him more like a snake in long grass—only deadly when you enter their domain.

When he notices me gawking at him, he nods a greeting before returning his focus to the documents stacked on his desk. I also shift my attention elsewhere. It doesn't wander far. It can't. The courtroom isn't overly large. Only a dozen or so people are filling the pews. Excluding Ryan, I don't recognize anyone in the gallery. They're here either waiting for their case to be brought forward or to support a loved one.

I stop peering at a lady in the corner of the room, dabbing her eyes with a tissue when Regan moves to stand in front of me. She fiddles with the collar of my jumpsuit, her nose screwing up like a rabbit.



“Did you sleep last night or have access to bathroom facilities?”

My already slumped shoulders hang even further. Clearly, I look as shit as I feel. When I shake my head, Regan sighs. I was given access to the shower block this morning but chose not to use them since the same privilege was given to the women housed in the holding cell across from me. Most appeared to be crack whores and hookers, but their taunts about my supposed ‘special treatment’ had me watching them more closely. Not all of them were low-ranked hookers. There were more narks in that room than stool pigeons.

When my third scan of the room fails to find the gray eyes I’m seeking, I lock my eyes with Regan. “Where’s Isaac?”

Her sigh reveals I won’t like what she has to say. “He can’t come, Isabelle, and neither can anyone who has any association with him. You won’t see him again until your charges are squashed.”

“Why?” Sheer panic resides in my tone. Rightfully so. That could be months away. Just the thought of not seeing him for that long has the cardboard cereal I choked down this morning threatening to resurface.

Regan guides me to the wooden chair next to her. “Sit down before you fall.”

As she fills a glass with water, her eyes consistently dart between my pale face and someone sitting in the corner of the gallery. I’m too busy struggling to maintain my composure to divert my attention to whoever she’s gawking at. My brain is so frazzled from a lack of sleep, I have to manually command my lungs to suck in breaths when needed instead of them doing it automatically. I thought to die in a horrifying plane

crash was my most supreme fear, but the thought of not seeing Isaac again outweighs that terror tenfold.

After handing me a glass of water, Regan once again shifts her eyes to the right. “*She’s okay.*” She mouths her assurance, ensuring the DA eyeing her from afar doesn’t hear her.

Confused by her oddball behavior, I shift my eyes in the direction she’s gazing. Dizziness clusters in my head from my sharp movements, but it does nothing to lessen the crazy beat of my heart when I spot what she’s peering at. A surveillance camera is mounted in the corner of the room. It’s flashing red, indicating it’s in the process of recording.

With my mind not as hazy as it was earlier, I dart my questioning eyes to Regan. I don’t speak any words. I don’t need to. The high arch of my brow is questioning enough. Her brows crease from my wordless interrogation, but her eyes spill a mammoth load of secrets. The most vital—Isaac didn’t abandon me. I should have known better. He’s not a man who steps back when challenged. He’d rather head toward the storm than be seen as a coward. Although he isn’t here with me, knowing he’s watching settles the nerves in my stomach. He has my back as promised.

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The first half of my arraignment is Regan and the DA having a fiery argument with the occasional phrase directed at the judge. It’s the scripted quarrel you see on any crime show where the defense attorney defends his or her clients’ innocence while the DA tells the judge how corrupt and immoral they are. The only time my attention is gripped is when the DA spits out the word “remand.”

“The accused is a federal agent. The crime she is accused of committing is a particularly heinous offense. Remanding her in custody is the only way the courts can ensure the safety of the public as it’s morally obligated to do.”

My pulse clusters in my ears as more hurtful words spill from his lips. “Dangerous, a murderer, calculated and premeditated, unhinged.” They’re the words the DA uses to describe my personality to the judge, and every word fired off his tongue tightens the constrictive noose curled around my heart.

As the panic I only just gathered resurfaces, I shoot my watering eyes to the surveillance camera. I stare at it in shock, equally sickened and panicked. I didn’t prepare for this. I rely on the justice system—*I believe in it*—so I never fathomed it would be used against me so unjustly.

When many more venomous words seep from the DA’s mouth, I can no longer reel in my anger. I’m stronger than this. My uncle raised me to be stronger than this.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” The room falls into silence when my chair scraping across the floor overtakes Regan and the DA’s vicious rumblings. When Regan begs for me to retake my seat, I shake my head. Tears careen down my cheeks, but what I have to say needs to be said whether I’m ugly crying or not. “I haven’t done anything wrong, yet I’m being treated like a criminal. What happened to being innocent until proven guilty?”

When the bailiff hovers his hand over his baton, my words come out in a flurry, ensuring I get them all out before he silences my right to freedom of speech. “This is from the male arresting officers throwing me onto the ground during my arrest.” I point to my cheek that’s so badly bruised, it didn’t

stop throbbing all night. “This...” I pull up my sleeves to show the judge the nasty black bruises circling my wrists. “... is from where they placed my cuffs on so tightly, they cut off my circulation. I couldn’t feel my hands for hours.”

I drag a shaky hand under my nose to remove the contents spilling there before locking my eyes with the judge. “Yes, I am a federal agent, but right here, right now, I’m ashamed to admit that. I’m disgusted I was ever part of a culture that’s so blatantly unjust they treat their own as if they’re the enemy.”

I’m reasonably sure my outburst lost me any chance at a fair trial, so you can imagine my surprise when the judge asks the DA if he’s aware of any of the incidents I just brought forward. “Whether facing a misdemeanor charge or being prosecuted for murder, defendants have rights... rights Ms. Brahn was not given if her claims are true.”

The DA balks before fumbling out a string of words that don’t make any sense.

“It isn’t a difficult question, Mr. Marco. Was Ms. Brahn rough-handled while in police custody? Yes or no—?”

“There’s a dashcam video that will corroborate Ms. Brahn’s statement.”

This remark didn’t come from the DA. It came from Ryan, who is seated behind him. When the DA glares at him, warning him to keep his mouth shut, Ryan smirks at him without the slightest bit of fear crossing his face. He’s either extraordinarily cocky or an idiot. I hope it’s the former.

My heart beats out a funky tune when the judge asks Ryan, “Do you have this so-called evidence on hand?”

When Ryan nods, my eyes rocket to the camera mounted on the ceiling. I didn’t mention the brutality of my arrest

yesterday because I didn't want Isaac to know. He's juggling too many things right now, so the last thing I want to do is add another matter into the mix.

As my ragged grunt from being thrown to the ground echoes off the white walls of the chamber, I mouth, "*I love you,*" to the surveillance camera, praying three little words will pacify Isaac's anger enough he won't become the criminal his FBI file makes him out to be.

## CHAPTER 7



## ISAAC

*M*y stomach heaves when an *oomph* broadcasts through the monitor I'm watching Isabelle's arraignment on. Regan was adamant I wasn't allowed in the courtroom today. Our argument lasted well into the wee hours of this morning, only ending when Regan said Isabelle could face twenty years in jail if I didn't step back. By having an association with me, Regan believes it will make the jury think Isabelle aided in Megan's death because of her obsession with my brother.

"Evidence is all the jurors will see. They won't see Isabelle as you do, Isaac. They'll look at her through the tainted glasses the DA places on their noses," Regan argued this morning. "Our job is to ensure their glasses are so clear, they'll see through the murky evidence."

My attention reverts to my computer monitor when a pained groan rolls through its speakers. Although I've only heard it in ecstasy, I recognize that groan. It belongs to Isabelle. When a second grunt booms into my ears, I stand from my chair with my fists clenched at my sides and my jaw tight. I can't see the video Ryan is playing for the judge, but I can hear every cruel blow Isabelle is hit with.

As I suck in big breaths attempting to douse the fire raging through my veins, I return Isabelle's stare. Her beautiful tear-filled eyes are staring up at the surveillance camera Hunter hacked into, aware they are my eternal weakness. Although they somewhat ease my fury, they're not sufficient enough to stop me from pegging my Mac notebook to the other side of the room. It shatters through my glass bar before landing on the floor with a soundless thud.

Top-shelf whiskey filters through my nostrils when I snap my eyes to the ceiling, so I can't see the sympathetic looks Hunter and Hugo are giving me. I'm usually more controlled than this. Exercising discipline in demanding situations is all I know. I handle multi-million-dollar negotiations without breaking into a sweat and have fought fighters twice my size without batting an eyelid, but this is different. This type of rage is uncontrollable because it's all bearing down on my shoulders.

I noticed the bruise on Isabelle's face yesterday, but in the haste of our gathering, I didn't stop to consider how she obtained it. I should have been more vigilant—warier. When I pledged to protect her months ago, that vow wasn't just for Col. It was for anyone stupid enough to wish her harm. I'm off my game, but this is inexcusable, and I refuse to let those in the wrong get off lightly.

“I want the dashcam video of Isabelle's arrest.”

Hunter's eyes widen, but he keeps his concerns to himself. “Consider it done.”

As he pulls his laptop out of a hemp bag dumped on the floor, my attention shifts to the computer screen in just enough time to witness the judge slamming his gavel down. Regan and the DA's squabbling has become too much for him to bear.



Wrinkles cover a majority of his face, but not even they can't hide his desperation to have this hearing over. Typically, arraignments last a few minutes at the most. Isabelle's is cutting it close to forty. I see it being the same with her actual trial.

Regan said convictions for murder in the absence of a body are possible, but the cases are harder to prove. Generally, the prosecution solely relies on the evidence they have on hand. In most cases, that's classed as circumstantial evidence. Regrettably, Isabelle's situation is unique. They have damning forensic evidence against her that significantly increases her odds of being convicted of murder without a body.

Although our focus, for the time being, is getting Isabelle out on bail, once that occurs, Regan and Ryan's focus will shift to having the forensic evidence expunged from the case. If that fails, I'll make Isabelle disappear just as quickly as I did Hugo. Not even an hour-long stay in the break room of the men hunting him had his cover blown.

The conceited grin tugging my lips high slackens when the judge's big burly tone bellows out of the computer speakers. "I've heard enough." My lungs take stock of my oxygen levels when he locks his eyes with Isabelle. Even through a monitor, I can see remorse glimmering in his worldly eyes. "After watching the dashcam evidence, I strongly recommend you have the officers who arrested you charged." Isabelle nods, her attention shifted back to the front of the chambers. "But, with that said, the evidence against you, Ms. Brahn, is incriminating."

My heart ceases beating. If he remands Isabelle into custody, my anger won't be dispersed by throwing a laptop across the room. I won't even be able to pound it away on the

bag in my warehouse. I truly don't trust what my motives will be if she's jailed until her trial. It's killing me not being able to hold her now. I won't last months.

The judge takes a few more seconds to deliberate before banging his gavel onto his podium. "Bail is set at three million dollars."

My sigh is so loud, I'm certain every resident in Ravenshoe heard it.

With my mind switching into game-mode, I swing my eyes to Hugo.

"On it." He jumps up from the seat to grab the suitcase full of money sitting on the safe in the corner of my office. He makes it halfway out the door before swiveling back around to face me. "Where am I taking her once she's out on bail?"

I stare at him, my mind blank. With us needing to pretend we don't know each other, she can't go back to my house. He also can't take her to her apartment as Brandon proved its security isn't as impressive as my security team made it out to be, so that only leaves...

Before the idea ruminates in my head, Hunter throws his keys to Hugo. "Take her to my place. I'll text you the address."

Smiling, Hugo jerks up his chin in thanks before hot-footing it out of my office. As far as the IRS is concerned, Hunter works for a telemarketing company in New Delhi. He's never met Isaac Holt, much less worked for him. He's never openly admitted it, but I'm reasonably sure they also believe he only earns a basic minimum wage, which only we know isn't true.

“The back door has been flung wide open.” The unease in Hunter’s usually thick timbre sets my nerves on edge—like they could get any worse. “Are you sure you want to watch this?” He raises his eyes to mine. They’re full of apprehension.

After shoving my hands into my pockets to conceal their shakes, I lift my chin. His throat works hard to swallow before he swivels his laptop around to face me. My heart drums against my ribcage when he presses play on the dashcam video. Hearing Isabelle’s winded grunt for the second time doesn’t lessen their impact. If anything, the visual makes it ten times worse.

The only benefit that comes from witnessing her attack is realizing my judgment of Brandon was wrong. Even outnumbered, he defended Isabelle to the best of his abilities. He knocked one officer off Isabelle with a hard fist to his nose before grabbing another in a headlock. When a third officer placed a gun to his temple, he elbowed him in the nose before diving for a fourth officer. It took three officers holding him down and another threatening to Taser him before he gave up on his campaign, and even then, his annoyance can’t be missed. He’s as pissed as I am now.

“Rewind it back to the middle section. I want to see the faces of the men who threw Isabelle to the ground.” The adrenaline pumping in my veins makes my voice deeper than usual.

When Hunter freezes the footage on the frame I’m requesting, I lock their faces into my memory bank. They’ll pay for their error in a way they’ll never see coming, and I don’t just mean their ability to breathe.

“Run their faces through the police database facial recognition software. Get me every detail you can on them.

Addresses, contact details, even what color the thread in their suits were when they attended prom. I want it all.”

Nodding, Hunter highlights the faces of the two officers before dragging them into the police database he’s illegally hacked into. While it searches for the men responsible for my newly blackened blood, I work on another neurosis that’s bugging me.

“How did Brandon arrive at my office only twenty minutes after Isabelle was arrested?” I prop my ass on the edge of my desk before folding my arms in front of my chest. “They would’ve retained him for assault.” My gaze shifts to Hunter, who is eyeing me curiously. “He assaulted four officers but was free only twenty minutes later. What the fuck am I missing?”

“Hold on.” Hunter digs a second laptop out of his bag. Once the screen is fired up, his finger taps on the keys at the speed of lightning. “The officers withdrew their charges within minutes of Brandon being carted off to the police station.”

A chill slides through me. Brandon has the appearance of a humble boy scout, but his eyes are hazed with secrets. There’s more to him than anyone has perceived, especially Isabelle.

My deliberations stop when a cell phone rings. It isn’t my standard cell phone, which is on my desk. It’s coming from the breast pocket of my suit jacket, slung over the coat rack in the corner of my office. By the time I retrieve it, the caller has been sent to my voicemail. The screen displays it’s an unknown number, but it has a local area code.

With curiosity heating my blood, I press the number for my voicemail before squashing my phone to my ear. When coins drop at the commencement of the message, I quickly perceive the call was made via a payphone.

Trains are running in the background, but they're barely heard over the gruff, accentuated voice shrilling down the line. "You do not need to worry about the police officers who assaulted Isabelle. I've handled the situation. Consider it a gift between family members."

## CHAPTER 8



## ISABELLE

While Regan takes a call, I drink in the small conference room I'm seated in. The walls are bland, and the furniture is dated, but my heart still skipped a beat when I walked into the room. I'd sit in the back of a garbage truck if it guaranteed I wouldn't be chained to other female prisoners while being hauled to jail to await trial. With it being December, my hearing won't likely be scheduled until after the new year. Even though my Uncle Tobias and *Dedushka* weren't the get-down-on-the-ground-and-play-with-Barbie-dolls type of men, Christmas was a celebrated tradition in our household.

No matter what case he was working on, Uncle Tobias always returned home no later than the twenty-third of December. We spent Christmas Eve morning searching for the perfect tree to decorate the same afternoon. Our meals were generally at the local diner or ordered from a catering company, but occasionally our neighbors, Mary and Kenneth, invited us to join them when their sons didn't return home to celebrate with them.

The judge took pity on me when I explained the brutality I endured when arrested, but I would have utilized any tactic to ensure I didn't spend my first Christmas with Isaac in a four

by four cell. I already missed our first Thanksgiving, so I wasn't willing to give up another special occasion. Even with a murder conviction hovering over my head, I want our first Christmas to be special. I want to add him to my family traditions before creating our own. It's early in our relationship, but there's no doubt Isaac is my soul mate, and it's time for the world to know that.

Regan stores her cell phone in the briefcase at her side before joining me back at the chipped wooden table. "Hugo is here to pay your bail." Because her smile is riddled with hesitation, it doesn't have the same heaven's-gates-being-opened appeal it usually has. "But before I can let you go, I need to be brutally honest with you."

"Okay. Good." The more brutal, the better. Only dodgy people skirt around the truth.

From the professional mask slipped over her face, I never anticipated for her to say this, "I know the type of man Isaac is... he's addictive, but unless you follow my instructions, your case will be impossible for me to win, so with that in mind, I need you to stay away from Isaac until the trial is over."

My mouth dries from the massive gulp I just took. That's like asking someone to go scuba diving at eight hundred feet and not take an oxygen tank. I can't breathe without Isaac in my life, so how am I supposed to stay away from him for weeks, if not months?

"I'm not requesting for this to happen, Isabelle. If you want to avoid jail, you need to do exactly as I say." A chair being dragged across tiles breaks the silence teeming between us when she adjusts her position to face me head-on. "Do you want to go to jail?"



“No, but staying away from Isaac is a cruel and twisted imprisonment all on its own.” Not only will my heart be pained, but my body will be punished as well.

“I understand that, but you need to think with your head instead of your heart for just a minute.” Her remorseful green eyes stare into mine. “Step back and evaluate this as if you’re looking in on this trial from the outside. By removing your feelings, you’ll assess the situation to the fullest.”

I hate what she’s saying, but I also understand it. My personal feelings have factored into every decision I’ve made the past two months—that’s why I made so many fatal mistakes. By stepping back and assessing the evidence as I’ve been taught to do, I’ll remain one step ahead of the people attempting to take me down.

After a few minutes of silent deliberations, the cloud that’s been clogging my head the past two weeks floats away. “My relationship with Isaac will fatten up the DA’s case?”

Regan nods. “Yes, but without a relationship, there’s no motive.”

“Then reasonable doubt will come into play.”

She smiles her heaven’s-gates-being-opened smile before nodding. “Exactly,” She places her hand over my fist, which has settled on the jeans I was arrested in. “I explained the same thing to Isaac this morning. He didn’t take the news well, so I need you to convince him this is best for all involved.”

Air whizzes out of my nostrils. In general, Isaac detests being told what to do, so I can imagine what his reaction was when Regan said he had to stay away from me. I doubt anything I could say will help the situation, but I do agree with

Regan. By us being a couple, I had a motive to kill Megan. If I want to stay out of jail, I have to stay away from Isaac.

“I’ll talk to him?” I don’t know why my confirmation sounds like a question. Probably because I’m skeptical Isaac will go along with our plan just as much as I know it will kill me staying away from him.

“Anything will help.” Regan huffs. “Now, we just need to work out where to bunk you until the trial. You can’t live in your apartment as Isaac owns the building. You can’t live with Isaac. Duh.” She ticks off the no-go zones on her fingers. “You can’t stay with Harlow as she’s dating Isaac’s best friend and business associate, Cormack, so that only leaves...”

“Regina?” I fill in when her reply comes up short.

“Sorry, she’s off the table as well.”

I scowl so hard, wrinkles indent my forehead. “Why?”

Regina retired from the force a few weeks ago. She has no connection to the case or with Isaac, so there’s no reason why I can’t stay with her.

I’m proven wrong when Regan says, “In preparation to lower her workload, Regina studied forensic science, meaning she’s the best person to squash inferior evidence. Since she’s working on your case, you can’t stay with her.”

“I lived with her for weeks, doesn’t that already cause a conflict of interest?”

Regan shakes her head. “No, because that was never public knowledge. Just like her relationship with Tobias, Regina kept her relationship with you off the department’s radar.”

A smile curls on my lips. My heart was pained when I didn’t spot Regina in the court chambers earlier today. We

only officially met six months ago, but she treated me like the mother I never had, and we've kept in regular contact since I moved out, so I was somewhat upset I was left to face my battles alone. Now I have more understanding as to why I felt abandoned. They didn't do it to hurt me. They were just putting my best interests first.

“What about blondie?”

I stare at Regan with my brow arched high. “Brandon?” When she nods, I huff. “We must have our Isaac Holt's confused. The one I know would *never* let me stay with Brandon.”

“Then, we won't tell him,” she says with a shrug.

“I'm not lying to him.” The mortified expression crossing my face should tell her how stupid I think her idea is, but just in case, I add words into the mix. “I haven't regained his trust from the first time I broke it, so there's no chance in hell I'll do it again. I'd rather go to jail than deceive him again.”

The sternness on Regan's face softens from my admission. After sucking in a big breath that puffs her chest out, she murmurs, “If worse comes to worst, you can stay with me until we find a more suitable arrangement.”

“Thanks.” I roll my eyes, detesting her lack of enthusiasm. “But wouldn't it be more suspicious if I roomed with Isaac's lawyer than a friend who happens to be dating an acquaintance of his?”

A blinding smile stretches across Regan's face. “I've worked for many pseudonyms of Isaac Holt, but I've yet to officially work for *the* Isaac Holt.”

“How many aliases does Isaac have?” The healthy beat of my heart is heard in my tone.

Grinning like a mouse with cream-slathered whiskers, Regan stands from her chair. “I’ll go get your bail sorted. For now, I’ll put my details on your application. Then once you’ve cleaned up and rested, we’ll finalize the rest of the arrangements.”

I fake a smile before nodding. Her and Isaac are on par for evading conversations they don’t want to participate in.

I’ve been alone for barely a minute when I detect I’m being watched. When I swing my eyes to the door, my breath snags halfway to my lungs. The person standing in the doorway isn’t who I was anticipating. “What do you want?”

Alex’s ocean blue eyes glide down my body, absorbing the gritty stains on my clothes before returning to my face. When they suspend on my bruised cheek, the shadow of hair on his jaw can’t hide its tick.

“I came to show my support. Even suspended, you’re still a part of my team.” He paces into the room, leaving the door open to show this isn’t a formal visit. “I’m not the enemy, Isabelle.”

“You’re not?” I pad closer to him so I can look him in the eyes when I reveal that I know about all the dirty little tactics he utilized the past six months. “So, paying for me to fly business class isn’t something an enemy would do?”

His brows scrunch, but before he can force any of the denials I see in his eyes, I keep talking. “I know all about your *special* treatment—”

“Special treatment?” He steps closer to me, his walk as arrogant as the expression on his face. “I treated you the way I did, Isabelle, to ensure you utilized this.” He taps his index finger on my right temple. “Instead of this.” He glides his hand

down my body. “Did I bring you onto my team as a piece of eye candy for Isaac? Yeah, I did... *initially*. But with some pushing, your investigative abilities were unearthed. Who discovered the real identity of Isaac’s bodyguard? The connection between Isaac, Henry Gottle, and Col Petretti? That was all you, Isabelle. Not some floozy all the male agents at the academy couldn’t stop flapping their gums about.”

I try to formulate a response, but I’m so shocked, I can’t produce a single word, much less an entire sentence.

“Does that mean I’m unaware of your relationship with Isaac? No, it doesn’t. I’ve known since the night he took you home from the skanky nightclub you and Brandon went to months ago.”

I balk, my pupils widening. *He knew all along?*

“But for months, your focus remained on the task at hand. You showed true signs of a capable agent because you ignored your feelings and thought with a rational, cool head.” He stands so close, his latte-scented breath flutters my lips with warmth. “You could still be a top agent in our field if you repress your feelings, so you see people for who they *truly* are.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest. “You should listen to your own advice. You judge Isaac on the shoddy evidence in his file instead of the man standing before you.”

“Just you saying that reveals he hasn’t told you why he was arrested.”

His vicious words stab in my chest, physically shunting me, but they don’t stop me from saying. “I trust Isaac—”

“And look where that got you,” Alex mocks, his tone arrogant. “Standing in a courthouse on bail for murder.” When

he peers past my shoulder, the mask he's wearing momentarily slips, but it does little to leash his anger. "I know you didn't do what you are accused of, so I'll do everything in my power to have your charges dismissed, but you need to look at the whole picture before you get buried so deep, you'll never climb back out."

Before I can tell him I'm already gone, the creak of a door gains my attention. Regan is standing in the doorway with her wide eyes bouncing between Alex and me. When she notices her silent stalk has been busted, she says, "Your bail has been paid. You're free to go, Isabelle."

Although she's talking to me, her focus remains on Alex. She seems as uncomfortable in his presence as me, but for a different reason. I don't know exactly what, but if forced, I'd guess they've met before.

While gathering my belongings from the tabletop, I return my focus to Alex. "Be the agent you quote I could be. Dig deeper, look harder, and unravel the truth instead of running with speculations. I'm not just talking about my case. I'm referring to Isaac's as well." I smile, pleased the backbone I lost the past six months has started rejuvenating. "And do it without tapping your agents' cell phones and paying exorbitant airfares."

Not giving him a chance to reply, I pivot on my heels and briskly stroll out the door. Even with my heart erratically thumping, my chin is lifted high, and a broad grin is stretched across my face. Pride costs nothing, but boy is it saucy.

## CHAPTER 9



## ISABELLE

*I* dash down the marble stairs of the courthouse toward Hugo, who's standing next to his 1969 Chevelle. My lungs relish the fresh, clean air, but the frantic sucks of my nostrils are barely heard over the blissful tune my heart is pumping out. Every gallop I take toward Hugo increases my megawatt smile.

I'm so eager to get away from the dark gloom looming over the courthouse, I'm unaware of the attention I'm gaining until members of the media swarm me. As their counterparts push their cameras in close to my face, reporters hammer me with a range of questions pertaining to Megan's case. For the most part, they're the standard inquiries any criminal anticipates when leaving court with an official indictment, but there are a handful of ones who make me extremely uncomfortable. They all center around Isaac and if I am in a sexual relationship with him.

When the lights become too bright for me to bear, I back away with my hands held up to shield my eyes. My fumbled steps cease when I bump into a hard, warm surface. Expensive cologne infuses the air when a jacket is placed over my head a mere second before I'm guided through the sea of reporters.



Their endless questions only stop when I'm helped into a taxi, and the back-passenger door is slammed shut.

"The corner of Tivot and Esplanade," requests a deep voice I immediately recognize.

When the taxi lurches to life, I yank off the coat covering my head. As suspected, the person who saved me from the aggressive swarm of media moguls is Brandon. He's wearing his standard work attire, which consists of dark trousers, a light-colored dress shirt, and a fitted jacket. He's forgone the tie he usually wears, switching it out for a massive bruise that covers a majority of his right cheek.

"What happened?"

He hisses when my fingertips skim over the bruise that looks freshly formed. Its size and pattern indicate a closed fist most likely made it. If I were still viewing the world through rose-colored glasses, I could blame my arrest for the mark, but I doubt that is the case. Brandon swung first, but none of the officers retaliated with their fists.

When Brandon drags the back of his knuckle-busted hand down my face, I continue my assessment of his face by only using my eyes. "We have a matching pair of bruises." As the remorse in his eyes triples, he locks them with me. "I'm sorry for how you were treated, Izzy."

I swipe away his worry by slicing my hand through the air. "You have nothing to be sorry for." When I rib him with my elbow, he sharply exhales, pretending my blow winded him. "But who knew you were hiding such impressive fighting skills, Mr. James?" I keep my tone witty, praying it will douse the tension hanging thickly in the air. "The officer you smacked won't breathe out of his nose for at least a week."

His hearty chuckle warms my heart. “He should be grateful he’s breathing at all.”

Just as Brandon’s chuckles die down, a thunderous engine revving rumbles through my body. In sync, Brandon and I snap our eyes to the back window of the idling taxi. Guilt swamps me when I spot Hugo’s glimmering candy apple-colored car is sitting behind us. My unexpected swarming by the reporters and Brandon’s bruise had me forgetting that Hugo was waiting for me.

*Jesus, could I be any more of an airhead this week?*

When apprehension washes over Brandon’s face, I aim to settle his panic. “It’s Hugo. He came to pick me up.” After gathering two twenties out of my purse, I scoot closer to the partition separating us from the taxi driver. “Can you please stop here?”

Upon spotting the generous tip I plan to give him for not even two minutes’ work, he directs his cab to the closest sidewalk. With a smile, I hand him the bills before slipping out of the taxi. When Brandon fails to mimic my departure, I tilt my torso so I can peer at him sitting motionless. “Are you coming?”

He watches me peculiarly before apprehensively nodding. As he hurries across the bench so he can exit the taxi onto the safety of the sidewalk, I stray my eyes to Hugo. His big beaming smile fades the instant Brandon joins me on the sidewalk. I don’t know why he despises Brandon so much, but his hatred is as evident as the sun shining in the sky.

After giving Hugo my please-behave face, I gesture for Brandon to slip into the back seat of Hugo’s *baby* before I slide in the passenger seat. Hugo’s woodsy smell activates my

senses when I slip inside his, but the familiar drawl of, “Hey, Isabelle,” warms my heart the most.

“Miss me?”

I slap his thick bicep when he mutters, “Like a hole in the head.”

After latching his belt, Brandon seeks Hugo’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Hey, Hugo.”

It takes a quarter of a mile, and my teeth clench to the point of cracking before Hugo returns Brandon’s greet, and even then, it’s short and clipped. “Blondie.”

When I peer back at Brandon, he nudges his head to Hugo, his expression questioning. I shrug, genuinely unsure of what Hugo’s problem is. I get he treats Isaac like family, so he hates the idea of anyone stepping on his turf, but that isn’t what Brandon is doing. He’s my friend—point-blank.

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Twenty minutes later, Hugo pulls into the driveway of a glass house on a cliff. My mouth dries up as my eyes bulge. “Are you sure this is the address Hunter messaged you?”

Hugo smirks, loving the doubt in my tone. “I told you Isaac gives *very* generous bonus checks in his Christmas cards.”

“You did, but this generous?”

With his lips clamped and his engine shut down, Hugo exits his car without speaking another word. As I mimic his movements, I take in the architectural wonder in front of me. Glass and steel beams stretch as far as the eye can see, and the ocean backdrop exhibits throughout each floor. It gives the

glass a blue tint, but it isn't dark enough to assure privacy. Hunter could get away with a lack of curtains if he didn't have neighbors, but we're not in the middle of the countryside. Modest, private-looking houses border his property, so how does he maintain privacy?

My eyes bug out even more when a wicked thought enters my mind. I shake it off, certain the confident man I met this weekend isn't *that* confident.

As Hugo paces toward the large double doors, he digs his phone out of his pocket. After he punches in a security code into a white panel at the side, a buzz booms over the waves crashing in the distance. Like I could get any more excitement, a second outbreak hits me when a computerized voice says, "Welcome home, Mr. Kane."

"I'm handing in my resignation first thing tomorrow morning." Brandon's tone doesn't indicate if he's joking or not, but the cranking of his elbow exposes it was more friendly than scornful.

After accepting the arm he's popped out in offering, we enter the elaborate home. My jaw drops lower with every step we take. Risqué female nude artwork adorns the pristine white walls. They're painted the same color as the ocean backdrop that expands as far as the eye can see. Modern white leather furniture is in abundance, and no expense was spared on the marble floors and granite countertops.

At a quick guess, I'd say this property has three bedrooms and two bathrooms. With the top story reserved for sleeping, all the living space is downstairs. The living room, kitchen, and dining area stretch across the entire back of the house giving uninterrupted views of the ocean, and an office is tucked away under the stairs.

When Hugo slides open the bi-folding doors at the back of the property, cool, salty air fans my cheeks. I unloop my arm from Brandon to move onto the glass patio outside. The calming noise of waves crashing in the distance soothe my agitated composure. It's serene here—almost too tranquil to be peaceful.

When I snap my eyes shut, eager to suck in the salty, warm air, the hairs on my arm prickle from the excitement scampering through my body. Only one person has ever made my body respond in such a manner. That person is the incredibly alluring Mr. Isaac Holt.

With my hope as high as my heart rate, I crack my eyes back open before pivoting on my heels to face the house. When my eyes lock in on Isaac standing in the entryway of Hunter's home, my breath hitches. He's talking to Regan. Their discussion looks heated, no doubt fueled by Regan's request for us to stay away from each other. Forever attentive, he notices my intense stare before I can verbalize my relief at seeing him again.

“Isabelle.”

His voice is barely a whisper, but it still rips through me like a knife. The sheer hurt in his tone reveals that this morning's proceedings gutted him as brutally as it maimed me. Eager to soothe his panic, I rush for him. My thighs are quivering, making my footing unsteady, but nothing can taper my strides.

After flashing a smirk that has my knees clashing, he matches my speed stride for stride. Halfway between the patio and the entryway, he catches me with his outstretched arms before pulling me into his heaving chest.

“You’re okay. I’ve got you.” His soothing purr lessens the chance of tears in my eyes trickling down my cheeks.

He gathers me in his arms before moving our reunion to a double leather sofa at the side of the living room. When he sits on the plush couch, I fist his business shirt in my hand, tethering myself to him so he can’t let me go. My greatest fear the past twenty-four hours was wondering if I’d ever see him again. I categorized my fear before storing it away for a more appropriate time, but now, having his smell, his allure, and his magnetizing pull directly in front of me, I can’t help but wonder what will happen if Ryan and Regina don’t get the scientific evidence refuted. There’s a very good chance I could spend the next twenty years in jail.

Isaac proves he knows me like no one else when he reads the need in my hold without a word spilling from my lips. “I’m not going anywhere, Isabelle, and neither are you. You will *not* spend one more night in custody. I promise you that.”

My heart swells when his thumbs sweep across my cheeks to ensure they’re dry. Once he’s confident the hue on my cheeks is from his nearness, not tears, he peers at someone behind my shoulder. “Give me one night, then I’ll do anything you ask.” The crackle in his tone hints he’s at the peak of his anger, but the softness of his words indicates he wants violence to be the last resort.

Nervous excitement sparks through me when Regan nods. “One night, then you have to step back and let me do the job you pay me to do.”

## CHAPTER 10



## ISAAC

“Come pick Isabelle up from the boathouse tomorrow morning.”

Hugo jerks up his chin, hearing the words I didn't speak the loudest.

“Then you can't let her leave your side. I don't know who's framing her for murder, but since there's no body, my suspicions that this is Col or someone in his crew has significantly increased.”

“I wouldn't be so quick to point fingers. Your arrest and Theresa's sudden resurrection in Ravenshoe smells mighty fishy to me. Have you had Hunter look a little deeper at that side of the coin yet?” Hugo's tone doesn't have an ounce of accusation. He's just wading through this muddled mess surrounding us by evaluating each viable vantage point.

I shake my head to his question. I briefly considered if our arrests were linked, but no matter how many ways I worked the facts, I couldn't find a connection. Theresa's attempts to coerce me back between her sheets were the most unscrupulous I've seen, but without a body, Megan's murder points to either Col Petretti or someone in his crew. Even when his family members die, a body is *never* recovered by law enforcement officers. He ties up *all* loose ends to ensure



there's no possibility of a ricochet effect to him or his organization.

"I don't trust either Col or Theresa as far as I can throw them. That's why you need to be Isabelle's shadow. If they can't make the murder charge stick, they'll switch tactics."

The twist of Hugo's lips is cruel. "She won't leave my sight." After jerking his head to Isabelle and Brandon talking across the room, he shifts on his feet to face me head-on. "I don't like him. He's hiding something... guaranteed."

A grin tugs his lips a little higher when I ask, "Aren't we all?"

"True. But his is big. I've never had someone rub me as badly as he does. He gives me the creeps."

I find his reply amusing. Nothing usually rattles Hugo, so I find it surprising someone as timid as Brandon raises his hackles.

"Do you trust him?"

I shake my head without pause for thought. "Not at all. Hunter is digging for dirt on him, but for the moment, our priority is keeping Isabelle safe and getting her charges dropped. Once we've handled that, we'll deal with him." Conceitedness heats my blood when I drink in the large bruise on Brandon's cheek. "Are you responsible for his shiner?"

Hugo crosses his arms in front of his chest, equally annoyed and pleased. "Nah, that wasn't me... *regrettably*."

My laugh gains the attention of Isabelle. Mercifully, the moisture pooling in her beautiful eyes has cleared away, replaced by the gleam that usually highlights them. When her tongue delves out to moisten her top lip, my cock becomes friendly with my zipper. They've formed a close kinship since

she came into my life—even more so when she glides her eyes down my body as she is now.

When her eyes return to my face, I arch a brow, wordlessly advising her I spotted her avid glance. The thrill of the hunt thickens my blood when a pink hue creeps across her cheeks. She's hot and bothered, praying I'll act on the threat in my stare. I would if the stunning visual of her squirming in excitement wasn't stolen by Hugo stepping into the frame.

"I forgot to tell you that Hunter called when you were... *settling*... Izzy earlier." A vein beeps in his neck when he says "settling." "He tracked the call left on your voicemail to a payphone located at the front of a junkyard and mechanic shop on 93rd Street. He sent one of the guys there. The phone was wiped clean of fingerprints, and there were no security cameras within the vicinity. He also reached out to Henry. He said he loves you like a son, but he doesn't invoke special privileges unless the source specifically requests it. He wasn't your mystery caller."

I scrub my hand over the stubble on my jaw as I cross one suspect off my list. Henry may be a mob boss, but he's as honest as a nun. "Did Hunter divulge any information on the officers from the dashcam video?"

Hugo shakes his head. "He said the facial scanning software in Ravenshoe is slower than you signing our bonus checks this year."

A grin lifts my cheeks high. "They're coming. I've just had other *priorities* on my mind." My eyes stray to Isabelle halfway through my explanation. I only have eighteen hours left to get my fill of her before I step back as Regan is requesting.

It's going to fucking kill me.

“When we leave, tell Hunter to switch his focus to having Isabelle’s charges squashed. I want to know who has had access to Megan’s motel room and any evidence obtained from there. When I return from the marina, I’ll call in a few favors. We need as many eyes on those files as possible.” Hugo notches up his chin, pleased for the assistance. “Peters is returning from New York this afternoon. He’ll swap places with your guy tomorrow so I can officially meet him. If he’s a good fit, I’ll sign him on as part of my security team before introducing him to Nick and Jenni.”

“All right, I’ll let him know.” He nudges his head to Isabelle, who’s still frozen in place, gawking our way. “Let your team do the job you pay us to do. For the next...” he checks the time on his watch, “... seventeen hours and thirty-two minutes, let Izzy be your priority.”

A smile stretches across my fatigued face. “I have every intention of doing precisely that.”

For the next seventeen hours, Isabelle and I will become lost in one another. Her touch will erase the apprehensions plaguing my mind, and mine will chase away the bad memories contaminating hers. For the next seventeen hours, it’ll once again be the woman who reawakened me from my grave and me—the man who’d go to the ends of the earth to keep her safe.

When Isabelle curls her arms around Brandon’s neck to hug him goodbye, I shove my hands into the pockets to conceal my clenched fists. It’s clear as day Isabelle has no sexual interest in Brandon, but I can’t stomach the idea of her arms wrapped around any man, much less one whose cheeks inflame from the friendliest gesture.

“Oh my...” Regan fans her heated face as her mouth forms an ‘O.’ “We seem to have a blusher in our midst.”

“Go and get him, tiger!” The slap Hugo places on Regan’s backside echoes in the foyer of Hunter’s house. “Show him who’s boss, woman.”

After shimmering her shoulders to shake out her negative vibes, Regan prances toward Brandon like a lioness on the hunt, playfully growling on her way. Her gleaming-with-mischievousness eyes collide with Isabelle for the briefest second when they cross paths in the living area, but with her prey locked and loaded, she doesn’t stop to share salutations.

“Should I be concerned about Brandon’s safety?” Isabelle asks when she stops in front of me. I’d be worried she overheard my earlier conversation with Hugo if her tone wasn’t full of mirth.

“Only as concerned as you should be when you’re in my presence.”

The humor in her eyes triples, but it has nothing on the lust gleaming in them. “So, you’re telling me he doesn’t stand a chance?”

“Precisely.”

Her laugh instigates an urgent meeting between my cock and my zipper. That alone has me more than eager to get our plans underway. “Are you ready to leave?”

When she nods, I float my eyes to Hugo.

“Izzy’s bag is already in your car,” he intuits, sensing my request. “When I hear anything, you’ll be the first to know.”

I catch Isabelle by her hips, moving her toward my car before all of Hugo’s reply leaves his mouth. I don’t have a

second to waste but many to devour.

## CHAPTER 11



## ISAAC

*B*y the time we make it to the dock where my yacht is moored, it's a little after noon. I grab the basket full of food Catherine brought to Hunter's before enclosing my hand around Isabelle's. When I assist her onto the polished wooden aft of the yacht, a growl emits from my lips. Her seductive scent is infiltrating my nostrils. When she hears my groan, her heavy-lidded eyes lift to mine. Her breasts thrust up and down when her breathing turns excited. She's struggling as poorly as me.

“Stop staring at me like that, Isabelle.” My brittle tone relays my wavering constraint. “Or all of Mr. Brown's Christmases will come at once.”

I dip my chin in greeting to Mr. Brown, the sixty-plus-year-old gentleman hosing down his boat next to mine. If he weren't standing there eyeing the tension bristling between Isabelle and me even a blind man would be able to see, I'd strip Isabelle out of her clothes where we're standing and devour her for lunch.

When Isabelle's eyes shoot to Mr. Brown, her cheeks give off a pink hue. She waves at him, her greeting friendly even though she feels anything but. She knows he's the reason for the delayed gratification she's currently facing.

“You can’t blame my wandering thoughts, Isaac. We seem to have a weird fascination for... *fucking* in or on modes of transport.” Her nose screws up when she curses. “First a jet ski, then a plane, then in the town car, and now on a boat.”

My cock stiffens so quickly it’s painful, but I play it cool. “It’s a yacht, not a boat, and technically the jet-ski doesn’t count, but I’ll be sure to rectify that sometime soon.”

After drinking in her hopeful smile, I slide open the back-entrance door of the yacht. When musty dampness filters through my nose, I mumble, “I wonder when the next train for Philly leaves?”

Giggling, Isabelle enters the cramped living quarters. She appears seconds from gagging when the scent of wet carpet hits her senses, but just like me, she keeps her cards close to her chest. “We just need to open a few doors and windows. Get some natural ventilation happening.”

While yanking up some windows in the compact yet luxurious living area, she seeks modes of transport we’ve yet to liaise in. “What about a bus?” Her eyes brighten so much it is as if a lightbulb switched on inside her head. “Maybe we could borrow Nick’s tour bus. That would be a lot of fun. We could roleplay. You’re the hot, brooding rock star, and I’m the naïve innocent virgin who really wants to be a groupie.”

“Or I could be a ruthless businessman, and you’re the agent assigned to investigate me.”

The tightness across my chest eases when she takes my comment as I had intended—playfully. After sticking out her tongue, she moves to the windows opposite to the ones she just opened.



I love that she's not letting her upcoming trial dampen her mood, but even if she did, she doesn't need to worry. I protect what's mine, and she is undoubtedly mine.

The scent I'm struggling to ignore amplifies when I murmur, "I'll call in a favor with Cormack. See if he'll loan us a tour bus for a night or three." If he doesn't, I'll buy a damn bus. The expense will be worth it if it maintains the lusty glint Isabelle's eyes are holding now. "But for now, we need to get these items packed away before adding gallons of water between us and anyone you may scare with your screams."

In silence, Isabelle follows me into the galley kitchen to place the cold items into the gas fridge before we move onto the helm of the yacht. After checking the instruments and gauges on the dashboard, I kick over the engine, stunned when it starts on the first try. I haven't taken her out in months, so I thought she'd be a bit sluggish.

A smile that will highlight my dreams for years to come stretches across Isabelle's face when the yacht chugs out into the ocean. Within forty minutes, we're surrounded by nothing but crystal blue water.

After mooring the anchor, I join Isabelle on the bow. Even in a pair of jeans and a light blue sweater, she shines brighter than the low-hanging afternoon sun. She detects my presence before I can announce it. That isn't unusual. I could be hidden in a sea of millions, and she'd still find me. The way we met is proof of this.

She gives our scenic location one final glance before straying her eyes to mine. "Is there anything you can't do?" You could misconstrue her statement as sarcastic, but her tone doesn't allude to that. She's in awe, and I love it. I'm not out

to impress anyone, but I'll take any compliments she's willing to give.

I wrap my arms around her slim waist before tugging her back, so my torso heats her back. "I've driven a race car, swam with sharks in Australia, flown a helicopter, been skydiving."

I feel her raging heart. "You're nuts," she mumbles under her breath. "Why would you jump out of a perfectly good plane?"

"For the adrenaline," I drop my lips to the shell of her ear, loving the goosebumps that follow their descent. "But not one of those things compete with the thrill I get when my name tears from your throat during ecstasy. Not. One. Single. Fucking. Thing." I graze my teeth over the fleshy meat on her ear with each of my last five words.

When she shudders, I glance past her shoulder. A handful of boats are scattered on the horizon. They're far enough away they'd have to strain to hear her screams, but close enough, I know we need to take our exchange elsewhere.

After curling my hand around Isabelle's, I guide her down into the cabin of the yacht. As we pace toward the main bedroom, only her shallow breaths can be heard. She could be admiring the affluent surroundings, but I doubt that is the case. My suite is decked out in my favorite wood, and the furnishings are top-end, but the energy crackling in the air has nothing to do with my yacht and everything to do with this being another first for us. Isabelle is the first woman I've brought here—just like she was the first woman to be invited into my private residence. Not even Regan has been there.

Isabelle's dark locks cling to my facial hair when she pivots around to face me. With her lust-riddled eyes arrested

on mine, she fiddles with the buttons of my dress shirt. As my eyes give her permission to guide the pace of our combustible lovemaking, I run my thumb over her plump lips. To give her confidence the boost she's seeking, I can relinquish a small amount of my dominance—*for now*.

A lot of the contact we've had the past six weeks has been sexually based, but that's because the real Isabelle is only unearthed in the bedroom. There, not only does she relinquish her power to me, her entire soul is exposed as well. We communicate our feelings through touch. Every nip, kiss, and gesture say more than words ever could.

Although I can't bring myself to say those three little words that take my breath away every time Isabelle says them, I have no issues displaying how much I care for her. My feelings for her are indescribable, but that neurosis is null and void when I'm expressing what she means to me through touch. Even discovering she lied to me for months couldn't dampen my desire to have her beneath me. She's my addiction. My drug. The one person I'll never get enough of.

Isabelle's eyes darken with need when my shirt falls to the floor with a soundless whoosh. It's closely followed by the removal of my belt and unclasping of my zipper. When she guides my boxer shorts and trousers down my legs, my cock leaps out. Her lush tits are scraping my thighs, making the throb in my cock more pronounced.

Once she has them puddled around my feet, she grasps my shaft in her silky-smooth hand before inching the lips I fantasize about toward my glistening knob. My thighs tense when her tongue skates across the crown of my cock to gather a bead of precum formed there. When she groans, I rock my

hips forward, eager for the vibrations of her moans to circle my cock.

She gets on board with my plans rather quickly.

With her eyes locked on me and her lips recently moistened, she glides them down my twitching shaft. When she takes me to the very back of her throat, a groan belonging to a man on the verge of falling to his knees tears from my throat. Although she can't take all of me, I'm not disappointed. Her hand works on the section missing out on the warm wetness of her mouth, and she takes in more of me with each suck she does.

Isabelle knows how to give head. I'm usually more controlling in the bedroom, but this is one task she doesn't require any guidance with. She literally has me by the balls with how well she sucks my dick.

When my knees dip to align my shaft with her mouth better, her sucks become more urgent, stronger, almost greedy. My breathing turns labored when the urge to come overpowers me.

"Fuck, Isabelle," I grunt when she works my cock into her mouth faster. "I'm going to come in your pretty little mouth," I warn since my climax is dangerously close to spilling. "And you're going to gobble up every drop I give you, aren't you?"

Her moan almost sets me off. God, I love the way she sucks my cock, all eager and obsessive like she can't get enough as if she's anxious to taste my cum again.

"I'm going to give you what you want before taking what I need. I need you, Isabelle. On your knees sucking my dick. In my bed. Beneath me. Above me. I need you any way I can get you."

My words spur on her pursuit to unhinge me. She draws me in with long, deep sucks, knowing the power she has over me. She's the only one who can make me absentminded, to completely forget everything around me. No one has this type of power over me. No one can unbalance me as she does.

When her teeth graze my knob, I can't hold back my urges any longer. With my head flopped and her name rumbling out of my throat, the first spurts of seed jet out of my cock.

"Fuck, Isabelle," I hiss, my words as violent as the brutal fucking I'm giving Isabelle's mouth.

Even with my cum coating the walls of her mouth, her pursuit to suck me dry doesn't waver. She pumps me greedily while her tongue laps up every drop of my spawn, her eagerness to please me keeping me as hard as a rock. She doesn't suck my dick because she feels forced, she does it because she loves it. The heaviness of me in her mouth. My taste and smell. She loves it all, but not as much as she loves watching me unravel.

Once every drop of cum has been expelled, Isabelle peers up at me over the bumps in my midsection. Her pupils are wide, her breaths jagged, and the wide span of her knees exposes the slightest sheen of wetness between her legs.

She looks thoroughly fuckable, and I haven't even touched her yet.

The urge to fuck her claws at me. I want to take her hard and fast, to fuck her as I was designed to do, but she didn't work me how she did for no reason. She wants to be devoured, to be cherished, and she wants me to do it.

As she peers up at me with full, glossed-over eyes, I murmur, "Now it's my turn."

## CHAPTER 12



## ISABELLE

*M*y torso jolts off the bed as a tingling sensation races through me. I'm covered with sweat, and my breaths are ragged, but it isn't the nightmare waking me before the sun has even risen. It's the deliriously skilled tongue of Isaac Holt toying with the swollen bud between my legs. From the slight thump of my head, I'd guess we've only been asleep for an hour or two. Aware we had mere hours left with each other before we're once again forced apart, neither of us was eager to seek sleep, but our exhaustion must have overtaken us.

When Isaac's lips circle my clit to suck it into his mouth, I weave my fingers through his thick locks, which are damp at the tips from the stifling heat bristling between us.

Excitement zaps my womb when his deep, rumbling voice vibrates on my clit. "Good morning, Isabelle."

I've always loved the way my name rolls off his tongue, but having it said while he's devouring my pussy gives it an entirely new meaning. He'll never speak my name again without getting me all hot and bothered.

When he parts me with his fingers, I wriggle against the satin sheets. I know what's coming next, and I can't hold back my elation.

He slips two fingers inside of me, grinding them at the pace my hips are rocking as his mouth hardens my clit to an unimaginable stiffness. It doesn't matter how many times he consumes me, the sensation never slackens. It's as combustible as ever.

“Oh... God... don't stop... Isaac.” Big, needy breaths space my plea. The sensation blasting through me is divine, and I'm immensely turned on to be awakened in such an erotic manner.

When his teeth graze my clit, I buck against his mouth like a bull. I need the friction—crave it. Tingles dance across my throbbing sex when he places the perfect amount of pressure to the sweet spot inside. I suck at his fingers greedily while grinding my pelvis against his mouth.

“Oh... ohh... ohhh.” My screams grow louder with each one that is released.

As the shake of my thighs turns rampant, Isaac peers at me over the meaty globes on my chest clapping in applause of his magnificent talents. “Eyes, Isabelle.” His demand proves how well he knows me. He seems to know when I'm about to climax even before my body does.

When I catch his heated dark gaze, stars combust before my eyes as his name is torn from my throat. My feet dig into the mattress, and my back arches as I ride the intensity of my umpteenth orgasm in the last twelve-plus hours. I pulsate around him, loving that he holds nothing back as he watches me unravel beneath him. He devours me as if starved of my taste like a man who didn't just bring me to the brink mere hours ago.

Several toe-curling minutes later, I sink into the mattress. My lungs are void of air and every fine hair on my body



bristles, but I feel fantastic. My climax was beyond comprehension, only growing stronger with each one I have—much like my feelings for the man who took me to the brink.

While gliding his god-crafted body up mine, Isaac places delicate kisses on the bruises mottling my skin. When he undressed me last night, fury unlike anything I had ever felt sparked out of him when he realized the bruise on my cheek was nothing compared to the ones dotted over my torso and stomach. The elbows and knees inflicted on me during my arrest are worn by my body, and for some stupid reason, I mistook Isaac's devastation as disgust.

I hated the way he was looking at me—so much so, I immediately commenced getting dressed. I wanted him to see me as the Isabelle he saw at the cabin, not a hideous, scratched-up victim. I was stronger than that. *We* were stronger than that.

My jeans didn't even make it halfway up my thighs when he kissed me with so much intensity, every doubt I was having vanished in an instant. He handled me with more care than he usually does, but he still took the control I happily handed to him. I love relinquishing my power to him in the bedroom because he rewards my trust in a way you could never imagine. He tilts the axis of my world like no one ever has.

"I want to be awoken like that every morning," I mumble over his lips when he finally reaches my mouth.

"It'll be my pleasure." My breath snags when his eyes flick up to me. Their unique coloring has always been mesmerizing, but from this closeness, they're utterly soul-stealing. "We just need to wade through the mud first, then I'll give you anything and everything you want."

My heart plunges into my stomach. I've been living in an Isaac Holt buzz cloud the past sixteen hours, successfully forgetting everything that's happened and will occur over the next several weeks. I've only got another hour or two before our bubble bursts. I refuse to waste a single second.

When I adjust my position to face Isaac head-on, he balances his stubble-covered jaw and leans on his hand that's propped up by his elbow. He looks tired, but he's still the most ravishing man I've ever laid my eyes on. When I cup his cheek, he playfully bites my palm before kissing the edge. The dark richness in his eyes dulls when they zoom in on the bruise circling my wrist.

"They don't hurt," I assure him, praying it will lessen the fury building in his alluring gaze.

My prayers go unanswered when he replies, "That doesn't make a difference, Isabelle. They shouldn't be there to begin with." His voice is as rugged as the scruff his chin doesn't usually hold. "I will not let this slide. They will not get away with putting their hands on you."

My pulse spikes. Even without his verbal confirmation, his eyes reveal his wish to seek personal retribution on the officers who arrested me. He's a protector. He protects the people he loves, and nothing I could say will change that, but he also isn't the man his FBI file makes him out to be, so although he'll seek revenge, I trust their punishment will never exceed their wrongdoing.

I swallow to relieve the dryness in my throat from my breathless moans during ecstasy before murmuring, "I love you, Isaac."

After snapping his eyes shut, he takes in a sharp breath, like my three little words are too much for him to bear. When

the tension on his face relaxes, he appears closer to his age, instead of the ruthless businessman others witness daily. I love that I'm one of the rare few who gets to see him out of his element, unearthed and exposed.

Utterly raw.

When his eyes flutter back open, the pain that had settled behind them has vanished, and a new fire has been ignited. The air shifts when his gaze flicks to the clock sitting on the bedside table before returning to my face.

“We have a little over two hours before Hugo will arrive at the boathouse to collect you.” His throaty purr has my core clenching. “Are you up for some outdoor activities?”

“Uh-huh.” When I shimmy down the bed, his pupils widen. “After I've returned the favor.”

As his dark brows curve high, his thumb softens my jaw for the exhaustive activity it's about to undertake. “You're always so greedy to suck me dry.”

I nod before I do precisely that. I drag my cheek down his rapidly stiffening shaft to relish his delicious scent before having the quickest taste of his arousal beading at the tip. He smells musky and sweet, an odd combination that ignites every nerve in my body.

After gripping his cock in his hand, he feeds the first inch into my mouth, too impatient to wait a second longer. His keenness turns me on. I'm hot all over, both aroused and eager to please. He angles my head so I can take him to the very back of my throat before lifting his hips off the mattress. He rocks into my mouth on repeat, his groans growing rougher with each pump he does.

“I love this, Isabelle. Your mouth. Your tongue. Your fuckable lips.”

I suck him faster. Greedily. I crave his wicked tongue as much as I'm dying to taste his cum once again. My cheeks burn from my ravenous sucks, but I hold nothing back. I lick, pump, and suck him, ensuring the heat of our exchange will keep him warm during what could be months of absence.

As his animalistic groans ramp up, his grip on my hair tightens. I love the sting. It's part of the package of him getting off, and I savor every moment of him unraveling beneath me.

When I drag my teeth over the cleft of his cock, he hisses out a curse word before bunching the sheets in his spare hands. He fists them as effectively as he clutches my hair. It's a dominating hold that reveals he is no longer in control of our exchange. All the power has been handed to me.

“Isabelle...”

His words are cut short by my tongue darting over the sensitive crown of his cock. I tighten my lips around him before pressing my tongue against the vein feeding his magnificent manhood. He rocks his hips harder, driving into my mouth like he usually does my pussy. Sweat pours out of him as he grapples for the power he unwillingly relinquished. He matches my sucks with equally pleasing grinds, fucking my face as I wish he would my pussy.

As if he sensed my silent bidding, he flips our exchange on its head. My non-bruised cheek mashes with the pillow a mere second after his cock is withdrawn from my mouth. He adjusts the tilt of my hips before entering me from behind with one fluid thrust, filling me as only he can. I call out, the sensation too unbelievable to be real.

“Isaac...” A whole heap of other words come out with his name, but I’m so hazed by lust, I have no clue what I’m saying. I doubt it’s as dirty as the ones he whispers to me while driving me to the brink.

“Again.” The judder of his command is as rippling as my pussy. I’m sucking at him ravenously, praying he’ll coat my womb with the seed my mouth missed out on. “Say it again.”

I could feign ignorance by pretending I don’t know what his demand pertains to, but I’m sick of acting foolish. I know what he wants just as much as I know the idea of us parting is killing him as slowly as it’s killing me.

“I love you, Isaac. Only you. I’m yours. And you—”

“Are mine.”

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A ragged gasp expels from my lips when the scorching hot water of the shower pelts on my nearly blue and snapped-off toes. “Sooo c-c-cold,” I stammer as another shiver runs down my spine.

Isaac pulls me into his chest before dragging his arms up and down my back, warming me with his body heat. “I told you it would be freezing.” His tone is a unique mix of fret and humor. “But you still wanted to go skinny dipping in December.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining when you followed me into the water.” My voice has an edge of wittiness to it. I saw a different side to Isaac the past hour, the fun-loving, I-may-be-a-multi-millionaire-but-I’m-still-just-a-man side. I love his

dominance, but I'm learning there's a lot more to this man than what I've unearthed so far.

Isaac cocks his brow. "You stripped naked before diving into the water. If you assumed I wasn't going to respond to that, you don't know me very well."

His deep, pussy-clenching chuckle bounces around the small confines when I rib him. "I had never skinny-dipped before, so I figured what better location than the middle of the ocean to tick it off my list. Our secluded location also ensured there would be less carnage."

"True."

The giggle bubbling in my chest erupts when Isaac spins me around so he can shampoo the lower half my hair. The shower recess in his yacht is so confined, his elbows are closer to bracing the tiles when he massages the fragrant products into my scalp. As his fingers knead away the headache that's been plaguing me most of the morning, a shallow moan vibrates through me. His nurturing is nearly as intoxicating as his sexual prowess.

My sluggish eyes pop open when the impressive girth of Isaac's cock is felt halfway up my back. I shake my head, shocked at the eagerness heightening my senses. We've been sexually active nonstop for hours, but anticipation is still coursing through me. Will I ever get enough of him? Usually, a couple's insatiable need to please each other dampens within weeks, but I don't see that being an issue with Isaac. I couldn't imagine it dying in years, much less months.

Would you listen to me? Years? We haven't even hit months yet, but I'm already discussing the future as if it's a guarantee instead of a probability. I shouldn't be so hard on

myself. I'll never get enough of Isaac. I'm just praying he doesn't grow weary of me before I've gotten my fill.

"Never going to happen, baby," Isaac murmurs, reminding me that I need to speak to someone about my annoying habit of thinking out loud. "You've got me by the throat... and the balls."

My cheeks burn from their sudden incline when I smile. When I pivot around to face him, I keep my elbows in close, ensuring they don't bump any crucial body parts in the process. Once I'm facing him front-on, I study all the exceptional features of his face. It's a long process since he has so many beautiful assets to explore, but it fills me with worry more than it soothes me.

"I don't want to go back. Going back means I have to give you up. I've only just got you back. I don't want to give you up again." I stop when my voice crackles. The urge to cry is overwhelming, but I give it my best fight to hold them back.

"Isabelle." My name shoots out of his mouth like gunfire. "Please don't cry."

I run my hand across my cheeks to remove any rogue tears that may have unwillingly spilled from my eyes. Mercifully, my cheeks are clear. I can't say the same thing for Isaac's next set of words. They're as murky as the Hudson.

"You don't have to go back. I'll make you disappear."

Pain shreds through my heart, crippling it even more than the thought of not seeing him for twenty years.

"*Us*. I can make *us* disappear. They would never find *us*," he clarifies when he notices the forlorn look on my face. "You're not going anywhere without me, Isabelle."

"You'd give up everything for me?"

He nods without hesitation. “Yes, Isabelle.”

“Your brother and your family?”

He takes in a quick, sharp breath, but his nod doesn't slacken. I don't know whether to burst into tears or swoon, so I do both. He's never reciprocated my verbal declarations of love, but his actions are proving time and time again that I'm under his skin just as profoundly as he's embedded in mine.

“I love you.” Relaying how much his statement impacted me with three simple words is unjustifiable, but they're all I have to express my gratitude, so they're all I can use. “But I'd *never* ask you to give up everything you've worked so hard for, let alone your brother and family.”

“You don't have to ask, Isabelle. I'd *willingly* give everything up for you.”

His words steal my breath and my self-control away. I dive at him so brutally, he crashes into the shower wall with an almighty thump. A sexy-as-sin growl erupts from his throat when my tongue strokes his luscious lips, requesting for them to open. When they do, I taste the cinnamon the homemade donuts Catherine packed for us were coated in. Our embrace is scorching hot, enough to buckle my knees and fill my heart at the same time. We devour each other, knowing this could quite possibly be the last time we do it for a while.

By the time the water runs cold, I'm so sexually sated, I no longer remember my name, much less the dense cloud that's about to reform above my head.



## CHAPTER 13



## ISAAC

“*Y*ou have a month, Regan. If the charges aren’t dropped by then, I’m taking her away from this.”

My tone indicates this isn’t up for further discussion. If I had it my way, Isabelle wouldn’t be seated in Hugo’s car as it drives away from me. She’d be in my car, with me, where she belongs, but Regan is adamant this is the only way we can clear her name.

Regrettably, Isabelle agrees with her.

She doesn’t want her Uncle’s name tainted with lies and delusional charges. I can’t say I don’t understand her request. I just wish she understood she’s going against one of the most corrupt organizations I’ve come across. Their tactics are the dirtiest I’ve seen, meaning I’ll soon be forced to smear my hands with so much dirt, they’ll never become clean.

I don’t want to do that. I want to be the man Isabelle believes I am, but they’re not giving me a choice. I’m once again having my hand forced. There’s nothing I hate more than being strong-armed, but I’ll protect what is mine, and Isabelle is undoubtedly mine.

“I’m doing the best I can, Isaac—”

“It’s not good enough, Regan. You need to do more.”

Hating that I’m projecting my anger at the wrong person, I flatten my foot onto the gas pedal. As the driver’s side window in the Bugatti slides into place, I skid out of the gravel lot of the marina. My shift in gears is so brutal, the gearstick buckles under the pressure. I could blame my raging emotions for my excessive speed, but it’s not the reason I’m notching forty miles over the signed speed limit. I want to reach Hugo’s Chevelle so I can have one final glance of Isabelle before she’s thrust back in the limelight she doesn’t want.

My breathing turns heavy when I do precisely that ten seconds later. With my jaw clenched as tightly as my clutch on the steering wheel, I veer onto the opposite side of the road and glide up beside Hugo’s baby. He grins when he spots my creep in the corner of his eye, but it does little to weaken the pain that jabs my heart when Isabelle’s profile pops out from behind his chest. Even from this distance, I can see the wetness glimmering on her cheeks.

*One month, Isaac. One measly month, then she’ll be yours again.*

I say my mantra on repeat as I increase my speed, so I can pull in front of the Chevelle. My somewhat manic pace soon makes Hugo’s car appear as if it’s a speckle on the horizon, but every inch I gain away blackens my veins with anger.

By the time I arrive at the Dungeon, my mood is woeful. Anger about everything that has happened the past seventy-two hours has finally caught up with me, making me the most unhinged I’ve ever been. Even Tina can sense my unraveling composure as the instant she spots my narrowed gaze and flaring nostrils, she alters the course of her direction, slipping

into the staffroom located behind the bar instead of greeting me with the flirty banter she usually runs with.

“Good choice,” I murmur under my breath as I shimmy out of my jacket. I don’t have the time nor the patience to deal with her theatrics today.

The abrupt closure of my office door awakens Hunter. He’s slouched over my desk that’s covered with papers that weren’t there yesterday. After scrubbing his weary eyes, he locks them with me. He hesitantly smiles but remains quiet, not game to speak for fear of retribution.

I store my jacket on the coat rack before shifting my focus from one annoyance to another. “Did you sleep last night?”

Hunter winces before checking the time on his watch. “Does a twenty-minute catnap count?”

While cursing, I drag my hand down my tired face. I didn’t get a wink of sleep last night, either. I was too busy watching Isabelle when she drifted off to sleep a little after three in the morning. I wanted to make sure her dreams weren’t plagued with nightmares. The instant a scared whimper escaped her lips, I calmed her in the best way I know how. Sexually.

“Go home and get some sleep.”

Hunter straightens his spine. “I can’t. I’ve got the facial recognition running, the—”

“It wasn’t a request. You won’t be helpful to anyone if you pass out from exhaustion.” I jerk my head to my hanging open door. “Go home and rest, then meet me tomorrow.”

“Where are we going?”

I arch a brow, unimpressed with his questioning tone. “I have some security matters I need to attend to. Considering

you're my head of security, I figured you'd want to be included."

Hunter scrubs at his beard before raising his murky blue eyes to me. "I thought the title was negotiable?"

"Is it... until tomorrow. If you prove yourself, it will no longer be negotiable. If you don't..." The grim expression on my face tells him everything he needs to know. Tomorrow is his final chance.

"All right." He stands, taking his hemp bag and laptop with him. "What time do you want me back tomorrow?"

"Meet me at the airport hangar at six."

He nods before striding toward my office door. Just before he exits, he pivots back around to face me. "I forgot to tell you. I scanned the device we found in Isabelle's apartment. The one with the... *pictures*." He fumbles over his last word. "The device hadn't been downloaded onto any servers, so the only images of Izzy and you are the ones on the USB stick I stored in your safe."

When he points to the safe next to my desk, relief washes through me. "Thank you. I'll be sure to have the images taken care of."

A grin sneaks out from beneath Hunter's shaggy beard before he exits my office without speaking another word. After taking a few moments to relish in the fact Isabelle's beautiful naked body won't be plastered around the country for the world to see, I shift my focus to the work Hunter has been undertaking the past twenty-four hours.

From the amount of paperwork on my desk, it appears as if he's downloaded every morsel of evidence Ravenshoe PD has compiled against Isabelle thus far. He's set aside irrelevant

information such as witness statements and reports from the officers first on the scene, instead choosing to focus on the damning scientific evidence—for instance, the blood-coated bullet that matches the caliber and brand as the one in Isabelle’s gun.

While I scan the vast collection of photos from Megan’s motel room, the phone on my desk rings. I eye it peculiarly. Usually, any calls I receive come through my cell phones, not my office landline.

After placing the evidence back onto my desk, I gather up the phone off the receiver. “Isaac Holt—”

Not even half my greeting leaves my mouth before I am interrupted. “Please tell me you didn’t do this?”

Recognizing the voice shrilling down the line, I growl, “What are you *falsely* accusing me of today, Ryan?”

Hating the tension bristling between us as much as me, he huffs. We’re not friends, but we were—once. “The two police officers who arrested Izzy.”

“Yes, and...” I leave my question open for him to fill in.

He follows along nicely. “They’re missing.”

I remain quiet, confident I haven’t heard him right.

I didn’t.

“Their patrol cars were found empty this morning in a wrecking yard on 93rd Street.”

I freeze as disturbing notion after disturbing notion fills my head. Am I concerned for the officers’ well-being? No, I’m not. The bruises they inflicted on Isabelle were... words can’t describe what I felt when I saw the marks tainting her beautiful skin for the first time.

I've never wanted to kill someone as much as I did last night.

The only thing that stopped me from helming the yacht back to the dock and hunting down the men responsible was Isabelle's big, chocolate eyes. They saw the disgust beaming out of me, but she was reading it in the wrong manner. I wasn't looking at her in repulsion. I'd never look at her like that. The hatred pumping out of me for the so-called men who get off injuring women like that, I was beyond disgusted that any man would do something like this, much less a lawful man.

I push the phone receiver in closer to my ear, my tone unrepentant when I say, "It wasn't me, but they deserve any punishment they get."

Horrified by my lack of remorse, Ryan grunts. I doubt he'll feel the same when he knows the entire story.

"The bruises Isabelle displayed in the courtroom yesterday were *nothing* compared to the ones on her body."

Ryan inhales a sharp breath, hearing the words I didn't speak the loudest. My woman was assaulted on my watch in my town. I'll never forgive myself for that.

"They're cowards who should be grateful someone got to them before I did because my punishment would have been much more severe than any they're undertaking or have already undertaken."

With my anger at an all-time high, I slam the receiver back onto the console, slamming it down three times for good measure. As a fire rages through my veins, I shift my eyes to the photo of Isabelle I placed on my desk when we returned

from the cabin. That was only two days ago. It feels more like a lifetime.

My heart drums against my ribs when I store her picture into the top drawer of my desk. I hate that I'm following Regan's suggestion, but I also understand that this is one of the many steps required to ensure Isabelle's safety. As far as anyone in Ravenshoe is concerned, Isabelle and I have never met.

I've only just closed the drawer when a quick tap gains my attention. "Come in," I instruct, not bothering to look up. Only a deranged man would dare to approach me today, so their visit must be important.

When several long seconds pass in silence, I lift my gaze. A rather large-looking man with a military crew-cut stands just inside my doorway. He has his arms folded in front of his chest, ensuring I can see he's bulked up for the occasion, and his lips are thinned into a stern line.

"Are you Isaac Holt?" The stranger's voice is gruff like someone who has swallowed a whole heap of gravel.

I nod, more amused by his approach than worried.

"So, you're the man who stole Hugo from his family?"

My smirk enlarges to a full, arrogant smile. It's been a while since I've been accosted on my turf by a stranger. With how pitiful my mood is, this meeting could become very interesting.

"You might want to get your facts straight before throwing accusations around."

After stepping around my desk, I move closer to the unnamed gentleman. His eyes watch my every movement, but



just like Hugo, he doesn't quiver in his boots from my furious glance. *Stupid bastard.*

When I stop to stand in front of him, I realize he has a good two to three inches on me in height, much less width. It doesn't bother me. I've taken down men his size with one punch, and I'm more than eager to see if I still have it.

"I'm the man who saved Hugo's life. Without me, he would have been dead years ago."

## CHAPTER 14



## ISABELLE

Every step I take has my brows creeping up higher on my face. Hugo isn't the slightest bit fazed by the opulent surroundings we're emerging into. I'm on the other end of the spectrum. I'm in complete awe.

"Your room is the second door on the right." Regan houses her wool jacket into the coat closet that's bigger than the walk-in closet in my apartment before spanning the distance between us. "Your room has an attached bathroom, but there's a powder room off the living area to save your legs the walk if you need to use the facilities."

There's an understatement of the century. This penthouse isn't just massive. It's ginormous. I shouldn't be shocked. It's an exact mirror of Isaac's *fuck pad* next door. It's just more impressive with earthy tones and the luxurious fabrics draped on nearly every surface.

I won't lie, when Hugo pulled onto the street this building is located on, my eyes got a little misty. After everything Isaac and I have been through, it's hard to believe I only 'visited' his apartment seven weeks ago. When we're together, we become so lost in each other. Time has no meaning. We wouldn't know if a week or a month passed. It's just us. Nobody else exists or matters.

I never knew this type of raw passion existed, but now that I've experienced it, it will be impossible to give up. No man will ever ignite my senses as Isaac can. My body is numb without him.

The cuff of Regan's silky blouse brushes against my arm, breaking me away from my thoughts. "Which room is yours?"

Smiling, she points to a door at the end of the hall. "But you don't want to go in there." Her nose screwing up like a teacher reprimanded a student for being naughty. "There are things in there that will scare blushers like you."

As I poke out my tongue, Hugo's brows shoot up into his hairline. His dilated eyes bounce between Regan and me for a whole two seconds before he bolts for the door Regan pointed to. She's on his heels in under a nanosecond, demanding he stop immediately. Her dangerously high stilettos assure she'll never catch him.

He swings open her bedroom door before she's halfway down the hall. "Damn, Regan, you're my type of girl."

Regan tugs on her skirt, raising it high on her thigh before curtsying, pleased by his compliment. "I know how to keep them keen."

Eager to join the conversation, I join them at the end of the elegant hallway. I pout like a child when Regan closes the door before I can pry into her personal space. *Party pooper.*

Smirking like she heard my private thought, Regan gives Hugo and me an impromptu tour of her residence. After showing us the remaining sleeping quarters, a den big enough to hold a poker tournament, and three bathrooms, we arrive in her adeptly decorated kitchen. Just like the kitchen in Isaac's

apartment, her fridge is bare. Excluding bottles of water, there's nothing nutritious inside.

Her pantry is just as scarce of food. Other than numerous tins of vanilla frosting, it's bare. Her food supplies give credit as to why she smells sugary, but it has my suspicion peaked.

“Is this your fuck pad or your home?”

I spin around to face Regan, who is wiggling her brows. “A little bit of column A and a little bit of column B.” She pads closer to me with her hips swinging like they'll seduce me as well as they will Hugo. “I only reside in Ravenshoe when Isaac's cases require a physical presence. Thankfully, that's not very often. I do most of my work from my home in Texas.”

My eyes bulge. Out of all the states, I would have never guessed she's a Texan.

Her eye roll is way too sophisticated for my liking. “Don't act surprised. Haven't you heard everything is bigger in Texas? I live there to ensure the quote is accurate for all regions below the belt.” A playful wink ends her tease.

Confident she has me right where she wants me, she digs a stack of pamphlets from a drawer under the island. They're from catering companies that specialize in in-home delivery. “Is there anything particular you feel like eating?” When she peers at me, I shake my head. “Anything you're allergic to? Or dislike?”

My head shaking is interrupted when Hugo pipes up. “Pumpkin. Izzy hates pumpkin.” My eyes shoot to him so quickly, I become dizzy from their swift movement. “What?” He gives me the same wink Regan just did. “You wasted a perfectly good slice of pumpkin pie in Harlow's bakery last

week.” He salivates at the mouth while rubbing his stomach in a circular motion. “Such a waste of a good pie.”

His hand falls from his tummy when Regan socks him in the arm. “Do we have to put up with him the entire time? Or can he just shadow you once you leave my apartment?”

I can’t tell if she’s being witty or serious, but Hugo doesn’t seem fazed. He has a megawatt smile stretched across his ruggedly handsome face, and his elbows are propped on the granite countertop. He’s tilting so close to Regan, his lips brush the shell of her ear when he murmurs, “You’ll want me here when you’ve got an itch you need scratched, but it’s just out of your reach.” His words are so hot, even I get scorned by them. “You can’t have special guests over when the king of your realm bans them.”

Their lips almost touch when Regan cranks her neck to Hugo. They would have if she didn’t inch back to authenticate the honesty in Hugo’s eyes. “What do you mean banned?”

Hugo braces his back on the kitchen counter before folding his arms in front of his chest. “Come on, Regan, you know Isaac. There’s no way he’d let you entertain *guests* while Izzy is here.”

“But that doesn’t mean he’d demand me to...” Her brow arches higher and higher until it is hidden by her long side bangs. “He knows what I’m like.”

They must have had discussions like this before as I’m lost on what she means, but Hugo has no trouble deciphering her coded statement.

“He knows all right, but that doesn’t lessen the issues he has with her.” Hugo nudges his head to me, his smile the

biggest it's been today. "Until she goes, that *apparatus* you have in your room is a no-go zone."

Regan scoffs, her face disgusted. "Order whatever you want! I have a case to be dismissed."

She tosses the pamphlets to my side of the countertop before hot-footing it out of the kitchen.

---

An hour later, I'm on the verge of a carbohydrate coma. My sloth-like walk to gather my Kindle out of my bag is my punishment for allowing Hugo to choose what we were to consume for lunch. He went the very bachelor route, meaning I gobbled more than my share of pizza, garlic bread, and spicy wings the past half hour. I could feel my ass getting wider with every bite, but it was so good, I couldn't stop eating.

I pout when I dig out my Kindle from my satchel. Since it hasn't been used in months, it's flat dead. After plugging it in, I pad down the long hallway, my strides guided by the numerous sighs and groans bellowing down the elegantly decorated space. Regan is so determined to have my case overturned, she refused Hugo's multiple requests to join us for lunch.

When I round the corner, I spot Regan's concerned face. Wrinkles are indenting her forehead, and she's tapping her index finger on her lips. Her hair has been yanked up into a messy bun, and her jacket is flung over the back of her chair. She's super casual but also prepped for business if that makes any sense?

"Can I help with anything?"

She peers at me over the report she's reading for a mere second before she diverts her focus back to the task at hand.

"I'm not the damsel in distress Isaac and Hugo make me out to be. I have at least half a brain." My comment is surprisingly playful considering how bruised my ego is, and it has the effect I was hoping for.

After gesturing for me to sit in the chair across from her, Regan hands me a stack of photos. "I've never worked a murder case before, but that won't stop me from saying the scientific evidence they have against you is compelling."

When she nudges her head to the photos, I drop my eyes to study them. The first dozen are of a vast pool of blood that covers a carpeted surface. A pillow sits to the side, and a copper bullet is to its left. It's marked as evidence one, two, and three. The remaining photos are of a trashed motel room. Nearly every surface is littered with shredded pillows, broken lamps, and pieces of the quilt Megan had on her bed.

"Was there any surveillance in the motel parking lot or hallways?"

When Regan shakes her head, I sigh. In a way, a lack of security is a godsend. Otherwise, they would have seen me illegally entering Megan's room two weeks ago when I attempted to jimmy the lock before shoulder-barging it open, but it's frustrating we didn't catch the real culprit on camera.

"Was there any brain..." I cough to clear my throat. "... or organ matter found in the pool of blood?"

After gagging, Regan digs her hand into the large stack of reports she's been tackling the past hour. Thirty seconds later, with twisted lips and a deep sigh, she shakes her head.



“So, Megan’s death wasn’t caused by a bullet. There would be some type of matter in the blood pool if it were the murder weapon.”

Regan hands me a blown-up picture of the bullet I’m referencing. “The bullet they recovered from Megan’s motel room has blood on it. It’s a match for Megan’s blood type.”

I shrug, not the least bit confronted. “That could be residue blood from a contaminated crime scene.”

After snagging Regan’s reading glasses off her desk, I use them as a magnifying glass so I can study the photo more closely. There’s barely anything to see but grooves scoured on a recently-fired bullet and some fibers caught in its wounds.

“What color was the carpet in Megan’s motel room?”

Regan checks a report before replying, “Stained cream if that’s its original color. Why?”

“There’s an inflexible dark fiber caught in the wounds surrounding the bullet.” I point out the fiber I’m mentioning. “When a bullet is fired, wounds to the bullet usually occur. If it were fired through a skull, fragments of bone would embed in its wounds. Even if it only grazed someone’s skin, skin tags would still be found. Although this bullet does have blood on it, there’s no other damage that would occur if it had been fired through someone. Wounds are indicating it was fired, but other than that, its wounds appear more as if they were shot through somethi—” I stop talking as my heart skyrockets.

Regan’s eyes track me when I leap out of my seat and rush into the living room. When Hugo senses my presence, his head lifts from a magazine he’s perusing. Obviously, the channel surfing he was doing the past hour became too draining for him.

“What happened to the car you were driving on the weekend?”

As his lips quirk, his expression ruffles.

“The car I shot the tires out, what happened to that car?”

Now he’s clued in. “Roger took it to a repair shop for new tires. Why?”

I twist the photo Regan showed me his way like he’ll see what I’m referencing from a distance. “The bullet recovered from the crime scene at Megan’s motel room has a material embedded in its wounds. It’s a dark material, and due to its inflexibility, it could be a vulcanized fiber. Like a material you’d get from shooting a bullet through a tire.”

Hugo’s mouth is opened wide, and his eyes are flicking, but not a word seeps from his lips. It’s for the best. I don’t need him to speak to know the next steps we need to take to have my charges expunged.

“Call Roger and find out where the tires were repaired. I think whoever is framing me for murder removed the bullets from your tires to plant them at the crime scene.”

His throat works hard to swallow. “If that’s true, that means there’s another bullet still out there.”

“I know.” My eyes bounce between Hugo and Regan, who just joined us in the living room. “That’s why we need to find out who’s doing this before they frame me for another murder.”

## CHAPTER 15



## ISABELLE

*R*egina stiffens when I greet her with a hug. With my busy work schedule and everything going on with Isaac, I feel like I haven't seen her in months. As usual, she's taken aback by my friendliness, but her dark eyes relay it isn't as bad as she's making it out to be. After shooting her eyes around the foyer of Regan's apartment, she returns them to my face. "A little fancier than my humble shack, kiddo."

My heart warms from her comment. 'Kiddo' and 'rabbit' were my Uncle Tobias's chosen terms of endearment anytime he referenced me.

I bump her with my hip before backing up my cuddle with my own analogy of times bygone. "But it's nowhere near as homey, Ge Ge." Ge Ge was what my uncle called her when they were a couple.

When moisture fills Regina's eyes, I tug her into the opulent foyer before greeting Ryan with a smile. Dark rings are still circling his glacier-blue eyes, and his stubble is thicker than it was twenty-four plus hours ago, but he still has a face that belongs on a *GQ* magazine cover.

After returning my greeting with a lift of his chin, Ryan's focus shifts to Hugo. He acknowledges Ryan and Regina's presence with a head bob and turns his back on us so he can

continue his conversation on his cell phone, no doubt talking to either Isaac or someone on his team as he has many times the past hour.

With Hugo's manners nonexistent, I'm left with the task of introducing Ryan and Regina to Regan, who is seated on one of her large, plush sofas. The cushions are so luxurious, their plumpness nearly conceals her tiny frame. When she realizes we have company, she finalizes her call, places her cell phone onto the glass coffee table, then stands to greet her guests. It's interesting watching her and Ryan interact. They're both equally beautiful creatures, but neither seems fond of the other. Maybe it has something to do with the double alpha thing Regan mentioned yesterday?

"Regan, is that a family name?" Regina questions, her dark eyes assessing Regan.

Regan smiles at Regina's question before nodding. "Yes, it's my grandmother's maiden name."

With a reserved grin, Regan offers for Ryan and Regina to sit at one of the three sofas in her massive living room. Just as Ryan steps into the sunken space, Hugo ends his call before requesting a word with him. When Ryan approves his request without a second thought, I try to keep my focus on Regan and Regina, but my essential need to know everything has my eyes continuously moving over to Hugo and Ryan's half of the living area. I can't hear anything they're saying, but Hugo's stance is off. He's the most rigid I've seen him, and the groove between his brow is so large, you could hide the Golden Gate Bridge in there.

The crater between Hugo's brows jumps onto my face when Hugo shakes Ryan's hand before making a beeline for

the door. He's so eager to get out of here, he's practically running.

When Ryan fills the spare seat next to me, my inquisitiveness gets the better of me. "Where's Hugo going?"

"He has a family emergency—"

"What type of family emergency?"

He shrugs, his face not giving anything away. "Nope."

He's lying. Don't ask me how I know. I just know he is.

"Liar." I glare at him for several long seconds before shifting my focus back to the conversation across from me. He chuckles at my comment but doesn't attempt to refute it. You can't deny the truth.

"We filed a subpoena request with the judge requesting that all the evidence in Megan's case be assessed by our precinct instead of the internal affairs division of the FBI," Regina informs Regan, her voice professional yet full of worry. "Theresa argued that the case she had compiled between Isabelle and Isaac was directly associated with Megan's case, but since you had her investigation into Isabelle squashed, the judge denied the connection before ordering for her to hand over all evidence to our department."

Sweet relief washes through me. If Regina can prove the bullet found on the scene wasn't shot through anything of a human matter, the DA will have no incriminatory evidence against me. The bullet is the only leg the DA has to stand on. They arrested me solely on evidence that is as corrupt as the woman who gathered it.

Ryan chimes in by handing Regan a one-page document. "FBI Special Agent Alex Rogers supplied me with a report this morning regarding Isabelle entering Megan's motel room.

He advised that he requested for her to investigate Megan after an incident at Isaac's nightclub earlier that day. That report will aide in having Izzy's fingerprints and hair fiber in Megan's bathroom thrown out."

Moisture floods my eyes. Although I'm still annoyed at the tactics Alex undertook to force me to go undercover, I'm grateful he's assisting in my acquittal.

"We're going to the mechanic where Isaac's car was taken to once we leave here. If the second bullet is still in the tire, we'll collect it and send it to a CSI officer I trust in Hopeton. His findings will be more credible than the Ravenshoe department. Theresa has too many connections with the staff at Ravenshoe." Ryan's comment forms a knot in my stomach because it's proof this witch-hunt is more about who you know than credible evidence. "But even if we get the bullet thrown out as evidence, don't become complacent, Izzy. You still have a battlefield to walk through."

My brows knit as I nod. "I understand, but it's still a step in the right direction."

"I agree, but this is also a murder investigation. The amount of blood in Megan's room can't be overlooked. Combine that with your fingerprints found in her family residence, and you're the DA's number one suspect."

My eyes snap to Ryan's. "I didn't touch anything at Megan's house. Brandon and I wiped down all the door handles and surfaces we touched before we left her property Saturday night."

Ryan cringes, his head juddering side to side. "Your fingerprints were recovered on a vanity tap in the main bathroom."

My heart plunges into my gut when the night in question rolls back in my head. With my mind on the fritz, I completely forgot about turning off the vanity tap.

*How could I have been so stupid?*

After exhaling a big breath to rid my body of nerves, I lock my eyes with Ryan. “So that one lot of fingerprints links me to Megan’s case?”

When he nods, I curse under my breath. I don’t usually swear, but with everything happening, nothing is close to ordinary.

“So, staying away from Isaac is utterly useless. I’m already linked to Megan’s case—”

“No.” Regina swipes her hand through the air, cutting me off. “I agree with Regan. You can’t have the DA or the jury knowing you’re in a relationship with Isaac. There are many arguments you can use as to why your fingerprints were found in Megan’s home.” Regina shifts her gaze to Regan, who is watching her in anticipation. “For decades, researchers have been trying to find a way to age fingerprints, but to date, no credible method has been discovered. So, you could argue Isabelle’s fingerprints were left during the FBI’s investigation into Megan as part of Isaac’s case.”

Regan smiles and nods, grateful for Regina’s many years of experience and knowledge. After accepting her un-worded praise, Regina devotes her attention back to me. “But if you choose to go down that track, you need to find someone willing to corroborate your story.”

My first thought strays to Brandon, but the dull ache hitting my chest weakens its hypothesis. Brandon has always been supportive of me, but asking him to falsely testify would



push the limits of our friendship. No matter how badly I want the charges dropped, I can't ask Brandon to lie for me. He's a great friend, and I'm sure he'd agree without a snippet of deliberation, but I refuse to put him in a predicament where he could lose his job, or even worse, his freedom. I'll take the upper hand and have faith justice will prevail.

"I won't have any more people dragged into this mess."

A blinding grin stretches across Ryan's face. "I don't believe you need anyone to corroborate your story. The murder in Parkerville aids your case more than hinders it."

"Murder? What murder?"

"The sheriff's office in Parkerville issued an arrest warrant for Megan for the death of Carlyle Shroud. Her fingerprints were found on the poison used to kill him, and her skin fragments were embedded on the rope used to hang him. The police discovered the crime scene in Megan's motel room as they were there to execute a warrant for her arrest."

Part of his comment fills me more with dread than relief. The horrid things I witnessed that morning still haunt me, but as the days go on, they're becoming less graphic. The smell, though, that's something I'll never forget.

"The jury will be more sympathetic when evidence of Megan's murder charges are presented," Regan remarks. "Adding a murder charge to her extensive medical records will significantly reduce the chance of the jury looking at her as solely a victim. The glasses the DA will give them to wear will now be smeared with dirt, so their compassion will be limited."

Regina places her hand over my balled one in my lap. "Don't look so worried, kiddo. The balance of power has

shifted back into your court.”

“At Megan’s expense.”

Regina halfheartedly shrugs. “She will get justice, Isabelle, but only when we convict the *right* person for the crime.”

As my eyes bounce between the three pairs staring at me in admired sympathy, the knot in my stomach lessens. I’m confident Megan’s killer will be brought to justice. I just need to stop the DA’s finger being pointed at me first.

---

By the time Ryan and Regina head back to the foyer of Regan’s apartment, half an hour has passed. Much to Ryan’s dismay, I assured him I didn’t require the babysitter Hugo supposedly organized before he rushed out of here like his backside was on fire. He only agreed to leave when I swore on my Uncle Tobias’s grave that I wouldn’t leave Regan’s apartment until Hugo returned. It was a dirty tactic, but it guarantees I wouldn’t step foot outside of these walls without Hugo. I’d never do anything to taint my uncle’s name.

My heart swells when Regina wraps me up in a warm hug. “Once this all blows over, you better introduce me to your sex-on-a-stick. If he passes my stringent list of requirements to date you, you can be assured your Uncle Tobias would have also approved.”

The swelling of my heart increases as do the tears in my eyes. “I will.”

When Regina steps into the corridor, Ryan stands in her place. He’s smiling, but his eyes are brimming with apprehension. “Can I ask you something?”

I nod without pause. He's stepped over a murky line to help me be granted bail, so the least I can do is answer any questions he may have.

"Were you with Isaac last night?"

My pulse beeps in my neck when I nod.

"Where?"

I clear the jitters from my throat with a quick swallow before answering, "We anchored his yacht a few miles off the Vela De Keys Marina."

Relief smothers the unease corrupting his handsome face. "Okay. Thank you. That was very helpful." After leaning in for an awkward hug, he joins Regina in the hallway. "I'll be in touch the instant we have anything new."

I wait for them to enter the elevator car before closing the door and returning to the living area to assist Regan with compiling the evidence in my case. There's enough red tape to keep us going for months. I'm just about to take a seat when a loud tap sounds from the front door. Hugo wouldn't need to knock as Regan gave him a key, so who else could it possibly be?

Regan's suspicion is just as high as me. After yanking off her reading glasses, she nudges her head to the hallway that separates the living area from the sleeping quarters. "Go to your room."

My teeth grit, hating that I'm being treated like a baby, but I follow her demand like a spineless coward. It's her house, so, unfortunately, it's also her rules.

My clumpy steps halt when, "Izzy, it's Brandon," booms through the door. "Are you home?"

A smile stretches across my tired face when my pivot busts Regan checking her face in the mirror. After dragging a finger across her glossy lips, she pinches her cheeks and rolls her shoulder back. She appears to give herself a mental pep talk before finalizing the last steps to the door to open it. Brandon's jaw drops as he drinks in her svelte frame, but his cheeks are minus the pink hue he usually gets when flustered. He's either finally caught on to Regan's ruse, or Regan needs to up her game.

Although Regan doesn't issue Brandon a greeting, her eyes happily absorb his body. Upon noticing her vigorous assessment of his physique, Brandon's trademark lopsided grin pops out from behind Regan's shoulder.

A giggle bubbles in my chest when Regan removes Brandon's trench coat without seeking permission. She is as forward as she is beautiful, and it's a fascinating exchange to watch from afar. A lioness is stalking her prey, and poor Brandon is the deer trapped in her headlights.

Once Regan has Brandon's jacket hung in the entry closet, he dips his chin in thanks. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure." Now Brandon's cheeks bloom. It's understandable. Regan's words purred out of her mouth like a kitty.

When Brandon's begging eyes lock with me over Regan's shoulder, I join them in the foyer before greeting him with a kiss on the cheek and a hug.

My earlier giggle erupts when he murmurs, "She scares me," into my ear.

"I heard that." Regan wanders into the sunken living area, her hips swinging more with every step she takes. "And you

should be scared.”

After gathering a stack of documents off the coffee table, Regan enters her office halfway down the hall, but not before one final rake of Brandon’s body. Once she’s disappeared from view, I shift on my feet to face Brandon. His eyes are wide and fixated in the direction Regan just went. I eye him curiously but give him time to appraise the situation. I know what it’s like when I’m zapped into Isaac’s vortex. Rational thinking is always the first thing to go. I’ve often said we’re too similar to ever be a couple, now I’m wondering just how similar we are. Is Brandon about to be trapped by his own alpha?

Several long, tedious minutes pass before the fog clouding Brandon lifts. When he turns to face me, I notice his hued cheeks are gone, but the cheeky sparkle in his eyes has been replaced with worry. He seems genuinely fretful about Regan’s attention, which is odd considering she’s an incredibly beautiful woman who could have her pick of any man.

“I hope you don’t mind me popping in like this, Izzy, but I couldn’t call you on your cell since Hunter smashed it, and I don’t have any of Regan’s contact details.”

“I can give them to you. All you have to do is ask.”

I had wondered if Regan had indeed left our conversation. Her comment proves she hasn’t. Laughing at her antics, I guide Brandon more toward the living room than the hallway Regan is camped out in. “Sorry, she’s a little…” My words trail off when I fail to find the appropriate word to describe her.

“Like Isaac?” Brandon fills in.

Grimacing, I nod.

While running his hand down his face, the panic in Brandon's eyes switches to full-blown hysteria. "I just wanted you to know I understand you not being able to come to the gala with me. With everything going on, you've got more pressing matters to handle than being my date for a night."

"The gala is this weekend?"

When he nods, I stomp my foot down like a child. I must be close to having an aneurysm with all the things I've forgotten this week. Brandon gave me a rundown of the event last weekend, but my brain has been understandably jumbled since then.

"It's Friday night, but you don't have to come."

Guilt smacks into me hard and fast. Brandon has been nothing but supportive of me the past six months, and the one time I'm supposed to return the favor, I can't.

Just as I am about to apologize for being a horrible friend, Regan steps out of her conspicuous hidey-hole. "You should go. Having you out in public with another man will help make the jury believe you have no association with Isaac." The scent of vanilla frosting whips up around us when she stops to stand in front of me. "It will also aid in your innocent plea. Only people with something to hide are concerned about prosecution."

"You don't think it will be distasteful for me to go to a fancy gala with a death hanging over my head?"

Regan shakes her head. "No. You knew of Megan from an FBI agent perspective, but you have no personal connection to her whatsoever. You don't mourn the death of a stranger."

Wrinkles crease my forehead when I frown. I'm not mourning Megan's death, but I do feel sorry that she came to

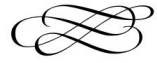
ill harm. No one deserves that, not even someone who's clearly psychotic. Megan's condition wasn't her fault, though. She was sick and required hospitalization.

“And with you being out of Ravenshoe for a few nights, I won't have to check your room every ten minutes to make sure Isaac hasn't snuck in.” I don't take her statement as cheeky. The stern expression tainting her face is anything but playful.

I compile the facts in front of me before separating them into pros and cons. No matter how many times I work the facts, the results never alter. Going away with Brandon will do more good than it will harm. I just really hope Isaac reaches the same conclusion as me.

After clearing the brick in my throat with a quick swallow, I shift on my feet to face Brandon. His nervous knee bob stops when I ask, “What time are you picking me up?”

## CHAPTER 16





## ISAAC

I'm icing swollen knuckles when Hugo barrels into my office. His hurried strides halt when his wide eyes lock on my newfound companion, who's slumped in my office chair, holding a wad of ice to his right eye that's nearly swollen shut.

He swallows hard when I snarl, "You didn't think to inform me that it was your brother-in-law watching over my brother?" Anger surges through my body so hard and fast it physically shakes me. "You're supposed to be invisible, Hugo, so how the fuck did he find you?"

He stares at the man I now know is Carey Hawke, his brother-in-law, before he devotes his attention to me. His eyes are brimming with torment, and his lips are set into a firm line, but his twitching hands give away the fear plaguing his usually carefree composure. This is the first time I've seen him display alarm in the years I've known him.

"Izzy." One word and my attention is rapt. "She somehow got access to my sister's case file. She knows what happened to Marjorie. Hawke followed the breadcrumbs her investigation left behind. It led him to Ravenshoe." His voice is as low as my heart rate. "I spotted him outside Isabelle's

apartment building the day I took her to see Cormack. I thought I'd seen a ghost.”

“Isabelle knows what happened?” My surging heart rate is heard in my high tone.

I begin breathing again when Hugo shakes his head. “No. As far as I can tell, she only knows about my sister’s and nephew’s accident. She hasn’t connected all the dots just yet.”

Hawke’s anger about our tussle is heard in his voice when he asks, “Who is this Izzy? And why is she prying into my wife’s death?”

Even though he has a right to be angry, in my defense, I told him I only allow one strike before retaliating. He didn’t heed my warning, so he suffered the consequences of his actions. I’ll give it to him, though, his right hook is impressive. My jaw is still tingling.

“Isabelle is no concern of yours.” My tone warns I’ll once again be forced to retaliate if he ever speaks her name with the sneer he just used. It will just be harder the second time around—hard enough to kill.

“Izzy is one of the rare good ones, Hawke. She isn’t an enemy, and neither is Isaac.” Air hisses between Hugo’s teeth when he removes the wad of napkins from Hawke’s eye. He glares at me, pissed I gave his brother-in-law a black eye.

“I warned him. He swung first.” I’m not the least bit sorry. You don’t disrespect me on my turf and not anticipate repercussions for your actions. “He should be grateful I only inflicted one punch.”

Hugo aims to conceal a chuckle by coughing. His attempts are woeful. With his fists clenched at his side, Hawke stands from his chair, sending it toppling backward in the process. He

glares at Hugo, giving him the same death stare he awarded me only an hour ago. It subdues Hugo more than it ruffles his feathers but not enough to stop his laughter.

“Hey, I warned you, yet you still came out swinging, so you deserved to be knocked out.”

“You’ll be kissing the pavement if you don’t shut your mouth.”

Hugo smiles, not the least bit confronted by Hawke’s threat. “Bring it on, big boy.” He bounces foot to foot while jabbing the air with his fists. His mood is the most carefree I’ve seen it in the past five years.

I scrub my hand over my head. As riveting as this family reunion is, I have more pressing matters occupying my time. The most vigilant, “Why aren’t you with Isabelle? I told you not to leave her side until this mess is sorted out.”

Hugo’s playful banter stops before he cranks his head back to face me. “She’s okay. Ryan and Regina are with her. When Tina called to say two bulls were going to battle in your office, I thought I better get here before you killed him.” His reply gives away a fatal flaw in my empire, but I’m too focused on what he says next to award it my full attention. “Ryan is with Izzy as there’s been a new development in her case.”

A knot forms in my stomach, but I remain quiet, waiting for him to continue. Mercifully, he doesn’t keep me hanging for long. “Izzy noticed that the bullet recovered from the scene had a volcanized material attached to it. She believes whoever is framing her recovered the bullets from the tires she shot out Saturday morning. I called Roger on the way here. He took the Audi to be repaired at a mechanic on 93rd Street. It’s still there as they had to order special tires.”

As the pieces of the puzzle click together, I shoot my eyes to Hawke. I learned quickly not to form an opinion on someone without first fully unearthing who they truly are, but I don't have time to deliberate on his reasons for being here. We don't have a second to spare, much less the hours it will take to unravel someone as complex as him.

I return my eyes to Hugo. "Can he be trusted?" I jerk my chin to Hawke during the 'he' part of my question. Hugo is my most loyal employee, so I'll trust him if he says I can speak openly with Hawke in the room.

Hugo nods without a pause for thought. "Hawke ain't a tattler, so you can be assured nothing will leave this office."

When his eyes drift to Hawke, he nods, agreeing with him.

"All right." I cough to clear my throat, praying this isn't the one time my intuition leads me astray. "The two male police officers who brutalized Isabelle during her arrest went missing last night. Ryan said their patrol cars were found in a junkyard on 93rd Street."

Hugo's brows tack together. "Are they trying to pin this on you or add more charges to Izzy's false accusations?"

"I don't know. Ryan straight-up asked if I had anything to do with it. I don't think he would have notified me that they're missing if he truly suspected I was the assailant."

After a few seconds of deliberation, Hugo peers at Hawke. "You up for a drive?"

When Hawke jerks up his chin, I gather my jacket from the coat rack in the corner of my office. It's halfway on when Hugo says, "Leave this to us, Isaac. You need to get some sleep." The genuine concern in his eyes appeases my need to

jump in with an immediate retort. “When was the last time you slept?”

I fasten the buttons on my coat before replying, “I’ll sleep when Isabelle is back in my bed where she belongs. Until then, sleep is the last thing on my mind.”

Not giving him the right of a reply, I exit my office. Both men closely shadow me.

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Nine police cruisers, two CSI vans, and one pissed-off detective confront us when we arrive on the scene at 93rd Street. Although Ryan’s scorn can’t be heard over the clicking of CSI cameras, there’s no doubt it was peppered with curse words. His lips are as harsh as the glare he’s giving me.

After shoving a handful of documents into the chest of a slightly overweight African American lady seated in the passenger seat of his unmarked police car, he quickly spans the distance between us. His fast, efficient steps have him reaching us before we even get close to the police tape securing the premises from prying gawkers.

“You can’t be here.” His tone is firm, yet panicked.

“Me? Weren’t you supposed to be watching Isabelle?”

Hugo doesn’t need me to voice the urgency of the situation. He jumps into his car, the squeal of his tires heard for the first two miles when he takes off in the direction of Regan’s apartment building.

“Izzy is fine. She’s tougher than you think, Isaac. She scored well above *all* her male counterparts in weapons training at the academy.”

I'm not surprised by Ryan's testimonial. Isabelle displayed perfect aim when she shot out Hugo's tires.

"Besides, I didn't leave her unattended. I passed Brandon on my way out. He said he'd stay with her until Hugo returns."

Anger bristles through me as my fists scrunch into firm balls. If he were hoping his comment would soothe my hesitation, he's way off the mark. If anything, I'm more frustrated now than I was earlier.

The twitch in my jaw grows more rampant when Ryan seizes my elbow in an attempt to drag me away from the police tape.

"This will be your *only* warning. Get your hands off me."

Fury hazes my vision when I lift my eyes to glare at him. His eyes are as murky as mine, his jaw just as hard, but nothing deters my attention from our cut-throat stare-down.

Ryan isn't quite so lucky. When everyone stops what they're doing to watch our charade, his Adam's apple bobs up and down. I'm used to gaining the attention of others, but he seems mighty uncomfortable with his new fame.

After removing his hand from my elbow, he runs it over his head, messing up his usually pristine haircut. "Unless you have a death wish, you need to leave. If they think this was you, they'll hunt you down like a dog."

I angle my head so I can peer into his eyes, which are now facing the taped-off crime scene. "If *who* thinks this was me?"

A huff of disbelief spills from his lips. "Police protect their own."

"Just like I protect what's mine." I take a step closer to him, pretending I don't have Hawke's watchful eyes boring a

hole in the side of my head. “I already told you this wasn’t me.”

“They won’t ask you like I did, Isaac. They’ll shoot first, ask questions later.”

“Who will?” I ask again. “Jimmy Travell, married father of two?” I gesture my head to Jimmy, who smiles when he notices he’s gained my attention. “Or what about Mary L. Turner, mother of four boys? Her husband is a drunk, but she puts up with him for their children’s sake because she doesn’t want them growing up in a broken family.” I turn my eyes to a group of officers on our left. “Or perhaps it will be Bob, or Robert, depending on what mood he’s in? Or what about Carter, Peter, Lionel, or Sophia?” I point to each of the officers I’m referencing, undoubtedly proving I have some type of connection with over half the officers here. “Who’s going to prosecute me without first hearing my side of the story, Ryan? From what I’m seeing, the only person doing that is you, although your eyes are telling an entirely different story.”

“They’re not your friends, Isaac. At the first sniff of money, they’ll pretend they’ve never heard of you.”

“No, they’re not friends of mine, but they have benefited from what my empire has given this community. Furthermore, a lot of cops in Ravenshoe are corrupt, but not all of them are like that. There’s a decent number who are just like you, Ryan. Ask them if they think I did this. They’ll give you the same answer your eyes are revealing.” I tilt closer to him, ensuring he’s the only one to hear my next set of words. “I’ve never hidden my ruthlessness, so why would I hide it now? If this were me, I’d parade their worthless carcasses for the entire community to see. That way, any time a resident of Ravenshoe

considers putting their hands on *any* woman, much less mine, they'd think twice."

With that, I turn on my heels and stride back to my car. All the questions I came here to have answered was done by absorbing the crime scene during my squabble with Ryan. The missing officers weren't kidnapped by Col Petretti or anyone in his crew, but if the signature left as clear as day in the middle of the crime scene is an indication to their identity, I know who is responsible, and let me say, it isn't who I was anticipating.



## CHAPTER 17



## ISAAC

When a shot of whiskey hits the back of my throat, I bask in its familiar burn as it slides down my esophagus and past my icy heart before landing in my stomach. Whiskey is a wonderful entity. If I consume enough of it, I can forget, wipe the slate clean, overlook everything I'm precariously juggling right now. It can even take away the throb of my busted knuckles from my run-in with Hawke earlier today.

But no matter how much alcohol I consume, nothing can dampen my insatiable need to have Isabelle beneath me. I love the way her pupils dilate, and her breathing becomes panted when she teeters on the edge of ecstasy. The desire to encounter that's irrepressible. I'll never get enough of her.

After slamming down my shot glass onto the mahogany countertop, I signal to Tina, requesting another refill. She removed the bottle from my grasp thirty minutes ago with the explicit instruction that I needed to "slow down" on the amount of alcohol I was consuming.

I'm not drowning my sorrows. I'm fighting the urge to drive to Regan's apartment and sneak into Isabelle's room. My fingerprint is the only tool I need to gain access to the floor Regan's apartment is on as it's the same floor as my *fuck pad*.

We have side-by-side penthouses. Regan's is just more adeptly decorated with furniture, paintings, and ornaments. I never felt the need to fancy up my apartment for the guests I took there. They were only there for one reason, and it wasn't to look at the furnishings.

A vibrating sensation steals my attention away from a group of men creating havoc for some of my female patrons on the dance floor. While shifting my gaze to my head bouncer, Travis, I pull my phone out of my pocket. With a simple lift of my chin, I instruct him to remove the Neanderthals from my premises before they disrupt the higher-paying, more valuable guests.

My heart thumps against my chest when my caller's number identifies as known. It's coming from the unregistered cell I gave Isabelle early this morning.

I hit the connect button before pushing my phone in close to my ear. "Isabelle, are you okay?" My tone is stern but riddled with anxiety. It's a little after one in the morning, so I'm somewhat perplexed as to why she's calling me so late.

When the loud thump of the bass streaming out of the speakers hung around my nightclub absorbs Isabelle's reply, I head into my office. I want to say the quiet conditions appease my worry, but that would be a lie. Thick, angry blood surges through my veins when her silent sobs barrel down the line.

"Isabelle, what's wrong?"

When my question arrives with more gut-wrenching sobs, I throw open the drawers of my desk, frantically searching for my car keys. When my hunt comes up empty, I thrust my hands into the pockets of my trousers with a sense of urgency. Suddenly, clarity forms. Tina. She removed them from the countertop after I'd consumed half a bottle of whiskey.

“Nightmare,” Isabelle hiccups through sobs.

The weight on my chest turns crippling. “It’s okay, baby, you’re safe. It’s just a dream, remember?” My voice alters from trembling with unbridled panic to a soothing purr.

While yanking my sleek black iPhone out of my pocket, I attempt to calm her down with words instead of my body. “Talk to me, Isabelle. Tell me what you did today, what you ate, what you watched. Anything.”

I hit the speed dial for Hugo’s number on my iPhone, then squash it to my opposite ear before rushing out of my office. This is the *very* reason I was adamant about not leaving her alone. The ghastly scene she witnessed in the barn was mere days ago. She shouldn’t be left alone, day or night.

My teeth grit when my call to Hugo’s cell phone goes to his voicemail. I revert my attention to my cell. “Talk to me, baby. I’ve missed your voice so much tonight.”

When she fails to respond, I race toward the bar, prepared to hustle through the hundreds of patrons milling around the vast floor space. Mercifully, when the crowd sees me coming, they part like the red sea, giving me an unobscured path. When I snag my keys from the container Tina puts the drunken patrons’ keys in, she shoots me a wry look. I cut her off any words preparing to spill from her mouth with a stern glare. I don’t have time for her shit today. Isabelle needs me, and no one is more important than her.

“I’m on my way. You’re okay. You’re safe,” I assure Isabelle while sprinting to my car parked in the lot at the back of my club.

I’ve just reached the driver’s side door when a deep voice sounds down the line. “I’ve got her, Isaac.” Hugo’s deep

timbre is breathless like he's just woken up. "It took me so long to get in here as she had the door locked."

I suck in many big breaths while struggling to quell my panic. It would be a shit-ton easier if Isabelle's quiet sniffles weren't still resonating down the line.

"I'll be there in thirty minutes." My snapped command should advise Hugo that my decision isn't up for negotiating, but just in case it doesn't, I disconnect our call.

I slide in the driver's seat of my Bugatti, forgoing my seat belt before throwing the gearstick into reverse. My sweaty palms clench the steering wheel as forcefully as my tires grip the gravel beneath them. In no time at all, I rocket out of the lot, harrowingly missing patrons heading to their vehicles after a night of dancing. My excessive speed as I race through the streets of Ravenshoe does little to ease the shake that has invaded my hands. Knowing Isabelle is upset is more alarming than I could have ever perceived. Even though she has Hugo, I won't be satisfied that she's safe until I see it with my own eyes.

Due to the early hour, the roads are deserted, void of the usual traffic that plagues Ravenshoe during daylight hours, so I make it to Regan's apartment in record time. That probably has something to do with the manic speed I was driving.

Tires skidding along the polished concrete floor bounces off the concrete walls of the underground parking lot when I slam my foot on the brake. Since I no longer need my *fuck pad*, the parking space that came with the apartment is now occupied by a white BMW convertible.

With my back molars crunching together, I shift the gearstick into reverse, so I can park in the only spare space in the entire lot, Apartment 3A. After throwing open my door

with more force than needed, I quickly stride toward the elevator banks. My lengthened steps falter when Regan darts to stand in front of me. She was hiding in the only dark corner of the garage, and that's not the worst of the travesty.

Barely a strand of her platinum blonde locks are visible under the shockingly repulsive peaked beanie she's wearing, but even its not as hideous as the words she speaks next. "You cannot go in there."

She folds her arms in front of her chest, angering me more. "She had a nightmare."

My jaw tenses when my attempt to skirt past her is impeded by her stepping back into my path. I grit my teeth before returning her glare with a fiercer one. It warns that I'm not in the mood for her alpha dominant games tonight. Isabelle needs me, but more than anything, I need her. I need to ensure she's safe and protected, and that no tears are staining her beautiful face. But more than anything, I need to make sure the last time we talk isn't while she's crying. I made that mistake once. I won't make it again.

The more Regan's green eyes float between mine, the less stern her mask becomes. "Hugo has her, Isaac. Let him do the job you pay him to do."

"That's not his job!" My angry sneer reverberates around the empty parking lot as I bang my fist on my chest. "That's my job! It's my job to keep her safe!"

Regan shakes her head. "That's no longer your position until Isabelle's trial is over, or the charges against her are dropped."

Although she's said the same thing numerous times the past thirty-six hours, the sting of her words hasn't lessened.

“Like fucking hell it isn’t!”

I skim past her to stride into the elevator, only stopping when she shouts, “Scanning your fingerprint will be useless.”

My head ricochets back quicker than a bullet fired from a gun. She’s barely visible in the shadows of the overhead lighting, but I can see the condescending smirk etched on her ruthless face.

“What did you do?”

She pops out her hip, strengthening her stance. “I stopped you from making a costly mistake. I had Hunter remove your prints from the security database.”

I growl like a bear about to begin hibernation. Regan has no clue how lucky she is to have female parts between her legs because if she didn’t, she would have taken her last breath by now.

With my mood as dangerous as my blood pressure, I pace back toward her. My steps are so furious and efficient, I reach her in less than a heartbeat. After seizing her wrist, I yank her toward the elevator banks. My thumbprint may not work anymore, but hers sure will.

Regan tries to tuck away the flinch my sudden movement caused, but she doesn’t fully suffocate before I see it. As the weight on my chest grows heavy, I release her wrist from my hold, mortified I caused her to show fear. When she catches my apologetic gaze, dread fades from her face, and her take-no-shit-from-anyone composure reins back over her features.

After exhaling a deep breath, she yanks me into the dark corner she was hiding in when I arrived. She’s so close, her breaths flutter my lips when she speaks. “You’re letting your feelings cloud your judgment. You need to step back and

properly assess the situation.” Even though her tone is stern, the remorse reflecting out of her eyes is anything but. “They’re watching you.”

My shoulders square as my brows furrow. “Who?”

She’s barely whispering now, but she lowers her voice a few more decibels before replying, “A pizza delivery van has been parked at the front of the garage since I arrived home this morning. No one eats that much pizza, Isaac. Not even Hugo.”

When my head pops out of the shadowed darkness, I spot the delivery van she’s referencing. From this angle, I can’t see the entire van, but I can see the back quarter-panel window that most likely has a surveillance camera positioned behind it. Its location gives it a clear view of the elevator banks at the front of the building.

After returning my eyes to Regan, I ask, “I lost my tail on the way here, so whose surveillance team is that? IA or Ravenshoe PD?”

She shrugs. “I think it’s IA. Their case against Isabelle has been thrown out, but I have a feeling Theresa hasn’t gotten the memo. But in saying that, Hugo ensured no one followed them here this morning, so they’re either here waiting for you or hoping you’ll lead them to Isabelle.”

“Theresa knows all about the women I bring here. She was one of them, so she’d also know I’d never bring Isabelle here.”

Theresa is bitter because I use to treat women more like a commodity than a person. In my defense, I didn’t know Isabelle existed back then. If I did, I would have never stopped looking for her.

“That’s my point, Isaac. It would be highly suspicious if you arrived at your *fuck pad* without a busty blonde draped on



your arm like you did every second day until a few measly months ago,” Regan replies, her tone surprisingly catty.

My jaw spasms as a growl emits from my lips. I’m used to Regan giving as good as she is getting, but that was a hit below the belt, and she knows it.

“Sorry, that was uncalled for.” Her sigh rustles my badly-in-need-of-a-trim hair. “It’s been a draining couple of weeks.”

She’s preaching to the wrong person.

As her gaze floats back outside, a mask I don’t recognize slips over her face. “If it’s Theresa’s team, she’ll be slapped with an injunction the instant the courts open tomorrow morning. Her obsession with you was already bordering on stalker territory, but I’m worried saving you from her trap thrust Isabelle straight into it.” Her regular, I’m queen-of-the-world fire gleams in her eyes when she says, “When I hit Theresa with another injunction, I’ll make sure it hits her horrid face this time around.”

A smirk curves my mouth, but it barely lifts an ounce of the weight on my chest. Surveillance or not, I need to see Isabelle. The desire is uncontrollable. I’m beyond exhausted, but I won’t sleep a wink until I see Isabelle isn’t upset.

“I need to see her, Regan. I need to make sure she’s okay.” This time, my statement comes out as a plea instead of a demand.

While she ponders my request, Regan’s gaze shifts between me and the van. She knows what happened with Ophelia, so she understands where my appeal stems from. Hearing Isabelle cry as she did without being there to support her is gutting me.

“All right,” she breathes out slowly a short time later. “But there’s only one way I can get you into the building without raising suspicion.” Confusion engulfs me when she fists my jacket. “Don’t worry, this will be as weird for me as it is for you.”

When her lips brush mine, I freeze, utterly shocked by her boldness. It’s been clear from day one that we have no sexual interest in each other whatsoever.

“If you want to see Isabelle, you need to make this look believable, Isaac,” Regan mumbles over my snap-shut lips.

Just hearing Isabelle’s name sparks a reaction out of me. I grasp Regan’s jean-covered backside to haul her body against mine. When I cup her thighs, she wraps her legs around my waist. To an outsider, we look like an intimate couple who can’t keep our hands off each other, only we know it is for show. For one, Regan is sitting so high on my waist, she’s practically on my chest, and two, neither of our tongues have attempted to leave the comfort of our mouths.

With our lips locked, I pace toward the elevator. When I inch back to place her thumb on the elevator dashboard security panel, she keeps the show alight by nibbles on the stubble on my chin. Once the elevator arrives at our floor, and we’re safely inside, we repel away from each other like we’re seconds from catching something.

While Regan runs her hand over her mouth to remove all traces of our kiss, I drag the back of my hand over mine to ensure none of her cherry-flavored lip gloss is smeared on my mouth.

“Yuck!” Regan’s dramatic voice echoes in the elevator. “That was *literally* like kissing my brother.”

I cock my brow. Call me conceited, but this is the first time I've ever been insulted for my usually stellar bedroom antics. Even though I wasn't putting in any effort, my ego still got bitch-slapped by her comment.

Regan eyes me curiously, seemingly baffled by my response. "I didn't mean it was bad. I... just..."

She stops talking as her gaze shifts to the elevator dashboard. She counts the floors, praying it will reach our desired level because she's forced to give me an explanation for her odd behavior. Her nervous response makes up for her swipe at my kissing abilities. I've known her for nearly eight years, and this is the first time I've seen her skittish.

With the elevator's ascent taking too long, she removes her ugly hat before shifting her gaze back to me. "You can't talk." Her voice isn't as jittery as it was earlier. "You didn't even get hard from me slobbering all over your neck."

I arch my brow again. Shock is all over my face.

"Don't deny it. I know you weren't into it. I felt what you have going on when you pulled my body flush against you." She waves her hand to the crotch of my pants, ensuring I can't miss the innuendo in her tone. "Even with my legs wrapped around your stomach, I would have felt that *monster* if he were coming out to play."

I throw my head back and laugh. My chuckles are so boisterous, they nearly drown out the ding of the elevator announcing we've reached Regan's floor. After ribbing me with her elbow and halting my laughter, Regan ambles into the corridor. I quickly shadow her, more than happy to skip the peacock parade for another day.

While jabbing her key into her front door, Regan jerks her head to the one opposite it. “What’s the deal with your apartment? Should I call an exterminator?”

I grimace before rubbing at a kink in my neck. “It’s a long story.”

When I follow her into her apartment, the first thing my eyes zoom in on is Hugo. His shoulder is propped against the wall separating the living area from the sleeping quarters. He looks as exhausted as I feel, but he still smiles before pushing off the wall to greet me in the foyer.

“She’s back to sleep,” he advises once he’s standing in front of me. “Regan gave her some Xanax with a glass of wine.”

I snap my furious eyes to Regan. She swallows bleakly before she shoots daggers at Hugo. “She needed to sleep. She’s exhausted. Now she’s guaranteed a minimum of ten hours.”

When her twitching mouth fails to hide her smile, my fists ball. The last time Isabelle mixed Xanax with champagne, she was out cold for over twelve hours.

Needing distance before I end my night with two fewer employees, I shake my head before entering the hallway Hugo just exited. I’m extra careful with the handle of Regan’s guest bedroom door since it’s hanging by its hinges. The whitewashed wood opens with only the slightest creak, revealing Isabelle’s small frame, which is being swallowed by the ginormous king-size bed. The crisp blue bedding makes her hair as dark as night, but it gives her skin an illuminative glow.

The closer I pad to her bedside, the more constrictive the clutch on my heart becomes. She looks peaceful, but no amount of lying could deny the tearstains on her cheeks. After crouching next to the bed, I remove the marks with my thumbs. I'm barely touching her, but even a deep slumber can't stop her from sensing my presence. She murmurs my name in her sleep, and her nose screws up when I press a kiss to each of her now-dry eyelids.

When a creak sounds through my ears a few minutes later, I crank my head to the side. Hugo's large frame is blocking the doorway. His arms are folded in front of his chest, and he has a pleading look in his eyes. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

When he nudges his head to the corridor, requesting privacy for our talk, I nod before shifting my focus back to Isabelle. She looks even more peaceful now that the tears on her face have dried.

After tracking my index finger across the cupid's bow in her top lip, I meet with Hugo in the hallway as requested. He rubs at a kink in his neck as his anxious eyes float up from the ground. "I think Izzy needs to talk to someone about what she witnessed on the weekend."

Even with a stabbing pain hitting my chest hard enough to knock me backward, I nod. Since I can't be by Isabelle's side to aid her through this, I agree that seeking professional assistance is the next best thing.

Relief washes over Hugo's face from my approving gesture. "The visual of him hanging..." His shudder will send earthquake warnings across the continent. "It's easily in the top five most horrific things I've witnessed, and you know that's saying something. I saw a shitload of horrendous things during my time in the Air Force."

I nod again. “I’ll organize an emergency appointment tomorrow morning.”

Like my mood could sour any more, Hugo injects a second dose of annoyance. “Ah... unless her appointment is for tomorrow, it’ll have to wait until we get back.”

I still can’t believe Regan convinced me that Isabelle going away with Brandon for a long weekend was a good idea. The only reprieve I have is that Hugo agreed to stand alongside Isabelle the entire time. His aversion to Brandon will assure Brandon will never get Isabelle alone. Hugo doesn’t dislike many things. Brandon James is not on that list.

“I’ll see if Avery can squeeze Isabelle in tomorrow. If not, I’ll organize a telephone conference.”

Hugo nods as the apprehension in his eyes clears.

“I’ll also email you the information for the hotel you’re staying at this weekend. Catherine organized side-by-side suites at the Wiltshire for you and Isabelle. The gala is being held in the ballroom of a hotel one block over, but they were fully booked.”

As a broad grin stretches across his face, Hugo waggles his brows.

I jerk my chin to Isabelle’s temporary abode. “I’m going to stay with her for a couple of hours.”

Hugo nods. “No worries. Since you’re here, I’ll head out for a few hours and come back in the morning. What time do you have to leave for your appointment?”

I check my watch. “I need to be out of here no later than six. I have an early flight to Vegas.”

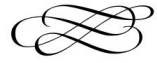
His lips twist as he struggles to hold in his real retort. “Okay, I’ll be back before then.”

After lifting his chin in farewell, he strolls out of the hallway. For how fast his pace is, I have an inkling he isn’t going home to catch up on some sleep. With Regan nowhere in sight, and her bedroom door shut, I shrug off my jacket before re-entering Isabelle’s room.

Once my clothing is removed, I slip into her bed. My heart hammers my ribs when her beautiful scent invades my nostrils. I flatten my hand across her stomach before yanking her back until my dick is nestled in the grooves of her perfect ass.

Even with my cock as hard as a rock, and the events of the past week replayed on repeat through my head, I soon fall into a peaceful sleep. Only Isabelle has this power over me. Only she can make it seem light when the darkness of gray shrouds me.

## CHAPTER 18





## ISABELLE

*F*or the first time, I wake up minus the headache that's been plaguing me the past week. My mind is clear, my body is warm and comforted, and I feel at *peace*? After pulling my arms out of the comforter, I have a long, leisure-filled stretch. My muscles are tender, but they are indisputably not as bunched as they were last night. When I glance at the bedside table, my eyes widen when I notice it's nearly ten o'clock. I slept for over twelve hours. *Wowzers!*

Although grateful to catch up on some sleep I lost the past week, there's a reason behind my new fondness of shuteye. The horrifying image at the barn jolted me awake a little after one this morning. It was more intense than any I'd had previously because it meshed together my greatest fears, including my most paramount one—the fear of losing Isaac. My nightmare wasn't a re-creation of the event that occurred in the barn. My mind switched my fears by replacing the man dangling from the wooden beam with Isaac. The dream was so realistic, I literally couldn't breathe through the tears streaming down my face.

In a state of panic, I called Isaac. His husky voice suppressed my anxiety, but since fear was curled around my neck asphyxiating my words, I couldn't explain the panic

scorching through my veins. Before I regained the ability to talk, Hugo kicked down my door and gathered me in his arms. Not long after that, Regan handed me two small oval pills she said would help me sleep. Through shaking hands and Regan's encouraging words, I washed them down with three mouthfuls of expensive, fruit-tasting wine. I don't recall much after that.

With my suspicion high, but my worry on the down-low, I throw off the covers before scampering out of bed to gather my satin dressing gown from a desk across the room. When a delicious fragrance engulfs my senses, I snap my eyes shut and suck in a giant whiff. The manly scent of Isaac has my heart leaping. His smell is faint since it's mingled within the freshness of the crisp near-winter morning, but still enough to awaken my libido.

Forgoing my gown, I rush out of the splintered door hanging precariously by its hinges. From following the trail of Isaac's mouthwatering scent throughout the apartment, my sock-covered feet skid to a halt at the entrance of the kitchen. My shoulders sag when my search for Isaac comes up empty-handed. I was so sure it was his scent I was following, I'm left a little stumped as to why I haven't found him.

When the aroma of coffee overtakes Isaac's inviting scent, I pad deeper into the kitchen. Regan is sitting at the island reading a paper and drinking a large mug of steaming hot brew. She must have woken not long before me as she's still wearing a vibrant red robe that barely contains her cleavage. I cringe when I glance down at my three-quarter cotton galaxy printed pants and dark gray cami that's incapable of holding in my heavy breasts with its unsexy built-in bra.

Shrugging off the fact that I look like a slob, I help myself to a mug of freshly brewed coffee sitting on the marble

countertop in the far corner of the kitchen. Regan's eyes lift from the paper when she hears my feet shuffling across the tiled floor.

“Morning.” Her groggy voice confirms my assumption that she's only just awoken.

“Morning.” I hobble to the fridge, praying a shopping fairy delivered some milk overnight. I love coffee—nowhere near as much as Isaac—but it does come a close second, but not when it's unsweetened and black. “Was Isaac here last night?”

My inner vixen lifts herself off the floor when my eyes zoom in on a carton of milk in the fridge door. After a quick sniff to ensure its freshness, I pour a generous dash into my mug before dawdling to the island.

After bracing my hip on the island, I nurse the warm mug in my hand before seeking Regan's gaze. She failed to answer my question, which means she is most likely hiding something. She's only evasive when she's deceitful.

After a short deliberation, she briskly shakes her head. “Nope, Isaac wasn't here.”

My brows furrow. I could have sworn the scent infusing the air was Isaac's tempting smell. Warily smiling, Regan rises from the barstool, bumps me with her hip before dumping her empty mug into the sink and sauntering out of the room. If that isn't a clear sign she's not up for her first interrogation of the day, nothing is.

She stops by Hugo, who is lounging on the reclining chair in the living room before entering the hallway. Guilt smacks me in the chest when Hugo's tired eyes glance my way. My terrified screams were so loud, I woke him up even with him sleeping on the opposite end of Regan's imposing penthouse.

“Coffee?” I jingle my half-empty mug in the air. I can’t return the sleep he missed last night, but I can help to ease his tiredness by supplying him with an unlimited amount of caffeine.

Smiling, he nods before joining me in the kitchen. I make his coffee with the three large teaspoons of sugar and milk he requests before handing it to him. He gobbles down two big mouthfuls as if it isn’t scalding hot.

“How did you sleep?”

I blow on my second cup for the day to cool it down before shrugging. “After the whole... *incident*, I slept well.” After peering at him over the rim of my mug, I give him my best ‘sorry’ face. “I’m sorry if I startled you.”

Hugo smiles against the rim of his mug. “Your screams scared the fucking shit out of me, but don’t apologize for something you can’t help.” He lowers the mug from his mouth. It’s almost half empty. “But from now on, can you sleep with your door unlocked?” In true Hugo form, his eyes dazzle with cheekiness during the last half of his request.

Feeling playful, I poke out my tongue. “I was just ensuring you worked off all that junk you ate yesterday.”

His chuckle has me wondering how stable the footings are in Regan’s building. One more rattle like that might have us toppling to the ground. When his laughter dies down, I ask, “Did you talk to Isaac last night?”

“Yeah. He was kind of shaken up.”

Pain claws at my chest. I was so worked up, I didn’t comprehend how my panic would transcend to Isaac. I didn’t mean to scare him. I just wanted his voice to jolt me back into reality. Hearing his voice affirmed my dream wasn’t real. It

was wrong of me to do, but I don't know how else I could have dragged myself out of my nightmare.

When Hugo spots my forlorn look, he tries to soothe my guilt. "Isaac isn't upset you called him. He just hates that you went through it alone. No one should have witnessed what you saw. It was..." Instead of finishing his thought, a shudder surges through his body.

The coffee I've only just consumed threatens to resurface when the image from my nightmare last night rushes to the forefront of my mind. Having a wondrous imagination can be great except during times like this.

When I brush off a rogue tear spilling down my cheek before I can make an excuse for my senseless babying, Hugo wraps me up in a warm embrace. Because he's so big, I'm literally suffocated by him. No words spill from his lips as he comforts me. He just runs his hand soothingly down my back, his consoling done in silence. It doesn't weaken its effect. If anything, a lack of communicating makes it even more compelling.

I don't know how much time passes before Hugo grumbles, "If you tell Isaac I had my arms around you, I'll be a dead man walking."

I inch back before raising my eyes. "It'll be our little secret."

A stretch of silence crosses between us. It doesn't feel uncomfortable. It just feels right. Hugo is undoubtedly attractive. His vibrant blue eyes and ruggedly handsome face would have most girls' panties moistening long before they take in the rest of his package, but I don't get the slightest rush of the excitement I get when Isaac is nearby. Hugo's like the big brother I never had. He's fun to have around, more

annoying than endearing, and more than capable of beating senseless any guy who dares mess with me. It's kind of cool having a big brother. I just wish my real brother had someone looking out for him as Hugo looks out for me. I'm sure he's fine. In Vladimir's world, men outrank women tenfold, but I still can't help but wonder what happened to Enrique.

When Hugo drags his index finger over his brow, removing tiny beads of sweat formed there, I watch him peculiarly. He looks petrified. I find out why when he says, "Isaac scheduled an appointment for you to... umm... talk to someone today."

"Jesus, I must have really scared him."

"It was my idea," Hugo jumps in, quick to defend his boss. "There's no shame seeking assistance in a crisis, Izzy."

The assertiveness in his tone has me wondering if he sought similar assistance when his sister and nephew were killed. The event that led to their deaths was haunting enough, but with the justice system failing to protect the innocent, it made the entire situation extremely prickly.

Taking my silence as confirmation I'll attend the session Isaac organized, Hugo dumps his empty mug into the sink before hot-footing it out of the kitchen. "Your appointment is in an hour. With how bad traffic is, we should head off shortly."

I nod. Although I've never spoken to a shrink, I agree there's no dishonor in seeking help when needed. A therapist may help me ensure Isaac isn't left harboring the brunt of my anxiety. I'll do anything to lessen the heavy burden he's carrying.

With time not on my side, I forgo a morning shower, instead throwing on the Levi jeans and dusty pink cashmere sweater I wore the morning I left Isaac's apartment after we became an official couple. When I pull the sweater over my head, Isaac's mouthwatering scent activates every one of my hot buttons. It's been laundered, but not even a hefty dry-cleaning bill could remove his scent from the cuddly-soft material.

After snagging my satchel off the bedside table, I dart out of the room, narrowly avoiding a second catastrophe by leaving my cell phone on the bedside table.

## CHAPTER 19





## ISABELLE

When Hugo pulls his beloved baby in the front of a brown brick building in a business complex in Ravenshoe, I shift my curious gaze to him. Compared to the elaborate houses and apartment blocks he's taken me to the past few weeks, this one is run down and dated. Not speaking a word, he unlatches his belt, opens the driver's side door, and peels out of his car.

I mimic his movements, my lips quirking in suspicion the further we travel down the concrete path. The foyer inside the office building isn't any more glamorous than the outside. There's a wooden staircase that's overdue to be re-varnished on my right, a hallway table covered with pamphlets to my left, plaques of therapist names and their specialties tacked to brown wooden doors that line the corridor.

When Hugo spots my uneasy expression, he tries to settle it. "Don't let the outdated surroundings fool you. Avery is very good at what she does. She's just one of the rare few who refuses to work for Isaac exclusively."

My brows shoot up into the air. "Isaac needs a full-time therapist on his payroll?"

Hugo's boisterous chuckle bounces around the desolate space. "Not for him. Avery is for his staff and family."

“Then why does he want her to be exclusive?”

“Isaac believes exclusivity comes with an invisible clause of loyalty attached to it.” Hugo takes a seat in one of the many hard plastic chairs lining the corridor before leaning his elbows on his knees. “If one person was your only source of bread and butter, would you bite the hand that feeds?”

“No, but not everyone is that smart. People get greedy.”

He nods, his smile picking up. “Yes, they do, but that’s why Isaac rewards his staff for their dedication and loyalty.”

I shoot him a confused look. “You can buy loyalty?”

“No, you can’t, but Isaac has a knack for reading people. Add that to his business ethics and bucket-loads of cash, and you have a formula for a very successful empire. When his staff gains his trust, they’re awarded for it. If they lose it, they lose *everything*.”

My heart drops into my stomach as moisture burns my eyes. “I lost his trust.”

“You don’t count,” Hugo assures with a chuckle. “For one, you’re not a member of his staff, and two, you didn’t lose his trust. It was just misplaced for a few days.”

Any reply my muddled mind has yet to conjure is halted by a soft voice calling my name. When I pivot toward the greeter, I discover a slender brunette in a red A-line skirt and white blouse. Her dark hair is pulled back in a side-swept French braid, and her lips are shimmering with a fresh layer of lip gloss she must have applied before greeting me. I can’t see the color of her eyes as thick-rimmed glasses hide them.

When her brow arches, announcing she spotted my prolonged gawk, I quickly span the distance between us. “Yes. Hello, I’m Isabelle.”

“Avery Clarke.” After accepting my handshake, she gestures for me to enter her office. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Isabelle.”

Avery’s office is as outdated as the rest of the building, but she has a unique sense of style. Vibrant- colored scatter cushions give an illusion of flair. However, the potted orchids sitting under the large bay window that spans one entire wall gives it a rustic, homey feel. It’s odd for two contrasting elements to come together so well, but Avery pulls it off.

As Dr. Avery Clarke moves around her desk positioned near the far wall, I finish drinking in the rest of her features. She’s quite short, even with altitude-defying stilettos, the top of her head only reaches my eyes. Since her hazel eyes only have the slightest amount of crow’s feet, I’d guess her age to be in the early to mid-thirties. She’s attractive but is happy to downplay it with a lack of makeup and figure-hugging clothes.

After snagging a pencil and a yellow lined notepad out of the top drawer of her desk, Avery gestures for me to sit in the chair opposite her. “Unless you’d prefer to lie down?”

When her hand strays to a clinical-looking leather chaise, I plop onto the closest seat. I thought those types of shrink chairs were only movie props.

Avery gathers the tablet from her desk before sitting across from me. When her eyes lift to mine, the butterflies in my stomach vanish. Her eyes are warm and inviting, no doubt an asset for a therapist. They appear so trustworthy, I bet her patients spill their deepest secrets without a thought of the consequences. That, in itself, is a terrifying notion.

“Before we start, I want to ensure you’re aware that nothing you say within this office will be disclosed to *anyone*.” The way she emphasizes anyone reveals who she’s

referring to—Isaac. “The sole reason I refused to work exclusively with Isaac’s team is because I didn’t want them believing I’d report anything they shared with me back to him. Any reports I take are solely for my patients’ benefit.” Her glistening, bright eyes stare firmly into mine. “The same courtesy applies to you, Isabelle. Anything you tell me, no matter how personal, will never be shared with anyone. Do you understand?”

I nod, trusting the honesty in her eyes.

“Great,” she says with a grin. “So, let’s get started. What brought you into my office today?”

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My appointment with Dr. Avery went very well. Although she explained nightmares in adults generally occur in two to eight percent of the population, it’s not a rare occurrence for someone who experienced what I did on the weekend. She also advised that sleep deprivation increases the risk of nightmares occurring, so I need to ensure I get an adequate amount of sleep per night.

She gave me sleeping medication to test for the next week. If it lowers the incidence of nightmares, she’ll write a full prescription at my next appointment. I also have a set of imagery rehearsal techniques I’m to perform each night before going to sleep. They will help my brain rehearse how the nightmares will transpire if I have one. Although the efficacy of the treatment hasn’t been demonstrated clearly, Dr. Avery said there’s no harm in testing the theory in cases like mine.

I have three main tasks to focus on before our next appointment—practicing good sleeping hygiene by ensuring

I'm not sleep deprived, maintaining regular exercise and eating something healthy before going to bed, and remembering that my bedroom is supposed to be a relaxing, tranquil place, reserved for sleep and sex, not stressful activities. I didn't have the heart to tell her Isaac and I have been banned from seeing each other, so the sex part won't be happening for a few weeks, if not months.

Ignoring my childish pout, I shove my keys into the lock of my apartment door before swinging it open. "Do you need to pick anything up while we are here?" I ask Hugo while bending down to collect the mail scattered on the floor.

He strolls into my living room like he owns the place. "Nope."

"All right, give me five minutes to pack a few items, then we'll be on our way. There's beer in the fridge if you're thirsty."

After flashing me a grateful wink, he strolls toward my compact kitchen as I dart into my room. My focus is to rummage through my limited clothing choices in the walk-in closet with the hope I'll find something suitable to wear to the gala tomorrow night. I don't like my choices, but with time limited, I'll have to work with what I have.

By the time Hugo joins me ten minutes later, I've narrowed my choices down to three different selections with starkly contradicting hemline lengths.

"Do you have to wear a ball gown to a gala, or can you wear any old dress?"

A mortified expression slips over Hugo's face before he shrugs. "You're asking the wrong guy about fashion choices." His deep drawl overemphasizes the words 'wrong guy.'

Certain a floral printed dress isn't the look I'm going for, I dump it next to Hugo's backside, which is planted on my bed, before giving the remaining two dresses a final once over. One has a black tulle skirt that will show a scandalous amount of legs, whereas the other silk skirt will drag along the ground no matter how high my heels are. It seems the less risqué of the two until you spin it around. The back gapes so dangerously low, it sits half an inch below the two dimples in my lower back.

When three minutes of deliberation doesn't get me any closer to picking, I float my eyes back to Hugo before giving him my best pleading face. "I can't pick. I need help."

"I don't remember waking up with a vagina," he mumbles under his breath before darting his eyes between the dresses I'm holding out in front of him. "Both will give Isaac a heart attack when he discovers you're wearing it while *not* in his presence."

I grin, loving the mirth in his tone.

"But if I had to pick, I'd go with that one." He points to the mini dress that will show a heap of leg.

"Are you sure? I was more leaning toward this one." I wiggle the mermaid tail dress with a teardrop back. When Hugo's lips thin into a stern line, I roll my eyes. "All right. Scandalous leg dress it is."

I dump the rejected dresses into my closet before shadowing Hugo out of my apartment. Although my time here was short, it still feels like home to me. I can't wait for all the drama to end, so I can return to my normal dull existence. Although, I doubt my life will ever be classified as boring with Isaac in it. He's anything but ordinary.

I groan when our exit of the elevator has us stumbling upon a late afternoon storm. The downpour lowers the already cool temperatures, making me wish I had packed a waterproof, fur-lined coat.

“Wait under the awning, and I’ll bring the car around.”

Not waiting for me to answer, Hugo hands me my dress bag and satchel before tugging off his business jacket so he can use it as an umbrella. After giving me a wicked smirk, he weaves in and out of the heavy foot traffic blocking him from his car, which is parked one block down. When the rain starts coming in sideways, I step back to ensure my dress for the gala doesn’t get wet.

In my eagerness to avoid the torrential downpour, I accidentally bump into someone. I’m about to offer an apology, but their snarky voice stops me. “When it rains, it pours.”

My stomach churns when the voice registers as familiar. Stupidly, I turn to face Theresa, who’s standing just out of the revolving doors of my apartment building. She has a cocky smile plastered on her face, and her arms folded under her breasts. Unlike every other time I’ve seen her, today she’s casually dressed in black slacks and a pink striped poplin shirt that’s paired with a black suede jacket. Since her gun and badge aren’t holstered on her hip, I’m going to assume she’s off duty.

I muster out a weak smirk before returning my gaze to the roadside. The tenseness of my stomach amplifies when Theresa moves to stand next to me. Her overly rich floral perfume adds to the gymnastics routine the butterflies in my gut are doing.

“Are you going somewhere?” Her thinly slit eyes drop to the dress bag I’m clutching for dear life. “I hope you informed your parole officer that you’re leaving town.”

I keep my focus on the road, praying Hugo’s car will miraculously appear. The judge didn’t put any restrictions on my bail or request for me to hand in my passport, but out of courtesy, I did inform my bail officer that I was leaving town for the weekend yesterday afternoon. He advised he wasn’t required to track my movements, but he appreciated me reaching out.

My teeth gnash together when Theresa steps into my peripheral vision, but other than that, my outward appearance doesn’t give any indication to my annoyance of her harsh glare.

“Don’t feel bad.” She keeps her tone low and aloof to ensure the other people using the awning for shelter don’t hear her. “You should be proud of your achievement.” My skin crawls when she glides her hand down my arm as she tries to falsely convey her concern. “Excluding Ophelia, the longest relationship Isaac has had was six weeks. You *astonishingly* lasted *nearly* that same length of time.”

I roll my eyes before pacing to the curb. I should’ve known she was still tunneling the Isaac-is-a-terrible-man trench she’s been digging for the past two weeks. Relief blasts through me when I spot Hugo’s cherry red Chevelle rolling down the road, and the bucketing rain has simmered to a drizzle, so I won’t get drenched while fleeing from Theresa’s obnoxious rants.

Theresa’s snarky question is barely heard over the earthy rumble of Hugo’s engine, but it still harnesses my wish to



leave. “Did he at least have the decency to break it off with you before he started sleeping with other women?”

A rock settles in my stomach. She asked her question as if she’s a scorned woman—most likely a scorned woman of Isaac’s.

My theory is proven when she says, “Because he didn’t with me. After six weeks, I was thrown out like a piece of trash.”

My lungs clench, winded by the brutal blow her comment inflicted on my heart. I’d been wondering if her relationship with Isaac was more profound than initially perceived. It wasn’t just what Ryan said in the holding cell that had my curiosity piqued. It was the fact her eyes clouded with bitterness every time she asked me about my sexual involvement with Isaac. Her jealousy is as apparent as the stars in the midnight black night.

“I’m sorry for the way you were treated, no one deserves to be disrespected like that, but people change.” My voice relays both my sympathy for what she went through and the truthfulness behind my statement that a leopard can change its spots. It just has to find the right person to change for.

Isaac has never hidden the fact that before me, he had no interest in a relationship. He also made sure anyone associating with him was aware of his intentions. Heck, he even told me the day we met that he didn’t have time for a relationship, that there’d be no calls in the morning, and no dates next week. It was a one-time-only deal, so I can’t fault him when other women don’t understand the message he’s relaying.

Any sympathy I’m feeling for Theresa blows away as quickly as the storm clouds above our heads when her evil,

conniving laugh breaks the silence teeming between us. “You’re a naïve imbecile if you believe he changed for *you*.” She spits out her last word like venom. “When you stop living with your head in the clouds, and you want to learn about the *real* Isaac Holt, call me.” She shoves a business card into my hand before pivoting on her heels and sauntering down the sidewalk that’s once again populated with foot traffic.

Her sneer is so vicious when people see her coming, they step aside, giving her a clear path to her dark blue sedan parked on the corner. Even the brawniest-looking men scamper away like cowards. Once she slips into her car, I slide through the door Hugo is holding open for me.

“What did she want?” Hugo jerks his head to Theresa, ensuring I can’t mistake who he’s referencing. “Regan said the IA’s case has been dropped.”

“It has been.” When he pulls away from the curb, my gaze strays to Theresa sitting in the driver’s seat of her car. She’s jotting something down into a notepad like our conversation wasn’t memorable enough for her to recall without notes. “Our conversation had nothing to do with their squashed investigation.”

“So, she just wanted to... chat?” Hugo’s words could only be grittier if he rolled them in dirt before articulating them.

“Yep.” The ‘p’ pops from my mouth. “A good one-on-one chat—woman to woman.”

Hugo pulls a face that mimics the slug sitting in the bottom of my stomach to perfection but remains quiet. It’s for the best because by the time we arrive at Regan’s apartment, my mood is pitiful. I’m not surprised by Theresa’s testimony, but it stings knowing Isaac had *any* association with her. I’m not stupid. I know he bedded plenty of women before me, but pain

still gnaws at my chest when I think about him with anyone but me. When it comes to stuff like that, I'd prefer to live with my head in the clouds. Reining in jealousy will never be a strong point of mine.

After dumping my satchel and dress onto the bed, I dig out a pair of running shorts and a loose shirt before returning to the living room. Hugo eyes me peculiarly when he spots the running shoes I'm in the process of tugging on.

"I need to run off this funk." I pop down to tie the laces on my bright white shoes before doing a quick set of warm-ups to prepare my muscles for the rigorous activity they're about to undertake. "Avery said exercise would minimize the risk of a nightmare, so why not kill two birds with one stone."

Hugo leaps up from the sofa he's sprawled on. "All right. Give me a minute to get changed, then I'll come with you."

Not waiting for my response, he sprints toward his room.

Not even thirty seconds later, "Holy shit," is murmured in a breathless moan.

Regan is standing next to me. Her jaw is on the floor, and a vein is working overtime in her neck. Once I finish stretching my triceps, I follow her gaze. My jaw joins hers on the floor when I realize what she's gawking at. For someone with not enough hours in the day to do all the tasks he must get done, Hugo clearly schedules in a workout session or three per day. His body is so ripped not even the vast collection of tattoos covering his torso, arms, and thighs can't hide the dips, bulges, and planes carved in his large frame. His body is mindboggling.

When Hugo senses our gawking, he freezes halfway between his bedroom and the living area. He finishes tying the

drawstrings in his black Nike running shorts—*yep! That's the only article of clothing he's wearing*—his brows draw together as his eyes bounce between Regan and me.

It takes him all of two seconds to realize we're a bunch of dirty, old pervs. "You've got that itch now, don't you?" His question isn't for me. It's for Regan who's still drooling like a baby cutting its first tooth.

Taking Regan's silence as an answer, Hugo winks before shifting his ignited gaze to me. "Ready?"

I swallow, praying it will return my jaw to its rightful spot before nodding. "Uh-huh."

## CHAPTER 20



## ISAAC

“Confidentiality is an integral part of a patient-doctor relationship, let alone the fact I’m bound by a stringent code of ethics,” Avery’s voice grows sterner as our conversation continues. “If you want to know about my session today, you’ll need to ask Isabelle because as far as you’re aware, I don’t even have a patient by that name.”

“I’m not asking you to divulge her deep, dark secrets. I’m merely requesting you to help me help her through this.”

Avery huffs as the creak of her leather chair sounds through the phone. Even though it’s a little after eleven in the evening back home, I’m not surprised she’s still in her office. She works as tirelessly as I do.

“If you want me to help you, Isaac, you’ll need to be a patient of mine.”

My groan tells her precisely what I think about her insinuation I need help. She’s tried many times the past five years to get me to lie on her shrink chair so she can unravel the mysteries in my head. Her endeavors have not yet reached fruition—they’ll never reach fruition.

“Hypothetically speaking—” Avery’s huff cuts me off, but nothing slows me down. “If my *friend* was suffering terrible

nightmares, what would another *friend* do to assist him or her through their crisis?”

“Hypothetically, that *friend* did the right thing by making sure his *friend* sought *professional* help.” She ignores my angry growl as effectively as I did her huff. “This is one of the reasons I denied your initial request to work with Isabelle, Isaac. You agreeing not to pry me for information is the only reason I had a consultation with her today.” I attempt a reply, but she continues talking, stealing my chance. “I know you’re trying to help her, but I promised her that our sessions would remain confidential. I intend to keep my promise, so if you want to know what happened today, you’re asking the wrong person.”

Her phone hitting the receiver advises she disconnected our call. After throwing my cell onto the coffee table, I move to the large floor-to-ceiling window of my suite. Usually, my nights in Vegas are spent on the high-roller floor or at my nightclub, Jacks, located on the strip. But tonight, I’m holed up in my room, praying Isabelle doesn’t call me with another nightmare.

Don’t misconstrue my comment. I want Isabelle to call me if she’s having a nightmare, but I’d prefer for her dreams not to be plagued by ghastly, horrid images while I’m a six-hour flight away. When I flew to Vegas with Hunter this morning, we’d anticipated a whirlwind visit, in and out in the one day. As always, not even the most well-thought-out plans follow their anticipated path. We hit a glitch, but once it’s been fixed, I’ll be on the first flight back to Ravenshoe.

An odd ding sounds from the middle of the suite a mere second before my burner cell vibrates on the glass coffee table. I eye it peculiarly while striding across the room. I’ve never

heard it make such a noise. When I flip open the screen, a ghost of a smile cracks onto my lips. The peculiar noise was announcing my phone has a text message. It's from Isabelle.

**Isabelle:** *I miss you.*

My faint smirk enlarges to a full smile when my phone buzzes again.

**Isabelle:** *I love you.*

After hitting the speed dial for Isabelle, I press my phone to my ear. She answers on the very first ring.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I reply as my hearing hones in on a faint dragging noise trickling down the line. “Are you biting your lip?”

Her giggles stiffen my cock. “How did you know that?”

“I know everything. Haven't you learned that yet?”

It's so quiet, I hear her cheekbones lift. I shift my eyes to the spectacular view of the Vegas skyline, acutely aware it has nothing on the awe-inspiring beauty Isabelle disperses when she smiles.

“Why were you biting your lip? You only do that when you're nervous?” *Or horny.*

She better be both nervous and alone.

When my question is met with silence, I prompt her to answer me. “Isabelle?”

“I wasn't sure if I was allowed to use this phone to send you messages, or if it was just for emergencies.” She sounds panicked as if she is seconds from getting into trouble. I understand why when she adds, “I deleted the messages as soon as I sent them, so no one can trace them.”



My lips vibrate when I release the breath I'm holding in. "That's the reason I gave you the phone. If you need me, call me. Anytime, day or night. Okay?"

"Okay."

Her soft purr has my cock straining against the zipper in my trousers, but I do my best to ignore it. "How did your appointment go with Avery today?"

While unbuttoning my suit jacket, I pace back to the bar in the middle of my suite. Isabelle is over twenty-two hundred miles away, so there's no use getting myself worked up over the sexiness of her voice when I can't do anything about it.

"Good. I really like her."

I grin, pleased. "Did you tell her about your nightmares?"

"Yes. She gave me some techniques I need to do before bed each night. They'll hopefully lessen their occurrences."

"What type of techniques?"

"Umm... visually *stimulating* prompts." Her voice lowers to a husky purr. "They're supposed to prepare my mind for a peaceful sleep by stimulating my senses with positive images."

My brow arches as quick, needy breaths double the output of my lungs. "What type of images are you looking at?"

"I don't know," she whispers. "I haven't looked at them yet."

My eyes drop to my watch, which advises it's 11:35 p.m. in Ravenshoe. "Are you not preparing to go to bed?"

"Yes." Her voice is even lower. "I just don't need Dr. Avery's images to visually *stimulate* myself."

My pulse quickens as sweat slicks my skin. “Are you using something else?”

I throw my jacket over a Victorian chaise on my right, too hot to need additional layers of clothing when Isabelle replies, “Yes.”

I pour myself a generous serving of whiskey before asking, “What are you imagining?”

“You...” I freeze as a growl rips up my throat, “... naked.”

My cock turns to stone. I’ve never participated in phone sex before, but Isabelle’s husky purr is encouraging me to open my mind to new possibilities. I plan to make Isabelle mine in every sense of the term, so phone sex should be included in that curriculum, shouldn’t it?

My lips brush my phone’s speaker when I ask, “Did it make you wet?”

“Yes,” she breathes out slowly. “Very.”

“How wet, baby?”

Her voice is as raspy as her sheets ruffling down the line when she murmurs, “Dripping.”

My cock leaps in my trousers. I ditch the decanter of whiskey onto the cherry oak bar, no longer needing its heat to warm my belly. Isabelle’s soft moans are already heating me up.

After sitting on the king-size bed, I commence undoing the pearl buttons on my business shirt until it exposes my white wife-beater underneath.

“Touch yourself, Isabelle.”

“What?” she asks breathlessly, sure she heard me wrong.

She didn't.

"I want to hear you come while playing with that pretty pink pussy of yours."

A moan parts her quick, panting breaths. "Will you do it with me?"

When my zipper lowering resonates down the phone, her gasps quicken. "I'm right there with you, baby."

I release my cock from its tight restraints, stroking it in a rhythm that matches Isabelle's breaths barreling down the line.

"Oh God, are you touching your..." Her words trail off as the most erotic fucking moans I've ever heard ramp up.

"Put two fingers in your pussy before circling your clit with your opposite thumb."

Her breaths lower before she moans. "Ohhh..."

"Does it feel good, baby?"

"Uh... huh." Her reply is barely a whisper, but it doesn't weaken their wickedness in the slightest. "I'm imagining my thumb is your tongue, tasting, licking, and biting my clit."

My pumps quicken as the desire to come overwhelms me. "When I see you next, I'll do precisely that. I'm going to spend hours tasting you before I bury my cock so deep inside you, you'll feel me for a week."

My cock throbs when a low, quivering moan vibrates down the line. I'd give anything for my outdated cell to have video capabilities. Watching Isabelle's face when she comes is an enthralling experience. The way her pupils dilate and her lips part before my name tears from her throat in a grunted scream is a riveting sight. I'll never grow tired of seeing that image. Just the thought of her beautiful face in ecstasy has my

strokes turning brutal. I guide my hand up and down my shaft, using the precum beading at the crest as lubricant with every stroke I do.

“I’m close,” Isabelle warns a short time later. “I’m going to come.” Her shuddering voice exposes how imminent her climax is.

I fist my cock faster, working it as desperately as I wish Isabelle could. “Your fingers are my cock, grinding in and out of you, fucking you hard and fast like you love it.” I match her moans for both intensity and loudness. With my imagination extremely vivid, I could imagine her pussy sucking at my cock, begging for its spawn. “My hand is your sweet, tight pussy, greedily milking my cock, begging to be filled with my hot cum.”

“Oh... God,” she murmurs. “Ohh... ohhh... ohhh.”

“Let me hear you, baby. I want to hear you come.”

My balls constrict when the most seductive purr I’ve ever heard booms down the line along with my name. Isabelle’s sweet cries of ecstasy spur on my own violent release. I grunt as cum jets out of my swollen crown, coating my hand and my trousers with its brutal force.

## CHAPTER 21



## ISAAC

The next morning, I'm tying my gray tie around my neck when a knock sounds on the door of my hotel room. Once I've secured the knot, I stride toward the door. My mood has dramatically improved after my phone call with Isabelle last night. My muscles are no longer bunched, and the headache that's been plaguing me the past two weeks has dissipated.

After cleaning myself in the bathroom, I stayed on the line with Isabelle until exhaustion overtook her. Her soft snores were the last thing I heard before the battery on my cell ran out of charge. A quick phone call from Hugo this morning advised what I had already suspected—Isabelle didn't have a nightmare last night. Obviously, Avery's plan to fill Isabelle's mind with visually stimulating images to reduce the chance of her having a nightmare worked. I very much look forward to testing out her theory again tonight.

When I swing open the door, Parker, a security employee I keep on the West Coast, greets me with a nod. "Boss."

I return his greeting with a lift of my chin before gesturing for him to enter my room. Parker has been with my empire the past six years. He doesn't have a job title. He was my all-rounder until Hugo arrived in the picture. He gives the

impression of a solitary man who rarely speaks unless it's a requirement. He prefers scrutinizing those around him than holding a conversation. His inky black hair hangs well past his ears, and his maturity isn't seen on his face. He's seven years older than me, but you wouldn't know that by looking at him. He has no trouble attracting the ladies if they're enticed by a guy who looks like a trained killer.

“Did the transfer of money go through as scheduled?” When my question is met with silence, I raise my eyes from my cufflink. Parker's eyes are darting around my room. They're brimming with suspicion. “Hunter scanned the room last night. No one has been here since then, and I've never left.”

Happy we're not being eavesdropped on, Parker says, “The transfer was completed as scheduled yesterday morning.”

“Then what caused the delay in the exchange of assets?”

He shrugs in a non-answering type of way. Mercifully, his non-verbal reply is backed up with words. “They're cautious after your arrest. They're suggesting we delay the exchange by a few weeks until things settle down.”

“That was not the agreement. I paid the required amount, so I want the exchange to occur as scheduled.”

“It will happen. Just not this week.”

Fury scorches through my veins, warming my body from its furious heat, but before I can voice my annoyance, Parker adds a stipulation to our negotiations I never saw coming. “They're requesting to meet with you before the exchange occurs.”

“When?”

“Now.” Parker’s reply is almost drowned out by three quick taps hitting my hotel room door. “That will be them.”

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A heavily tinted black Escalade takes me to a massive steel warehouse on the outskirts of Henderson, Nevada. It’s a one-level complex tucked away from the main roads, inconspicuously hidden from prying eyes. I’ve always wondered how far Col’s underground fight circuit stretched across the country. Now I know his demographic reach is impressive.

When I step out of the back of the car, two burly men with automatic weapons strapped to their waists move toward Parker and me. My jaw muscle tenses when one of the gentlemen, a large Samoan man, begins frisking me. “I was searched before entering the car, yet you feel the urge to do it again upon exiting. Paranoia causes costly mistakes.”

He grunts but continues his vigorous search. “I can guarantee you that that’s all me,” I sneer when his extensive search pats over my crotch on more than a half dozen occasions. “If you don’t believe me, ask your mother for confirmation.”

The brute’s nostrils flare as he rises to his feet. The width of his shoulders is double mine, and my eyes only hit the bottom of his chin, but nothing will have me missing the furious blaze igniting in his eyes from my taunt. He has a very short fuse that’s ready to explode at any moment. If he were ever part of my empire, his short fuse would warrant an immediate termination. Keeping him on would be a costly mistake for any business capitalist.



Our intense stare-down is interrupted by a deep, accentuated voice on my right. “Casper, that’s enough. This is not how you treat family.”

Casper’s head immediately balances on his broad chest. When feet padding across a concrete floor sound through my ears, I shift my head in the direction the voice came from. The thump of my heart kicks up a gear when I glance into a pair of eyes that are a replica of Isabelle’s in every way.

“Isaac Holt, it’s a pleasure to put a name to the face I’ve heard many great things about the past five years.”

Vladimir’s Russian accent is as thick as the gel holding his hair back. For a man at least in his seventies, he’s a fit-looking gentleman. His face is void of the wrinkles most men his age have, and he stands at approximately six-foot-two or three. His build is similar to mine, although he’s a little rounder in the mid-section.

I keep the riled expression off my face when he places his hands on my cheeks to cradle my head like you would a child. “I heard your meeting with Albert was...” he stops talking to find an appropriate word to express my botched meeting with his right-hand man, “... flagrant. I assure you the FBI will not bother you while you’re in my house. Vegas is my home, and you, my friend, are always welcomed in my home. You also have my guarantee that the error shown by my men that day was taken care of.”

I was arrested the morning after attending a meeting with Vladimir’s right-hand man, Albert Sokolov. The men who flanked Albert assured me our meeting was being held in a secure premise. If my arrest is anything to go by, their intelligence was severely lagging that day.

“It was nothing I couldn’t handle.” I stare into a set of eyes that are identical to Isabelle’s while saying, “The FBI doesn’t have the authority to say who I can or cannot dine with.”

Vladimir grins. It’s a smile that shows the conniving, vindictive man he is. “I’m glad to hear that, Isaac, as I’m very much looking forward to the adventure we’re about to undertake.” He gestures for me to follow him into an office at the side of the warehouse. “So why don’t we get down to business.”

When he shuffles away, Parker tilts in close to my side. “Are you sure you want to do this, boss?”

“It’s too late to back out now.” I shadow Vladimir into the office that’s going to push my empire in a direction I never saw coming. It will now forever be seen as a syndicate in the Russian mafia crime entity known as the Povov Clan.

## CHAPTER 22



## ISABELLE

*I* drag my overstuffed suitcase out into the entryway of Regan's apartment, grunting for every inch I travel. I wasn't sure what to pack for a fundraising gala, so I was a little obsessive with the number of accessories and shoes I crammed into my bags. Noticing my struggle, Brandon grins a lopsided smirk before assisting me the last four feet.

"You do realize we're only going away for three nights, don't you, Izzy?"

Hugo's cheeky question doesn't warrant a reply, so I don't give him one. Instead, I roll my eyes and stick out my tongue. He smiles a megawatt grin before winking, loving that I responded to his taunt even without words.

"Is this everything?" Brandon's eyes float over the large suitcase and five carryon bags dumped at his feet.

I nod. "Yep."

"All right, I'll take them down to my car."

Hugo's brow arches, but since Brandon is so eager to get on the road, he fails to pick up on Hugo's silent annoyance.

"Thanks." I wait for Brandon to juggle my bags into the idling elevator before shifting on my feet to face Hugo. "We're traveling in the one car because not only will it save the

environment with fewer emissions, it'll also stop your *baby* from getting too many miles on her clock." I strive to keep my tone neutral to smother the unease in the air. "Brandon even agreed to let you drive."

Hugo does a good job of keeping the tick of his jaw out of his words when he says, "The driver also maintains control over the radio."

"As long as it isn't country, I'm fine with that."

"There's no possibility of that *ever* occurring."

Our banter brings back the Hugo I was verbal wrangling with before Brandon arrived. Who knew a man four inches shorter than him and a hundred pounds lighter could rile him up so much?

I dash back into my room to grab my cell phone and charger off the bedside table. I don't want a flat battery having me miss out on another arousing phone call. Last night was the first time I've participated in phone sex. I've sexted and sent the occasional raunchy pic to boyfriends during my younger years, but I've never orgasmed during a phone conversation before. I'm not usually so bold, but Isaac's deep, commanding voice had me paying careful attention to every syllable he spoke.

I thought I'd be too embarrassed to get myself off, but Isaac's pleasurable moans soon took care of that neurosis. Add that riveting experience to the four-mile run Hugo and I undertook yesterday afternoon, and exhaustion soon overtook me. I fell asleep with a smile on my face, my cell attached to my ear, and not a single negative thought in my head.

After housing my phone into my jeans pocket, I follow Hugo out of Regan's apartment. The air is forcefully removed

from my lungs not even a second later. Since my steps were ultra-springy, I crashed straight into the back of Hugo when he suddenly stops walking.

“A little warning next time...”

My playful scorn fades away when I discover the reason for his abrupt stop. Clara is standing across from us. She’s wearing a Yves Saint Laurent red and black floral satin shirt with black leather pants. She’s the most casual I’ve ever seen her, but she’s stunningly beautiful.

“Hi, Clara.” I grit my teeth, loathing that my greeting came out with a quiver.

“Isabelle.” She flashes a smirk that makes it seem as if she has the world at her feet before she closes her apartment door—the same apartment door that once belonged to Isaac’s fuck pad.

As bile burns the back of my throat, I walk shoulder to shoulder with Clara to the elevator bank at the end of the hallway. Thankfully, the elevators are programmed to ascend straight to the penthouse floor. Unfortunately, that means the thick stench of awkwardness plaguing the corridor will soon move into the even smaller confines.

“Have you been living here long?” Even with my insecurities wreaking havoc with my stomach, my quintessential need to know everything means I can’t help but pry.

“No. I only moved to Ravenshoe two months ago.” Clara gestures for me to enter the idling elevator car before her. I’d buy her class act if I weren’t delivered with a devious smirk. “But I’ve stayed at the apartment many times previously.”

It could be paranoia and perhaps a dash of jealousy, but I'm certain her tone came out bitchier this time around. "Isaac said you've been friends for several years, so I'm not surprised you've stayed with him. He's very accommodating to his friends." I literally have to strangle my words out of my mouth, and even then, they're delivered with a scowl.

Clara's red-painted lips lift into an illustrious grin. "*Friends?* I'm reasonably sure Isaac has never taken *friends* to *that* apartment."

Since I'm preparing my heart for its imminent collision with my stomach, Hugo replies to the insinuation in Clara's tone before me. "That's enough, Clara."

I touch his forearm before shaking my head. I'm more than capable of handling my own when it comes to bitchy, jealous women. When I take a step closer to Clara, victory heats my blood. I barely moved, yet intimidation still flashed through her eyes.

"If you're insinuating that something happened between you and Isaac, you can quit right now. I asked Isaac weeks ago if there was anything between you two. He assured me nothing like that had happened, nor will it happen."

When the elevator arrives in the lobby, I adjust my satchel before pacing out of it. I freeze just outside the doors when Clara's nasally voice screeches through my ears. "I suggest you ask Isaac again as the circumstances of our *friendship* altered since your original interrogation."

She has the most patronizing smirk stretched across her face, but before I can remove it, the elevator doors snap shut before it continues its descent to the parking garage one floor below.

“Izzy—”

The plea preparing to flow from Hugo’s mouth stops when I cut him off with a glare. “Just give me a minute.” Like a minute will be sufficient to calm the anger tearing me in two. “Just one goddamn minute.”

When he nods, I move to the side of the lobby so I can take a moment to contemplate my next move. If I call Isaac, I fall straight into the trap Clara planted for him. If I don’t, paranoia will eat me alive until my question blurts out of my mouth at the most inappropriate time, so I may as well get the inevitable over and done with.

After yanking my cell out of my pocket, I hit the speed dial for Isaac’s cell, then press it to my ear. After several painstakingly long rings, he finally answers. “Isaac Holt.”

I’m taken back by his abrupt greeting. My number is stored on his phone, so he’d know who’s calling him, wouldn’t he?

“Hey, it’s Isabelle—”

“I’m aware of that. Now is *not* a good time.” His tone is similar to the one he uses when talking to members of his staff.

“I promise it won’t take long. All I need is a minute of your time.”

He sighs heavily down the line. “Is it an emergency?”

“No, but—”

“Then it can wait until I call you this afternoon.”

My frustrated squeal bounces off the fancy gray walls of the lobby when he disconnects our call without giving me the chance to reply. With my hackles up and my annoyance at its



pinnacle, I angrily fumble my fingers over my phone. Because it's so ancient, it takes me nearly five minutes to send a two-line text, but the reprieve it comes with is undeniable. It's time for me to start sticking up for myself.

**Me:** *Don't bother calling me back. You obviously have more pressing matters to take care of.*

I stare at my phone, willing it to ring or announce it has received a text. It's an extremely long two minutes.

As disappointment stabs my chest, I snap it shut, shove it into my pocket, then stomp to Brandon's blue BMW idling at the curb. Hugo doesn't speak a word as he retraces my steps. He's not stupid, and this also isn't his battle. Only one person is deserving of my wrath. That person is the incredibly alluring and undoubtedly frustrating Mr. Isaac Holt.

## CHAPTER 23



## ISABELLE

*M*y eyes bulge when Hugo weaves Brandon's car down a large pebbled driveway lined with manly hedges that are a foot tall. A dense thicket of trees blocks the view of anything over the horizon, but the heavily-wooded property adds quaintness to the country residence in the distance. The white two-story house is surrounded by rolling turf and deciduous trees that display the color of fall. All the windows at the front face the rolling hills, and they're flanked by rustic blue shutters that are in the process of being given a fresh coat of paint. The ladder and paint tins stacked to the left of the house assures this, much less than men painting the lower level shutters. Brandon's family home is a classic farmhouse that will be breathtaking once it's renovated.

As the car rounds the corner, a cedar wood barn peeks out from behind the farmhouse. Its roofline matches the height of the house, but it's longer in length. The double black wooden doors are hanging open, exposing bales upon bales of hay.

"Do you have horses?"

The veins in Hugo's arms bulge when Brandon places his hand on my shoulder. He's not cozying up. He's merely assuring me the panic in my tone isn't necessary. It is, but who am I to argue? I'm as scared of horses as I am flying.

“Do you want me to teach you how to ride—?”

“No.” My tone is blunt and straight to the point and somewhat rude. “I prefer keeping my feet on solid ground, thank you very much.”

When my nerves make my voice come out as bitchy, Hugo’s rigid grip on the steering wheel weakens. He smiles, believing I’m shutting down Brandon’s offer simply because it came from him. I’m not because unlike him, I don’t dislike people without a plausible reason.

Once the fear clutching my throat slackens, I force out. “Horses scare me. They’re so big and... *hairy*.”

Brandon’s grin competes with the mid-morning sun. “I swear I like you more and more every day, Izzy... *as a friend*.” He adds on his last three words in a hurry when Hugo’s growl demands an explanation for his comment. “I meant as a friend.”

He pulls on the collar of his shirt, suddenly overheated. He’s not the only one feeling the heat. Sweat rolls down my back as awkward stuffiness fills the car with humidity.

After slitting my eyes, I lock them with Hugo. “Stop it,” I mouth.

My request appears to fall on deaf ears, but I know he heard me as his familiar giant grin adds to the disgusting mugginess teeming between us.

My attention reverts from Hugo to Brandon when he sucks in a sharp breath that puffs his chest out. He’s peering at a young lady dressed in tan riding pants, knee-high black boots, and a black jacket with tan patches on the elbows. Her tight outfit accentuates her fit, petite frame, and her wavy blonde hair frames her flawless heart-shaped face. She’s guiding a

bowed-back horse along the dividing fence of the neighboring property. I don't know if she's going for a ride or returning from one.

Once the blonde, who Brandon's gaped mouth assures me is Melody, walks out of our vision, I devote my focus back to Brandon. His pupils are the size of saucers, and his cheeks are hued of red.

I squeeze his hand before giving him a reassuring smile. "You've got this."

Before he can respond, Hugo pulls the car in front of a large six-door wooden garage. When he flings open the driver's side door, the undeniable smell of country invades my senses. It's a refreshing change from the city fumes I've become accustomed to sucking in the past seven months. Birds are heard chirping in the distance, and the occasional moo and neigh of livestock sound from the barn.

I smile when my curl out of the car has me stumbling onto Hugo's scrunched-up expression. He's plugged his nose, and his forehead is indented with three deep creases. "All I can smell is cow dung," he remarks, gagging.

I giggle. Cow dung is prominent, but since it's mixed with trees, fresh-cut grass, and wildflowers, it's not as potent as he's making it out to be.

When I pace to the trunk to assist Hugo and Brandon in removing our luggage for the weekend, Hugo's blue eyes pop up to Brandon's. "Which bag is yours?"

Nerves jump off my vocal cords when I reply on Brandon's behalf. "We need all the bags."

Hugo's eyes bounce between Brandon and me for several heart-clenching seconds before they settle back on Brandon.

“Do you have a death wish?”

When Brandon shakes his head, Hugo purses his lips while shifting his eyes to me. “He doesn’t have a death wish, so I guess we’re staying at a hotel.”

“Brandon’s mom said it’s fine for us to stay here.”

“Oh, okay, since Brandon’s mom said it’s fine, I guess it’s fine.” Don’t let his words fool you. He’s being a sarcastic ass. “Where’s the phone Isaac gave you in case of an emergency.”

“This isn’t an emergency.” His cocked brow stuffs the rest of my reply into the back of my throat.

Before I can find the backbone I lost somewhere between here and Ravenshoe, a medium-build, middle-aged woman barrels out of the house. With a wonky smile stretched across her beautiful face and her arms thrust out wide, she yells, “BJ!” at the top of her lungs.

Her half blonde/half gray hair bounces on her sweater-covered shoulders when she gallops down the paint-peeled steps. She leaps into Brandon’s arms, her smile doubling when he spins her around the concrete path. When my eyes flick to Hugo, I note even he’s grinning at their enthusiastic greeting. That’s not surprising. It’s so heartwarming, I yank up the sleeves of my shirt to settle down my raring heat.

After pleading to be put down, Brandon places the lady back onto her feet. Once she has her askew apron sitting back, front, and center, she lifts her sparkling blue eyes to Hugo and me. The crazy beat of my heart ramps up a notch when she rushes my way to greet me with as much enthusiasm as she greeted Brandon with.

“Isabelle! It’s such a pleasure to finally meet you.” The scent of rhubarb pie and dandelions filters through my nose

when she wraps me up in a warm hug. “You’re even more beautiful than Brandon described.”

Heat creeps across my cheeks. I don’t know who this lady is, but she has an aura that makes me instantly fall in love with her. When she inches back from our embrace, she holds me at arm’s length so her eyes can assess my face with precise detail.

“Oh my goodness, my grandbabies are going to be beautiful!”

A scratch impinges my throat when it suddenly dries, and I don’t need to turn my gaze to know Hugo heard her comment. His glare is burrowing a hole in the side of my head.

“Mom, she hasn’t even walked through the front door yet, so don’t scare her away with baby talk.” Brandon rubs his hands together as his edgy gaze shifts between Hugo and me. He has the right to be nervous. Not only is Hugo glaring at him with the eyes of a killer, I’m just as perplexed. His reply insinuates that we’re a couple, which we are not.

Not a word spills from Brandon’s mouth, but he doesn’t need to talk for me to hear his plea. His begging eyes say more than his words ever could. Although peeved he’s placed me in this position, I nod, agreeing with his wordless plea for me to follow his ruse. I’m not happy, but my scorn can wait until we aren’t in the presence of his mother.

Cashmere brushes against my wrist when Brandon’s mom curls her hand around mine. It’s like she felt the tension in the air, so she anchored herself to me so I can’t do a runner. When her nurturing eyes shift to my right, her pulse surges through our conjoined hands. A smile curls my lips when the almost translucent skin on her cheeks blooms with a pink hue.

Apparently, Brandon gets his blushing from his mother's side of the family.

"Ma'am," Hugo greets her with a curt nod of his head.

The nervous sparkle in his eyes is cute. He's accustomed to being hit on—he's gorgeous, so I'm sure it's a regular occurrence—but the way his wide eyes timidly float around our surroundings exposes that he's not used to being visually undressed by a lady twice his age.

"What squadron were you in?" Brandon's mom gestures her head to the tattoo on Hugo's arm I investigated a few months ago.

Hugo tugs down the sleeves of his long-sleeve shirt to conceal his vast collection of tattoos before answering, "American Hornets, ma'am."

So, I was right, he was in the Air Force, but why isn't there any details of his deployment in their database? Sensing my silent questions, Hugo flashes me a grin. It isn't his usual smile, but it's a clear indication that he'll never answer the questions beaming from my eyes.

After suggesting we leave the boys to unpack the car, Mrs. James ushers me inside. Freshly baked cookies and pie infiltrate my nostrils when we enter the foyer of her country residence. When my stomach grumbles, she laughs.

"Lunch is still an hour away." Her cornflower-blue eyes stare up at me lovingly. "But I'll let you sneak in a few cookies before we sit down to eat. Just don't tell Brandon. I don't let him eat sweets before dinner since he'd never eat his greens."

I keep my expression as neutral as possible, but something on my face must give me away as she peers at me with



suspicion not even a second later.

“It was only once, and I promise he ate all his dinner.” He complained about me burning the marinara sauce, but he still polished his plate clean.

Giggling, she leads me into the room responsible for the scrumptious smell in the air. By the time Brandon and Hugo join us, I’ve demolished four raspberry and white chocolate chip cookies. Things are always tense between them, but it’s more noticeable now.

When Brandon’s hand gets slapped by his mom for attempting to steal a cookie from the cooling rack, Hugo uses their distraction to his advantage. He nudges his head to the hall requesting a private word.

After running my sweaty hands down my thighs, I hop off the barstool before following Hugo into the hall. I barely make it halfway into the photo-littered space when Hugo’s fighting stance reveals he won’t just use words to get his point across.

“We’re *not* staying here.”

I huff as my mood slips back into the eerie blackness my confrontation with Clara started. I’ve been getting pushed around so much lately, my usually easy-going demeanor is gravely faltering.

“It’s my job to protect you, Izzy, so until we know who’s framing you, and if they are the same person who was tailing you last week, *everyone* will be treated as a potential threat.”

Guilt makes itself known with my gut. I’m not trying to make things difficult for him, I’m just sick of not having a say in matters that affect me. This is my life, so shouldn’t I get a say on how it’s run?

“Until Brandon is cleared as a suspect, Boy Wonder over there will remain number one on my hit list.”

When he motions his head to the kitchen during the ‘Boy Wonder’ part of his arrogant admission, the defense wall I was just lowering resurrects. Brandon has always been there for me, but more than anything, he’s my friend.

“Then, I guess it’s lucky I don’t need your permission on where I can or cannot stay.” My tone is edgy with a nasty side of bitchiness.

“You may not need *my* permission, Izzy, but do you really think Isaac will let you have a sleepover at a *male* friend’s house?” He folds his arms in front of his chest as his smile picks up. “He wouldn’t even let you stay at Hunter’s house because he has the wrong appendage between his legs.”

“Isaac doesn’t seek my approval for what *friends* he allows to sleepover at his apartment, so why should I?” The anger I felt earlier during my argument with Clara resurfaces stronger than ever. “I’m an adult, Hugo, so how about you start treating me like one!”

“If you get Isaac’s permission to stay here, we’ll stay here. If you don’t, I’ll carry your ass to the car kicking and screaming.”

My mouth forms into an ‘O.’ “You wouldn’t dare.”

He steps closer to me, his expression deadly serious. “Test me, Izzy.”

“You hate Brandon that much?”

His shrug isn’t fooling anyone. “I don’t *hate* hate him, but I don’t trust him. Trust has to be earned, and he hasn’t earned it yet.”

“Says the guy who lied to my face by pretending he got fired!” My roar echoes down the hallway. I’m so angry, I swear steam is close to billowing out of my ears.

“I did that for your safety.” His tone is as low as his brows are sitting. “And if we’re going to discuss the semantics of being deceitful—”

I cut him off with a glare. The guilt I feel for lying to Isaac for months still stings my heart, so I don’t need Hugo throwing it in my face.

Hugo breaks our intense standoff first. “You know I’m not the one who makes the rules when it comes to you, Izzy. If you want to fight the system, argue with its creator.”

“Fine. I will.”

Pretending my heart isn’t racing a million miles an hour, I yank the phone out of my pocket before dialing Isaac’s number. I can barely breathe when the seductive voice of Isaac sounds down the line not even two rings later.

“Isabelle.” My name rolls off his tongue in a seductive purr, but the brashness in his tone reveals his earlier anger is still paramount. “I was just about to call you.”

“Hello.” I roll my eyes at my own dimness. It’s understandable. Even irately angry, my body melts from hearing his knee-weakening voice, but I’m better than this. “*Hugo* wanted me to let you know *we’re* staying at Brandon’s parents’ house this weekend.”

Hugo’s brows disappear into his hairline, stunned I just threw him into the deep end without a life jacket.

“No, Isabelle.” Isaac’s deep rumble booms out of the speakers so loudly, even Hugo hears his reply. “*Brandon* can stay at *his* parents’ house. You and Hugo will stay at a hotel.”

I love the arrogance in his tone, but I act unaffected by it. “I wasn’t seeking your permission. I was courteously informing you of my decision.”

My panties moisten when his sexy-as-sin growl cracks down the line. “You’re not sleeping under another man’s roof —”

“It’s not his house!”

When Hugo’s chuckle screeches through my eardrums, I hit him with the best angry scowl I can muster. It’s convincing enough to stuff his laughter into the back of his throat, but not strong enough to wipe the cheeky grin off his face.

After turning my back on Hugo, I snarl down the line, “I’m staying at Brandon’s parents’ house. If you don’t like it, then come take me to the hotel yourself.”

I snap my phone shut, equally excited and petrified. I just forced Isaac to interact with me. Half of me is beyond comprehension at the prospect of seeing him again, whereas the other half is scared of what the repercussions will be for forcing his hand. If there’s one thing I know about Isaac, it is his dislike of being strong-armed.

When, in the corner of my eye, I catch sight of Hugo sneaking up on me, I spin around to issue him a stern finger point. “If you even attempt to drag me to the car, I won’t hesitate to show you that firing a weapon isn’t the only test I aced at the academy.”

He isn’t the slightest bit intimidated by my threat. If anything, he appreciates the challenge. I’d take him up on his offer if I weren’t thrust into cardiac arrest by my phone unexpectedly ringing. It startles me so much, I throw it in the

air with a squeal, only just catching it before it collides with the wooden floorboards under my feet.

I get a second fright when the number calling me registers as familiar. It's Isaac.

After exhaling a big breath to settle the nerves in my voice, I hit the connect button, then raising my phone to my ear, I attempt to speak, but Isaac beats me. "Put Hugo on the phone."

"Okay." Hugo's brows furrow when I thrust my phone into his chest. "He wants to speak to you."

He looks more panicked now than when I issued my threat. While working his jaw side to side, he squashes my phone to his ear. "Boss."

When his eyes dart up from his polished black shoes, my pulse quickens. He has a bizarre glimmer in his eyes I've never seen before. I honestly don't know if I'm in trouble or on the brink of greatness. Fingers crossed it's a bit of both.

Their conversation is very brief. Hugo only says two words, "I understand," before he disconnects their call and hands my phone back to me.

"What did he say?"

He doesn't grace me with a reply. He just grins, winks, then strolls into the kitchen to steal one of Mrs. James's famous cookies, leaving me on a knife's edge.

## CHAPTER 24



## ISABELLE

After balling my hands into loose fists, I pivot around to face the full-length mirror in the corner of the room. My jaw gapes when I take in the usual sight in front of me. When Brandon said his mom likes to play Barbie dolls, he wasn't joking. Mrs. James spent the last three hours treating me exactly as if I were one. She polished me so well, I swear my skin is sparkling like the vampires in *Twilight* do when they stand in the sun.

My skin isn't the only thing gleaming. Every hair on my head has been faultlessly wrangled into place, and a few curls have been added to my usually kink-free lock. Dramatic shadowing enhances the richness of my dark eyes, but my lips are neutral with only the slightest shimmer of lip gloss coating them.

Even my \$39.97 bargain dress I purchased from eBay looks even more regal than it is. I originally bought my dress to wear at my graduation party from the academy, but even with me sending my bust, waist, and hip measurements to the Chinese manufacturer six weeks before my graduation as requested, it didn't arrive in time.

The black skirt is made up of ruched silk, and the silver bodice is adorned with diamante rhinestones. The hem jumps

from somewhat risqué to wickedly naughty when I slip my feet into a pair of black and silver strappy heels. I'm showing off more leg than I like, but I feel like a princess, so I wouldn't change my outfit even if I had packed another dress.

While fanning my cheeks to settle down the heat spreading across my face, I pace out of the bathroom. My heels dig into the plush cream carpet of the room Mrs. James seconded so I could prep for tonight's Gala, but it has nothing on the gooeyness of my insides when Hugo mutters, "Damn, Izzy. You're smoking!"

Although he didn't relinquish his protective bodyguard demeanor this afternoon, his presence hasn't been overly smothering. He spent the majority of his day reading outdated magazines and tapping his foot in beat to the classic car tunes he played during our drive. For someone who was adamant we weren't to play any country music, he had no troubles belting out "Sweet Alabama" by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

He probably kept his distance because anytime he got close, I relentlessly nagged him about his conversation with Isaac. Regrettably, the information-seeping Hugo I've become accustomed to the past two weeks has been replaced with a locked-up-tighter-than-Fort-Knox Hugo. He didn't need to say anything, though, just me still being here several hours later is evidence enough. I had both a victory and a loss today. A win because Isaac trusts me enough to let me stay at a male friend's house but a loss because his jealousy wasn't enough to force him to react.

Hugo isn't the only quiet male today. Brandon has been notably distant as well. I haven't seen hide nor hair of him since lunch. Shrugging off my confusion of the opposite sex, I gather my black clutch purse from my suitcase. After checking



it has the necessities needed for a night out, I spin back around. The heel from my pretentiously high stiletto heels snags on the thick carpet pile.

Just before I collide with the floor, a broad set of arms catches me. Expensive cologne and... *cookie dough* swamp my senses when my savior assists me back onto my feet. After ensuring I didn't flash any private parts during my fall, I lift my gaze and am met with the sparkling hazel eyes of Brandon. My mouth gapes when I notice he's wearing a tuxedo with tails. His hair is slicked to the side, and his dark suit makes the green in his eyes even more noticeable.

Upon noticing my appreciative glance, his cheeks turn a pink hue. "Are you ready?"

Smiling at his flustered face, I nod before accepting the elbow he's holding out. I've never been to a fancy shindig before, so I'm excited and somewhat nervous to see how the night unfolds.

When, in the corner of my eye, I catch Hugo shooting daggers at Brandon, I give him my best 'behave' face. He rolls his eyes before shadowing us out into the hall.

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My eyes narrow into a thin line when I spot Hugo's nosey glance for the fifth time in the past thirty minutes. Being polite, I sat in the backseat with Brandon to allow Barbara to ride shotgun. Even with a gap big enough to park a truck between Brandon and me, Hugo's eyes rarely leave the rearview mirror. I'm surprised he hasn't run us off the road.

Because of the number of attendees arriving at the same time, the line to enter the closest multi-story parking garage

near the gala stretches for nearly half a mile.

After a stern warning that I'm to stay in the foyer, Hugo pulls Brandon's BMW in front of the hotel the gala is being held at to let us out. I can't wipe the excitement off my face when I enter the opulent lobby on Brandon's arm. Hundreds of people dressed to the nines are milling around the space. The air has the pungent aroma of wealth and importance, which isn't surprising with how many designer dresses and exorbitantly priced shoes are in one area. Some of the diamonds around the ladies' necks are larger than the fake ones hanging from the chandeliers above my head.

Harlow would have a field day at an event like this. Other than the occasional quick text message, I haven't heard from her the past week. Trying to text her on an ancient cell phone is so painful and tedious, I'm going to ask Hugo to stop into an electronics store so I can replace the phone Hunter destroyed.

Barbara excuses herself to assist other charity members who are hosting the gala tonight. I don't know what charity they're raising money for, but from the caliber of wealth in the one room, it must be important. Most guests are already wearing their masks as mandated by the fundraising team, but a few are clutching them in their hands like Brandon and me. When Brandon comes to a sudden stop halfway across the foyer, I shoot my eyes up to his. His face pales the longer he keeps his angst-ridden gaze focused on something across the room.

Following his gaze, I discover the girl we saw earlier today leading the horse around the paddock. "Is that Melody?"

Swallowing hard, Brandon nods, his eyes never leaving the woman responsible for the lack of color in his cheeks. I figured her presence would have the opposite effect because

she looks stunning in her red silk ball gown that sweeps the ground as she walks. Her blonde hair is pinned off her face, and the vibrant color of her lips matches her dress to perfection.

Sensing our gawking watch, her gaze lifts and turns our way. When she notices Brandon across the room, a vein in her neck pulsates before a huge smile stretches across her face. I nudge Brandon with my elbow, confident she's throwing out feelers. "Go say hello."

His panicked eyes dart down to me before he briskly shakes his head. I raise my brow, giving him my best it-wasn't-a-request look I mastered from Isaac.

After a few seconds of silent contemplation, the anxiety marring his face relaxes, and his shoulders roll high. "Wish me luck."

He swoops down to place a peck on my cheek before weaving through the hundreds of event-goers separating them, her eyes once again not leaving his. Once they greet each other with a somewhat awkward hug, I saunter toward a gentleman balancing drinks on a silver tray. With so many people crammed in one spot, the temperature is stifling.

When I accept a bottle of chilled water from the grinning waiter, a shiver jolts down my spine. Uneased by my intuition warning me I'm being watched, I drift my eyes over the people surrounding me. Other than a guy drinking a brown-colored liquor out of a crystal glass on a loveseat, no one appears to be paying any attention to me, so he must be the cause of my angst.

The good-looking stranger dips his chin when he realizes he's captured my attention. After returning his greeting, I

make my way to a group of people congregating at the back of the foyer, diligent that there's always strength in numbers.

As I drift across the vast space, I keep an eye on the suspicious gentleman without turning my head. Other than his unsuitably long gawk, he seems innocent enough. I'd give anything for my intuition to pick up the same vibe. It's warning me to remain cautious. It's not a caveat that comes with a nasty side of fear. It's just an alarm that won't be doused without further evaluation.

My pulse surges through my body when the stranger stands as soon as I reach the edge of the crowd. When I break through a group three deep, and he loses me from his sight, he rushes my way, his steps hurried. I maintain a calm, cool approach, confident months of training and on-field tactical responses will keep me safe, not to mention the drills my uncle ran me through from when I was a child.

While moving slowly through the crowd, I watch the stranger in a floor-to-ceiling mirror that spans one side of the foyer. He maintains an adequate distance between us, having me wonder if he's trained in surveillance. If I had to guess his age, I'd say early to mid-twenties. His dark brown hair is clipped close at the sides, but the top is loose and shaggy. His vibrant, dark brown eyes stand out on his beige skin, and he's tall, at least six-foot-three. He has a fit build that even his suit can't hide the impressive span of his biceps and thighs.

When my eyes return to his face, I choke on my spit. He's peering at me in the same mirror I studied him from. His brow is quirked, either amused by my stare or frustrated by it. If his smirk is anything to go by, I'm leaning toward the former. I swear I've seen him before, but I can't place his face. Col has

many ‘family’ members, so there’s no way I’d recognize every face I’ve scanned the past few months.

I follow the direction of the stranger’s eyes when he peers past my shoulder. Hugo is heading my way, his strides long and efficient. When I return my eyes to the mystery man, his smirk switches to a smile before he vanishes amongst the crowd—not even his impressive height keeps him in my sight.

The shudder of my thighs is felt by Hugo when he sets his hand on my shoulder. “What’s wrong?” His eyes bounce between the hundreds of people swarming us. “Where’s Brandon?”

“Umm...”

I’m so confused, I can’t form words. My interaction with the stranger was unnerving, but I didn’t feel threatened by him. If he wanted to harm me, he would have made his move before Hugo arrived. The fact he didn’t has me suspicious of his motives.

Before I can get a grip on reality, a new type of idealism courses through my body. As the hairs on my neck prickle, I spin in a circle, slowly drinking in the vast assembly of people in the one space. The gala organizers are opening the ballroom’s frosted glass doors, meaning most attendees are assembled there, but my body’s heightened response is directing me down another path. I can’t see Isaac, but I know he’s here. I can feel him.

My breath traps in my throat when my eyes collide with Isaac’s not even three seconds later. He’s standing on the bottom step of the hotel’s elegant staircase, staring straight at me. The pulse in my neck descends to my pussy when my eyes soak up the sexually satisfying visual of his delicious body

encased in a black tuxedo, white dress shirt, and black bow tie. He looks ravishingly hot, and he's making me sticky all over.

I'm not the only one enjoying the visual. My inner vixen screams in euphoria when a seductive smirk forms on Isaac's well-carved mouth after he drinks in my outfit. His jaw has that taut look, the one that reveals he either approves of my outfit or is desperate to peel it off me. I'll be happy with any decision he makes.

After placing a black mask over his eyes, he hops off the bottom step before moving toward a sea of black tuxedos. Because of the large volume of people gathered in one space, I soon lose him in the crowd.

I lift my glowing eyes to Hugo, who's wagging his brows at me. "Put your mask on." He snags my black and silver feathered-design mask from my hand before spinning me around to secure the silver straps into place. "Now, go get him."

Enthusiasm clusters in my pussy when he barges me toward the horde of people entering the gala's ballroom. I can't see Isaac, but his magnetizing pull is undeniable. It guides my steps, and every one taken increases the zing of intimacy that binds us together. Not even Hugo tracing my every move can dampen it.

A short time later, a fingertip brushes across my bare shoulder. The zap it arrives with is too intense to belong to any other man. It had to come from Isaac. My body only responds to him with this much intensity.

With wide eyes and clammy palms, I pivot around to face him. Confusion rockets through me when I discover a tall African American man and his wife standing behind me. They

eye me cautiously, curious as to why I'm bizarrely glancing at them.

After a quick apology, my gaze shifts to Hugo. Grinning, he shrugs, but before he can articulate any of the theories in his eyes, the faint yet deep rumble of "Isabelle" slicks my panties with moisture. When my name is quickly followed by the briefest skim of a hand past my thigh, I crank my head to the left before slowly shifting it to the right. I know Isaac is here, teasing me, but the endless sea of black tuxedos thwarts my search.

I pace through the crowd, my steps guided by my body's awareness of Isaac. The air is thick with humidity, but it can't mask Isaac's alluring scent. It's as potent as the excitement heating my veins.

Eager to suck in his panty-wetting aroma, I close my eyes to enhance my sense of smell before drawing in a big breath through my nostrils. My heart thuds my ribs when his scent doubles a mere second before the softest pair of lips sweep past my parched mouth.

My eyes snap open in just enough time to catch a flurry of a black weaving through the dense crowd. With a broad grin etched on my mouth, I push through the herd of people to chase Isaac down. I know what he's doing. He's punishing me for my defiance earlier today. Since I forced him to interact with me, he'll torment me until pleas for forgiveness fill his ears. It's an enthralling game we've played many times before.

The natural wave of the crowd has our game soon spilling into the ballroom. The room is decorated with silver and black silk stretched as far as the eye can see. Mirrored balls bounce diamonds onto every flat surface. Black long-stemmed roses in crystal vases adorn each table, and multi-hued chandeliers

encourage a visually stimulating display, but it isn't elegance that has my heart galloping. It's every gentle touch Isaac hits me with as his relentless pursuit to unravel me continues without pause.

The faint brush of his fingers has my head slinging in all directions, but I've yet to catch sight of him since our kiss over fifteen minutes ago. He's like a ghost meandering in and out of the crowd with ease and simplicity.

By the time I make it onto the jam-packed dance floor, my panties are saturated, and pleas for forgiveness are sitting on the tip of my tongue. He's teased my shoulders, neck, thighs, and both my arms, but the most passionate one was the one that skimmed the back of my knees. It shamefully buckled my knees and had me wishing we were alone.

My pussy pulses when the lips that highlight my dreams stroke my neck. "Are you ready to beg yet?"

Nodding, I step backward, yearning for his body heat to simmer the shivers running rampant through mine. I'm not cold. I'm so incredibly turned on, my brain thinks I have a fever.

When I crash into his torso, my insides purr like a kitten. I lean into him deeper, craving his closeness more than my next breath.

My knees violently crash together when he gathers my hair to one side of my sweat-slicked neck so he can ravish the other side. He bites and licks me three times before he presses his lips to the shell of my ear. "Say it, Isabelle."

"I'm sorry." My whisper is barely heard over the music booming out of the speakers above our heads, but nothing can deny the plea in it.



“Louder.”

A hum of excitement vibrates between us. It’s more compelling than the electricity energizing the air. There’s so much beautiful friction between us, I’m afraid I may soon combust.

I’m confident without a shadow of a doubt when he tugs me back another inch. I’m not the only one getting carried away by the moment. Isaac is as turned on as me.

With my horniness at its peak and my self-respect at its lowest point, pleas for forgiveness spill from my mouth like a waterfall over a boulder. “I’m sorry... so very sorry. Please forgive me.”

A pleasing jolt heats my skin when my begs are rewarded by him swinging his hips. His dance moves are effortless but seductive enough to seduce me with our clothes on.

With his manly scent eradicating my every qualm, I make the sways of his hips roll for roll. My dance moves are teasing—somewhat sexually suggestive. I make love to him with my clothes on, praying this won’t be our first and *only* dance.

Every kiss he places on my neck as we dance like we’re the only two people in the room enlarges my heart. Muggy dampness is invading the air, but it would take more than a monsoon to dampen the heat bristling between us.

I grind against his hardened rod, loving that our closeness has generated such a profound response from him. Even swarmed by elegantly dressed men and women hasn’t stolen the admiration we have for one another. When we’re together, it is just us—the man I’d go to the end of the earth for time and time again and me.

## CHAPTER 25



## ISAAC

*I*sabelle has always been super responsive to my touch, but tonight, that notion has reached an entirely new level. I'm barely touching her, yet she's purring like a pussy cat. Her seductive scent has my cock wrangling with the zipper, and her skin is so hot, it sizzles when I drag my tongue along it.

I didn't plan to tease her when I first arrived. I had every intention of waiting until we were in the privacy of our hotel room before forcing her to plead for clemency, but her mouthwatering dress crumbled my best-laid plans. She's always been a ravishing mix of beauty and seduction, but tonight, her diamond exterior is polished to perfection. She's every man's walking wet dream, making me confident no man in this hotel could look at her without getting aroused. That's how appealing she is.

Her long, lavish legs are on full display in the super short skirt she's wearing. Her lush tits are barely contained by the strapless bustier that forms the top half of her risqué number. Her glistening lips are begging to be tasted, and don't even get me started on her gorgeous eyes. The dark shadowing varnishing them adds even more appeal to her sex-pot appearance.

She's totally fuckable and entirely mine.

A growl ripples through my lips when she grinds her curvy ass on my hardened shaft. The scent of her hungry pussy reveals how close to the brink she is, not to mention the heat I feel pumping out of her from regions below the belt.

“Not here, Isabelle,” My words crack out of my mouth like a whip, but not even their sternness can hide my wavering constraint. “I’m the only one who gets to see you come.”

Unless you count the moan vibrating her lips, she doesn't voice an objection to my demand.

The longer we dance, the more her scent sparks a wild, primitive response from my body. The urge to claim her as mine is so strong, the need dominates my levelheadedness. I'm hazed by lust, so desperate to taste her again. I scan the area, knowing we'll never make it back to the seclusion of my hotel room before I'm overcome with desire.

A smug grin curls my lips when I spot Hugo standing on the edge of the dance floor. He's gesturing his head to a door at the side of the ballroom, the gleam in his eyes telling me he anticipates praise for his on-the-spot thinking.

I guide Isabelle across the room, growling when her lusty eyes collide with mine when we step off the dance floor. No words need to be spoken between us for her to know what we're about to do. Her rapid breaths indicate she's well aware of what activity we are about to undertake.

The spark of attraction between us is so intense, it zaps my hand when I place it on her back to lead her into the storage room tucked away from prying, snobbish eyes. I lift my chin in thanks to Hugo when his large frame blocks the doorway once Isabelle and I walk through it. It's closed, but his size

alone will ensure we won't be interrupted. It will also guarantee his succor will be immensely rewarded.

After securing the lock into place, I spin around to face Isabelle. She's absorbing the space that usually houses the tables and chairs that are set up in the gala. There are a stack of white catering chairs lining one wall and a dozen tables in the middle of the room. It's basic but suitable for quenching the desire raging like a wildfire through my body until we get back to my hotel suite.

A vein in Isabelle's neck beeps when I stealthily prowl toward her like a panther on the hunt. She threw out the bait, entrapping me with the jealousy that curses my acumen when it comes to her, and now I'm here to collect restitution for her defiance. I've never been a jealous, dense idiot before, but the thought of Isabelle with anyone but me is an uncontrollable rage I doubt I'll ever contain. It's irrepressible—much like my feelings for her.

I stop striding when I'm close enough to smell her enticing scent, but far enough away she can't reach me. "Take off your mask. I want to see your beautiful eyes when I fuck you."

She swallows harshly before she unties the silk straps of her mask. My cock throbs when her smoky eyes become fully exposed. They're as tempting as the vixen hiding behind them.

I remove the mask, throw it onto the table at my side, then continue with my ruse. "Now your dress."

Isabelle's eyes widen before they shoot to the door we just entered.

"No one will *ever* see you. Your body is only for *my* eyes."

An exciting thrill quivers through her thighs as she nods. When she unfastens her dress, my zipper bites my cock. Her

dress slips past her delectable curves to gather in a pile of silk and tulle around her strappy shoes. The thrill of the hunt surges through me hard and fast. She knew I was coming tonight because she's wearing the steel gray strapless bra and lace panties she wore the day we fucked in the plane. It took Catherine visiting four stores to find the boy-leg panties I shredded that night, but I'm so fucking glad my campaign paid off. Isabelle looks ravishing.

"You wanted me to come tonight? Is that why you provoked me?"

Isabelle shakes her head. "No. I packed these with the *hope* you'd come. I didn't set out to purposely antagonize you." Her rich chocolate eyes relay the honesty in her statement.

She sucks in a sharp breath when I take a step closer to her. "I purchased a ticket for this gala when I found out it was a masked ball with the hope you'd *ask* me to attend with you."

Remorse flashes through her eyes. "I would have invited you, Isaac. I wanted to, but Regan made me promise to stay away from you. She made me swear on my uncle's grave." She huffs, peeved at how many people are commanding her life right now. "I didn't even keep my promise for a nanosecond." Tears gloss her eyes when she whispers, "I can't stay away from you."

"No one can keep us apart, Isabelle," I kiss her turned-down lips before raising her head via her chin. "Not Regan. Not Col Petretti. Not Theresa. Not even a hurricane could keep us apart. You're mine, and I am yours."

A ghost of a smile cracks onto her pouty lips before she seals them over mine. I growl, loving the strawberry flavoring of her lips. Too many hours have passed since her lips have

been on mine—too damn many. When I delve my tongue into her mouth, it muffles her soft moans. After moving her hands into my hair, she pulls me closer, urging a more passionate kiss.

Gripping her nape in my hand, I hold her mouth hostage to mine before deepening our kiss. I taste the lip-gloss slathered on her mouth, and the peppermint of her toothpaste while slipping my other hand under her bra to cup her breast. When my thumb skates over the stiff peak of her nipple, my mouth steals every hot breath escaping her lips. I tease her breasts for several long minutes, loving that not even the prospect of being busted dampens her body's response to my touch.

After a few more heated moments, I inch back. “My cock leaped when my eyes landed on you tonight.” I gaze into her eyes, seeing my reflection in her massively dilated pupils. “That dress... fucking Christ. I nearly had a heart attack.”

Heat creeps across her cheeks as they rise to sit high on her face. “You can thank Hugo for that.”

Jealousy almost gashes me open until I remember Hugo is standing guard to ensure we're not disturbed. He's the first man I called after my arrest, and the *only* man I trust to keep Isabelle safe when I can't. He's not a threat to my relationship. He's an asset.

“I'll be sure to show him my appreciation when I sign his bonus check.”

I tuck Isabelle into my side before striding to a stack of tables on our right where I adjust her position until her breasts are splayed on the tabletop, her legs are spread wide, and her delectable ass is suspended high into the air. Once I have her where I want her, I take a step back. She's so aroused, her

panties are clinging to the folds of her pussy, and I'm sucking her seductive scent like a drug addict sniffing coke.

After tugging a handkerchief out of the breast pocket of my tuxedo, I hand it to Isabelle. "I love every scream that escapes your lips, but those are *my* screams."

She lied in the plane when she said she wasn't a screamer. I love every erotic moan that tumbles from her throat, but my ears are the only ones privileged enough to hear them.

I hook my thumbs into her panties before gliding them down her quivering thighs. Her bra is unhooked and discarded to the floor with a flick of my wrist two seconds later. As I shrug out of my tuxedo jacket and undo the buttons on my dress shirt, my eyes absorb her seductive curves. Isabelle stays still, motionless, and in perfect position looking as if she is a buffet ready to be sampled.

"I know I said last night I'd spend hours tasting you, but I wasn't expecting that to take place in a storage room, so that must wait." I unbutton my trousers, then lower the zipper. This hiss of the metal increases the wetness between Isabelle's legs. "But I can't wait any longer to bury my cock deep inside you."

When I release my throbbing cock from my boxer briefs, Isabelle peers back at me before licking her lips. A hungry glint ignites in her eyes when I wrap my hand around my shaft to give it a firm tug in the rhythm of her breaths. Her eyes widen more with every stroke I inflict.

"You like watching me stroke my cock?"

Last night was the first time in over ten years I've come by my own hand. That alone shows the power Isabelle has over me.



She nods, her scent increasing me. “Yes,” she whispers with her gaze fixated on my cock. “As long as I get to touch it, too.”

I’d love nothing more than to recreate last night’s phone call. The sounds were stimulating enough, so imagine how riveting the visual would be? But we don’t have the time, and we’re in a storage room with thousands of gala attendees mere feet away, so that fantasy will need to simmer on the burner until I get Isabelle back to my suite.

My eyes shift to her bare mound, erotically showcasing her arousal. “Are you ready for me?”

She licks her lips and nods.

“Say it, Isabelle.”

“Yes,” she murmurs, her voice a throaty purr.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I’m ready for you.” Her lips crack into a smile as the lust in her eyes detonates. “Ready for you to *fuck* me... to make me beg for forgiveness.”

My lips crimp. I knew she would have understood my tease the moment I brushed my fingertip across her shoulder blade. She knows me better than anyone.

I step closer to her until the crown of my cock braces against the seam of her ass. When I place pressure on the puckered hole, Isabelle stiffens before her head cranks back to me. She doesn’t speak, but fear is clouding her usually bright eyes.

“One day, I’ll claim *all* of you, Isabelle.”

Her pupils widen to the size of saucers as she swallows harshly.

“But not tonight as I need to make sure your body is prepared for that.” I shift the tilt of her hips, so the ridge of my cock braces the entrance of her pussy. “Grip the table and hold on tight as this is going to be hard and fast.”

She may have begged for forgiveness on the dance floor, but that doesn't mean I won't fuck her into submission. Her rebelliousness requires some sort of punishment, and mercifully, she loves being punished by my cock just as much as I love punishing her with it.

Isabelle bites down on the handkerchief before securing a tight grasp on the table. Her grip is so rigid, her knuckles go white. I finish coating my cock in her juices before sinking into her in one fluid thrust. Our combined groans bounce off the white walls when her soaked pussy accepts me without protest.

Fuck, she feels good.

Tight.

Wet.

*Mine.*

I drive into her on repeat, fucking her until her body is slicked with perspiration, and her pussy is weeping with the musky goodness I love devouring. When my brutal pounds cause the table's feet to jump across the wooden floorboards, Isabelle firms her grip, knowing I need to fuck—to come. Not because it's the only way I can disperse the jealousy still blackening my veins, but because I can't get enough of her. Her smell. Her moans. Her hot, slick channel that's softer than a feather but as savage as a wild animal.

My thrusting becomes frenzied as I jackknife my hips on repeat. It brings her screams up to an ear-piercing level, soon

overtaking the sound of skin slapping skin.

“Bring it down a notch, then I’ll permit you to remove your handkerchief.” I’m dying to hear her moan my name as she does during climax, but I can’t risk anyone else hearing her. Even though it’s my name, so I should be banging my chest like a macho-man, I refuse for anyone to hear the lyrical gold that flows through my ears when she comes.

When Isabelle does as requested, I tug out the handkerchief being held in place by her clenched teeth, then go harder, faster, and more violent. Beads of sweat roll off my cheeks landing in the small of her back. It adds to the glossy substance coating my shaft and balls, it’s just not as shimmery.

“Isaac...”

She’s so close, I can taste her arousal on the tip of my tongue. It has me slamming into her on repeat, giving her everything I have. Her pussy sucks around me, begging for my spawn as much as my balls are pleading to be freed from the tightness asphyxiating them. I can feel cum sitting at the crest of my cock, prepped to erupt, but I hold it back, never once chasing my own release until Isabelle is exhausted of hers.

“Oh God...”

I move one of my hands to the dark locks spilling down her back, twist it around my wrist until it’s close to cutting off my circulation, then tug back until the eyes I’d kill for lock with mine. The lust in them spurs on my campaign. I rock into her on repeat, my hand violently yanking at her hair with every thrust. I’m certain I’m hurting her, but I’m too blinded by the chase to care.

As the tautness in her face softens, her pussy tightens around my cock. “Eyes, Isabelle.”

The walls of her vagina clamp tightly around me while she fights the urge to shut her eyes during the terrifying climax that's seconds from roaring through her body. She stills, then moans, the functions of her body no longer hers to control. Her torso becomes one with the table as she calls out my name. It's loud enough for me to hear, but not loud enough to have me worried it was heard by the partygoers outside. Hugo, on the other hand—I'll need to have a word with him.

When Isabelle returns from the depths of hysteria, I put weight back into my pumps. I build her excitement with precise strokes of my cock and calculated rolls of my hips, advising her that we're not leaving here until her pussy milks my cock for sperm for the second time tonight.

I get precisely that not even ten minutes later.

## CHAPTER 26



## ISABELLE

A damp napkin scratches my skin when I remove the mascara smudged under my eyes, giving me a raccoon look. My hair is a tousled mess from Isaac's firm grasp, and my cheeks are flushed. I look thoroughly fucked. Rightfully so, I should look this way. Even with thousands of people mere feet from us, Isaac's stamina went above and beyond my greatest expectations. I didn't think it was possible, but the sex gets better and better with every tryst we do.

As I drag my fingers through my hair, hoping to regain some control over the tangled mess clinging to my sweat-slicked neck, I try and comprehend what Isaac sees in me. After sex, I'm a sweaty, repulsive disaster, whereas he looks like he just stepped out of the pages of a magazine spread, primed and ready to go.

"I guess that will have to do," I murmur to my reflection in the vanity mirror.

After a quick dab of lip gloss on my mouth, I exit the crowded bathroom. When I saunter past the long line waiting to use the facilities, I spot Hugo leaning against the wall. Heat spreads across my face when he winks at my disheveled appearance. Only after doing the *deed* does my rational-thinking head click on. An average person would wait until

they're in private before participating in sexual activities. My urges can't be helped, though. The instant Isaac is in my presence, all my levelheadedness sails out the window.

"Do you feel better?" Hugo's question arrives with a fresh batch of laughter.

I whack him with my clutch purse. "Shut up," I mutter while keeping my gaze fixed on anything but his chortling face. "Where's Isaac?"

Hugo nudges his head to the large group of people filling the ballroom. "He had to make a call. He said to put your mask back on, then he'll meet you inside." He hands me the mask I left in the storage room before guiding me back into the wealthy-smelling room.

I snag a glass of wine off a silver waiter's tray halfway in. The gala has the distinct aura of poise and importance—a category I don't belong in. Even with their eyes covered by colorful masks, I feel the heat of several pairs of male eyes following me as Hugo and I float across the room. Obviously, my attempts to clean myself up was pointless.

My leisured pace slows when I spot the gentleman who was watching me earlier tonight. He's at the bar with a glass of whiskey in his hand, and his dark eyes are planted on me. When he notices he's captured my attention, a smirk curls his lips. Just like earlier tonight, I'm not afraid of him, but my intuition is once again immensely piqued. He's watching me but in an unthreatening nature.

Letting my curiosity get the better of me, I stroll toward him. My quick steps falter when he shakes his head, requesting me to leave him alone. I freeze as my brows narrow down my face. He stares at me for several heart-thrashing seconds before his eyes flick to the other side of the room. He

watches Isaac walk through the frosted glass doors at the entrance of the ballroom. Even with his alluring gray eyes covered with a black mask, his authoritative charisma can't be hidden. A man with an aura like his doesn't require an introduction.

My breathing levels when I turn my gaze back to the bar to discover the mysterious stranger has vanished. I frantically search my surrounding areas, growing dizzy when my eyes dart between hundreds of men wearing similar black tuxedos. A huff parts my lips when I don't locate him anywhere.

"Did you see the guy sitting at the bar?" I raise my eyes to Hugo before nudging my head to the bar the stranger was seated at. "The one staring at me?"

Hugo slings his head in the direction I nudged. "Which one? There's at least a dozen of them."

"He isn't there now. He just left."

Hugo shakes his head. "No, I didn't see him." He steps to stand in front of me, blocking the bar from my view. "Is that what made you rattled earlier tonight? A man?"

Yes. "No."

His brows shoot up his face as he works his jaw side to side. He doesn't need to say anything. His look alone calls out on my deceit.

"He didn't rattle me, he just... *startled* me." My voice is as confused as I feel. "His face seems familiar, but I'm having a hard time recalling if I saw it while scanning Col Petretti's file into the FBI database, or if it's from a more personal setting."

Hugo's carefree attitude changes to menacing in an instant. "Do you think he's one of Col's men?"



“I don’t know,” I reply with a shrug. “I just have a *feeling* I’ve seen him before.” I stop talking to suck in a big breath. “He knows who Isaac is, though, as he gestured to him just now.”

Hugo curses under his breath. His scorn is quiet, but it still gains him the attention of the pompous-looking people mingling around us. A lady in a cream sleeveless sheath dress huffs before she saunters away from us with her nose held high in the air.

Suddenly, the hairs on my arms bristle, announcing that Isaac is close. My heart warms when he wraps his arms around my waist before pulling me in close. Once his torso is warming my back, he presses his lips to my temple.

Although I’m floating into the lust haze Isaac always instigates, the pleading look in Hugo’s eyes keeps my feet on the ground. No words escape his lips, but he’s wearing the same pleading look he had when he begged me to let Isaac’s security team into Megan’s family residence before the authorities.

After exhaling a breath to release the nerves knotting my stomach, I nod. Hugo smiles, pleased his big baby blues eyes worked before locking his eyes to Isaac. “We need to leave. There’s an unsecured threat to Izzy in the gala.”

Isaac stiffens before his arm drops to the lower half of my back. Without speaking a word, he guides me out of the ballroom and through the foyer of the hotel. Even with having his impressive reputation hidden behind a mask, the crowd parts when they see him coming. The heat bouncing off him settles the shiver running down my spine, but I’m still worried.

When Isaac leads us out of the hotel’s revolving doors, we skirt past Brandon and Melody chatting at the side. My

pleading eyes lock with Hugo's, hoping he'll inform Brandon of our departure. They narrow into thin, angry slits when he shakes his head, soundlessly denying my request.

A black town car skids to a stop at the front of the hotel, its sudden arrival shocking the concierge attendants. Snubbing their alarmed gazes, Isaac opens the back-passenger door before gesturing for me to enter first. I slip inside, then slide across the cold bench seat, the coolness of the leather giving relief to my overheated skin. After talking in hushed whispers with Hugo, Isaac slides into place next to me and slams the door shut.

"Isn't Hugo coming with us?" I peer at Hugo through the heavily tinted windows as the car pulls into the bustling traffic.

"No. He'll scope the area to see if he can locate the gentleman he saw you with earlier." His darkened eyes shift from glancing outside to me. "Why didn't you tell me there was a threat when I first arrived?"

"He wasn't threatening. His interest did startle me, but if he truly wanted to hurt me, he had the opportunity to..." My words dither when an angry growl rips from Isaac's snapped-shut lips. "He *had* the opportunity to, but he *didn't* hurt me. I don't believe he intended to harm me, Isaac. Not every man is a threat to my safety."

"Jesus Christ, Isabelle."

As he scrubs at the stubble on his chin, silence encroaches our vehicle. It's tense and awkward but gives me plenty of time to study Isaac's eye-catching profile. His unshaven jaw is ticking, and his fists are clenched into tight balls, but my body still aches for his closeness. Even with him sitting right beside me, he seems distant.

After sliding across the bench seat, I place my hand over his enclosed fist. Pain stabs my chest when he peers into my eyes. His stern glare can't hide a facial expression I've never seen before. It's a look that forces my heart to stop beating, an expression I never thought I'd see tainting his face. It's the look of fear. It's clouding his eyes' normal appeal, corrupting them in a thick haze of doubt. *I did that to him. I made him feel this way.* So, it's *my* job to make things right.

Not seeking permission, I climb onto his lap to straddle him. I press my lips to the tick in his jaw before nuzzling into his neck where I inhale deeply, loving our romp is still evident on his skin. His silence weighs heavily on my chest. So many words want to spill from my lips, but I hold them back, realizing the best way to comfort him is by showing him I'm safe and protected.

The concierge at the hotel doesn't bat an eye when he opens the door, and Isaac slides with me still in his lap. He maintains his quiet front when he sets me onto my feet before encasing his hand around mine. His grip is tight, alluding to his authority but not firm enough to cause me any pain.

Our walk through the impressively large hotel lobby to the elevators at the back is made in silence. The elevator attendant ushers us into a private elevator at the side of the gold-speckled corridor with tabletops decorated with white *Phalaenopsis* orchids.

Isaac doesn't utter a word, but the attendant jumps into action. He places a key into the panel on the internal wall of the elevator and hits the 'P' button at the very top of the dashboard before removing his key and exiting the elevator car. It ascends straight to the top floor, not stopping at any of the levels highlighted on the panel.

My pulse twangs faster when we exit into a corridor with a burgundy and gold wool hallway runner down the middle. We head toward a set of double doors with ‘Presidential Suite’ written on a plaque next to them. My pupils widen nearly as large as my mouth when we walk into the room. It’s so massive, a cheerleading tournament could be held here.

After relinquishing my hand from his firm grip, Isaac strides to a set of cream French doors at the side of the expansive living area. His strides are so fast, I have trouble keeping up.

“Wow,” I murmur breathlessly when the twinkling lights of the city skyline come into sight. The view is awe-inspiring.

My jaw drops more with every step I take toward the large floor-to-ceiling windows. Nothing but the flickering of lights against a backdrop of skyscrapers can be seen, and because we’re on the very top floor, the people milling along the sidewalks are as tiny as ants.

When Isaac groans my name in a gruff, surly moan, I pivot to face him. Lines are creasing his forehead, and his eyelids are close to touching.

“Sorry. I was distracted by the view.” *Although, it’s nowhere near as inviting as what I’m viewing now.*

Isaac has kicked off his black polished dress shoes, removed his tuxedo jacket, and his black bow tie is unknotted and dangling around his neck. My mouth waters when he yanks the pleated white dress shirt out of his black trousers.

“Have you eaten tonight?”

I shake my head, unable to take my eyes off the delicious visual of him stripping to formulate words. We only left the

storage room forty minutes ago, but the rush of excitement is still pumping through me.

He moves toward the king-size bed to gather the room service menu off the bedside table. “Do you want a full meal or something light?”

I shrug. “A cheeseburger and some fries?”

He watches me in silence, aware I’m usually more cautious about the number of carbs I consume after seven o’clock.

“My period is due.”

I cringe, but Isaac makes a face like everything suddenly makes sense. After ordering two cheeseburgers and a serving of fries, he requests for a large bowl of chocolate mint ice cream to be brought an hour later for dessert. It’s my favorite ice-cream when cramps are hitting me.

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Thirty minutes later, we’re sitting in the living area of the suite eating mouth-salivating burgers. Grease dribbles down my hands from the overgenerous serving of swiss cheese, but I’m enjoying every delicious bite. We’re sitting on a thick Persian rug using the coffee table as a dining table. There’s an antique setting on our left, but you can’t eat burgers and fries in a formal dining area. That’d be like taking McDonald’s into one of Isaac’s fancy restaurants.

Isaac’s designer tuxedo has been replaced with a pair of well-fitted jeans and a blue cotton V-neck shirt. He’s barefoot and eye-catchingly gorgeous, although he’s returned to the mute I met at the airport many months ago. He maintained his

quiet self the past half hour, only talking when he's taken the occasional call on his cell. The fear plaguing his eyes earlier has dampened, ruefully overpowered by fury.

Gorged and minutes from sinking into a carbohydrate coma, I push away the plate of fries before bracing my back on the plush sofa. I'm so stuffed, I need to pop the top button on the jeans I slipped into before joining Isaac in the living area. When my eyes leisurely scan the beautiful suite decorated with rich materials and antique furniture, I wonder how Isaac can afford to pay his staff so well and live such an extravagant lifestyle.

After absorbing the luxurious surroundings, my eyes turn to an even more compelling visual. Since Isaac is so fixated on his iPhone, he fails to detect my snooping glance. His brows are pulled together, and his lips are set in a hard line. His furious composure should have me recoiling. It doesn't. I'm on the opposite end of the spectrum.

When he throws down his phone with a huff, I ask, "Did Hugo find him?" I don't want to increase his anger. I'm just curious.

Isaac shakes his head. "No. It appears he left the gala the instant *you* did."

Anger radiates off him, making the room so stifling, it feels like I'm sitting next to a furnace. When he abruptly stands and paces into the master suite, I scamper off the sofa and chase him down. He shoots me a vicious glare when I enter the room on his heels. He balls his fists as a vicious scowl contorts his handsome face.

Over his moody, brooding machoism, I strip out of my clothing, leaving them where they fall. Once my cashmere sweater, jeans, and cami are removed, I kick them to the side,

then pace toward him. My heart wallops my chest more with every step I take, but I don't back down.

“Where do you want me?” When I stand in front of him in a strapless steel gray push-up bra and lace boy-leg panties, he arches a brow. “You're angry at me, and you want to punish me, so where do you want me? On the bed? In the shower? Against the wall?” I stray my eyes to each location I mention. “Punish me. Get it out of your system, then we can move onto wading through the next shit-storm that hits us because it never ends, Isaac. The whole fucking universe is against us being together.”

Part of my grouchy mood has to do with my period being due, but the compilation of everything that's happened the past two weeks is also catching up with me.

“I don't care who the fuck is against us, Isabelle, all I care about is keeping you safe. He could have hurt you.” His voice heaves with uncontrollable anger. “But instead of telling me you were in danger when I arrived, you let me fuck you in the storage room like some sort of... of—”

“Whore?” I fill in. “Is that the word you're seeking? Or maybe prostitute as that seems to be a term of endearment for me lately.”

“Don't put words in my mouth!”

Tears burn my eyes from the anger flaring through his eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I'm too angry to give him the satisfaction of witnessing my tears.

“I wasn't scared of him, Isaac—”

“Then that makes you an idiot.” His words crack out of his mouth like a whip. “You don't know these people like I know them. They're ruthless.”

“Go ahead, add more taunts to the list of names I’ve been called the past two weeks, but don’t you dare pretend I don’t know who these people are.” My voice loudens as my anger is unleashed. “The fact my father sold me to the highest bidder makes me acutely aware of how ruthless they are!”

When I brush away a stupid tear sitting high on my cheek, hesitation sparks in Isaac’s furious gaze. When he attempts to cup my face, I step back, denying him the opportunity.

“Call me an idiot, stupid, naïve, or even a whore if you want, but my gut was telling me he wasn’t going to hurt me. I trust my intuition, Isaac, because it’s what I use to guide my relationship with you, and it’s the only thing keeping my head above water right now.” I inhale a shaky breath that rattles my chest cavity. “I know it’s hard for you to understand, but I truly don’t believe he was going hurt me, just like I know you didn’t sleep with Clara.”

When guilt darkens Isaac’s eyes, the air is forcefully removed from my lungs. I slap my hand over my mouth when my stomach violently recoils. Even though no words seep from his lips, the liability in his eyes stabs my heart, physically wounding me.

Dizziness impedes me when I collect my clothing discarded haphazardly around the room. When Isaac attempts to still my swaying movements, I yank away from him. “Don’t touch me!”

He takes a step backward with his hands held out in front of himself. “Jesus Christ, Isabelle, give me a chance to explain.”

I snarl at him while yanking my jeans up my thighs. “There’s nothing to explain. You either slept with Clara, or you didn’t.”



“It isn’t that simple. Not everything is black and white—”

“Yes, it is! There’s no gray for stuff like this.”

Anger courses through me when he is unable to maintain eye contact. Shaking my head in disgust, I throw on my cami, not bothering with my sweater since fury is heating me from the inside out. My anger is so fierce, it dried every tear threatening to spill down my face.

While sucking in a deep breath, my eyes scan the room, searching for the purse I dumped on the way in. “Where do you think you’re going?” Isaac questions when I snatch it off the side table.

“As far away from you as possible.”

“Isabelle...”

His dangerous tone clatters through my chest, but it does little to slow me down. “No. Not this time. You said nothing would come between us. Not Regan. Not Col. Not Theresa, but you failed to mention the one thing that could. This hasn’t just come between us, Isaac, it broke us. I thought I knew you, the *real* Isaac Holt, not the enigma, but I don’t know you at all. I’m just as clueless as the rest of them.”

When I spin on my heels to race to the door, he seizes my wrist. Using my free hand, I slap him hard across the face. My palm sets on fire causing more tears to spring from my eyes.

Isaac inhales a sharp, quick breath as his dark, tormented eyes stare straight into mine. They’re emotionless and unreadable and utterly annihilate my heart.

“Goodbye, Isaac.”

I yank out of his grasp before making a beeline for the door. This time, he doesn’t stop me. Through a blur of unshed

tears, I throw it open, only making it part way out before I crash into a wall of flesh.

Lifting my eyes, I'm met with the concerned face of Hugo. "Izzy, what's wrong?"

Unable to speak for fear of sobbing, I burrow my face into Hugo's chest. Without speaking another word, he guides me to the elevator car idling at my floor. Just before the doors snap shut, the last thing I see is remorse flashing through a pair of alluring gray eyes.

## CHAPTER 27



## ISAAC

“*B*oss,” Hugo greets me, his tone brusque.

When I hear Isabelle’s soft breaths meddled with car honks, my anger gets the better of me. “Take me off speakerphone.”

Hugo instructs for Isabelle to stay in the car before a door creaking open sounds down the line. “I’m alone,” he informs me a short time later, but it’s the words he doesn’t speak that are the loudest of all.

“Enough with the attitude, Hugo. You need to remember who you work for.”

He sighs but doesn’t repudiate my statement.

“Where are you taking her?”

I hear him scrub at the stubble on his chin. “We’re heading to the airport. She wants to go home.”

“She’s afraid of flying. That’s why she drove here.”

“I know,” Hugo interrupts. “But she said her greatest fear has already happened, so what’s the harm in facing another one?”

I stay quiet, unable to comprehend what Isabelle means by her statement. She said earlier that the gentleman at the gala

didn't scare her, so why is she afraid?

"Her greatest fear was losing you." The weight on my chest is more crippling than Hugo's desolate tone. "What did you do, Isaac?"

"I made a mistake." *One that I'll regret every day of my life.* "Please keep her safe, Hugo. You can't let anything happen to her." My tone makes my request come out more like a plea than a demand.

"I will." His voice isn't as harsh as it was earlier.

"Thank you."

Just as I'm about to disconnect the call, Hugo's deep voice shouts my name. I press my phone back to my ear in just enough time to hear him say, "Not all mistakes are unfixable. If you work hard enough, even the most broken things can be repaired."

He can say that because he didn't see the look in Isabelle's eyes when she said goodbye. It cut me like a knife. Nothing has ever hurt as much as hearing those words seep from her lips.

When the creak of the suite door opening resonates into the living area, I strengthen my stance, pretending my heart wasn't just ripped out of my chest.

"Hey."

Hunter strolls into the living room, dumping his hemp bag near the sofa on his way. While scratching his scraggly beard, he takes in the space, paying dutiful attention to the half-eaten food on the coffee table. After his eyes shoot to the French doors, they drift back to me. "Where's Izzy?"

Ignoring the low hit his question smacks my stomach with, I gather the dishware off the coffee table to place them on the waiter's trolley. "She and Hugo have gone back to Ravenshoe." My tone is as gruff as Hunter's beard.

"I thought she was staying here until Monday?"

The dishware breaks when I throw it onto the stainless-steel trolley with more force than needed. While scrubbing my hand across my tired eyes, settling my fury, I turn around to face Hunter. "Her plans changed."

He watches me curiously with a puzzled expression clouding his gaze. His pupils widen when his eyes zoom in on the red welt Isabelle's hand left on my face. "Did she find out about our trip to Vegas?"

I shake my head, confusing him more. "She found out about the tenant staying in my apartment." My words are so hoarse, it's as if my throat has been cut with shards of glass.

My proclamation doesn't ease Hunter's confusion. If anything, it intensifies it.

"My apartment on Hyde."

"Oh fuck..." he breathes harshly, finally clueing on.

He knows about my indiscretion as he was the first and only man I called when I woke up with Clara in my bed. He accessed every security camera in my building to substantiate that there was some type of error, that what I saw with my own two eyes couldn't have been true.

The only error that morning was my abysmal lapse in judgment.

Clara is one of Cormack's younger sisters. I've known her for nearly as long as I've known Cormack. He introduced us

when she visited our dorm on the first family visit at our college over nine years ago. She's undeniably beautiful with long golden hair, bright blue eyes, and flawless skin, but she reminds me so much of Cormack, all I see is him when I look at her. That alone meant I'd never look at her in the same light that she looks at me.

I know she's had a crush on me for years. She's tried numerous times to make our relationship something more than a friendship, but I never looked at her that way. I never saw her as anything more than a friend. That's why I'm so shocked. The day I got arrested, I spiraled out of control, but even in the most demanding situations, I usually maintain a collective mentality.

Obviously, that day my moral compass was way askew.

"Did you explain the situation to Izzy?" Hunter asks.

"What's there to explain? I got rip-roaring drunk the day you arrested me, then woke up the next morning in bed with another woman having no recollection of the night before."

Hunter pulls at the collar of his shirt. He's back to his standard jeans and t-shirt combination. "I probably wouldn't use those words, but if you explain what lead to it, she might understand."

My disbelieving chuckle booms in the quietness of the living area. It's a laugh that expresses the pain tearing through my chest.

"Explain that you didn't purposely deceive her. It was just the wrong-time-wrong-place shit." His concerned eyes glance into mine. "You were dealing with some bad shit that day, Isaac, and this proves you're a mere man and not the myth everyone thinks you are. People make mistakes all the time.

You had a lapse in judgment. That doesn't make you a terrible person."

I shake my head. Blaming my poor choices on a drunken mistake is the easy way out. I'm more capable than that. I fucked up. I made a mistake, but if I'm being entirely honest, when I woke that morning, I wanted Isabelle to feel the betrayal I felt when I discovered she had lied to me for months on end. I wanted her to suffer through the broken trust I was dealing with. It was only when guilt surfaced, and my drunken haze lifted, did I realize I had made a colossal mistake. A blunder so mammoth our relationship may never come back from it.

When I found out Isabelle didn't deceive me, I should have come clean before begging for forgiveness. Instead, I acted like a coward by sweeping it under the rug. I used Megan's incident as a distraction from telling her because I knew she wouldn't forgive me, but I couldn't give her up.

I can't give her up.

She's my addiction.

She's my everything.

She's mine.

I will make this right. I just need time to work out how.



## CHAPTER 28



## ISAAC

“Good afternoon, Isaac.” Tina leans over the bar so far, her cleavage is dangerously close to spilling out. “A gentleman is waiting for you in your office.”

While gesturing with my head that I heard her, I continue my brisk strides. I’m not surprised when I enter my office to discover my chair facing the window. Henry Gottle, Sr. has been a building watcher for as long as I’ve been born. Even living in a city with an abundance of scenery, he never stops absorbing every architectural structure and landscape around him.

“Henry.” I sling my jacket over my coat rack before spinning around to face him. His dark blue suit is only just visible on the arm of my leather chair, but a man with characteristics like Henry doesn’t require me to see his face to know it’s him. I can sense it in my bones.

“You’ve always had a fascination with arches, Isaac. The curve and the design of this window is marvelous.”

He waves his hands to the curved brick window in my office before swiveling the chair to face me. His dark blue suit is impeccably tailored, but he wears it with an edginess that makes him appear younger than he is. His wavy black hair,

mocha-skin coloring, and icy blue eyes make him the spitting image of his son, although, obviously, he's a few years older than him. Not many—just a few.

Henry became a father at the tender age of seventeen. People believe their rift is because Henry put his empire above his son, but that isn't the case. Henry loves his son. He loves him so much he refused to let him live the lifestyle he was raised in.

Henry was born to be the man he has become. It was his destiny. Being the first-born son of the world's most notorious mob boss guaranteed he'd have a viable reputation, but the difference between Henry and others in his industry is that he isn't a monster, and he most certainly isn't ruthless. He commands respect, but he does it without the underhanded and brutal tactics of his competitors. Everything I've learned the past nine years, I learned from Henry. He's a second father to me.

“It's a similar arch to the one you have in your bedroom window. Yes?”

Smirking, I nod. “It was done by the same architect. If I look hard enough from my bedroom window, I can see the Dungeon from there.”

Henry smiles. “The king overlooking his empire.”

I glance out the window. Before Isabelle, my every accomplishment was measured by my wealth, my business, and my reputation. Now, it all seems worthless. While running my hand along my cropped beard, my gaze shifts back to Henry. He's studying me with as much concentration as he used on the architecture of my office. “Did you get the photos?”

His eyelid gets an involuntary tick. “Yes.” His short reply doesn’t allude to his findings. He’s skilled at keeping his cards close to his chest. Another point that makes him brilliant in his industry.

“And?”

“You forgot a photo.” He stands from my chair and ambles toward me. “This one.” When he hands me the picture of Isabelle I left in the top drawer of my desk, a fierce storm brews within me, surged on by my vital necessity to protect Isabelle. Sensing my vicious composure, Henry stills. The chill of his icy gaze runs over my face, absorbing the turmoil scorching my veins. “She’s your Katarina?”

Katarina was Henry’s one and only love. She’s also Henry, Jr.’s mother. Not only did Henry give up his son to save him from this lifestyle, he also gave up the love of his life as well.

“Yes, she’s my Katarina.”

Henry’s brows pull together as his eyes dash between mine. “Do you know who she is?” This time, he leaves his cards laying on the table fully exposed for me to see.

I nod. “Yes.”

“Then you know she can’t be your Katarina. You dodged a bullet once with Ophelia. You can’t dodge it again with her.”

I shoot him a wry look, warning him that he overstepped the mark with his comment. “She doesn’t have any association with Vladimir. She doesn’t even know him—”

“Just like Ophelia was unaware her father was trying to sign you as his fighter for months before you started dating?”

My jaw clenches tight. This isn’t the first time he’s accused Ophelia of being an elaborate ruse to force me to fight

under Col. “Ophelia died, yet that still isn’t enough for you to stop harboring ill feelings toward her,” I snarl viciously. “You’re obviously more callous than your reputation suggests.”

Henry flinches from my bitter words, and the anger fettering his face softens. “If you merge your empire with Vladimir’s, Isaac, you’ll never get out.” He paces closer to me as the concern in his eyes overtakes his fury. “Is she worth losing everything for? Your wealth? Your empire? And perhaps even your life?”

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation. “She’s worth risking everything for.”

Thick silence meets my response. Henry’s commanding stature doesn’t falter. He merely maintains control the same way he governs his empire—with sharpness and authority.

I rein in my anger, emulating the man from whom I’ve learned many valuable lessons. “Was the signature at the junkyard him?”

“Yes.” After dipping his chin, he strides to my office door. Just before he exits, he turns back to peer at me. “Tread carefully, Isaac. If you need me, I’m only a phone call away.”

I issue my thanks with a lift of my chin.

Once my office door closes, I dig my phone out of my pocket and dial a familiar number. Ryan answers a few seconds later. “Ryan Carter.”

“Ryan, it’s Isaac—”

“Now isn’t a good time. Can this wait?”

His voice is strained with worry, but I’d rather pass on this message now. “It will only take a minute.”

A doctor being paged to the intensive care unit bellows down the line along with Ryan's shuffling feet. My brows furrow, wondering why he's at the hospital, let alone an intensive care unit.

"If it's regarding Isabelle's case, the bullet recovered from Megan's crime scene is being removed from the DA's evidence. The CSI officer in Hopeton agreed that the bullet did not pass through human matter."

Relief washes over me. "Does that mean their case against Isabelle has been dropped?"

Ryan sighs. "Not yet, but we're close." His voice muffles for the quickest second before he tells me he has to go.

"Before you do—"

He sighs again, louder this time.

"You'll want to hear this." He doesn't say anything, but the fact he hasn't hung up tells me I have his attention. "The two police officers who assaulted Isabelle—"

"Yes." Now he's invested enough to speak.

"They're dead."

"Fuckin' hell, Isaac."

"It wasn't me." My tone gets an edge of anger to it.

"But you know who it was?"

"Yes. If you can meet with me, I'll explain everything."

"I'll be at your office in an hour."

Not waiting for my reply, he disconnects the call.

## CHAPTER 29



## ISABELLE

A nightmare wakes me from my sleep at 3:35 a.m. I gasp in quick breaths to suffocate the scream attempting to break out of my parched mouth. My body is coated with sweat, and my heart is erratically beating. This dream was much worse than any I've had previously. The vivid scene from the barn has come back full force, but my wondrous imagination multiplied the horrific image.

The gruesome scene I witnessed that morning has been plaguing me since I left Isaac at the hotel four nights ago. I've tried clearing my mind of negative thoughts before going to bed as recommended by Dr. Clarke, but nothing has worked. Every night, without fail, before I fall asleep, my mind wanders to the last time I saw Isaac. Add that to my upcoming murder trial and suspension from the Bureau, and you've got the perfect recipe for nightmares. I'm beyond exhausted, heartbroken, and numb. I'm a fucking wreck.

My gaze floats to the bedside table holding the turned-off and most likely dead cell Isaac gave me last week. Even beyond pissed, my heart yearns to know Isaac isn't hurt like my dreams portray. I loved him from the moment I crashed into him at the airport, so I can't just switch off my feelings no matter how hard I pray.



Instead of making a costly mistake I can't take back, I put on my dressing gown and pad into Regan's kitchen. When Hugo and I flew back to Ravenshoe, I begged him to take me to Harlow's apartment. My pleas fell on deaf ears. Hugo said we either go to Regan's house or he'd pay for a hotel out of his salary.

Isaac pays his staff very well, but I didn't want Hugo to pay for my stubbornness, so, with reluctance, I walked back into Regan's apartment, ignoring the door opposite the one I was entering. I'd love nothing more than to scratch my nails down Clara's disgusting face, but since that would have her believing she won, I've kept a cool, collective approach—for now.

I fill a glass of water to the brim before gulping it down, hoping it will dislodge the lump in my throat. The water eradicates the dryness in my mouth, but it does little to alleviate the ache in my chest.

When something suddenly moves in the corner of the room, I startle. I clutch my chest, which is struggling to contain the mad beat of my heart. "You scared the shit out of me."

Hugo grins before pushing off the wall his shoulder is propped against. He's wearing a pair of dangerously low-riding blue cotton pants. I say dangerously low as nearly every portion of his impressive 'V' muscle is on display.

His lips tug into an uneasy grin as he takes in the sweat-drenched collar of my shirt and wide, panicked eyes. "Another nightmare?"

I nod before sharing the details of my dream. It's another tactic Dr. Clarke believes will alleviate the stranglehold my nightmares have on me.

Hugo remains quiet, nodding at specific parts of the story while cringing at others. “If it makes you feel any better, Isaac is safe. I was talking to him before I heard your door open.”

Relief is the first thing that washes through me. It’s closely followed by worry. Why was Isaac calling Hugo so early in the morning?

As if he heard my inner monologue, Hugo says, “He was calling to make sure you hadn’t had another nightmare. He does that same thing every morning.”

“And what did you tell him?”

Even though I already know his answer, I want Hugo to spell it out for me. He’s loyal to a fault, but I don’t believe his loyalty to Isaac is solely because Isaac pays his staff well. My intuition is telling me it’s much deeper than that.

Hugo rubs at a kink in his neck. “I said you were sleeping well.” He drops his hands before intertwining his fingers. “He hung up before I heard your door open.”

“Are you planning to call him the instant I go back into my room?”

“Nah.” He flashes me a mischievous grin. “I’ll wait at least a minute or two.”

His chuckles bounce around the kitchen when my elbow becomes friendly with his ribs. After a final stink-eye, I head back to my room. I don’t even make it into the hallway before overhearing part of Hugo’s phone conversation with Isaac. “She’s okay... it didn’t seem as bad this time. Yeah, I will. She has another appointment with Avery at ten this morning. I promise you, Isaac, nothing will happen to her.”

---

I shower and dress before hurrying out of Regan's guest bedroom. Because it took me so long to settle after my nightmare, I overslept my alarm, and I'm now running late for my second appointment with Dr. Clarke.

My quick steps falter halfway between my room and the entryway when I spot Alex standing by the table housing my satchel and the iPhone I purchased Tuesday morning. Snarling, I quicken my steps. No words spill from his mouth when I dig my iPhone out of my satchel so I can search for the bug he no doubt planted.

"I didn't plant the bugs in your phone, Isabelle." His admission is backed up by my phone coming out of my investigation without evidence, but I still don't trust him. "The first time I heard about your phone being tapped was when you mentioned it at the courthouse last week."

"Then how did you find out about Isaac's private residence?"

Isaac said the house wasn't in his name. No one but Hugo and I knew about it. So, unless Alex was tracking my phone, he wouldn't have known about Isaac's private oasis.

Alex's eyes shift to the other side of the room. Following his gaze, I see Hugo loitering in the living area. His stance is solid, and his livid gaze is raptly planted on Alex. "I followed you there."

My eyes snap back to his, expecting his focus to still be locked on Hugo. I take a step back when I discover his eyes are directed at me.

“Me?” Who knew one little word would take so much effort to deliver?

Alex nods. “You and Isaac. I lost your tail for nearly fifteen minutes when I followed you from his apartment one night, so you could imagine my surprise when I found his Bugatti pulled over on the side of the highway on my way home.” He looks minutes from being ill. “I put a tracker on his car when the windows got a little foggy.”

Oh my god. It is my fault. That was the night Isaac took me to his private home. I was upset about discovering we’d just left his *fuck pad*, so Isaac pulled over so he could comfort me. Although I didn’t lead the Bureau to him directly, I did in a way.

“If you knew about his private residence for so long, why did you take months to request a search warrant?”

A twitch impinges Alex’s top lip. “Because back then, we had nothing on Isaac.” My smile turns into a frown when he quickly adds on, “I said *back then*, Isabelle,” His tone reeks of arrogance. “The search we conducted on was a *valid* search warrant with a *very valid* reason.”

Before he can display anymore of his arrogance, we’re interrupted. “You were not invited into my home under the pretense of discussing matters pertaining to Isaac Holt.” The cuff of Regan’s designer shirt tickles my wrist when she moves to stand next to me. “You said you had information that would assist my client. If that statement is false, I suggest you leave my premises immediately before I file an injunction against you.”

Alex’s loud gulp sounds through the quietness, but his firm stature doesn’t falter from Regan’s whip-cracking

stubbornness. “I do have credible information that will be of benefit to your client.”

“Then let’s get this over and done with.” Regan gestures for Alex to enter her living area before murmuring, “I wouldn’t want to take up too much of your *valuable* time.”

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“So, the request for me to join your team was filed before I even graduated from the academy?” My tone relays my utter confusion. Nothing Alex is saying makes any sense.

Alex nods. “Yes. The paperwork was dated a month before I was assigned to my position.” He hands me a transfer request form that displays my name and FBI contact information in explicit detail.

“But that doesn’t make any sense. You said you brought me in as a piece of eye candy for Isaac.” Regan’s eyes snap to mine. Her livid gaze has my pulse accelerating. “I didn’t know that until after I joined Alex’s team. I also refused to become a commodity for the Bureau. My refusal got me on coffee and filing duties for seven months.”

Alex returns Regan’s glare with as much intensity as she’s hitting him with, but the remorse in his eyes makes his efforts less than stellar. They’ve met previously. I’m certain of it. And if the heat creeping across Regan’s neckline is anything to go by, I’m going to assume their meetings weren’t business-related.

“The decision to bring Isabelle onto my team as a decoy for Isaac was decided after attending a conference in San Francisco in April,” Alex informs us, his gaze not leaving Regan. “Every male agent in the vicinity kept mentioning a

hot, new rookie agent who was seeking a placement. I was shocked when I discovered it was the same agent I denied a transfer request from during my first week in the Ravenshoe office as the superior officer.”

His eyes shift to me. “I wanted to see if you lived up to the hype. I was also desperate to force Isaac to make a mistake, so I used any tactic I could find. I heard from a very reliable source that a beautiful lady was his eternal weakness.”

“A beautiful *blonde* lady,” Regan sneers. “And the person you got that information from knew you were squeezing them for confidential facts. That’s why she led you down the garden path.”

The temperature in the room turns stifling when Regan and Alex undertake an intense stare-down. It’s so roasting, a sweat mustache forms on my top lip.

“Either tell me what information you have that’ll assist my client or get the hell out of my house.” Regan’s demand is croaky with emotions, but also full of bitterness.

Remorse flashes through Alex’s eyes. After trailing his index finger over his brow, removing a layer of sweat beading there, his hand digs into his leather satchel braced against the single sofa chair he’s sitting on. “It took a bit of convincing, but Brandon supplied me with the serial numbers from the tracking devices stored on your phone.” He hands a sheet of paper to both Regan and me. “After searching through many hidden back channels, I discovered the devices were placed in your phone by the FBI.”

When my furious eyes snap to his, he clarifies, “Not by my department. It was the same person who initially requested your transfer to Ravenshoe.”

I glare at him for several heart-thrashing seconds before scanning the document he handed me. My teeth grit when I discover who ordered the two tracking devices for my phone.

“That bitch!” Regan’s response is more reserved than the defiling ones running through my head right now. Her eyes lift and lock with Alex. “How could you let this happen to an agent on your team?” she scolds him. “I thought you said nothing like this would ever happen to a member of *your* crew. That you were more ethical and better than those before you. This just shows you aren’t any better than your predecessor. You’ve let Theresa hinder your investigation from the very beginning.”

“Regan... don’t. This isn’t a personal attack,” Alex interjects.

Regan abruptly stands from her seat. Her face is ashen, and her eyes are welling with tears. “No, it *isn’t* a personal attack.” Her stance strengthens as she crosses her arms in front of her chest. “But it was. You used me, all to climb the corporate ladder at the Bureau, then you let this happen because you became a jealous green-eyed monster.”

Alex recoils like her words slapped him across the face. He’s as shocked as Hugo, who is watching their exchange from a guarded position in the corner of the room.

After running her hands down the front of her tight, red cotton skirt successfully removing the crinkles while also drying her damp hands, Regan shimmies her shoulders. Once a professional mask has slipped over her face, she devotes her attention back to Alex. “Thank you for supplying us with these documents. I’ll be sure to pass on my commendations for your tact to your superior officers.” Her tone is professional with a hint of sternness. “Hugo will show you the way out.”

“I don’t need to be shown out. I already know my way.” Alex gathers his leather satchel from the floor and his jacket slung over the back of the chair before making his way to the entryway. He gets two paces away from the door before he stops and pivots back around. “I’m looking further into how this happened to you, Isabelle. You have my word, my department will thoroughly investigate this.”

Part of my anger dissipates from his words. He’s the most genuine and honest I’ve seen him. “Thank you.”

He accepts my commendation with a dip of his chin before his focus shifts to Regan. Seeing them stand side by side is like looking at a solar eclipse. Both have dominant, strong personalities with a healthy dash of stubbornness. Both as gorgeous as the other, but just like Isaac and me, the string tethering them together has somehow snapped.

Once Alex shows himself out, Regan’s endeavors switch from a professional campaign to a personal one. “Please don’t say anything to Isaac. I... umm... met Alex before I knew who he was. The instant I found out he was working on a team assigned to investigate Isaac, I ended everything, and I haven’t seen him since.”

My heart is pained by the forlorn look straining her beautiful face. Even angry, her eyes give away her ultimate betrayal. She had deep, heartfelt feelings for Alex.

The harsh expression tainting her face fades when I nod, agreeing to keep her secret. “It would’ve taken Alex a lot to share this information with us, Regan. He’s not usually willing to impart with vital information.”

“I know,” Regan replies as her tongue delves out to moisten her top lip. “But it’s still a very small step compared to all the mistakes he has made.” She squeezes my hand,



assuring me she's not taking my comment lightheartedly before heading to her office. "I need to make a few phone calls regarding this new evidence we've been presented."

"Will this help with my investigation?" I gesture my head to the document I'm grasping.

Regan nods. "Yes. It gives us a good chance of having any evidence gathered by Theresa or her team thrown out."

My heart leaps. "That's *all* the evidence in the case. Her team was the first one at the crime scene." My words are drenched with excitement.

"I know." Regan's face breaks into her heaven's-gates-being-opened smile. "It's time to take this bitch down once and for all."

## CHAPTER 30



## ISABELLE

*I*yank a pair of super tight jeans over my thighs. “I can’t believe you convinced me to do this.”

Harlow’s head pops out of my walk-in wardrobe. “What is the good of best friends if they can’t convince you to get a little bit *flirty*?” She says ‘flirty’ like she’s trying to pry a hundred-dollar bill from the hand of an old geezer at a strip club.

I command my lungs to take their last full breath before fastening the button on my jeans. I really need to go for a run... *or five*. I’ve been binging on carbs the past two weeks, and my ass is suffering from my poor choices. The only exercise I’ve done is the bicep curl from the constant lifting of food to my mouth. I’m not eating because of stress. I’m eating out of boredom—and perhaps a broken heart.

Harlow convinced me to celebrate tonight because Regan finally got approval for an emergency court hearing to dispute the evidence in my case. Because of the busy Thanksgiving and Christmas season, it took two weeks to have her request approved. While waiting for approval, I’ve done nothing but lounge in her apartment, eat ice cream and chocolate, and play Xbox with Hugo while successfully hiding the wounds of a broken heart.

I miss Isaac every day, and it takes all my strength not to call him amid a terrifying nightmare. All I want is to hear his voice, so I know he's safe, but then the hurt of his betrayal resurfaces, and my levelheadedness returns. I haven't spoken to him since the night I left the hotel. I also haven't shed a tear since that night because once I let them flow, I'll never reel them back in.

I've overheard random conversations between Isaac and Hugo, though. They're only brief. More Hugo updating Isaac on my situation than anything. I guess we don't need to talk since everything was said at the hotel. I can still breathe without Isaac in my life, but I feel numb, empty, almost lifeless.

"Hey." Harlow smacks me upside the head with a shimmery midriff shirt. "Get your head out of those clouds. No Isaac. No trial. Nothing but sweaty bodies and loud, booty-shaking music. They're the only thoughts allowed in your head tonight." She's quoted the same saying since she called me earlier today convincing me that a night of dancing would get me out of the funk I'm in. "Now, put this on and get over here, so I can hide the bags your eyes are carrying."

I place the shimmery black-sequined midriff shirt before planting my backside in the dining chair in front of the full-length mirror. I cringe when I catch my reflection. My hair is drenching wet and hanging loosely on my head. Since it's soaked, it's nearly as dark as the rings around my eyes. My face is pale, showing I haven't had a decent night's sleep in weeks, but the ghastliest aspect of my appearance is the heartbroken woman my face shouldn't be parading.

I wonder how much makeup will be required to hide that?

"How is Cormack?"

Harlow dabs concealer under my eyes as her lips purse. “He’s okay. The record company is doing everything they can to assist Noah. Cormack is personally paying for the medical specialists working with him. It’s just a waiting game now.”

The lead singer in one of the bands Cormack’s label manages was in a horrific car accident the week we arrived back from the gala. He’s a young and extremely popular resident of Ravenshoe, but for some reason, the news of his accident has been kept under wraps. I don’t know why. Perhaps out of respect for his family?

“Is their song still number one?”

“Yep!” Harlow requests for me to close my eyes. “The remaining band members have more pressing matters on their minds right now, but once things settle down, I think they’ll be pleasantly surprised with how well their album is doing.”

My heart squeezes. I’m glad Isaac’s brother’s band is getting the recognition they deserve. I haven’t heard them perform live, but their song, “Surrender Me” is one I’ve listened to a lot the past two weeks.

They’re so talented, Cormack personally oversees their career. I wonder if they realize they have a billionaire negotiating their terms and conditions?

---

My eyes bulge as my mouth gapes. “Holy shit!” My glowing eyes shift to Harlow. “You’re in the wrong business!”

She bumps me with her hip. “Makeup, icing, it’s all the same thing. It helps cover up the little flaws on a scrumptiously delicious product.”

Little flaws. My God, she's a genius. I look revamped. Happy. Hell, I look hot! The dark circles around my eyes have vanished, my lips are fire-engine red, and my face is glowing.

Squealing, I throw my arms around her tiny shoulders. "Thank you." Her makeover has the first rays of sunshine peeking out of a dark, turmoiled cloud that's been hovering over my head the past two weeks.

---

Pumping music booms out of the club we're entering. It's so loud, it rattles my chest as effectively as my heart. Fighting the urge to do a little jig on the spot, I shift my eyes to Harlow and Hugo. Both have huge smiles on their faces. Harlow is smiling because she's excited about a night of dancing. Hugo's grin is for an entirely different reason. He just spotted Cormack's assistant, Peta, standing in the VIP section we're strolling toward.

When Harlow told Cormack she wanted to take me out dancing, his approval came with one condition—he organized the night. Since he's so flashy, we are the very exclusive guests at a highly overpriced VIP section of a dance club in Hopeton. Only the wealthiest and most respected guests convene here.

With the line to enter going all the way down the block and around the corner, I'm going to assume Isaac owns this club. It isn't just its popularity leading me to my conclusion, it's the fact Isaac is embedded in each of his nightclubs. Dark gray metals with mahogany wood features give off the ambiance of sex and sensuality, but it also makes my heart squeeze. It reminds me so much of Isaac.

“Ms. Murphy, Ms. Brahn, Hugo.” Peta’s tone is professional, yet kind, but when Harlow wraps her up in a friendly hug, she stiffens.

Peta was gorgeous the first time I saw her, but tonight she looks dazzling in a tight red spaghetti-strapped dress and black Milano pumps. Her hair is hanging loosely down her shoulders, framing her beautiful face, and her eyes have a fun sparkle to them.

A smile curls my lips when her cheeks heat from being subjected to Hugo’s glance. Hugo’s well-fitted trousers, buttoned-up shirt, and a dark jacket give him a casual look compared to the suits he wears at work, but with an edge of the dangerous bad-boy vibe girls go silly for.

“Mr. McGregor arranged for your drinks to be supplied to the booth—”

Harlow stops Peta mid-sentence. “Not tonight, Peta. You’re officially relieved of your duties.” When Peta’s eyes widen in fear, Harlow puts her worry to rest. “For tonight. God, I’d never fire you, Peta. I meant that you’re here as a guest of mine, not a staff member of Cormack’s.”

My heart warms when genuine admiration flares in Peta’s eyes. “Thank you.”

---

Even with the drinks being ridiculously high-priced, and a booth costing more than most people earn a week, the VIP dance floor is packed with partygoers eager to spend their Saturday night dancing. The atmosphere is electrifying, and when its added to my alcohol-fueled carefree attitude, all the

worries that have been plaguing me the past several weeks vanish into the bass blaring out of the speakers.

While making my way back to our booth, I swipe away the sweat beading on my nape from dancing the past three hours. My eyes roll when I hear the heavy footsteps of Hugo shadowing me. Even while dancing with Peta, he'd incessantly peered over at me.

"You could have stayed dancing with Peta." I slide across the booth seat before signaling for the waiter. I've been sampling a delicious array of cocktails tonight, but unlike the last time I went out, I'm ensuring my ratio of water to cocktails is more even, so I'm only now getting the pleasant buzz of alcohol prancing through my veins.

Hugo remains silent, but he doesn't need to say anything. His arched brow and straight lips reveal his answer, anyway.

When the waiter sets down a large bottle of sparkling water, I add something more appealing to my order. "Can I also get a strawberry daiquiri, please?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Brahn. We've been instructed to only supply you with water for the remainder of the night."

I glare at the water in shock and bewilderment. "By whom?"

With every second that passes, my anger unsteadily grows. "Are you kidding me?" My furious eyes dart to Hugo. "I'm not even drunk, yet my alcohol supply has been cut off."

Hugo shrugs, but his eyes relay that Isaac's instructions weren't given to him.

My gaze floats back to the waiter. "Then *Hugo* would like to order a strawberry daiquiri, *please*."



It isn't the waiter's fault he's been shoved between me and an arrogant, egotistical asshole, but he's the only person I can lash out at, so he, unfortunately, suffers the main brunt of my anger.

The waiter cringes. "Mr. Holt advised the waiting staff that Hugo was not drinking tonight since he's driving." He places down a second bottle of water like it will somewhat subdue me. "Is there anything else?"

With a huff, I shake my head before shifting my focus back to the dance floor. Two eye-catching males flank Harlow and Peta. Seeing them dancing seductively with a range of eye-catching men inspires a brilliant idea. Isaac can cut off my alcohol supply, but he can't stop me from dancing with a bunch of horny, fearless men.

---

An hour later, I stomp toward the women's restroom on the VIP level of the club. My disenchantment isn't just from Isaac failing to react to me dancing with other men, it's because no matter how up close and personal I get with my dance partners, their dance moves severely lack in intensity and seduction. Maybe it's just me? Perhaps my disheveled appearance from the past few weeks has resurfaced? Or maybe I'm just too fussy about the caliber of dance partners since I'm forever comparing their dancing style to Isaac's.

Either way, I was certain Isaac would have reacted to me getting *friendly* with any suitor who wasn't him, but nope, not a peep has been heard from him the past hour. Even Hugo seems surprised. Anytime I caught his gaze, he just shrugged before the confusion on his face intensified.

Hugo grins before taking a protective stance on the outside of the bathroom door. I do my business before walking to the vanity to wash up. After placing my clutch on the black granite vanity, I lift my eyes to the mirror. Half the makeup Harlow put on earlier has slid off my face, but I still look halfway decent. I have a sexed-up look going on, the look I usually hold after strenuous sexual activities with Isaac. God, I miss seeing that look on my face.

I dampen a napkin before running it across my cheeks, removing the mascara smears giving me raccoon eyes. My attention diverts from my disastrous face when I hear a group of ladies giggling through a frosted glass door at the side of the stall. I throw the dirty napkin into the waste receptacle before pacing toward the cheer-filled noise. My heart rate quickens when I open the door to discover another bathroom on the other side. Unlike the one I'm using, this one is crammed with women.

The female security officer guarding the door eyes me curiously as I stroll into the bathroom. She's standing guard to ensure the regular patrons don't mill into the VIP bathroom, but she has no qualms about the opposite happening.

Seeing this as the prime opportunity to replenish my parched mouth with a fruity cocktail, I exit the bathroom from the other side. The lower half of the club is just as impressive as the VIP section. Hundreds of people are gathered in the sweaty-scented space, meaning I have to stand on my tippy toes to locate the closest bar.

I located it a few seconds later. It's in the far-right corner. Sweat rolls down my back from the stifling heat as I pace through the throng of people. The bar is packed with patrons

requesting service, so I move to the end and wait my turn to be served.

A male bartender with gorgeous chocolate skin and a twisted afro smiles a greeting approximately two minutes later. “What can I get you, baby?” He has the type of voice that would be perfect for a jazz singer.

While digging a twenty-dollar bill out of my purse, I reply, “A strawberry daiquiri, please.”

My attempt to pay is thwarted by a deep voice at my side. “This one is on me.”

The bartender nods before moving down the bar to prepare my order. While he does that, I drink in the dark-haired man offering to buy my drink. He’s wearing a snug pair of jeans and a Ralph Lauren polo shirt. His chin has a small layer of stubble, and his arms have veins entangled around them, revealing he works out. His eyes are dark and sharp, and his lips are plump, although his bottom lip is slightly smaller than his top.

“That isn’t necessary.” I strive to project my voice over the thumping music blaring from the speakers above my head. My efforts are less than stellar when he tilts closer to me. “That isn’t necessary,” I repeat, shouting. “I can pay for my drinks.”

These types of places are great to mingle with others while looking for a casual sex partner, but even heartbroken and tipsy won’t alter the facts that I’m not ready for that. I don’t think I’ll ever be prepared for that.

My skin prickles when the unknown gentleman places his hand on the bare skin on the lower half of my back before brushing his lips against my ear. “How about we move down to the end of the bar so we won’t have to yell.”

Not waiting for me to reply, he guides me to the very far end of the bar. I could maneuver myself out of his hold, but he seems harmless enough. Because we're no longer under blaring speakers, the music simmers to a more manageable volume.

My eyes lift from the countertop when the bartender places my order in front of me. I attempt to pay him, but once again, the casually-dressed suitor beats me. Thirsty, I take a sip of my daiquiri. I moan when its sugary goodness hits my taste buds. It's well worth a trek through a human jungle.

“Good?”

I lock my eyes with the dark-haired man before nodding. He takes my appreciation as a sign to offer an introduction. “Lance.” He offers me his hand to shake.

“Isabelle,” I reply, accepting it.

“You're breathtakingly beautiful.”

I blush. I appreciate that he's not hiding his intentions, but throwing out direct compliments like that is awkward for all involved.

“Thank you,” I answer, trying to mask a cringe.

His smirk merges to a full smile when horror crosses my face. “Oh, be still my beating heart. It's rare to find a woman who doesn't realize the captivating beauty she has.”

The heat on my cheeks amplifies. Lance has dashing charms and mouthwatering good looks, but I'm not interested. No man will ever spark an interest out of me the way Isaac can.

Several long minutes pass in silence. It's highly uncomfortable, although Lance doesn't seem to notice. He

thinks he's in with a chance. I'm not so inclined to agree.

Thankfully, the ding of a phone interrupts the uncomfortable silence. "It isn't me." Lance gestures his head to my clutch purse. "It came from in there."

I dig my phone out of my clutch, curious to discover who is texting me. My first guess is Brandon. I haven't seen him for the past two weeks, but we've kept in contact via dozens of text messages every day.

The screen on my iPhone displays that I have one message from an unknown number.

**Unknown Number:** *Lose the date.*

Although the number is unrecognized, I know who it's from. It isn't just my intuition being activated but my libido as well. My heart wallops against my ribs as I return my eyes to Lance. He's eyeing me with a spark of interest in his heavy-lidded gaze, blindly unaware of the volatile situation approaching him.

A vein in my neck works overtime when my phone dings again.

**Isaac:** *Last chance, Isabelle. Lose the date.*

Stupidly, my eyes scan the crowd. Even with the club being packed, a man with an aura like Isaac stands out, so I'm certain he isn't here. I just can't help but check.

My eyes freeze halfway across the bar when my phone pings with another message.

**Isaac:** *Look up.*

My pulse quickens when I spot a black security dome mounted on the ceiling. I should have realized he'd be watching me. He's always watching.

Idiotically, I reply to his text.

**Me:** *Leave me alone. I'm not your possession anymore.*

Seconds feel like hours as I await his reply, but my heart ceases beating once it arrives.

**Isaac:** *That's where you're wrong, Isabelle. You are MINE!*

Feeling spiteful, I lift my gaze to the camera, smile brightly, then dump my phone into the ginormous cocktail the lady next to me is consuming.

“Hey,” she shouts, her mouth forming an ‘O.’

I cringe when her nasally voice shreds my eardrums, then cringe some more when I realize I just ruined my brand new way-more-than-I-can-afford-to-replace phone.

Lance chuckles, impressed with my rebellious tantrum. “Some friends and I are hoping to secure a booth in the VIP section. Would you like to join us?”

“I already have a booth with some girlfriends. You and your friends are more than welcome to join us if you'd like?”

I know I'm digging my own grave, but jealousy is rearing its ugly head, clouding my judgment. Besides, Isaac is also in Ravenshoe, so Lance isn't in any immediate danger.

When Lance smiles and nods, I offer my apologies to the lady next to me by placing my twenty-dollar bill next to her ruined drink. It probably isn't enough to replace her drink, but it's the only money I have, so it will have to do.

As he did earlier, Lance places his hand on my back to guide me through the sticky, dense crowd. The hum of activity is invigorating, and it has my pulse fastening. We're a little over halfway across the packed space when a phone in Lance's

jean pocket rings. After digging it out, he apologizes for the interruption before pushing his cell phone to his ear.

The longer his conversation continues, the more the color in his face drains. He licks his parched lips before handing me his phone. I eye him curiously, stumped. He makes a gesture like me speaking to his caller is detrimental to his livelihood. Although I'm uneasy by his request, I press his phone to my ear. My knees meet when the seductive purr of Isaac sounds down the line. It's been weeks since I've heard such an intoxicating voice.

“Do you ever do as requested?” His tone is low and dangerous—as depleted as my morals from how turned on I get from his deep timbre. “This is your last chance, Isabelle. Lose the date. If not, I'll come remove his hand from your body myself.” I shouldn't get turned on by his threat, but I do. “And I'll break every finger of his that has brushed your bare skin.”

The tingles of my traitorous pussy are heard in my reply. “You wouldn't dare.”

“Test me, Isabelle.”

He disconnects our call, stealing my chance to reply. My hand tremors when I hand Lance his phone. It isn't shuddering in fear. It's shaking with excitement. An angry Isaac is as sexy-as-sin, but a jealous Isaac is ten times hotter.

Lance's angst-riddled eyes dance between mine. “I... umm... forgot about a deadline—”

“It's okay, I understand.” Isaac scares even the brawliest-looking man, so someone with a down-to-earth personality like Lance wouldn't stand a chance battling against a man with a fierce reputation like Isaac's. “Thank you for the drink.”

When I lean in to give him a quick, friendly hug, I catch sight of Hugo standing outside the entrance of the VIP section. His face is constricted with anger, and his fists are clenched at his side. He's pissed, and all of his anger is directed at me.

After expelling a sharp breath, I pace toward him.

“Are you trying to get me fucking fired?”

“I'm sorry.” I skirt past him, hating both the way I'm acting and how I'm being treated. “I only wanted to get a drink.”

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For the next hour, I sit like a bona fide misery guts in the booth. Even the latest club hits keeping broad smiles plastered on Harlow and Peta's faces can't lessen the weight sitting heavily on my chest. I haven't had any contact with Isaac for over two weeks, yet he's still calling me his. Weeks ago, I would have given anything for him to declare that I was his. Now, now I don't know what the hell I want. I love Isaac. I love him with every fiber of my being, but I can't get past his betrayal. I can't forgive him for that. It's unforgivable.

With a huff, Harlow slides into our booth. Her face is misted with sweat, and her hair is damp at the ends. “It's crazy out there.”

I smile. She's been dancing with hot, sweaty men for hours, and Cormack hasn't said a peep. I, on the other hand, had my alcohol cut off, and a man was threatened harm by one I'm not even dating.

Harlow takes a sip out of her cocktail to calm the redness on her cheeks before devoting her attention to me. “What



happened?”

When I shrug, her brow cocks, calling bullshit on my halfhearted response.

Giving in, I spend the next five minutes updating her on what happened an hour ago. Her mouth gapes during some parts and firms in others, but for the most part, she remains quiet.

Once I finish telling her all the juicy details, she takes a few minutes to contemplate before her eyes drift lift to Hugo. “Shoo.” She waves him away like he’s a fly.

Hugo arches his brow before he crosses his arms in front of his broad chest.

Harlow smiles, not deterred by his determination. “We’re about to talk about periods, tampons, Viagra, vaginal cups—”

“All right, all right!” Hugo sounds mortified. “I’ll be right over there.” He points to a spare booth two spots up from us. “Please don’t go anywhere, Izzy.”

When I nod, he reluctantly strolls to the booth he pointed to. Harlow coughs to clear her throat before starting our conversation in a battlefield I never saw coming. “Don’t shoot me, just listen. He made a mistake, but that doesn’t mean you can’t forgive him if you want to.” Her glossed-over eyes flick between mine as she gathers my hand in hers. “Clara caught him during an extremely vulnerable moment. He was hurting, Izzy, way more than you probably realize.”

“You’re defending him?”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m not. I’m helping my best friend through a terrible phase of her life.” My heart warms from her referring to me as her best friend, but it does little to ease the pain in my chest. “You look so broken, Izzy. I hate

seeing you like this, so I want you to open your eyes and look at the whole picture. You know what Clara is like. Can you truly trust anything she says?”

“Isaac didn’t deny sleeping with her. That’s all the proof I need.”

“He didn’t confirm it either.”

I glare at her in disbelief. “I can’t believe you’re defending him. Do you think I should sweep it under the rug and forgive him?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. Whether you choose to forgive him or not is only a decision you can make, but I think you should talk to him. Find out what *really* happened. Get the *whole* story before formulating an opinion. You can’t act on something when you don’t have all the facts.”

I’ve always said you must have all the evidence before forming an opinion on something, but I didn’t give Isaac the chance to explain anything before I fled his hotel room. In my defense, I was beyond devastated that night. My heart was torn into a million pieces just from the guilty look marring his handsome face.

“Have you heard Lady Gaga’s song, “Million Reasons?” My eyes pop up from the tabletop to peer at Harlow. When I shake my head, she adds, “You should listen to it. It really resonates with your situation.” She squeezes my hand. “It’s time for you to give it as good as you’re getting it, Izzy.”

A weary grin stretches across my face as the heaviness on my chest lessens.

“And while you’re at it, take that bitch, Clara, down once and for all.”

My weary smile turns into a full-toothed grin.

## CHAPTER 31



## ISAAC

Okay, I'll admit it. I reacted poorly when the man seated with Isabelle eyed her like she was a meal he was about to consume, but I lost the ability to rein in my jealousy when he placed his hand on the bare skin of her back. No man's hands are allowed to touch skin that belongs to me, so you can be assured my threat wasn't idle when I said I'd break every finger that touched her. He's incredibly lucky he leads with his left hand, meaning his right would have remained untouched if he didn't adhere to my warning. He was proven more smart than stupid when he obeyed my demand while talking to him on the phone. He walked away from Isabelle without injury. That, in itself, is miraculous.

When Harlow told Cormack she and Isabelle were going dancing, he immediately called me. Cormack hides it better than me, but he's just as possessive of Harlow as I am of Isabelle. He didn't want her dancing with deviant men while he stayed home, twiddling his thumbs, so I divulged a plan.

My club.

My staff.

My crew.

Isabelle and Harlow assume the guests in the VIP section are paying patrons. They aren't. They're staff who were instructed on how they could interact with Isabelle and Harlow. Dancing was fine as long as their hands remained at an appropriate distance, and no portions below their belts grinded against any part of either girl's body. My ruse lost me thousands in revenue, but it was worth every penny to ensure no man would touch Isabelle.

Although Isabelle was furious at the waiter when I cut off her alcohol supply, I didn't do it to ruin her night. I did it to save her from having a horrible nightmare. Avery explained that too much sugar in the evening could increase the risk of nightmares. Hugo said Isabelle's nightmares have lessened the past two weeks, but I didn't want anything dampening the quality of her sleep. She has enough going on in her life right now. She doesn't need more added to the mix.

The past two weeks have been a major cluster-fuck. The lead singer of my brother's band was in a critical accident that's resulted in him being placed in an induced coma. Ravenshoe may not be on the map compared to bustling cities like New York, Paris, and the like, but it has one of the most advanced hospitals in the country. Cormack and I have made sure of it.

After harsh negotiations, my exchange of assets with Vladimir's crew is scheduled to take place at the end of the month. Isabelle is due in court first thing Monday morning with the hope of having the charges expunged, and Henry, Jr. organized a way for my fighter, Jacob, to fight the current champion in our region, at the cost of over three million dollars. So, you can imagine my fury when Jacob refused to leave Noah's bedside to participate in the fight he's been nagging me to arrange for the past five months.

I can't say I don't understand his loyalty to his friend, but he has no clue how many hoops I had to jump through to get him that lucrative fight. Not only will he tarnish my reputation if he refuses to fight, but he'll ruin any chance of fighting professionally again.

When the back-exit door of my club swings open, my gaze lifts from the screen on my phone. My heartbeat freezes when Isabelle emerges from the club looking more ravishing than she did in the surveillance footage I saw of her earlier tonight. She's always been appetizing, but tonight she's downright delectable.

Her quick steps falter when she senses my presence. Her head cranks to the left before swinging to the right, no doubt seeking me amongst the people milling outside the club. Hugo is the first to notice me leaning against the back panel of my town car. Although he's never trained as a bodyguard, his eyes persistently scan his surroundings for potential threats. It's a bad habit he established before he joined my empire.

After noticing the direction of Hugo's gaze, Isabelle inhales a big breath before pivoting around to face me. The crippling pain in my chest amplifies when our eyes collide. Hers are the most broken I've ever seen them. I try to speak, but my words congest in my throat. Their constrictive hold is nearly as tight as the one strangling my heart from the devastated look on her face.

My heart whacks against my ribs when Isabelle tilts in close to Hugo's side. I'm not being stung by the bite of jealousy, it's the words she speaks to him that has my pulse kicking up. "I'll meet you back at Regan's."

Smiling, Hugo nods before bridging the gap between his Chevelle and himself. Blood surges through my veins when

Isabelle slowly saunters toward me. Her beautiful scent invades my nostrils when she glides past me to slide into the backseat of my town car.

I slip in after her before raising my eyes to Roger, who is peering at me in the rearview mirror. “To Regan’s apartment.”

Isabelle’s breaths become faster when I raise the privacy partition. She’s not the only one nervous. I can feel butterflies tap-dancing in my stomach, which is utterly ridiculous. I’ve never been nervous. Call me conceited, but I’ve never had a reason to be—until now.

I expel a deep breath before turning my eyes to Isabelle. Her gaze is fixated on the star-filled sky. She’s not taking in the scenery. She’s just trying to ignore the energy bristling between us. When I run my index finger down her forearm, the veins in my hand bulge and the hairs on her arms bristle. Even angry, her body can’t deny me.

It’s a pity the same can’t be said for her words. “Please don’t touch me.”

My hand recoils, scorched by her words. She’s never denied my touch before. For several painstaking minutes, we sit side by side, the distance between us feeling greater than the Amazon River. The further we travel, the more her eyes fill with tears. God, I hope she doesn’t cry. I can’t stand having this much distance between us as it is, let alone if she cries.

After biting on her bottom lip, internally battling to keep her tears at bay, she locks her eyes with mine. “When did it happen?”

To start with, I’m confused about what she’s referring to. So much has happened the last month, I’m struggling to process it all, but it only takes seeing the anger clouding her

alluring eyes for me to understand. She's talking about my incident with Clara.

I hesitate, unsure how to reply without making it seem as if I'm placing the guilt on Isabelle's shoulders. She's not to blame for my lapse in judgment, so I don't want to make her feel that way.

The moisture in Isabelle's eyes dries when fury takes hold. "Don't lie to me, Isaac. I'm sick to death of being lied to. Just tell me the truth!"

Her angry voice claws at my heart, forcing me to say words I never wanted to speak. "The night I was arrested."

She slaps her hand over her face as her face scrunches up. "Oh my God, so it's my fault."

I scoot across the seat. "No, this isn't your fault. *I* made a mistake, Isabelle. Me. I'm an adult, so I'm more than capable of making my own decisions. This is *not* your fault."

She intakes a sharp, quick breath. "But you did it because you were angry at me. You punished me for my disloyalty by betraying me."

"No, Isabelle."

She calls out my deceit by narrowing her eyes, proving without a doubt she knows me better than anyone. "I didn't do it to antagonize you, but when I woke up with Clara in my bed, I wanted you to experience the hurt I was feeling." My tone is brutally honest, but it also displays my sorrow. "But I never meant to hurt you. I regret ever hurting you."

She rubs under her eyes to ensure her tears haven't spilled over before asking, "What *exactly* happened that night?"

"I don't know."



Her eyes narrow as a stern mask of anger taints her face.

“I’m not lying to you, Isabelle. I don’t know what happened. After my house was trashed from the FBI serving the search warrant, I had Roger take me to my apartment, forgetting Clara was there—”

“Why was she there to begin with?”

“She needed a place to stay.”

Isabelle folds her arms in front of her chest. “Her family are billionaires, Isaac. She didn’t need your charity,” she remarks, her voice an angry sneer. “She didn’t want your help, she wanted *you*.” Her tear-filled eyes drill into me. “And that’s precisely what she got.”

I shake my head. “No. She’ll never have me.”

Even if Isabelle never forgives me, I’ll never be with Clara. That mistake will *never* happen again. Only now, after Isabelle’s statement, do I realize Clara used my guilt about what happened to Ophelia to deceive me. How could I have been so foolish to fall for her trap? I’m usually more astute than that.

I glance into Isabelle’s sad eyes. “I only belong to you. I’ll only *ever* belong to you.”

Time freezes when a tear drops down her pale cheek, and the stranglehold on my heart turns crippling. Not giving her the chance to protest, I seize her wrist and pull her toward me until she sits side-straddled on my lap. She fights my hold, but I maintain my grip, refusing to let her go as easily as I did two weeks ago.

After several long minutes of painful sobs and vicious claws at my chest, her body turns lax, and she molds into my torso.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper in a soothing purr. “Let it all out.”

If her submissiveness is the only way I can get her to express her true feelings, I’ll use it. I hate when she cries, but she needs this. If she expels all the hurt tainting her beautiful face, then maybe she can find a way to forgive me.

By the time her sobs lessen, my dress shirt is clinging to my chest, and we’re three-quarters the way home. I collect my scattered composure and exert some of the control I use daily. I need to tether us down before we spiral out of control. Isabelle is the only person who can so gravely falter my composure. Only she rocks my core so hard it hurts.

After peeling her off my chest, I gather her hair off her face, then slant her chin so I can see her beautiful eyes. Her lips quiver when our eyes collide, but she keeps her tears at bay—barely.

“I’m sorry for everything I did. I made a foolish, drunken mistake. If I could go back and change it, I would, but I can’t. All I can do is say I’m sorry and hope one day you’ll forgive me.”

“I don’t know if I can,” she whimpers as her pained eyes stare into mine.

The honesty in her words brutally twisted the knife in my chest, but even being cut open and exposed won’t have me giving her up. I can’t quell the desire to make her mine.

“I won’t give up, Isabelle. I’ll fight every day until you’re mine again. You belong to me. You’re mine.”

Her quivering lips harden into a snarl. “Is this what that was all about? Jealousy? Did you only show up tonight because another guy attempted to mow your turf? I should

have realized that's why you suddenly showed up! Am I not on your mind until another man starts sniffing around?"

"What?" My tone harshens as my agitation rises. "I gave you the space you *wanted*. You *needed*, but I never gave up on you. I never gave up on *us*. You're in my thoughts all the time. How can you not see that? Everything I've done is for *you*. Every meeting, every exchange, it's all been for *you*. You've never left my fucking mind—"

"Except that one time."

She may as well have slapped me across the face as her words sting more than any blow she could inflict. When she attempts to move off my lap, I clutch onto her tightly. I'll physically tie myself to her if I have to. I'll do anything to keep her secured to me.

Isabelle tries to mask her moan with a huff, but I still hear it. She wants to be taken care of and nurtured—until she's in the bedroom. There, she loves being controlled, but I can't use her submissiveness to my advantage. In the past, it was different. She wanted to be sexually tortured into forgiveness. She enjoyed it, but this time, she isn't the one pleading for clemency. I should be on my knees, not her.

"You once told me I was fighting a battle bigger than us both. That saying goes for you, too, Isabelle. You can fight it all you want, but your body wants me, your heart wants me. *You* want me."

She doesn't attempt to refute my statement, but even if she did, her eyes would convey her deceit. She yearns for me as profoundly as I crave her.

When I lift my hand to her face, I pray she doesn't pull away. Air hisses between my teeth when my thumb skims over

lips fantasies were made from. After tracing the cupid's bow on her top lip, I set to work on removing the tearstains marking her ashen face.

Just as I'm about to cup her cheek, praying she'll nuzzle into my embrace, Roger pulls into the underground garage at Regan's apartment building. When I peer out the heavily-tinted windows, I spot Hugo leaning on the whitewashed brick wall. His knee is bent, and his foot is braced on the brickwork. He pushes off the wall when he detects our approach.

I turn my gaze back to Isabelle. After gathering her trembling hands in mine, I press a kiss to her palms before placing them over my heart. "When you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I'll be waiting for you," I quote. "Once you realize you're fighting a battle bigger than us both, I'll be waiting for you."

My heart beats wildly when I open the back-passenger door, slide out, then offer my hand to assist Isabelle out. If I had it my way, she wouldn't be leaving my car, but if I want any chance of winning her back, I need to give her time to process the confusion no doubt hindering her mind.

Every step she takes away from me cuts me open more, baring my heart to the world, but I know this is the right thing to do. When she enters the elevator, her gaze lifts from the ground. Relief courses through me when I notice her tears have dried. Her eyes aren't as bright as they usually are, but the quickest flash of a smile before the elevator doors snap shut gives me the slightest slither of hope.

## CHAPTER 32



## ISABELLE

When I saunter into the kitchen, Regan's eyes pop over the newspaper she's reading. "Hey, you guys came home earlier than expected last night."

Air expels from my nostrils. "Yeah, our plans were altered." *By your boss threatening harm to another.*

I switch on the rarely used electric kettle. Although my thumping head would appreciate a kick of caffeine, my overtired body needs the soothing effect of a cup of tea.

When I dump my used tea bag into the bin, my mouth becomes ajar. There's a can of chocolate frosting in the bottom of the receptacle.

A smile curls on my mouth as I pace to the fridge to remove the carton of milk. "What did you get up to last night?" I keep my tone void of any accusations. I don't want to scare Regan from a one-on-one girlie chat. It will be nice to discuss a relationship that doesn't center around my disastrous one.

Regan's shoulder almost touches her ear when she shrugs. "Nothing much." Her lips twitch when she attempts to conceal her smile.

I step away from the fridge before hitting her with the best ‘bullshit’ face I can muster. “Fine, it was more than nothing. It was huge!”

A giggle rumbles up my throat. I’m not laughing at her statement. I’m smiling at the carefree, down-to-earth Regan I rarely see. Her personality is as high-strung as Isaac’s. She keeps her emotions guarded from prying spectators, so only a very select few get the privilege of seeing both sides of her enigmatic personality.

I place a dash of milk into my steaming hot tea before steering our conversation into unfamiliar territory. “Anyone I know?”

Regan’s carefree attitude switches from friend to kickass lawyer more quickly than a flash of lightning. “Nope.”

The longer I stare at her, the more her eyes glance at random items in her kitchen. Small cracks are forming in her composure, but before I can get her to fully crack, Hugo strides into the kitchen.

“Morning.”

He friskily winks before helping himself to a large mug of steaming hot brew. I pout as my inner vixen screams obscenities at the top of her lungs. She’s already fuming mad that I walked away from Isaac last night, and now her anger is amplified from being denied her early morning pick-me-up.

It took all my strength to walk away from Isaac last night. Even though I said I’d never forgive him, the more I glanced into his eyes, the more my inhibitions dissipated. I’ve always said his eyes are the gateway to his soul, but last night, I couldn’t see any deceit reflecting back at me. All they exposed was that he’s hurting as much as I am. The pain in his eyes

mained my heart. They were the main reason I couldn't hold back my tears for a second longer.

I don't know how long I cried in Isaac's arms, but it felt good releasing all the pent-up hurt I've been harboring the past two weeks. It cleared some of the fog in my head and allowed me to start looking at the facts more rationally.

After he dropped me home, I rushed into my room to download the Lady Gaga song Harlow told me about earlier. It is the perfect song to express how I am feeling. It's about having a million reasons to leave someone, but only needing one to stay. There are a million reasons why Isaac and I should have never become a couple, but there's only one reason I can't walk away from him. It's the one thing that will tether me to him for eternity, even if we aren't a couple. He owns my soul.

My thoughts are interrupted by Hugo waving his massive hand in front of my face.

"Pardon? Did you say something?"

He chuckles. "I was asking if you'll be ready to leave soon for your appointment with Avery?"

My gaze shoots to the clock on the microwave. "Shit." With everything that happened last night, I forgot Dr. Avery scheduled me a Sunday morning appointment. "I'll be ready in five," I promise before darting to my room.

The accuracy of my timing is a little askew. Fifteen minutes later, I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Hugo's *baby*. He's back to wearing his standard work attire—a black suit with a white dress shirt, but the shadow on his jaw is darker since our rushed departure didn't give him time to shave.



Upon feeling the heat of my gaze, his head slants my way.  
“What?”

“You’re hard for me to read.” I thought Isaac was the only man protecting a bucket-load of secrets, but Hugo’s glacier-blue eyes are just as full. “You’re a huge box of secrets I want to unravel.”

He smiles, but the way his grip on the steering wheel tightens reveals his true response to my statement. He’s as locked up as a Fort Knox.

With a huff, I float my eyes back to the scenery flicking past my window. People are milling on the sidewalks, hustling to ensure all their to-do tasks are ticked off before Christmas arrives in a little over a week.

A rock settles in my stomach. I had intended to spend my first Christmas in Ravenshoe with Isaac. Now I don’t know where I’ll be. If Regan gets the charges dropped, what happens to me then?

My attention is diverted from outside when air whizzes between Hugo’s teeth. “I can’t believe I’m going to do this... *again.*” As his eyes drift between the traffic and me, his grip on the steering wheel tightens. “There’s only one way to fully get to know someone.” He pauses long enough to pique my interest before asking, “Do you want to play twenty questions?”

After nodding, I offer for him to go first, hoping it will ease the worry fettering his face.

It does—somewhat.

He takes a few moments devising a response before asking, “Why do you hate pumpkin so much?”

I giggle, grateful he didn't come out swinging. "Because it's *disgusting*." My last word is drenched with sarcasm. "My *Dedushka* force me to eat it when I was younger. I gagged the entire time. When his back was turned, Uncle Tobias scraped my plate onto the floor so the dog could eat it, but pumpkin is so disgusting, even he refused it."

Hugo's chuckle booms through my chest. "You need to try pumpkin pie because nothing wrapped in pastry is disgusting." His gaze shifts from the road to me. "Your turn."

I take my time thinking about a suitable question. I have so many I want to ask him, but I don't want to force him to share privy information unless he wants to, so I keep it simple. "How long have you owned your *baby*?"

Hugo swallows harshly as moisture fills his eyes. "This was Jorgie's first car." Jorgie was his sister, Marjorie's nickname. "She nagged me relentlessly to help her restore her to its former glory, but I was always too busy to get it done. It sat in the back shed at our parents' house for years after her death." A ghost of a smile crosses his lips. "I mentioned it in passing one day to Isaac. It turned up fully restored on my doorstep a month later."

Tears prick in my eyes. Isaac pretends he's a ruthless enigma who doesn't have a heart, but the man behind the mask is far from the man his reputation denotes.

After wiping under my eyes to ensure no tears have fallen, I angle my torso to face Hugo. "Your turn."

His index finger taps the steering wheel as his lips purse. After a short stretch of silence, he asks, "What are you going to do if the charges get dropped tomorrow?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly.

I haven't considered what my next move will be if the murder charges are dropped. I've been too occupied wading through the mess between Isaac and me to consider anything not associated with him.

"I might go back to Tiburon." I have to strangle my words out since my mouth refuses to relinquish them.

"Running away from your problems won't fix them, Izzy."

"I know that, but some things are unfixable."

"No, they aren't," Hugo interrupts, shaking his head. "Everything is fixable. Take this car, for example. It sat rusted and undriven for over five years, and she's fixed. With a bit of time and effort, anything can be fixed."

I remain quiet, unable to form a reply. I've had relationships before, but nothing consumed me the way my relationship with Isaac did. The feelings I have for him are at times overwhelming, and if I'm totally honest, scary. I didn't know anything like this existed. Without him in my life, I truly feel lost. Dead. Completely heartless.

But do you know what the scariest part is? Knowing the man who consumes your every waking moment is the same man who could shred your heart into a million pieces. It's the doubt hovering over Isaac's betrayal I'm finding the hardest to work through. He doesn't know what happened that night with Clara, so how am I to understand it?

It only leaves me two choices. I either live without ever knowing what happened or live without Isaac in my life. With how much pain stabbed in my heart during my last confession, I doubt that is the solution to my predicament. Just the thought of him not being in my life hurts more than I could ever express. I genuinely feel like I can't breathe without him.

The remainder of our drive passes in a blur, our game of twenty questions over in three. As I pace toward Dr. Avery's office, I shut down my brain, praying daftness will mask the turmoil in my heart. Since I'm not paying attention to where I'm walking, I trip over the concealed lip at the entrance and tumble to the ground, landing hard on my hands and knees.

Pain radiates through my wrist when it jars against the tiled floor, but I scamper to my feet, mortified with embarrassment. The zing radiating down my wrist shifts to a jolt of pleasure when I'm assisted off the floor.

When a mouthwatering scent engulfs the air surrounding me, I snap my eyes shut and inhale deeply, relishing the delicious smell. When my eyes flutter back open, my breath snags halfway to my lungs. The most riveting gray eyes I've ever seen are staring intently at me, studying my face.

"Are you okay?" Isaac questions, his voice raspy.

I bite my bottom lip, concealing the smile attempting to tug it high before nodding. Those were the very first words he spoke to me after we head-butted at the airport. I was smitten with him from that very moment.

Sensing a shift in my composure, Isaac angles his head to the side and arches his brow. The thick cloud that's been hanging over my head the past two weeks weakens when he questions, "How many fingers am I holding up?"

When he wiggles two fingers in the air, the broadest grin stretches across my face. "Two."

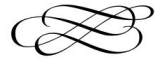
His lips twitch like he's preparing to speak, but before he can, Dr. Avery calls my name. She's at the end of the hall, watching my exchange with Isaac with the same amused twinkle in her eyes Hugo has.

“I better go?” I don’t know why my statement comes out sounding like a question.

After smiling to thank Isaac for his assistance, I skirt past him. Excitement melds through me when his index finger briefly skims my arm on my way by, igniting every nerve in my body with the most meager touch.

Just before I walk into Dr. Avery’s office, I turn around for the quickest second, briefly catching a heart-stuttering smirk on a deliriously handsome face.

## CHAPTER 33



## ISABELLE

*I* throw a pair of Nike running shoes at Hugo. “Come on. You shouldn’t have pinky-promised if you didn’t plan to follow through on your pledge.”

Air whistles between his teeth, winded from the shoes hitting him in the stomach. He’s sprawled on one of the sofas in Regan’s living room, eating junk food as he has since we arrived back from my appointment with Dr. Avery over three hours ago.

Today was my fifth session with Dr. Avery, but it was the first time our talk focused on my relationship with Isaac than my nightmares. I don’t know if that has more to do with my nightmares dampening as the weeks move on, or because she witnessed my interaction with Isaac and couldn’t help but pry. I’d say it was a combination of both.

When Hugo commences begrudgingly putting on his shoes, he mumbles, “I thought I was a guaranteed winner.”

Last night, Hugo blatantly stated Isaac would arrive at the club within twenty minutes of me hitting the dance floor to dance with other men. He said, “There’s no chance in hell Isaac will let another man near you, much less touch you.”

We bet on it. If I lost, I'd make Hugo breakfast every morning for a month. He requested the works—bacon, eggs, French toast, pancakes, and freshly squeezed orange juice, unaware I can't cook to save my life. If Hugo lost, he agreed to come running with me every day for a month. He hasn't stopped grumbling from the last time we went for a run, so it was the perfect punishment for him being so poorly wrong while also forcing me to start living again.

Hugo peeks up at me as he finishes tying his laces. "Can we at least jog past Harlow's on the way back so I can replenish the calories I'm losing?"

Grinning, I nod. "It's all about the right balance."

When I race into the kitchen to throw my chewing gum into the bin, my brows stitch. There's *another* empty canister of frosting at the bottom of the receptacle. I swear Regan is home, although I haven't seen her since I walked in the door, so she could have left.

Upon noticing my curious glance, Hugo's lips twist. "What?"

When he throws open the door, I jog to catch up to him. "Do you like frosting?"

Time slows to a snail's pace when he answers my question with a brazen wink. His leisured pace to the elevator picks up, but it has nothing on the wide drop of my jaw. "I think we need to play that game of twenty questions again."

My playful mood is squashed when I spot Clara mingling near the elevator banks. As always, she's impeccably dressed in black knee-high boots and a Burberry full-length trench coat. Her hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, and her



makeup is done in a seductive, alluring style. She looks like a sexy kitten about to go on the prowl.

When she spots my gawk, she smirks at me. It isn't a friendly smile. It's a conniving, vindictive grin that showcases her as the real bitch she is.

"We'll wait for the next one," Hugo tells Clara when the elevator arrives at our floor.

Snubbing my twisted heart, I step into the elevator car. I'm sick of playing Clara's game. Harlow is right. It's time for me to get as good as I am getting. If Clara is happy to leave our exchange without any words passing between us, I'll follow suit. But if she doesn't, I won't be held accountable for my actions.

We don't even make it three floors before Clara has my inner bitch awakening and ready to pounce. "I heard the gala you attended was an enormous *success* for all involved." She doesn't attempt to conceal her bitchy tone. "It's always endearing when people unite to help the needy."

"That's enough, Clara." Hugo's snapped tone is a clear warning that I'm not the only one over Clara's antics.

"It's okay, Hugo," I interject, stepping up to the plate. "What she said is true. It is wonderful when people come together to assist those less fortunate."

Clara's eyes glide down my body before her chin lifts high, apparently feeling superior. I can't believe I ever stupidly thought she'd be the perfect partner for Isaac. He needs someone who will keep him grounded when everyone is determined to make him float away. He needs someone who will fight beside him when times get tough, not someone who cowers away during the hard times. Clara has lived her life

with a silver spoon in her mouth. She doesn't understand the struggles regular people go through, the ups and downs that make us better people, so she isn't the right woman for Isaac. I am.

"I feel sorry for you, Clara."

She balks and takes a step back. "Why would *you* feel sorry for me? I have a perfect life. I have a wonderful family and friends, and more money than I could ever need—"

"And no one to share it with."

She chuckles a menacing laugh. "Says the lady who can't name one family member. Who do you put down as your emergency contact? Your cat? The homeless man sleeping on the corner?" She shifts her glare to Hugo. "Or maybe a man who only associates with you because he's *paid* to do it?"

The air is forcefully evicted from my body. Even for someone who has no morals, that was a blow below the belt.

"I may not have any family members, but at least I don't have to force the man I love to interact with me."

"Unless you failed to get the memo, *sweetheart*..." She spits out a term of endearment as if it is vomit. "... you can't force Isaac to do anything against his wishes. He was with me because he wanted to be with me."

"Bullshit!" I retort loudly. "You caught him during a moment of weakness, and you exploited it to your advantage, because, in all honesty, you knew that would be your *one* and *only* chance of *ever* being with him." I take a step closer to her, fighting with all my might to keep our altercation verbal. "I hope it was worth it, Clara, as he'll never look at you in the same manner now. He'll always see you as the woman who

once again forced his hand by strong-arming him into doing something he *never* wanted to do.”

For the first time, Clara’s cool, calm composure cracks, but it doesn’t stop me from unleashing the tirade I’ve wanted to relinquish the past two weeks. “So, yes, I feel sorry for you, Clara. I’m sorry you feel so unworthy, you can’t find a man who loves you as much as you *believe* you love Isaac. I’m sorry you aren’t strong enough to realize you’re waging a war you’ll *never* win. And I’m sorry you don’t understand that he will *never* look at you the way he looks at me.”

Tears well in her eyes, but I don’t back down. “I can’t say I don’t understand your fascination. Isaac is captivating, so if you’re happy to settle for half a man, keep chugging along, try every underhanded tactic you can find, then maybe, one day, he might look at you as more than a friend, but remember, you’ll only ever get half a man, never the full one you deserve.”

With that, I dash out of the elevator as quickly as my shaking legs can take me. The doorman taps the brim of his hat in greeting when he sees me coming before opening the door. My nostrils sting from the cold air forcefully pumping through them when I dart through them. I increase my pace to a brisk jog before weaving between the heavy foot traffic clogging the sidewalks in Ravenshoe.

Hugo catches up with me halfway down the street. He wraps his arm around my shoulders and squeezes the bejeebus out of me. “Yes, Izzy, yes!” Excitement that I finally stood up for myself is seen all over his face.

His squeeze is so tight, it forces the first tear to vacate my tear-filled eyes. I quickly brush it away before breaking into a sprint. By the time I make it up the grueling St Thomas Street

hill, I'm utterly exhausted. Not just physically. Emotionally as well. Mercifully, the sweat sliding from my sweat-drenched hair should conceal the tears sitting high on my cheeks.

When I hunch over to suck in some much-needed breaths, Hugo rests his arms on top of his head. "Fuck, Izzy. If we run like that every day for a month, I'm going to die."

I chuckle at the actuality in his tone. After many big breaths, I straighten my spine before cranking my neck to Hugo. My body is aching, but it also appreciates the adrenaline pumping through my veins. For the first time in weeks, I feel alive.

When Hugo's eyes collide with mine, his mouth forms into an 'O.' Obviously, my sweat isn't concealing my tears as initially hoped. He stares at me, seemingly wanting to speak but unable to get his mouth to release his words.

"It's okay. You don't have to say anything." I can't even decipher a reason for my tears, so what chance would Hugo have?

Hugo follows me down the hill. "Forgive him, Izzy. Then you can move past this."

"It isn't that easy, Hugo." *Even though I wish it were.*

He grabs my forearm, stopping my sluggish steps. "Yes, it is. You already doubt that he slept with Clara, but instead of trusting your intuition, you're basing your conclusion on the words of a vindictive bitch who's been trying to sink her claws into him for years."

"Even if nothing happened that night, he should have never put himself in that position to begin with. He should have known she'd exploit him."

“He’s known her family for years, Izzy. Her brother is his best friend. If he has to double-guess everyone who comes into his life, he’ll live one very lonely life.” Hugo moves closer to me as his remorse-filled eyes shoot between mine. “He *was* living a very lonely life until you arrived.”

My heart squeezes. I love Isaac. I love him more than I’ve ever loved anyone, but I don’t know how to move past this.

“Forgive him,” Hugo pleads like he can hear my silent thoughts.

“I can’t.”

He looks at me like I’m an imbecile. “Why? Why can’t you?”

“Because then I’ll be no better than her.” I thrust my hand to the stream of cars gliding past us.

Hugo peers down at me in confusion. “Who?”

My nose tingles when moisture rushes into my eyes.

“Who?” Hugo asks again, more forceful this time.

“Clara!”

“What?” His tone gets an edge of anger to it. “How can you compare yourself to Clara? You’re *nothing* like her—”

“Yes, I am! I’m exactly like her,” I interrupt. “Even if I can get past wondering if he slept with her, I’m still settling for half a man. I’ll only ever get half a man, never a full one. He will never look at me as he did Ophelia. He will never love me as he loved her. She left him broken. She left him as half a man, but I want all of him, Hugo! I want him solely for me. I don’t want a broken man!”

Hugo stiffens, but he doesn't refute my statement as he knows what I'm saying is true. Isaac's heart will never fully belong to me as a piece of it will always belong to Ophelia. It's callous of me to feel this way, and I understand that Isaac can't help what happened to her, but the insecurity that he will never love me as he did Ophelia has been gnawing away at my insides since the day I stumbled across my uncle's report on them in Col Petretti's file. I thought if I loved him enough for the both of us, it would squash my uncertainties. Only now, after my confrontation with Clara, do I realize that everything I said about settling for half a man was me projecting my anxieties and self-doubt out loud.

Angrily, I shake my head before storming down the sidewalk. I'm not angry at Hugo or even at Isaac. I'm fuming at myself for being a selfish, heartless cow.

I don't need to turn around to know Hugo is following me. The heavy stomps of his feet are all the indication I need, much less his furious growl. "You don't know what would have happened between Isaac and Ophelia if Ophelia didn't die," he stumbles out. "Maybe they would have split up."

I pivot on my heels to face him. "You don't know that."

"No, I don't, but neither do you, Izzy. That's why it's called blind faith. No one knows what might have happened between them. Just like there's no guarantee for you and Isaac. It could fizzle in months, or it could last a lifetime, but you won't have *anything* if you don't stop running and start fucking fighting!"

"Fighting! That's all I ever do, Hugo," I retaliate. "It's one shit storm after another."

"That's what you do for someone you love!"

I angrily snarl. “No, you don’t. You just run and hide, don’t you, Hugo? You know all about hiding from the people you love.”

The instant the words escape my lips, I want to force them back in. I don’t know anything about Hugo’s personal life, so who am I to judge him and his decisions?

Hugo’s jaw muscle tenses. “Yeah, that’s what I did, Izzy. I went and hid like a coward. But I didn’t do that because I didn’t love my family. I did it because I love them more than you’ll ever realize. Just like Isaac loves you more than you’ll ever realize.” His voice cracks with emotion, making the constrictive hold on my heart dangerous. “People make mistakes. Even the strongest men you know make mistakes, but that means they’re human, and they have a heart. They’re not fucking robots programmed to perform and act on cue!”

He steps closer to me, the pain in his eyes undeniable. “I’m going to say to you what I said to Isaac mere weeks ago. If you wait too long, you’ll lose him, then you’ll regret every day of your life that you didn’t fight harder when you had the chance.”

Stealing my chance to reply, he briskly strides down the street. Because his steps are so furious, he soon gains a decent amount of distance between us. As I watch his quickly retreating frame, everything he said runs through my brain on repeat.

The feeling of betrayal will never diminish, but everything Hugo said was true. I will regret it. Not just failing to investigate Clara’s claims with more diligence, but also for punishing Isaac for something he had no control over. I’ve said previously that he’s a man of many talents, but he can’t be

held responsible for a traffic accident, so why did I use it against him?

Because I'm a terrible person, that's why. I've let insecurities make me as callous and as vindictive as my father and Col Petretti. That needs to stop. It needs to stop now.

After balancing on my tippy toes, I cup my hands around my mouth to project my voice over the people crowding the sidewalk. "Hugo!"

The ache in my chest lessens when his angry strides stop, and he turns around to face me.

"I'm sorr—"

Before all my apology escapes my lips, a broad arm curls around my waist, and I'm dragged backward. My pupils widen in fear when a white cloth is placed over my mouth. The liquid the material is soaked in burns my throat and my eyes. They feel like they're on fire.

I fight with all my might to get out of my assailant's hold, but since I'm overwhelmed by dizziness, my kicks aren't as hard as usual. As my blinking lengthens, and my body grows heavy, I catch flashes of Hugo frantically sprinting toward me. He barges past spectators watching me being pulled into a white Range Rover that's just mounted the curb without stepping in to help.

I'm thrown into the back seat with a grunt, then all I see is blackness.

*To be continued...*



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Part four in the Enigma series has been released.

Title - Enigma: The Final Chapter.

<http://a.co/fIMBuTf>

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Hunter's, Hugo's, Hawke's, Ryan's, Cormack's, Rico's and Brax's stories have already been released, but Brandon, Regan, and all the other great characters of Ravenshoe will be getting their own stories at some point during 2020.

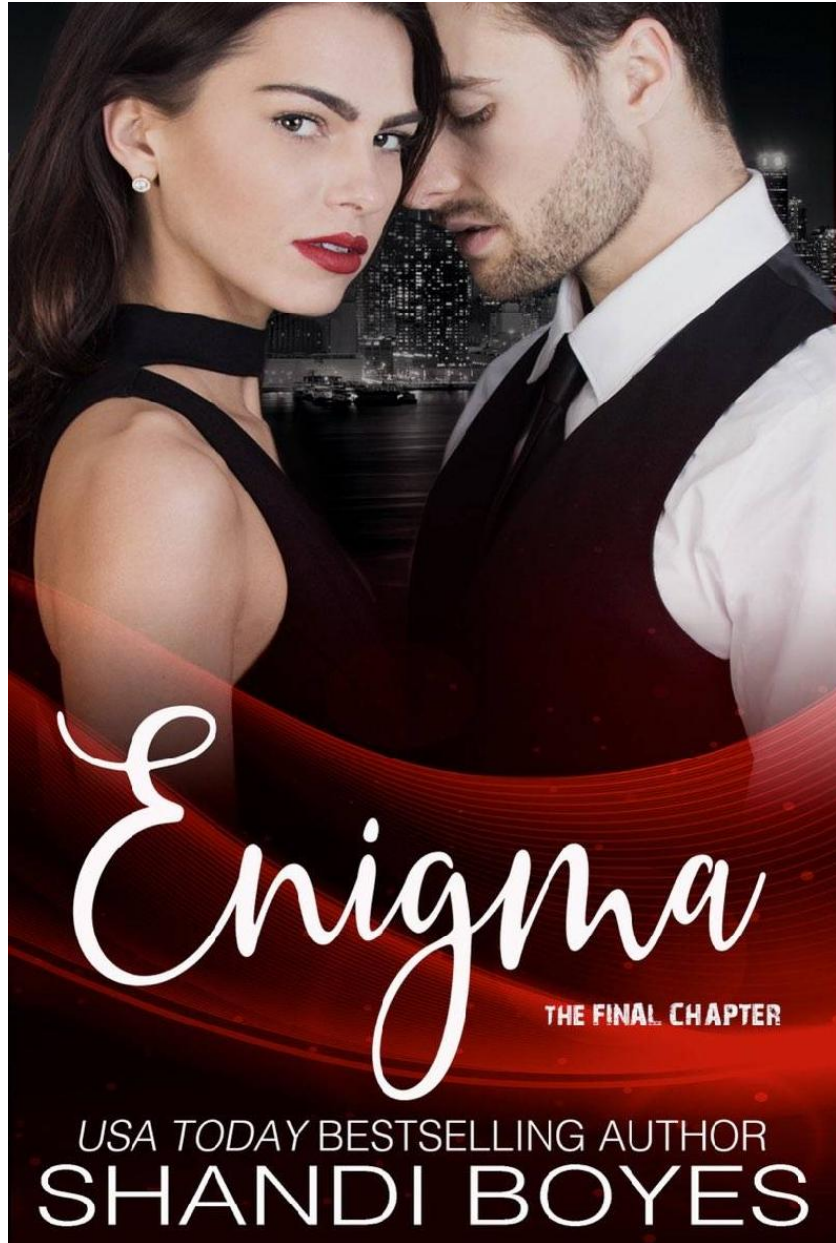
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# ENIGMA: THE FINAL CHAPTER





*To everyone who has rode the Enigma ride with me.*

*I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.*

*To our Enigma, Isaac—thank you!*

*Shandi xx*

# CHAPTER 1



## ISAAC

“**S**ocial security number, birth certificate, and passport.”

When Hunter places each stated item onto my desk, I undo the button on my suit jacket and take a seat to scrutinize them. “Were there any issues having them verified?”

He scrubs his hand along his scruffy beard. “No, I used the same guy I did when we got Hugo’s identification.”

“Cooper?”

Hunter nods. Cooper has worked with Henry Gottle, Sr. for the past decade. When it became vital for Hugo to disappear, Henry steered me to Cooper. He lives and breathes for his enterprise, and he’s damn good at what he does. Although he comes off as blunt, I soon realized he’s hardened his shell to ensure he remains viable in the ruthless industries he’s immersed himself in.

Cooper’s knack for forgery ensured Hugo became a ghost, a phantom, the invisible man—until the whirlwind of Isabelle arrived in our lives. She unearthed the real Hugo faster than those who have been hunting him for years. Now I need to ensure the breadcrumbs she left during her investigation don’t

have a recoil effect on Hugo, which, in turn, will have a carry-on effect on my empire.

Hunter slouches into a chair across from me before balancing his boot-covered ankle onto his opposite knee. “Cooper’s charges have substantially increased in the past four years.”

“It’s a price I’m willing to pay for legitimacy like this.” Even acutely aware the U.S. passport is counterfeit, the expertise is so compelling, I’m beginning to wonder if Cooper works for the State Department.

A tangle of emotions holds my thoughts hostage when my gaze zooms in on a pair of big chocolate eyes in the passport photo. They’re the eyes that hold the key to unraveling the real Isaac Holt. They could fully reveal me, leaving me open and exposed for my competitors to see. Although they’re eyes that will bare me as a mere man instead of an enigma, they could also inflict my greatest demise. That could decimate me. Everything I’ve built the past seven years teeters precariously on one pair of big brown eyes.

My silent contemplations are interrupted when Hunter places a large manila folder onto the desk. A handful of noted papers fall out of the overstuffed document wallet when he slides it across to me.

“Isaac, I have the pleasure of introducing you to Mr. Lucas Marco, District Attorney of Ravenshoe.” I flip open the folder and peruse the first few documents as Hunter continues with his dynamic introduction. “Married, father of three, thirty-two years old, has resided in Ravenshoe the past two years after leaving his hometown of Merryville. His wife is...” He stops talking, his lips twisting impenitently before a rough, deep growl emits from his throat. “... a mom I’d *really* like to fu—”

Any further words about to spill from his lips trap in this throat from the wry look I direct at him. He grins and winks, relishing that he forced a reaction out of me. He's clearly noticed my usually ruthless equanimity has faltered the past two weeks. Because I failed to react to his taunting behavior, his personal digs have become unyielding.

For years, my hunger for success was urged on by the excitement of power and wealth. I wanted to conquer it all, to be in complete control. So I aspired to build an empire that amassed substantial wealth because with wealth came power. The wealthier I became, the more powerful I wanted to be. But with more power, came more wealth. And thus began the vicious cycle that had me always yearning for more.

The rancorous events altered my perspective of living. Before Isabelle came into my life, it had no conclusion in sight. She forced a steel bar into the cogs, stopping the rotation that would have soon had me spiraling out of control.

After I was arrested, I stepped back and evaluated my life. I realized everything I'd built, the years of blood, sweat, and tears didn't crumble when I left my office before my club reached full capacity. It didn't collapse when I spent a weekend with Isabelle at my private residence after she officially became mine. It ran like the well-oiled machine I had built it to be.

It was only then I realized my greatest accomplishments can't be calculated by wealth or power. It's measured by the people in my life. That's why I'll stop at nothing to ensure Isabelle once again becomes mine because she is without a doubt, my greatest accomplishment.

This morning, after running into Isabelle at Avery's office, the blood pumping through my body became potent, thickened



by the thrill of the hunt. Only hours before, she said she didn't know if she could forgive me for my betrayal, but I saw sparks of the old Isabelle in her eyes when I assisted her off the ground after her tumble. She had the same wild, frenzied look she had the morning she crashed into me at the airport. A look that promised she'd not only be my greatest possession but also my hardest battle. I'm up for the challenge. I've been fighting my entire life. It's who I am, and it's what I do. I'll fight every day until Isabelle is once again mine.

My bed.

My house.

My rules.

*MINE.*

But first, I need to guide her through the minefield she's precariously tiptoeing through. Once the landmines have been annihilated, my focus will shift to a more personal endeavor.

I lay a piece of paper on my desk. "Mr. Marco's bank accounts, although not as pitiful as some I've seen, are less than stellar, so how can he afford a Cartier Diver watch?" I lift the surveillance photo of Lucas that shows the expensive timepiece encircling his wrist off my desk. "They sell for eight to twenty thousand dollars each. A new DA would be lucky to take home sixty thousand a year, let alone the fact he has three young children to provide for." My gaze shifts to Hunter. "Does he have family money, an inheritance?"

Without glancing at the documents, Hunter shakes his head. "He still has student loans in the thousands. His mom was a primary school teacher, and his dad was a car salesman before he was laid off at the end of last year. Lucas's past fiscal year tax return was for fifty-eight thousand."

“His wife?”

Hunter shrugs. “She’s a stay-at-home mom, and although her family is better off than Lucas’s, they wouldn’t gift such an expensive item.”

I’m not surprised by his revelations. I’ve always had a knack for reading people, and even through a computer monitor, I had a feeling Mr. Marco wasn’t quite the saint he’s portraying with his family-man image. He’s often photographed at charity events with his wife on his arm, and in local newspapers he’s reported as a well-respected member of the community, but there’s something dark in his eyes.

That’s why for the past two weeks, I shifted my focus from having the evidence in Isabelle’s case squashed to unearthing the man who’s campaigning for her false conviction. It wasn’t just Mr. Marco’s inaccurate description of Isabelle the morning of her arraignment that piqued my interest. It’s the fact I read him as a sly, underhanded man, a wolf wearing sheep’s clothing. I see an evil man hiding beneath a reputable job description. Those are the people you should be wary of. The quiet, calculating men are often the ones who create the biggest ripple.

Hunter’s tattoo-covered hand ruffles through the documents on my desk. “Watches aren’t the most elaborate purchases he likes to fiddle in. Expensive, high-caliber hookers are his pleasure of choice.”

My head shifts to the side as my lips tug high. Although my empire doesn’t dabble in the prostitution conglomerate, I have a close connection to the man I allow to run the one and only high-priced brothel in my town—Henry Gottle, Sr.

“I contacted Henry on your behalf. He gave me access to his security servers,” Hunter advises, reading my thoughts.

“We have some noteworthy pictures that will create a spark from Lucas.” His broad grin peeks out from behind his scraggly beard. “If not, I’m sure his wife will be more than appreciative to find out the information I have unearthed.”

He hands me a collection of photos of Mr. Marco in compromising positions with various members of the personnel from Henry’s brothel, Kiki’s Kinks. My smirk merges into a full smile. Bribery has never been a forte of mine. Not a soul receives a penny from me or my empire unless they have rightfully earned it, but blackmail is an entirely different story.

Although it’s evident Mr. Marco is a man happy to accept a golden handshake under the table, he will soon learn that isn’t how things are run in Ravenshoe. Even with Ryan being confident Isabelle’s charges will be dropped tomorrow morning, I’ll follow through with ensuring Mr. Marco is displayed as the wolf he is to the community, shamed and exposed for all to see.

“Call Regan and request contact information for Mr. Marco. I need to schedule a meeting with the soon-to-be ex-District Attorney of Ravenshoe.”

“Your meeting is at four tomorrow afternoon,” Hunter interrupts, grinning.

My eyes snap to his. Even with a broad smile etched on his face, he looks exhausted. His work ethic the past three weeks has been tenacious. Very rarely does he leave my side as we continue to evaluate every viable threat to Isabelle. Although my staff is compensated well for their loyalty, Hunter isn’t here seeking a larger bonus check. He’s here because of the burden of guilt he carries over the ‘Megan’ incident.

Hunter, although reserved, shouldered the blame for my security team's lack of knowledge regarding Megan's personal records. Instead of thoroughly evaluating the situation, they brushed it off as a side effect of fame. Even though he's taking the blame, it doesn't lessen my anger. I appreciate that he had the gall to admit his error, and considering it's been his only lapse in judgment the past four years, I don't see the need to further reprimand him. He's punishing himself enough. He doesn't need additional guilt on his already-weighed-down shoulders.

My eyes drop to my Rolex. It's a little after two in the afternoon. "Why don't you head home, and we'll reconvene our compilation about Mr. Marco's indiscretions after Isabelle's court hearing tomorrow morning?"

Hunter scrubs his hand over his weary eyes before nodding. "I have a few back programs running on my home servers I should probably go and check, anyway."

I shoot him a sardonic look. "I wasn't suggesting you go home to continue working. Go rest and revive. Maybe even give Kiki a call and see if she can send someone over to help get those *kinks* out of your shoulders."

His rumbling chuckle barrels around the quiet of my office. "Thanks for the offer, but I don't require the services of an establishment like Kiki's to unkink my *tension*." His shimmering eyes float up from the desk to glare at me. "But if I do, I'll be sure to ask for a *family* discount since you have a recurring tab there."

I grin, but I don't attempt to refute his accusation, as everything he said is accurate. I have used Kiki's services before but not for what you're thinking. Tatiana and the many other women I dated those four weeks after Isabelle and I

returned from the McGregor's residence were employees of Kiki's. I figured if I used a paid service instead of the regular women who approached me daily, the chances of them expecting something more after the date would be significantly reduced.

Although most were overly friendly like Tatiana, their disappointment at not being invited into my bed was eased when I handed them the envelope with their five-thousand-dollar paycheck inside. I did occasionally get caught unaware when ushering them back to my town car after our date. One, at the very beginning, even managed to sneak in a brazen kiss on my mouth after I refused her third attempt at seducing me by offering her services free of charge.

Before Isabelle, I wouldn't have hesitated, but after I tasted her in the office of my nightclub, 57, no other woman has aroused the slightest bit of interest from me. One taste was all it took for my obsession with her to surge to levels I'd never experienced before.

The shrill of a phone distracts Hunter's steps to my office door. He freezes, knowing the only time my untraceable cell has rung the past few weeks is to deliver bad news. Relief scuttles through me when I discover it's Hugo calling. For the past two weeks, he makes contact a minimum of three times a day to give me updates on Isabelle.

The strain hampering Hunter's face relaxes when he too notices the call is from Hugo. He lifts his chin in farewell as I flip the screen on the cell phone and press it to my ear.

Heavy stomping comes down the line. Hugo sounds like he's chasing something *or someone*. "They have her. They've taken Izzy." His words are barely audible in his breathless state.

Fear grips my heart. “Who has her?”

“I don’t know. They pulled her into a white Range Rover at the bottom of St. Thomas Street,” he informs me. “Fuck, boss, I’m sorry, I only left her for a minute.”

The air in my lungs is forcefully expelled as fear shivers down my spine. “Where are you now?”

Cars honking is the only noise resonating over the frantic beat of my heart. “I’m tailing them on foot. They just pulled down Tivot.” He inhales a sharp breath. “Fuck. Get down!”

My knuckles pop from the sudden clench of my fists when gunfire sounds down the line. Sensing the shift in my composure, Hunter moves to stand next to me, unhousing his laptop from his bag and his cell from his pocket on the way. He calls Tallis to place him on alert while I pay careful attention to any noises resonating through the speakers of my phone.

My chest heaves up and down with every inhalation I take as anxiety envelopes my body. Hugo’s stomping feet still thud down the line, along with the alarmed screams of panicked spectators.

“Hugo,” I shout. “Give me an update.”

I freeze when another two shots are fired before our call is disconnected.

## CHAPTER 2



## ISABELLE

The deep hum of profound voices filters through my ears as I drift in and out of consciousness. My anxiety levels are havocked as the nightmares that have been plaguing my dreams come to fruition. I swallow hard, moistening my throat that's beyond scorched, gagging through the thickness of my tongue. My mouth feels like it's been wiped dry, then stuffed to the brim with cotton balls.

Ignoring the screaming protests of my thumping head, I slowly blink my eyes open. Dirt particles scratch my eyelids with every blink I take. Speckles of dust dance in the late afternoon sunlight like a flurry of fireworks in a darkened sky. The black plastic taped to the windows of the office I'm waking up in fails to conceal its bright rays. Considering the tired headache I've had the past few weeks is still present, I'm going to assume it's still Sunday.

The smell of soot and sweat filters into my nose as I scan the stark confines. Other than the ripped double sofa chair I'm waking up on, there's a chipped wooden desk in the middle of the room, a steel four-drawer filing cabinet in the corner, and a set of rusted weights and barbells at the side.

Giddiness clusters in my head when I rise from the sofa. The urge to vomit is so overwhelming, tears prickle in my dry



eyes. I battle to hold down the bile surging forward as I head to the half-open office door at my left. My footing is unsteady as queasiness plagues my balance.

When I reach the door, my breath hitches in my throat. Standing mere feet away from me, talking into a cell phone, is a massive brute of a man. His arm squashing the phone to his ear has a large, colorful snake tattoo entangled around his wrist.

Silently, I take two steps backward, nearly tripping over a pile of rope left dangerously on the floor. The beat of my heart expediently climbs when the assailant's eyes meet mine. His face hardens with anger as his dark eyes narrow into thin slits.

Fighting through a rush of dizziness, my eyes zoom around the room, frantically searching for a weapon to protect myself. The first thing my vision zooms in on is the deadbolt on the door. When his lips curl into a grim smirk and he sprints for me, I charge for the door. Due to my dizzy head, I crash violently into the door, winding myself. My hearing obscures from the blood pumping thunderously through my body as I secure the lock.

A frightened squeal emits from my lips when my eyes lift to discover the gentleman standing in front of me. Relief overwhelms me, grateful for the shield of glass and wood between us. He stares at me while raising his hand to rattle the door handle. When he discovers it is dead-bolted, he returns his eyes to me. They're emotionless, almost soulless.

“Open the door, Isabelle.” When I shake my head, he bangs his fists on the glass. “Open the door!”

I take a step back, frightened by the uncontrollable rage burning from his angry gaze. The veins in his neck bulge when he kicks the door with his boot-covered foot. His heavy

stomps on the door bellow into the quiet office, fastening my pulse. The wood buckles under the compression of his foot, but the glass stays firm, making me realize it must be bulletproof.

As he continues kicking down the door, I scan the room again, seeking another exit. Dread washes through me when I realize the only way in and out of this office is by the door he's blocking with his imposingly large frame.

*I need to arm myself.*

My eyes settle on the only movable instrument in the room. With my heart in my throat, I rush for the weights housed in the corner. I scream in frustration when my attempts to lift the barbell are fruitless due to the heavy weights on each end.

Dropping to my knees, I unscrew the dumbbell lock clamps off the side as my frantic gaze flicks between the door buckling from the stranger's powerful kicks and my shaky, sweat-slicked hands.

A door shooting open ricochets through the room just as I remove the second lock clamp. I pounce to my feet, dragging the barbell up with me before I turn to face my assailant. Dizziness impedes my vision from my sudden movements, but I shake my head, clearing the flashing white lights from my eyesight. With the barbell clenched in front of my body, I glare at him, warning that I will defend myself if he comes near me.

“I've been instructed not to touch a strand of hair on your head, so unless you want me *not* to follow those strict instructions, you need to put down the barbell.” He steps toward me with his arms in front of his body. “Put it down, and I won't hurt you.”

I shake my head, not believing a word coming out of his mouth. When he takes a step closer, I swing the barbell through the air with all my might. The end of the steel rod connects hard with his left wrist. The vibration of my cruel blow shudders up my arm. He cusses, his spare hand instinctively shooting up to shelter his wrist.

My pulse shrills in my ears when his beyond-furious eyes lift from his already bruising wrist to me. When I raise the bar, preparing to strike again, a roguish snarl curls on his mouth a mere second before he rushes for me. I put all my strength into the next swing, but before it can hit him, one of his large hands seizes my wrist mid-air, while the other wraps around my waist, pulling me in close to his body. His fingers dig so painfully into my hip, my lungs can no longer fill with air.

“Drop it!”

His hot breath blasts my ear with warmth as its putrid stench makes my stomach swirl. I grit my teeth and shake my head. Tears rush to my eyes when he tightens his grip even more, so his fingers will leave bruises on my skin.

Once the sting of his touch becomes too much to bear, steel clanging against concrete echoes through the office. He kicks the barbell out of my reach before his clutch on my body lessens. Although he loosens his grip, he holds me close to his body, his easy hold making it appear as if I’m as light as a feather.

My heart ceases beating when he lifts a white cloth from a cardboard box that holds a bottle of clear liquid. The strong scent of bleach and chemicals infiltrates my nasal cavities.

“No, please.” My voice is weak and scratchy as I fight against his hold.

Ignoring me, he unscrews the lid of a plastic bottle and pours vaporizing liquid onto the cloth, drenching it with so much wetness, liquid flows off the desk and puddles onto the floor.

“I will do as you ask. I’ll do anything,” I beg, knowing my best chance to staying alive is by following the three C’s—being conscious, calm, and cooperative.

My pleas go unanswered when he places the soaking wet cloth over my mouth and nose. My throat sets on fire as the dryness of my eyes intensifies. Because of the potent strength of the ammonium, my vision blurs until he’s nothing but a mush of black and white clouds.

“That should settle you down until he returns.”

When he releases me from his grip, my stomach heaves as it fights against the disgusting chemical seeping through it. When the room’s spins become too intense, my knees buckle. Just before I hit the rigid concrete floor, I’m caught by a broad set of arms, and the scent of chemicals is replaced with the smell of bottled cologne.

“What did you do?” Unlike the man who just drugged me, this one doesn’t have a heavy accent.

“She was trying to escape. She hit me with a fucking barbell.”

A groan vibrates through my chest. “You were warned not to touch a strand of hair on her head!” Sprays of the spit flying out of his mouth land on my overheated cheek.

“How was I to know she’d wake earlier than expected? I put a heap of chloroform on the cloth. It should’ve knocked her out for hours. Where have you been anyway? I’m sick of waiting around for you.”

“I was fixing your fucking errors by dumping the car. I said no weapons, so why were you carrying a gun?”

“Protection. Do you know who she’s linked to?” I wince in pain when the man holding me like a rag-doll tightens his grip. “She’s Isaac Holt’s girl.”

“I’m not worried about him.”

The other man laughs. “Then that makes you a dead man walking. When he finds out you’ve taken her, he won’t stop until he finds her.”

When a stretch of silence crosses between them, I try to peer at the man carrying me through the fog coating my eyes. His features are distorted like I’m looking at him through a kaleidoscope. With my vision lacking, I try to speak, but my words are logged in my burning throat.

My bones jump out of my skin, even though I don’t physically move, when he screams, “Get out!” at the top of his lungs.

“My—”

“Your payment is on the table,” he interrupts. “Your services are no longer required.”

“Whatever, it’s your funeral, man.”

A door slamming shut booms into my ears as my eyelids grow too heavy for me to fight. No longer having the strength to keep them open, they drift shut just as a calloused hand removes strands of hair that have fallen onto my face.

“It’s okay, Isabelle. Go to sleep. This will all be over soon.”

My last thoughts go to Isaac.

## CHAPTER 3



## ISAAC

For the slightest second, fear hazes my usually impenetrable composure. It's soon replaced with adrenaline as my need to protect Isabelle surges through my blood. Even though everything I've feared the past few months is coming to fruition, now is not the time for my composure to fail.

For years, I've been waiting for Col to swing the ax he's been grinding since the death of Ophelia, but his threat of retribution was never more than callous words fired off a vindictive tongue. That only changed as I now have someone significant in my life he can seek vengeance on, but Isabelle's presence also means I've upped my game, ensuring I'm ready for his strike.

My gaze lifts to Hunter, who's seated in the chair across from me. His laptop is balanced on his knees as he awaits further instructions. "Hugo said he was last on Tivot. Bring up all the CCTV cameras in the area. We're looking for a white Range Rover. Also, call Tallis back. If Col so much as sneezes, I want to know."

I know this is Col. I can feel it in my bones.

Hunter nods as his fingers fly over his keyboard at a lightning pace. I hit the speed dial for Henry's cell, then press

my phone to my ear. He answers on the very first ring. “Isaac.”

“The King has decided it’s time to remove the final pawn from the chessboard. He needs to protect his queen.”

Henry inhales a quick, sharp breath. “I understand. Where are you?”

“Where all the sinners are taken to await trial.”

“My crew will be there in a matter of hours.”

My grip on the phone tightens. “I wasn’t calling to ask a favor. I just wanted you to hear my decision directly from me. I know in our industry this isn’t recommended, but the rules of our game have changed.”

“Chaotic actions will only create bad consequences. Trust me, my boy, if you choose to play this type of game, you’ll require structure that comes with years of experience,” Henry replies. “You’re like a son to me, Isaac. I want to help you protect your Katarina.”

With that, he disconnects our call. I throw my phone onto my desk, so I can run my hand along my jaw. Hunter’s anxious eyes lift from his laptop. His lips move, but his words stay entombed in his throat. He doesn’t need to speak for me to hear his thoughts, though. I can see the trepidation in his eyes. He understands the ramifications of the decision I just made, but I was serious when I said I’d do anything to protect Isabelle. Anything at all.

I’ve wanted to seek vengeance on Col for years, but I never did because I knew the aftermath would be greater than anyone predicted. Also, in this industry, you’re never to attack the King. You can strategically remove the pawns surrounding them until their kingdom collapses beneath them, or take them



down via a monetary death, but you must never attack them directly.

When Col's son, Roberto, cooperated with the District Attorney's office by supplying them with vital information pertaining to Col's family business, the majority of Col's kingdom collapsed around him. Nothing but rubble was left behind. Financially, he was decimated. With Col's reputation tarnished with so much corruption, his business never returned to its shining glory.

I would have allowed that to be the end of our game of chess, but Col took it one step further by attacking the Queen, who stands next to the King, breaking the unspoken rules of our industry. The rules of our game have been altered, the guidelines removed, the board swept clean. Now, only two Kings remain standing ready to battle head-on.

Hunter's gaze drops to his laptop. "I've got video of the kidnapping."

I move around my desk to glance over his shoulder. My blood blackens when Isabelle is grabbed from behind by a massive brute of a man, easily the size of Travis, my bouncer, who stands at the door of my nightclub. Isabelle's legs kick out so wildly, her running shoes fly off from the force of her blows, but the longer he holds the white cloth over her mouth, the weaker her kicks become.

My jaw muscle tenses when a white Range Rover mounts the curb, and Isabelle's lifeless body is thrown into the back seat. Hugo enters the screen from the bottom right corner of the frame. His furious steps have him reaching the vehicle faster than a heartbeat. The black, heavily-tinted passenger window shatters into tiny shards when his fists connect with it.

He launches his torso into the shattered window, vainly trying to drag Isabelle out of the back seat.

When the Range Rover skids down the road, leaving black tire tracks and a dislodged Hugo on the sidewalk, Hugo leaps to his feet and chases after them on foot. The steady flow of traffic aids his ability to pursue the fast-moving vehicle.

“Freeze the image,” I demand when my gaze zooms in on an object in the background of the photo.

Anytime I’m given surveillance photos, I pay vigilant attention to the entire picture, not just the sections your eyes initially focus on. It’s often the minutest thing that causes the biggest ripple.

“There, you can see the driver’s face in the side mirror.” When I point to the section in the frame I’m referring to, Hunter magnifies it.

At the start, it’s pixelated and contorted so that you can’t see Isabelle’s kidnapper’s face, but after a few strokes on Hunter’s keyboard, it becomes bright and unblemished.

“That’s the same guy from the surveillance images at the gala?” I half-inform half-query. “The one who was watching Isabelle?” *The one she compellingly stated wouldn’t harm her.*

Hunter hacked into the mainframe at the gala hotel to obtain their security footage the night he arrived at my hotel suite. That night, we located the gentleman who accosted Isabelle in multiple frames standing just to the side of her. He was in plain sight for all to see, but concealed amongst the dense gathering of men wearing similar black tuxedos.

Hunter nods. “Yes. I already ran him through the Police Department’s facial recognition software. It didn’t find anything.”

My gaze shifts to my office door when it swings open. I'm surprised to see Regan standing behind it. She's worked for me for years, but not once has she set foot inside my office. I wave for her to enter as the cell on my desk rings. Relief washes through me when I notice it is Hugo calling.

"Hugo," I greet him.

"It's Brandon," he says breathlessly. "Hugo's been shot." My pulse shrills through my ears when sirens filter down the line. "They're taking him to Mercer Hospital."

"Instruct them to take him to Ravenshoe Private. Tell them it's at the request of Isaac Holt. I'll call the head of surgery there and advise her of his impending arrival."

"Okay." Brandon muzzles the phone as he passes on my instructions. A gurney being pushed into the back of an ambulance and doors slamming shut sounds down the line as Brandon calls my name.

"Yes."

"Ask Regan to call the head of the FBI division in our county."

My jaw muscle clenches.

"Alex will help if he knows it's for Izzy. He has a higher clearance than Hunter does on the police database. It may be your only chance of finding her before it's too late. If this is Col, he won't keep Isabelle alive for long."

The weight on my chest increases. I said earlier I'd do anything to keep Isabelle safe, so shouldn't that include acquiring the assistance of my arch-nemesis if it guarantees she's returned to me uninjured?

I drift my eyes to Regan. "Regan is here. I'll call him."

Brandon exhales a large puff of air.

“Brandon.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you for your help. Please keep me updated on Hugo.” My words come out scratchy and strained.

“I will.”

When he disconnects our call, my eyes lift to Regan. Her face is pale, and her eyes are plagued with red rims. “I need to talk to you.”

“Can it wait?” My tone is clipped as fear takes hold. “They’ve taken Isabelle.”

Regan clutches her neck before briskly nodding.

“I need you to call Alex and request his assistance.”

Her pupils widen as she swallows harshly.

“Brandon said you’re the best person to ask for his help. I don’t know what your history is with him, and at the moment, I don’t fucking care. My only concern is getting Isabelle home, so I need you to do this for me, Regan.” My tone is stern but still apologetic for the fretfulness slipped over her usual take-no-shit-from-no-one face.

She licks her lips. “Okay.”

She removes her cell phone from the pocket of her shimmery black trousers as I hit the speed dial for Jae. Several heart-clenching seconds pass before she answers. “Hey, doll face, how are you?”

My lips twitch as they suppress a smirk from her playful quip. Jae has always called me ‘doll face’ as she swears I’m the spitting image of a male model she lusted over when she

was a teenager. His face was plastered on the cover of an Australian magazine called *Dolly*, hence the doll reference.

“Hugo’s been shot.”

Regan and Hunter’s eyes snap to mine in sync.

“The paramedics have been instructed to take him to your hospital. His ETA should be around...” I stop talking and check my watch. It’s late afternoon, so rush hour is at its peak. “Ten minutes... maybe fifteen.”

“Do you have any further details. Injuries? Where he was shot?”

“I relayed to you everything I know.”

She sighs. “I’ll get the OR prepped and on standby,” she advises as the sound of her tiny feet padding along a tiled floor come down the line.

I gulp in a big breath. “Jae, Hugo is like family to me—”

“I know, Isaac. He’ll have the best surgeons in the country looking after him. He’ll be well taken care of.”

“Thank you.” I disconnect our call and place my phone into my pocket, hiding my shaking hands. When I spot Regan’s tear-filled eyes, my anger gets the better of me. “Not now, Regan. We need to keep it together until we bring Isabelle home. Jae will look after Hugo.”

Her lips quiver as she nods.

“Did you get ahold of Alex?”

She shakes her head. “He isn’t answering his phone, but I know where to find him.”

Five minutes later, Hunter and I follow Regan into the building Hugo used to collect Isabelle from every evening.

The hum of activity simmers to a flurry of whispers and gawking stares when I step inside the foyer. The agents' shock at seeing the man they have been surveilling from a distance up close and personal is marked all over their faces.

Regan shimmies her shoulders and exhales sharply before she walks toward a glass office in the corner of the room. Alex is standing with his back turned to us, peering out a large window behind his desk. When he senses the awkwardness suffocating the air, he swivels around. His lips curl into a wide, egotistical smile when he notices Regan sauntering toward him, but it switches to a snarl when he spots Hunter and me.

Regan walks into his office, not waiting to be invited in. "Alex Rogers, this is Isaac Holt and Hunter Kane," she introduces, gesturing her hand between Alex, Hunter, and me.

Alex's top lip twitches as he glares at Regan. "I thought you didn't know Isaac Holt."

Regan scoffs. "I said I didn't know him *sexually*." Her voice is barely a whisper. "*You*, like always, chose only to hear the words *you* want to hear."

Any reply Alex is formulating is cut off by my furious glare. "You can finish your lovers' quarrel later. We have more pressing issues to address." I shift my gaze to Alex. "Isabelle was kidnapped this afternoon." He stiffens, and his eyes widen, but he remains quiet. "We have an image of the assailant, but we've been unable to identify him using the police facial recognition software." He doesn't appear the slightest bit fazed by my admission that we're utilizing police resources illegally. "Brandon suggested I contact you. He said you have access to better facial recognition scanning software."

Alex curses under his breath as he runs his hand over his head. “For Isabelle, I’ll call it a truce, but once she’s safe, all bets are off.”

Confusion crosses his features when I thrust my hand out in offering. “Deal.”

After we seal our agreement with a handshake, Alex gestures his head to his desk. “There’s a secure port behind the filing cabinet.”

Hunter nods and places his laptop on the desk a mere second before his brows scrunch. “If I connect to the FBI’s server, it could leave your security vulnerable to infiltration. If they get in, I may never get them back out.”

I shrug. “Let them have it. I have nothing to hide.” I ensured anything incriminating on my servers were wiped clean the morning after my arrest.

Regan touches my forearm. “What about Hugo?”

*Shit!* I’ve been guarding Hugo’s secret for years, but if the FBI gains access to his personal records, I will no longer be able to guarantee his safety. He’d be once again defenseless to the wolves gunning for his blood.

Regan crosses her arms in front of her chest before turning her gaze to Alex. “Promise me your department will not access anything on Isaac’s servers today, and I’ll forgive you for exploiting me.”

Alex balks. “I didn’t exploit you, Regan.”

Tears glisten in Regan’s eyes, but she maintains a confident composure. As Alex’s narrowed gaze shifts between Regan and me, he runs his hand over his head, something he always seems to do when nervous. After several painful seconds, he drifts his eyes to Hunter. “Send the photo to the

email address on the card.” He hands him an officially embossed FBI business card. “The FBI servers automatically upload all content on any devices plugged into their mainframe, so I’ll use my computer to access the image.”

Hunter snags the card out of his hand and fires up his laptop.

“Thank you,” Regan whispers faintly.

In the corner of my eye, I see Alex step closer to her. His face is hard-lined, but his eyes are shimmering with silent apologies. Regan shakes her head and paces to the other side of the room, her thighs shaking with every step. When she uses me as a protective shield between them, the twitch in Alex’s top lip amplifies before he storms around his desk to sit in a large leather chair.

“Done,” Hunter informs us, straying his eyes from his laptop to Alex.

My heart beats in an unnatural rhythm when I take in the time on the antique clock on the wall. Isabelle was taken nearly an hour ago. “We need to hurry before it’s too late.”

“Move.” Hunter nudges Alex in the shoulder. “Your two-finger typing is too fucking slow. We’ll be here all night at this rate.”

Alex snarls but moves out of the chair as requested. Hunter’s fingers wildly fly over the keyboard. His face is scrunched up, and his lips are pursed, but he’s in his element. There’s no better hacker or computer programmer in the world than the man seated in front of me.

Hunter’s eyes shoot to me. “You need to donate some money to the local police department so they can get this software installed.”



I smirk and nod. In my current state, I'd agree to anything.

Hunter's eyes return to mine when my untraceable cell rings in my pocket. I flip open the screen and press my phone to my ear.

"Col is moving." Tallis's usually thick timbre is barely audible. "He requested for his driver to take him to a warehouse on the corner of Henter and Joyce at—"

"Harbortown."

"Yes. I have to go." He disconnects our call as a thick Italian accent sounds down the line.

I gesture with my head for Hunter to join me at the side of the room. He scoots past Alex and stands in front of me, scrubbing his thick beard.

"I know where he's taken Isabelle."

His brows scrunch. "Where?"

"The warehouse at Harbortown." I don't need to say any more. From the way his pupils widen, I know he understands.

"I'll call in Roger and Peters." He glances down at his watch. "I could get a few more guys there, but they're an hour away."

"No men. He'll kill Isabelle before they even step foot inside the warehouse," I respond, fear heard in my voice. "Call Tallis and advise him it's time to move. If he doesn't answer, send some guys in and get him out."

Hunter nods. Tallis is a man I put inside Col's operation two years ago. That saying 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer' was the premise for me putting Tallis undercover. I knew one day Col's quest for revenge would inevitably happen. I just never figured I'd have someone

significant in my life he could seek his vengeance on instead of me.

As Alex's blue eyes flick between Regan, Hunter, and me, he yanks open the top drawer of his desk and removes his FBI-issued revolver and spare chamber. After snagging his jacket off the coat rack in his office, he moves to stand between Hunter and me. "Isabelle is still an FBI agent. We protect our own." His tone indicates his statement isn't up for discussion. "I know this man. I know how he operates. I've been working on his case since I was a rookie."

"Then you know Col orchestrated this because he wants me, so if anyone but me enters that warehouse, he will kill Isabelle."

The pain in my chest amplifies.

"I know that," Alex interrupts. "But that doesn't mean you can't have backup waiting in the wings in case things don't go according to plan."

I stare into his eyes, contemplating a response. I've always been a man who takes care of myself. I have a dedicated team of security, but they're to ensure my staff and family are safe while keeping my empire away from the prying eyes of strangers, but this is different. Typically, I'm only protecting myself, whereas now, I also have Isabelle to protect.

Col never goes anywhere without his heavily-armed right-hand man, let alone the fact he may still have Isabelle's two kidnapers to aid in seeking his revenge. I know Henry and his team have pledged their support, but by the time they make it here, it may be too late.

But can I do this? Can I trust putting Isabelle's safety into the hands of another man?

Can I relinquish my vital necessity to protect her to another?

Although my ego takes a hit admitting it, yes, I can. I'll use every tactic I can to ensure Isabelle is safe, even using the antagonist standing across from me.

“He has Isabelle at a warehouse in Harbortown. You can follow me there.”

I may accept Alex's assistance, but that doesn't mean I'm a foolish man. I can't guarantee he wouldn't arrest me the instant I advised him of Isabelle's location. By requiring him to follow me, it means I'll still be the first man on site.

I shift my focus to Hunter. “Get Tallis out and call Ryan. Tell him we're going back to where it all began.”

Alex follows me out of his office, barking orders at a handful of agents milling around the confined space. I don't hear any of the words he's saying. My sole focus is on reaching Isabelle before Col hurts her.

Just as my foot enters my Bugatti, I glance at Alex. “Get in. This will be quicker than the piece of shit you've been tailing me in the past few weeks.”

He stiffens, surprised I knew he was tailing me. I've known for weeks, but I figured if he wanted to waste his personal time surveilling me, he could because the more attention he focuses on me, the less heat on Hugo and my team.

After dipping his chin in farewell to Regan, Alex slides into the passenger seat of my car. Nothing but the smell of burning rubber lingers in the air from my heavy compression on the accelerator.

It's time to lay my cards on the table.

Line up all my ducks in a row.

It's time to play my most lethal hand.

## CHAPTER 4



## ISABELLE

This time, when I blink my eyes, the sun is no longer shining through any cracks in the black plastic. No skyline is visible. My head is thumping ten times worse, and the urge to vomit is so overwhelming, I dry-heave through the thick material stuffed in my mouth. I attempt to move my arms, wanting to rub away my blurred vision, but my efforts are futile since my wrists are tied behind my back.

Dropping my blurred vision to the polished concrete ground, I discover my ankles are bound with the rope I tripped over earlier in the office. After blinking numerous times, my dry eyes scan the area. I'm no longer in an office but in an industrial-looking building, similar to the warehouse Isaac owns in Hopeton. There's a black boxing ring with stadium chairs surrounding three sides of it. It appears to be a professional fighting club, except there's no sponsorship promotional material or signage like you'd usually see in a professional fight circuit.

Dread washes over me. This must be Col Petretti's underground fighting circle.

I soundlessly squeal when something cool brushes my shoulder. My pupils widen when my eyes lock in on a gentleman standing next to me. Even though my vision

remains clouded, there's no mistaking he's the man I saw at the gala two weeks ago. The same man I swore to Isaac wouldn't harm me as I trusted my intuition.

*How could I have been so stupid?*

He crouches down in front of me. "If you squeal, the gag will have to go back in." His tone is firm but not threatening. "Got it?"

Unable to speak through a severe case of cotton-mouth, I nod. My tongue darts out to lick my parched lips the instant the gag is removed. While I bring some fluid to my throat with quick swallows, he is unscrewing the cap of a water bottle. Once the lid has been removed, he lifts it to my mouth and tilts it back. An appreciative gasp expels from my lips. The refreshing coolness of the water trickling down my scorching dry throat is a godsend.

"Slow down, your gulps or your swirling stomach won't hold in the water. You don't want to vomit while having a gag in your mouth, or you'll run the risk of choking." Although his voice is super throaty, his words are more soothing than intimidating.

Once half of the bottle has mollified the dryness impinging my throat, I pull away.

"Enough?"

When I nod, he screws the lid back on, then stores the bottle next to my shoeless feet.

I flinch when his hand returns to my face. "I won't hurt you."

He wipes away the water that spilled from my mouth during my greedy gulps. When he's finished, he dabs his

thumb under my eyes that are likely stained with black mascara streaks.

“Please let me go,” I beg, realizing his actions are exposing a side most men have but refuse to acknowledge—their nurturing instincts.

After removing the marks under my eyes, his dark, dangerous gaze locks with mine. “I can’t let you go. Without you, I won’t get any of the answers I’ve been searching for.”

“I can’t help answer any of your questions. I don’t know anything.”

When he moves to a table at my side, his large frame becomes fully exposed. Compared to the last time I saw him, he’s more casually dressed, wearing dark denim jeans and a long-sleeve Henley shirt that showcases his well-formed, muscular physique. My breath snags when my eyes zoom in on a semi-automatic weapon and a Glock sitting on top of the table he’s standing next to.

“You’re not the one answering my questions, Isabelle.” He snatches the semi-automatic weapon off the table and houses it in the back of his jeans. “He will be.”

Anxiety makes itself known with my gut, but before a word can spill from my mouth, a heavily accented voice sounds from across the room.

My assailant rushes toward me to stuff the gag back into my mouth. “Be quiet and follow my lead. Doing that is the only way you’re assured of leaving this building still breathing.”

Not waiting for me to reply, my attacker stands behind me as the shuffling of his feet drum along with my pulse.



“He is to stay outside. The deal was only you. Him being here was not the terms of the negotiation we agreed upon,” says the kidnapper. “If you wish to cancel our agreement, I’ll move Isabelle on to the next highest bidder. A woman of her caliber is highly sought after in this industry.”

Fear straightens my spine as my frenzied eyes dart side to side, frantically trying to see who has once again purchased me. Due to my poor position, all I can see is the shadow of three men reflecting off the office window.

“Mario, wait outside,” instructs a deep, accented voice.

An uncomfortable length of silence passes, the only noise heard is the wild beat of my heart and someone’s stomping steps.

I snap my eyes shut and suck in a big breath, vainly trying to quell the anxiety thickening my veins. When I flutter them back open, my breath snags and my pupils dilate. There, standing before me is one of the men I fear the most.

Col Petretti.

“Hello again, angel.”

My teeth grit the material in my mouth when he squats down in front of me to glide his hand down my face. If my feet and hands weren’t bound, I would kick and fight with all my might to get away from one of the most ruthless men I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting. But since I’m tied to a chair, I angrily snarl at him instead before cranking my head to the side, denying his touch.

“Such a spark of feistiness,” he remarks with a broad grin carved on his abhorrent face. “Just like your mother.”

My breathing stills as my eyes snap back to his. I’m unaware he knew my mother. His grin grows conceited when

he notices my confused expression. He grips my chin painfully before lifting my head into the air. His beastly eyes roam over me like he's studying the clarity of a rare black diamond instead of a tear-stained face.

Once his skin-crawling assessment is over, he releases my chin and stares at me. "I knew you were Felicia's daughter from the moment I saw you outside of Isaac's club, 57. You're the spitting image of your mother in every way. Same hair coloring, skin tone, beautiful angelic face." His eyes narrow into thin slits. "Except for your eyes. They're as rotten as the man who gifted them to you. I'd always wondered what happened to you the past twenty years, but your father didn't. Do you know what he said when I told him I'd found you?"

I remain quiet, refusing to react to his taunts.

"*I'm not interested*, that's what he said. He didn't show any emotions at all." He grips my hair and yanks my head back before drifting his eyes down my body. "Even with his hideous eyes, you're an angel, a gift from heaven. Perhaps I should have shown him a photo so he could see how much you look like your mother. I bet he would've been interested then."

My nostrils flare as I inhale deeply. All this time, Isaac thought he was protecting me from Col because of his vendetta against him, but Col wasn't after me because of what happened to Ophelia. He wants me because of who my father is.

I can't fathom why? If he thinks he can use me as a bargaining chip against my father, he's more senseless than I originally thought. Vladimir Popov doesn't negotiate with people's lives unless he's the one selling them.

"Your mother was a breathtaking woman, Isabelle. It was such a pity she had to die." Col's callous tone doesn't match

his statement. “If only Vladimir were more willing to share his toys, then maybe she’d still be alive.”

My eyes widen before shooting to Col’s to seek any truth to his statement.

He chuckles a menacing laugh. “Oh, you didn’t know? Although your mother was addicted to meth, she didn’t die of a drug overdose as reported. She died because of your father’s inability to share his whore.”

I grit my teeth and shake my head, causing tears to spill down my face. My Uncle Tobias was a truthful man. He told me my mother died of a drug overdose. He wouldn’t have lied to me.

“You’re lucky no one from Vladimir’s crew has heard of your false allegations,” sneers my kidnapper.

Col’s dark gaze shifts from me to him. “That’s where you’re wrong, Rick. Not only were Vladimir’s closest family members aware of the treachery over Felicia’s death, they helped conceal her murder.”

A *pfft* whizzes from Rick’s mouth. “Why hide her death? Felicia’s life was a disaster. She was nothing but a low-grade whore who was paid for services rendered with drugs and money stained with blood.”

My nostrils flare as I glare at my assailant. Even though my memories of my mom are vague and full of unpleasantness, at the end of the day, she’s still my mother. Without her, I wouldn’t exist.

Col stands from his crouched position to move to stand next to Rick. Even though he’s several years older than Rick and more notorious, Rick isn’t the slightest bit intimidated by

him. He stands tall with his feet planted the width of his shoulders and a snickering expression etched on his face.

“Those were my sentiments exactly, but she was a whore who refused to open her legs for anyone but Vladimir.”

Rick rolls his eyes. “She obviously needed to be taught a lesson that Vladimir wasn’t the only King she was required to service.”

My stomach rolls, sickened at the thought of my mom being treated like nothing more than a commodity. From the photos I found of her in my uncle’s personal records, she was so young and full of life before she met my father. She only agreed to become his mistress because he promised her a life of luxury and happiness. All she got were broken promises and shattered dreams.

Col’s chest puffs high, smugly basking in the glory of Rick’s praise. “Ah, you’re a man after my own heart. There’s nothing I love more than teaching someone a valuable lesson. Except perhaps watching the light being extinguished from their eyes... the fear, the silent pleading, the scent of death. Nothing comes close to that thrill. It’s the most addictive drug of them all. Although Felicia’s death was many years ago, it’s one of my most treasured memories.”

“Then why hide your glorious victory? You snuck in under Vladimir’s nose and killed his most prized mistress. That’s not a feat a mere man would accomplish. You should be shouting it from the rooftops.”

Col chuckles with arrogance. “Felicia’s death was during a moment of lust-fueled rage, urged on by the wrong head on my body. It was only once she stopped withering under my hands did I realize my business dealings with Vladimir were

worth more than claiming the death of a whore. Luckily for me, she was a drug addict, so her murder was easy to conceal.”

My throat burns when I heave against the gag. Add that to the dizziness inflicted from being chloroformed twice and the virulence of Col’s words, the urge to be sick is overwhelming. I suck in a big breath as my eyes shift to the wall, vainly trying to keep my stomach from recoiling again. If I can’t fight the urge to be sick while gagged, I’ll most likely asphyxiate myself.

When I close my eyes, my mind drifts to a happier time, a more settled place. The first image that enters my thoughts is Isaac and me dancing at the gala, then it changes to our time together on his yacht. The swell of my stomach eases as the memories of our months together filter through my mind.

I’m brought back to reality when my head is yanked roughly. The swishing of my stomach returns when I glance into Col’s soulless eyes. “Watching the life vanish from Isabelle’s eyes will be worth any damage my business will sustain. Although, seeing her up close does make me reconsider my original plan.” He licks his lips in a sickening way. “Maybe I should keep her alive a little while longer... see if she is as feisty as her mother. With her beneath me, it will be like the past twenty years never happened. I’ll once again be in my prime.”

When Rick takes a step closer to me, I breathe in the smell of his bottled cologne, hoping its spicy scent will quell my stomach. He’s standing so close, his jean-covered calf scratches my wobbling knees. “Why go to all the effort of dragging Isabelle here if you just plan to kill her? I could have given you the opportunity at the gala two weeks ago.”

My heart stops beating when Col smirks an evil, stomach-churning smile. “Because this is different. Here, I get to kill two birds with one stone in a place that holds great sentimental value to me.” His heavy-lidded eyes roam over my face before they glide down my body. “This is, after all, where it all began. This is where my business started, and the same place an angel gained her wings.” He treks his index finger across my tear-stained cheek. “Furthermore, I want Isaac to watch her die, to see firsthand the light in her eyes doused, knowing he’s responsible for the death of the woman he loves.”

My heart clenches. How was I so blind that I couldn’t see Isaac loved me when even a man like Col could? Weeks I wasted with Isaac by choosing to listen to the callous words of a spiteful bitch instead of ensuring her claims were legitimate. I should have fought harder. I should have demanded proof instead of believing speculation. I shouldn’t have given him up without a fight.

Rick shrugs. “Sounds like a story of a bitter, revenge-seeking old man.” My pulse quickens when he takes a step closer to Col. “The story circulating through my crew is that you’ve become so blinded by revenge, you’re taking uncalculated risks that are putting your crew in jeopardy.”

A muffled squeal erupts from my mouth when Col backhands Rick. The harshness of his blow is so brutal, Rick’s head flings to the side, and blood dribbles from his mouth. “Another insult like that will have your body sitting in the bottom of the ocean as fish food,” Col snarls through clenched teeth. “People learn the hard way that a man with a reputation like mine is *not* to be disrespected. I’ll have no qualms ensuring you’re aware of the same thing.”

Rick moves his head back to its original position, his eyes stormy and beaming with unbridled anger. The heat in the room turns stifling when he smiles a sinister grin. From his smiling reaction, you wouldn't think the whites of his teeth are tainted with blood.

After running his index finger across his bottom lip, gathering a trail of blood formed there, his darkened eyes lift to Col. "This proves the rumors circulating the mill are correct. You've lost your game, Col. First, you bring law enforcement into an industry they don't belong in. Then, you falsely frame people for murder." My pupils widen as my blurry eyes shoot between Rick and Col. "And now, you're so heedless, you can't even see the grim reaper standing in front of you."

My heart rate ramps up when Rick slyly moves his hand toward the semi-automatic weapon he housed in the back of his jeans earlier. "You should've been more vigilant, Col, more cautious, as haste—"

"Haste decisions cause unforgiving mistakes," interrupts a voice at the side of the warehouse I immediately recognize. "Mistakes I regret every day of my life."

Fear bubbles inside of me when my gaze locks in on the impressive stature of Isaac entering an open roller door at the side. He's wearing black trousers and a light blue business shirt rolled up at the sleeves. He's devoid of the tie, vest, and jacket he usually wears.

His darkened gaze shifts from glaring at Col to scan my face, the tick in his jaw amplifying when he notices the tearstains on my ashen cheeks. The constrictive clutch on my heart tightens when Rick points the barrel of his gun at Isaac's torso.

Even in immediate danger, Isaac's commanding composure doesn't falter. He exudes importance and demands attention. While tugging his business shirt out of the waistband of his trousers, he keeps his gaze securely planted on Rick. He raises his shirt high so Rick can see he's unarmed.

*He doesn't need to carry a weapon. His body is his weapon.*

When Rick lowers his gun, Isaac strides toward our group. His steps are fast and efficient, reaching us within two heart-thrashing seconds. "You wanted my attention, now you have it. Let Isabelle go, and I'll ensure the repercussions of your idiocy will be less severe than what will be inflicted on Col."

Even though his words are directed at Rick, his gaze remains fixed on Col, intuiting the greater evil of the two men in front of him.

Col smirks a malicious smile. "And here I thought Henry taught you everything he knew." He paces nearer to Isaac. "That's not the way things work in our industry, and you know that. If it were, I would've slit your snitching throat years ago."

Isaac's cheeks rise as his lips curl into a snarl. "The rules of our game changed the instant you sought your vengeance on Isabelle instead of me."

"I'm evening the score," Col sneers. "You took my angel, now I'll take yours."

"Ophelia's death is on your head, not mine!" Isaac's tone is dangerously low. "If you had just let us walk away that night, she'd have never died, and I would've saved her from living a calamitous life with you."



My heart squeezes over the pain in his words. Words that should have been spoken six years ago. Words that will hopefully help to heal Isaac's heart.

Col spits at Isaac's feet. "You couldn't have saved her. She died running away from you, not me!"

Air whizzes from Isaac's lips, physically winded by Col's cruel words. He tries to smother the look of guilt on his face, but he isn't quick enough to fully suffocate it before Col notices it. "See, even you know her death is your fault. If she'd never met you, she'd still be alive, just like Isabelle. *E giunto il momento per gli angeli di incontrarsi.*"

I can't breathe when Col thrusts his hand into the breast pocket of his jacket and produces a vintage white pistol. The greatest parts of my life flash before my eyes when he swings the barrel of the gun toward my face. The smell of gunpowder, burning flesh, and blood invade my nostrils as sharp and brutal pain rockets through my body.

Then all I see is blackness.

## CHAPTER 5



## ISABELLE

*A*n insistent dull beep sounds through my ringing ears, waking me from my sleep. Slowly, I blink my eyes open, my brows stitching when I'm met with a white circular light. A groan spills from my parched throat as I move my hand to something jabbing painfully in my arm. My movements are sluggish and slow since my brain is not instantly relaying the prompts to my body.

"Leave it," commands a deep voice at my side I instantly recognize. "It's an intravenous line."

Isaac houses his cell phone into the pocket of his trousers before moving to stand next to me. I inhale deeply, appreciating the smell of his seductive scent over the horrid odor of bleach mingling in the air. His face appears restless, and the stubble on his chin has grown since I saw him in Avery's office, but he is still incredibly alluring.

"Where am I?" The thump of my head increases with each syllable I speak.

"You're in Ravenshoe Private Hospital."

Confusion surges through me.

Isaac lifts a pale yellow pitcher to fill a clear cup with water. "Do you remember anything that happened?"

I shake my head, doubling the worry on Isaac's face. After placing a plastic straw in the cup, he raises it to my mouth. I greedily gulp down the water, eager to quench my thirst. My throat is so dry it feels like I haven't had a drink in months.

"Not too much." His voice is a soft, nurturing purr. "You need to give your stomach a chance to adjust."

I pout when he pulls the half-empty cup away from my still-parched mouth, but my pulse quickens when he mutters, "If you drop that lip again, I'll bite it."

He lifts a remote, the cords of which are twisted around the steel railing of the bed, to recline the top half of the mattress. "Is that better?" he asks once I'm in a half-seated position.

I nod, ignoring the swirling my stomach is doing from the gluttonous gulps of water I swallowed.

As always, Isaac senses my discomfort. "Are you in pain?"

I shake my head. "No."

His dark brow arches high, calling out my deceit.

"The water is a little sloshy in my belly."

His lips set into a hard line. "I'll get the doctor."

Before I can object, he moves to a closed glass-paneled door. While he fetches the doctor, I lower my blurry eyes to my body, seeking hints as to why I am in the hospital. Other than wearing a blue hospital gown and having an IV line inserted into my wrist, I appear unharmed. I scan the room. There are a blood pressure machine and heart monitor to my right, an IV stand with two bags of clear fluids to my left, and numerous bunches of floral arrangements on every flat surface in the room.

My eyes stray to the side when a doctor wearing pink scrubs and a white coat enters the room with Isaac. Her dark brown, nearly black hair is secured into place with two pens. She has a lovely Asian appearance with bright green eyes. Her skin is flawless, her cheekbones are high, and her thin, pink lips are glossy.

“How are you feeling?” My brows scrunch, surprised by the uniqueness of her heavily drawled accent. She smiles at my reaction. “My mom is Korean, my dad is Australian, but they’ve lived in Texas for over thirty years. I’m a little mix of them both... my mom’s looks and my dad’s accent.”

My heart warms to the stranger. Her aura is just like Harlow’s, and I can tell if given the opportunity, we could become great friends.

“You sustained a traumatic concussion when part of your temporal skull hit the concrete during impact,” she advises while pulling a white ophthalmoscope from the pocket of her coat.

My eyes shoot across the room when Isaac’s attempt to suppress a groan is futile. He scrubs his hand along the thick stubble on his jaw as guilt hampers his usually tempting gaze.

“I’d choose to sustain a concussion over a bullet wound any day, Isaac,” the doctor mumbles as she flicks a bright light in front of my eyes. White lights dance around the room for several seconds when she returns the flashlight to her pocket. “Your optic and oculomotor nerves appear to be functioning accurately.”

I wince as a sharp, jolting pain radiates through my head when she pushes on the right side of my skull, just behind my ear. “Sorry.” She continues her assessment. “The area of impact will be tender for a few more days.” She shifts her gaze

to Isaac, who is standing beside me. “Ensure she’s administered pain relief every four to six hours but steer clear of anything aspirin-related. I’ll also give you a prescription for a stronger dosage of pain medication, but it runs the risk of increasing her nausea and fatigue.” Her gaze turns back to me. “Only use it if you feel the pain is becoming too much for you to handle.”

I nod as Isaac moves closer to my bedside. “Isabelle is having some issues with her memory.”

The doctor smiles to ease the panic fettering his face. “That isn’t unusual for someone who sustained a level three concussion. Her CT scan came up clear. There’s no bleeding or swelling of the brain. Symptoms of a concussion can clear within minutes, hours, days, or even a week. Unfortunately, it is just a waiting game, but until all the symptoms of your concussion are gone, you can’t return to your normal activities.” Her smile merges into a full-toothed grin. “That includes vigorous bedroom activities.”

I squirm as my knees meet. Just the idea of undertaking any bedroom activities with Isaac has my inner vixen climbing out of the pit she entrenched herself in two weeks ago. The dryness impinging my throat earlier returns full force when I spot the devilishly delicious smile curved on Isaac’s mouth. His eyes consume me, touch not required to ignite every nerve in my body.

Our lust-filled stare-down is interrupted when the doctor giggles. I cringe, mortified I forgot she was here. I shouldn’t be surprised. When Isaac is in the room, no one else matters. They’re nothing but white noise in the background.

After removing my IV, the doctor says, “Give me a few hours to do a complete set of monitoring on your condition. I

want to make sure I haven't missed anything. If it all goes okay, you can be discharged later tonight or maybe tomorrow morning."

"Thank you."

She smiles before running her hand down Isaac's arm in a comforting manner. Surprisingly, I don't feel the slightest bit of jealousy from her gesture. I can see her fondness for Isaac is just like Regan's. They're friends, nothing more.

When she exits the door, Isaac's focus returns to me. My thighs quake when he stealthily prowls to me. "I'll explain everything that happened..." A glint in his eyes stimulates my core. "... after I kiss you. It's been too darn long since I've tasted your lips."

Before I can protest—*not that I was going to*—his lips seal over mine. His kiss is soft and sweet but laced with the promise of something greater to come. Even in my concussed state, I know we have a lot of unresolved issues we need to discuss, but after everything we've been through this weekend, I no longer have the energy to fight a war bigger than us both.

I cup his jaw so I can kiss him with just as much tenderness as he's bestowing on me. His arms wrap around my waist, pulling me closer as his tongue delves into my mouth, sampling and savoring every inch like he's starved for my taste. My breathing deepens when he adjusts my position, so his thickened rod braces along my stomach.

Our kiss grows more passionate when I weave my fingers through his thick, luxurious hair. I pull him nearer, deepening our kiss. The playful, tantalizing embrace has my womb coiling with every nip and stroke inflicted.

A shameful whimper rumbles from my tingling lips when he inches back from our embrace. His heavy-lidded eyes shift between mine as he caresses my left cheek. “You scared me, Isabelle. I’ve never been scared before, but when Col pulled out his gun and aimed it at you, for the first time in my life, I was truly scared.”

Warm tears slide down my cheeks from the genuine fear relayed in his beautiful eyes, but I remain quiet, exulted that a man as guarded as Isaac is opening up to me.

“Fury raged through my body hot and fast when I saw you bound and gagged to that rickety wooden chair. Your hair was damp and clinging to your neck. Your eyes were open wide with pupils dilated, and your beautiful face was stained with tears.”

He stops talking to wipe away my tears with his thumbs. “Your concussion is my fault, but I had to protect you. I didn’t mean to hit you so hard, but I had to beat the bullet. I couldn’t let him hurt you.”

His words come out strong, but his gaze remains fixed on the wall behind me. I want to speak and offer him comfort, but I can’t. My words are congested in my throat, refusing to be relinquished.

“The instant Col pulled the gun out, I charged at you. We hit the ground with a sickening thud. I sheltered you with my body as bullets, screaming demands, and wounded cries broke through the shrill in my ears. The smell was sickening. Nearly as ghastly as the scent that invaded my nostrils when I entered the barn weeks ago. It was the smell of death.”

My brain struggles to unscramble the muddled mess clustered in it. I recall the argument with Hugo, being pulled



into the white Range Rover, and swinging a bat at someone, but other than that, it's a hazy blur of confusion.

“Was anyone injured?”

My breathing stills when Isaac nods. “When an unnerving quietness filled the air around us, I cranked my neck back to look behind me. Col lay dead on the dirty concrete floor with Ryan standing over him. Alex had your kidnapper kneeling in front of him with his hands twined behind his head, and one of Alex's agents had Col's right-hand man cuffed and lying on the floor at his feet near the entrance of the warehouse. Seeing that all potential threats had been secured, I unwrapped you from my cocoon.”

My brows stich. I'm truly shocked that the FBI and Ravenshoe Police Department worked with Isaac to find me.

“I'd do anything to protect you, Isabelle, even asking my arch-nemesis for help,” he explains, reading my thoughts. “We made a deal to put our differences aside until you were returned safely.”

My heart squeezes as the most inappropriately-timed smile tugs on my lips. Alex has never hidden his animosity of Isaac, so I'm surprised and somewhat pleased that they worked together. Maybe now Alex will realize Isaac isn't quite the man his FBI file makes him out to be.

Isaac's brows lower. “My heart plummeted into my stomach when I noticed your eyes were closed and your mouth was ajar. I removed the restraints from your ankles and wrists before laying you flat on the ground next to the splintered chair you were bound to. My hands were shaking, petrified I'd killed you. Thankfully, even though it was faint, you had a pulse.”

I reach for him, wanting to erase the lines of worry marring his handsome face. He draws in a sharp breath when my fingertips brush his cheek. “Thank you.”

His brows furrow, seemingly confused by my praise.

“For saving my life,” I explain to his puzzled expression.

Stealing his chance to refute my accurate statement, I press my mouth to his. My heart warms when his lips move sweetly beneath mine.

After giving me a heart-stopping kiss, he murmurs over my lips, “You can thank me by never leaving my sight again.”

Smiling, I stare into his eyes, which don’t look as pained as they did a few minutes ago.

“I’m not joking.”

Our heated reunion is interrupted when three brisk taps sound at my hospital room door. I smile when I see the boyishly handsome face of Brandon. Ignoring the screaming protests of my thumping head, I scamper off the bed then wrap my arms around his neck to greet him. Brandon returns my embrace before pulling me back to arm’s length so that he can assess me for injuries. His plump lips curl before his eyes shift to Isaac sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, looking sexy as sin with his hair mussed from my fingers running through it.

My pulse quickens when I notice a touch of panic in Isaac’s glistening eyes. Usually, jealousy is the only thing relayed when Brandon is around, so his fretful gaze has my nerves sitting on the edge.

“What’s going on?”

The dark, stormy cloud hampering Isaac’s eyes before we kissed returns full force. He stands from the bed and moves to

stand next to me. I can feel the frenzied rush of his pulse when he encloses his hand over mine. “Hugo was shot by one of your attackers.”

The air in my body is evicted as tears well in my eyes. “Is he okay? Where is he?”

“He’s been wheeled into recovery. They said he should be in his room in around an hour.” Brandon’s voice is scratchy with emotions. “They won’t give me information on his condition as I’m not a member of his family.”

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Two hours later, Isaac ushers me into Hugo’s private wing. Everything slows when my eyes zoom in on his massive frame lying motionless in a double bed. My pulse, my breathing, my heart—it all stops. Nothing but guilt is felt when I see the machines and monitors attached to him.

I can barely breathe through the tears flooding my face as I pace to his bedside. I’ve spent so much time with Hugo the last two months, he’s become like a brother to me. He’s my family. The only reason I haven’t collapsed in a heap on the floor is because of Isaac’s firm hold around my waist.

I choke back a sob when Hugo’s eyes flutter open. “Hey, Isabelle.” His greeting doesn’t come with the familiar drawl I’ve become accustomed to.

I rush to him, wrapping my arms around his torso the best I can while being cautious not to cause him any pain. A grin tugs my mouth when he mutters, “Are you trying to get me fucking fired... again?”

His normal woodsy scent has been overtaken by the antiseptic smell all hospitals seem to have, but he's alive so that's all that matters. I pull away and stare into his clouded eyes, issuing my regret for the cruel words I said to him during our fight.

"It's all good, Izzy. We're all good, aren't we?"

"Yeah, we're good," I reply as the doctor who assessed me earlier enters the room.

I move off Hugo's bed to join Isaac at the side. He slings his arm around my waist, then tugs me in close, so the material of his shirt can catch my tears before they roll down my face. The doctor checks Hugo's vital signs before peeling the hospital gown off his chest. More tears spill from my eyes when I see the stitched and cleaned, but still obvious, bullet wound in the top half of his chest.

"You must have a guardian angel looking out for you," the doctor remarks, lowering the dressing. "Do you remember anything that happened?"

Hugo's lips purse before he shakes his head. "I only remember chasing after the car and suddenly being sprawled onto my ass like I was hit in the chest by a bull... or Isaac's right-swung fist."

A smile curls my lips. Even being shot can't dampen his cheeky demeanor. I'm not the only one laughing. Isaac tries to conceal his smile with a stern glare, but his lips curve high, giving away his deceit.

"What's Hugo's condition, and how long until he can be discharged?"

The doctor moves to the end of Hugo's bed so she can address us all together. "The bullet entered Hugo in the front

upper left chest cavity and exited through his left shoulder region at the back. The bullet was a through and through, so astonishingly, no significant bone damage was caused since it entered and exited in between Hugo's ribs."

Hugo weakly winks, seemingly pleased with himself.

"You're not out of the woods just yet, Hugo. We need to make sure the wound doesn't become infected and that the damage to your lung remains stable."

My gaze shifts from Hugo to the doctor. "What damage to his lung?"

"When the bullet entered Hugo's chest, it slightly veered and nicked the top of his left lung, causing it to deflate. When he arrived, the surgeon noticed the wound was sucking, and the skin had a bubble-wrap appearance. They inserted a tube to drain the blood and air pooling in his chest around the wound site. The tube will also assist in re-inflating his lung. This type of injury isn't uncommon for someone with a gunshot wound. It is called a hemopneumothorax. Since it was treated adequately and quickly, Hugo shouldn't suffer any long-term side effects."

"So how long will I be subjected to sponge baths by sexy nurses in tight white uniforms?" Hugo asks with a frail waggle of his brows. Even though his voice is laced with cheekiness, the spark in his eyes isn't as prominent as normal, and his jaw is set in a tight line, showing he's in pain. "A bullet deserves a much *more* worthy reward than a bunch of stinky flowers."

When Isaac snickers over his comment, I elbow him in the ribs. All snickering stops when a nurse with perfect timing enters the room. She's young and cute with long platinum blonde hair with a streak of pink down one side.

In silence, she checks Hugo's blood pressure, temperature, and his wound site before handing him the remote control that was resting near his hand. She advises him that he can self-administer his pain relief by pushing a button on the remote and shows him how to operate the television hanging from the ceiling.

"If you need me for anything, *anything at all*, press the big green nurse button in the middle."

When she leaves the room, my wary eyes shoot up to Isaac. He shrugs, pretending he didn't organize for the sexy little kitten to be Hugo's nurse. He kisses the crinkles on my nose when I squint my eyes even more, calling bullshit.

"We better let Hugo get some rest." The doctor gestures her head to the door. "If you *behave*, I may get you out of here before Christmas."

After farewelling Hugo with a kiss on his cheek, I exit the room huddled in the crook of Isaac's shoulder, grateful Hugo wasn't more injured than he is but hating that he was injured at all while protecting me.

"It's his job, Isabelle, so don't carry an unnecessary burden on your shoulders." Isaac's mutter is only audible to me. "Hugo wouldn't blame you for being shot any more than you'd blame him for being kidnapped."

I pop my head off his chest to peer at him. "It wasn't Hugo's fault they took me." *That was my own stupidity.*

"Exactly." Isaac glances into my eyes. "Just like Hugo being shot isn't your fault. Some circumstances in life are beyond our control."

Yes, they are. Like the death of Ophelia was beyond his control. Only now do I realize everything I said to Hugo about

only getting half a man was an extremely inaccurate assessment. A man with an aura like Isaac's could never be half a man. Even if I only got five percent of him, I'd still be getting more of a man than any of the previous men I've dated.

## CHAPTER 6





## ISAAC

*J*erk up my chin in thanks to Raquel when Isabelle and I stroll past the nurses' station located outside of Hugo's room. Raquel isn't a registered nurse. She's a qualified trauma surgeon—*nearly*. She's in her final year of medical school and works as a waitress at Kiki's to pay for her tuition. By agreeing to be Hugo's nurse until he recovers, she'll have her outstanding student fees paid in full.

She was given this opportunity years ago, but just like me, she has difficulties accepting assistance when required. Jae was apprehensive about allowing a non-qualified nurse into her unit until Hunter supplied her with the last two years of Raquel's transcripts. She was grateful to accept Raquel on her team with the hope she'll consider becoming a full-time trauma surgeon at Ravenshoe Private Hospital once she's qualified.

Raquel returns my greeting with a playful pucker of her lips. I snicker and shake my head. Raquel is beautiful, and just like her big sister, Regan, she knows it.

Isabelle stifles a yawn before burrowing her head in deeper to my chest. I increase my strides, wanting to get her back to her hospital room so Jae can complete a final set of observations and hopefully permit me to take her home. My

efficient steps falter when Isabelle tightens her grip around my waist. I stop walking to glance down at her. Her breathing is quick, propelling her chest up and down, and her eyes are wide as she peers at something down the hall.

Following her gaze, my blood thickens, my knuckles popping when I clench my fists. Isabelle's kidnapper is being ushered down the corridor by a nurse and four plain-clothed officers. The shackles encasing his ankles hitting the tiled floor, bellow over the paging of nurses and doctors.

When his eyes float up from the ground, they lock with Isabelle, his head tilting to take her all in. Fury courses through my veins when he has the audacity to smile at her. Blinded by rage, I charge at him. My stealth movements catch the plain-clothed officers by surprise, freeing me to unleash a lethal left and right combination on his unprotected face.

Even being flanked by four officers, I throw him back until his torso slams against the glass window of a hospital suite, then clutch his throat. His pupils widen, and the veins in his neck throb under my firm grasp, but he smirks, seemingly amused by my anger.

The blood surging through my veins shrills in my ears, making it almost impossible to hear the demands of the officers pulling me away from him, but one voice will never be silenced.

“Stop, Isaac, please stop,” yells a distorted voice. “He’s my brother.”

Flashbacks of the night I fought CJ Petretti rush to the forefront of my mind. Those were the last words Ophelia spoke to me before she died. All I can see is her beautiful face soaked with tears and her pleas for me to stop beating her brother.

I shake my head, erasing the painful memories clogged there before tightening my grip on Isabelle's attacker's neck. This time is different. I'm not hurting this man because I was strong-armed into doing something I didn't want to do. I'm punishing him for hurting Isabelle. My Isabelle. The one woman I'd do anything to protect.

"Stop, please!" screams through my ears again. This time, from a voice I recognize.

When I shift my eyes to the voice, Isabelle's tear-stained face glances up at me. "Please, Isaac." She hiccups through tears. "He's my brother."

Haunted by memories of the night Ophelia died, I release my fingers from the stranger's neck before taking a step back. He bends in half before gasping in some big breaths. When he regains his breath, he glares at me. My brows furrow. I'm not frightened by his stare. I'm confused as to why I'm staring into a pair of eyes I've seen many times before. There's no mistaking those eyes. They're identical to Isabelle's in every way.

I scan his face as my disordered brain tries to compile some sort of normality in this bizarre situation. He has the same plump, cupid-bow lips, same nose, although his is more prominent than Isabelle's, same hair coloring, and even the same skin tone.

I take another step back. How the hell did I miss this? He isn't *just* a half-sibling of Isabelle's, he's her full-blooded brother.

Isabelle drops to her knees before placing her juddering hands onto the sides of his swollen, bloodstained cheeks to hoist his downcast face up. Her lips quiver as fresh tears spill from her eyes unchecked. "I'm sorry, Enrique. I'm so sorry,"

she apologizes. “I was only a child. If I were older, I’d have begged for Tobias to take you, too. I would’ve never left you behind, but I was only a child, Enrique. I didn’t know any better. Please forgive me. *Please.*”

Logically, I understand Isabelle harbors guilt for leaving him behind, but she said it herself—she was only a child. She was only six when she was sold, so she can’t be held accountable for the actions of the adults who surrounded her. The burden of culpability doesn’t belong on her shoulders, and if Enrique doesn’t realize that, he doesn’t deserve the apologies trickling from Isabelle’s lips.

No longer able to watch her plead for forgiveness from a man who mere hours ago drugged and kidnapped her in broad daylight, I pull Isabelle away from Enrique. When my arms curl around her waist, she stiffens until she realizes who is grabbing her.

A painful whimper escapes her lips as she burrows her head into my neck, her tears dampening my shirt. “I’ve got you, Isabelle.”

I stride down the corridor, ignoring the frightened glances of the police officers and hospital staff. My stern glare is impressive enough they won’t dare stop me.

“I’ve got you, baby,” I repeat. *And I’m never going to let you go.*

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An hour later, we’re sitting in Isabelle’s private suite in Ravenshoe Private Hospital. The only time Isabelle wasn’t cradled in my arms was when Jae finalized a set of

observations on her. The instant Jae left the room, I gathered Isabelle back into my torso.

We've spent the last hour in silence. It hasn't been uncomfortable. We just don't require words to articulate our thoughts. The intimacy that forever surges between us still crackles in the air, but there's something stronger, more tangible, expressing what our words have failed to communicate.

Isabelle inhales a sharp, quick breath before her head pops off my shoulder. "I remember what happened. Col knew who I was. He said he recognized me the instant he saw me as I'm the spitting image of my mom." Her nose screws up as she battles to hold in her tears. "He killed her, Isaac. Col murdered my mother because she wouldn't give herself to him."

My lungs feel heavy, making it hard for me to breathe. I knew the type of man Col was—heartless and foreboding. That's why I strived so hard to keep Isabelle away from him. My plan only altered when he produced his gun. Even though I wanted to look in his eyes while I made him suffer as he did me seven years ago, my virulent desire to protect Isabelle overwhelmed me.

Before I could comprehend what was happening, I charged for her, sheltering her body with mine. My desire to keep her safe annulled my toxic need for revenge. That, in itself, shows her importance to me. Even revenge I craved for years doesn't come close to my yearning for her safety.

I gather Isabelle back into my chest to settle her tears. Although the stories Isabelle shared of her family revealed she didn't have a close bond with her mother, she'd still be pained to know she was murdered.

“I only realized who Enrique was when his eyes filled with fear. It was the same look he had any time our father came to visit us.” Her words flutter my dress shirt. “I should have taken him with me, Isaac. I should have saved him from that lifestyle.”

I place my hand under her chin and raise her downcast head. “You were only a child. You aren’t to blame for the man he grew up to be.”

“I know that, but he never had the chance to grow up to be a respected member of society with Vladimir as his father.” Her eyes dart between mine. “If he came with us, he would’ve at least stood a chance of a normal upbringing.”

I don’t attempt to rebut her statement as everything she said is true. It’s the reason Henry ensured his son wasn’t raised in this lifestyle. It’s the sole reason he sacrificed everything so his son wouldn’t be tarnished with the same brush that painted his life.

“I know you think he’s a terrible man, Isaac, but I honestly don’t believe Enrique set out to hurt me.”

I stiffen as my jaw sets into a hard line. “You were gagged and bound to a chair, Isabelle.”

She cups my cheek with her hand that’s still wet from her tears, quelling some of the anger surging through my blood. “I know, but he gave me water, and he took care of me—”

“After drugging you twice!”

“He wasn’t the person who drugged me.” Her tone is remarkably stable for how fast her chest is heaving.

“It doesn’t change the particulars of the case. He kidnapped you and held you against your will. I know he’s your brother, but you’re looking at him as if he’s the little boy

you left behind. He's not that boy anymore. He's a man who was raised by a monster. He'll be lucky to even have a heart in his chest."

I instantly regret my outburst when Isabelle loses her battle to hold in her tears. Hot, salty liquid spills from her eyes as her pain stabs me right in my heart. A crying Isabelle is more than I can handle. Multi-million-dollar takeovers, ruthless mobsters, and dodging bullets are a walk in the park compared to dealing with her when she's crying. Every tear cuts me raw.

I scoot down the bed, keeping my grip tight, before rolling onto my side. Isabelle mimics my position but on her opposite hip. Guilt seeps into my veins when I peer at her tear-soaked face. I'd do anything in my power to protect my little brother, but I expect Isabelle to react differently when it's her blood she's fighting to protect.

I use the pad of my thumb to remove her tears while my eyes issue silent apologies for my cruel words. After a few hiccups and too many tears to count, her cries lessen, and the weight on my chest eases.

"I'll make a few calls and see what I can find out about your brother."

She drags the cuff of her long-sleeve shirt under her nose before nodding. "Thank you."

"But I can't guarantee anything, Isabelle. I have to tread carefully, or I'll run the risk that people will learn your secret. If I'm not cautious, they may find out who your father is." My tone relays my genuine concern. If her secret is exposed, it will make her a target, just like it did for Henry, Jr.

"I can handle that." Her tone is surprisingly firm. "With you by my side, I can handle anything."

My first thought is gratitude, thankful she's planning on having me at her side, but that relief is short-lived, soon overtaken by apprehension. Just Isabelle being with me already places a bull's eye on her back, not to mention when my competitors find out who her father is, but I'm a selfish man, and even though it would have been safer for Isabelle to have never met me, I have no intentions of giving her up.

Isabelle is mine, and I protect what is mine. If anyone tries to seek their revenge on her father against her, they'll have to get through me first, and that is one fight they'll never win.



## CHAPTER 7



## ISABELLE

Warmth blooms across my chest when my eyes flutter open. Isaac and I are still lying in the hospital bed in the position we were last night. My head is buried in his chest, relishing his delicious scent, and his broad arms are wrapped around my torso, cocooning me with protectiveness.

This is the first time I've woken before him. Our body clocks were wired so differently, Isaac had to adjust to sleeping while the moon was still in the sky for the month I lived with him. But no matter how late he came to bed, he was awake and working in his office by the time I rose.

I glance out the window. The sun is beaming through the cracks of the plush curtains covering the large window. At a guess, I'd say it's after eight. My eyes drop to scan Isaac's handsome face. Even with us sleeping for nearly ten hours, he still appears tired. Obviously, I wasn't the only one who lacked sleep during our separation.

Not wanting to wake him, I snuggle back into his chest where the soothing rhythm of his heart soon has me drifting back to sleep.

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When I wake the second time, Isaac is no longer in bed. The smell of coffee is lingering in the air along with his manly scent. My eyes flutter open to discover him standing in the corner of the room, talking on his cell phone. He's dressed in his regular attire—a well-tailored three-piece suit. His hair is wet, and the stubble on his jaw has been trimmed into a neat, well-kept beard. I've been meaning to ask him about his new facial hair. Ever since we left the cabin, his freshly-shaven look has become null and void.

When I notice a giant Styrofoam coffee cup in his spare hand, I'm torn on which appetizing product to sample first.

Who am I kidding? I'd choose Isaac over caffeine any day of the week.

When I sit up to rub the sleep from my eyes, Isaac pivots around to face me. My pussy clenches when his eyes rake my body. Once he finalizes his call, he places his phone into his pocket before strolling my way. The smell of luxurious body wash and shampoo overpowers coffee the closer he gets.

“Good morning, Isabelle.”

“M-morning,” I stammer as heat imposes my cheeks.

He said his greeting in the manner he did when we were on his yacht, and he woke me in the most glorious way. From the sparkle in his eyes and the curve of his scrumptious mouth, I'd say he's well aware of that fact.

“Do you have one of those for me?” I ask after regaining some of the shrewdness that always disappears whenever he's in my vicinity.

He jingles the Styrofoam cup in his hand. “One of these?”

“Uh-huh.”

After locking my gaze on the epitome of an alpha male, I’ll need something strong to suppress my urge to feast on him for breakfast.

“This is yours,” he says, holding out the coffee.

Just as I’m about to reach for it, he pulls it out of my grasp. My bottom lip drops into a pout as my inner vixen stomps her feet.

“What are you going to give me for it?” The sexy deepness of his voice has my womb coiling tight.

Happy to return his tease, I raise myself to a kneeling position before dragging my tongue along my hungry lips. His pupils widen when he watches my tongue’s travels. As my teeth skim my lower lips, I drink in the very essence of the man, only pausing when I reach the impressive bulge his trousers are failing to conceal. Now, a caffeinated brew is the last thing on my mind.

Growling, Isaac hands me the cup of coffee. “You play dirty.”

I smile. “Says the guy who wakes up every morning looking like sex-on-a-stick.” I take a sip of the coffee, burning my tongue with its scorching heat. The twinge of pain subdues the roaring chant of my inner vixen who’s loving our flirty banter.

“Sex-on-a-stick?” Isaac asks, muffling a chuckle.

“Uh-huh.” I place the boiling coffee on a wheeled table to cool before adjusting my position so we come face to face. “Regina called you sex-on-a-stick a few weeks ago. The

nickname stuck,” I say with a shrug. “Even she couldn’t deny your sex appeal, and her idea of a perfect man is a tall, balding Russian with a heart bigger than his ginormous head.”

My Uncle Tobias was the very essence of a giant Russian teddy bear. His shoulders were nearly as wide as he was tall. He was thick, tall, and as bald as a badger, but he had the largest grin I’d ever seen and the softest pair of eyes. It was his nurturing eyes that secured my trust. Even though most men feared him, I craved his attention because under his rough appearance, he had the eyes of a gentle man. Just like Isaac.

“But there was no other *druzhok* for her.”

“*Druzhok*?” Isaac questions, puzzled

“It means boyfriend in Russian.”

I press my lips to his before licking the seam of his mouth, requesting him to accept my kiss. His lips taste minty with a slight hint of the chocolate powder they sprinkle on freshly brewed coffee, but they fail to open. He’d rather talk—dammit!

“You speak Russian?”

I scrunch up my nose. “Not really. My Uncle Tobias and his *Dedushka* spoke fluent Russian, so I learned a handful of phrases, but nothing overly useful. My uncle *always* said I wasn’t allowed to have a *druzhok* until I was thirty, so that word is easy for me to remember.”

Isaac smirks a delicious smile that has my pussy throbbing. “Does that mean I have to wait another five years before I can become your *druzhok*?” His tone is serious even though his eyes are glistening with lust.

I smile over his hideous pronunciation of the word before nodding. “Well, four years and eight months, give or take a

few days, but who's counting?"

My playful banter immediately dissipates when he asks, "What's the word for husband in Russian?"

I swallow, eradicating the large lump suddenly lodged in my throat. "*Muzh.*"

"*Muzh?*" When I timidly nod, Isaac cups my cheeks with his large hands then stares into my eyes. "Did your uncle instill any rules on when you were allowed to have a *muzh*?"

My breathing stills as my mouth becomes ajar. "No, but you normally have a *druzhok* before you have a *muzh.*"

Isaac shrugs as his lips twist. "Minor details."

I arch my brow. "Are you *asking* me something?"

His lips curl into a panty-moistening smile. "No, Isabelle."

I release the breath I'm holding in as my normal heart rhythm returns. I love Isaac, but talking marriage this soon is beyond ridiculous.

"Yet," he continues.

My eyes snap to his.

"You'll have no doubt when I ask you to become my wife." He presses his lips to the shell of my ear. "Just like you had no doubt the first time I fucked you."

*Oh god.*

His teeth tug on my earlobe, sparking a cluster of pleasure to race through my body. When his tongue lashes the wound, soothing the sting of his bite, a noise erupts from my throat I've never heard before. It's a cross between a meow and a purr. It's deep, throaty, and brimming with yearning like a female version of Isaac's sexy-as-sin growl.

He places a trail of nips and kisses along my jawline before searing my lips with a heated kiss. If he asks me to marry him after kissing me like he just did, I won't have a chance in hell of denying his request.

Our make-out session—which to my dismay, never goes over a PG rating—is interrupted when my hospital door creaks open. I peer toward the door, expecting to see Dr. Jae since she said I'd be discharged this morning. I'm surprised, but happy when I notice Hunter and Regan.

Regan, as always, looks stunning in a pleated black pencil skirt and fitted fire-engine red jacket. The only thing tainting her remarkable beauty are the tears staining her cheeks. Hunter is dressed in his regular attire—jeans and a plaid shirt rolled up at the sleeves. He looks tired, but a smile is sneaking out from behind his thick beard.

“How's Hugo?” Isaac queries, intuiting the reason for Regan's tears without needing to ask her.

Regan smiles. “He's good, already nagging to get out of here.”

Isaac jerks up his chin. “I talked to Jae. If he maintains good vitals and the wound doesn't show any signs of an infection, she may discharge him on homecare by tomorrow afternoon or the following day.”

Regan's brows furrow. “He can't go back to his apartment by himself.”

Isaac shakes his head. “No, he can't. I'll arrange a room in my house, and a dedicated team of nurses to look after him.”

Regan's lips thin as a stern disposition morphs over her face. “Have them set it up in the spare room in my penthouse. Then I can keep a close eye on him.”

My heart rate hastens as my suspicious eyes bounce between Isaac and Regan. Does Regan want Hugo close because he's her frosting companion? Or is she genuinely concerned about his well-being?

I stare into her evocative eyes, but just like Isaac, she keeps her emotions locked up so tight, it's hard for me to read her true intentions. Thankfully, Hunter doesn't have any tact. "Are you keeping an eye on Hugo or Raquel?"

He chuckles when Regan slaps him on the chest. "Shut up."

Isaac's snickers stop when my confused eyes dart to his. "Raquel, the nurse who came into Hugo's room last night, is Regan's sister—"

"She isn't a nurse," Regan interjects, glaring at Isaac.

When Isaac shrugs, my eyes shoot back to Regan. Raquel and Regan do have the same hair and eye coloring, but they seem at complete opposite ends of the stratosphere regarding their personalities. Regan is high-strung and headstrong, where Raquel looks like a little ball of mischief who's all about having fun.

"She's a thorn in my backside," Regan says to my curious glance.

"Only because she's following her big sister's footsteps," says Isaac, smiling. His eyes turn down to me. "Don't let Regan's polished exterior fool you. It took a lot of spit to get her that shiny."

My lips curve. I love seeing this side of him. It's rare to see him out of his element. Other than Cormack, this is the first time I've seen him amongst friends. I know Hunter and Regan



are technically his staff, but you can see how much he cares for them. They're his family.

“Anyway.” Regan claps her hands together. “We didn’t come here to discuss the particulars of my teenage rebellion.” Her eyes narrow at Isaac when she says ‘teenage rebellion.’ “I’m here to see if you’re ready to go?”

“Me? Where are we going?” I drift my eyes between three pairs staring at me like I have two heads on my shoulders instead of one daft one.

When Isaac leans in intimately close to my side, I wish we were alone. “Is it the concussion that’s making you forgetful?”

I shake my head. Although I’m still a little dizzy and off-balance, I don’t have any other side effects from my concussion.

The heat of his breath tickles my earlobe when he murmurs, “It must be from me kissing you senseless then.”

I try to muffle my moan when he licks my earlobe, but it must be audible as Hunter excuses himself from the room, and Regan looks like she’s about to be sick.

Eager to move our conversation along, Regan hands me an overnight bag. “I didn’t want to go through your belongings, so I packed you some of my clothes to wear today. We leave in ten minutes, so chop-chop.” She claps her hands again. “We can’t be late. We don’t want to give the judge any excuse to be mad at us.”

My mouth drops open. I completely forgot I’m due in court today. After pressing a quick peck to Isaac’s mouth, I dash into the bathroom. The thrashing of my heart matches the thumping of my head from my quick movements.

Five minutes later, I nervously walk back out. My hands are fisted in tiny balls at my side, and sweat is beading on my top lip. It isn't my court appearance that has my insides juddering like a teenage girl who kissed the quarterback at the kissing booth, it's the fact I'm wearing a black, studded Valentino shift dress and a pair of Jimmy Choo Romy pumps. Both items are gorgeous, but well over my budget if I get the teeniest stain on them. Even the dry-cleaning bill would cost a mint. Regan also included a black wool coat, but I'm perspiring so much with nerves, I'm overheated and don't require a jacket.

Isaac's head lifts when he senses my presence. The smirk carving onto his plump lips falters halfway when his eyes roam over my attire. I adjust the jacket over my arm, internally battling not to fidget from his vigorous assessment. I freeze, seared in place when his heavy-lidded gaze lifts to my face. His eyes are fiery, sparked by desire. He looks like a tiger about to go on the hunt, and he has his prey locked and loaded.

My pulse rings in my ears when he stealthily prowls toward me. He doesn't speak a word as he wraps his arm around my shoulders and guides me out the hospital door, but I swear on my uncle's grave, I hear him mumble "mine" under his breath when we walk past a pair of male interns in the hospital corridor.

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An hour later, I'm tapping my foot on the polished tiled floor of the courthouse, waiting for my name to be called by the court bailiff. Although Isaac isn't sitting next to me, his support is undoubtedly felt by the people surrounding me. Ryan is talking to Regan near Courtroom 4's double doors.

Hunter is talking on his phone to someone a few benches up from me, pretending he isn't here with me, and Roger, Isaac's driver-bodyguard, is standing in the hallway, ensuring no sneaky reporters accost me.

When Regan and I exited Isaac's town car, we had to walk through a gauntlet of reporters screaming out a range of questions about Megan's trial, my connection to Isaac, and if I had any comment on the news that Col Petretti was killed in an FBI operation yesterday afternoon. I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized the details of Col's death and my kidnapping were not linked.

Regan talked to the reporters at the top of the courthouse stairs. She issued a statement about what my court hearing is about and how justice will finally prevail when all charges are dropped after her client, aka me, is found to have no connection to Megan Shroud's death.

It was impressive watching her in her element. She didn't fluster when reporters probed her about my connection to Isaac and Col. She merely ignored them before answering a question from a reporter that pertained to my case. She didn't even break into a sweat. I, on the other hand, was a sweating bag of nerves.

"Here." Regan hands me a cup of coffee in a paper cup. "It's bad, but it's all they have."

My nose screws up when the thick, ghastly taste of the poorly brew hits my taste buds. It isn't that I have affluent tastes, but this coffee is so terrible, the undissolved beans cling to my tongue when my mouth refuses to swallow it.

When I dump the full cup into the bin I'm sitting next to, my eyes turn to the side of the room. The hairs on my nape bristle when they detected Isaac's presence. My inner vixen is

like an animal in the wild. She can sense her mate from a mile away.

A smile curves on my mouth when I spot Isaac standing at the end of the corridor. He's talking to a gentleman in a fancy black suit with a large briefcase in his hand. He doesn't appear to have noticed my gawp, but his curving lip as he continues with his conversation reveals he has spotted me. He's just playing it cool.

My attention is diverted from Isaac when the courtroom door swings open, and "Isabelle Brahn" thunders out of the mouth of the court bailiff. I suck in a big breath before pacing to the door he's holding open. The last thing I see when I enter the courtroom is the flash of a smirk on an adorable face.

## CHAPTER 8



## ISAAC

*I* wait for everyone to enter before slipping into the courtroom where Isabelle's proceedings are being held. Isabelle doesn't turn around, but I know she feels my presence as her shoulders square and her breathing slows when I step inside the courtroom.

Wanting to ensure I don't raise any suspicion, I take a seat in the back pew next to Hunter, but a few spaces over. My brows scrunch when a few minutes later, he slides a piece of paper across the polished wooden bench. 'Watch Lucas' I read off the paper.

When my wide eyes stare at Hunter, he waggles his brows before gesturing his head to the front of the courtroom. I turn to face the front of the courtroom, pausing on Isabelle when I notice her fidgeting in her seat. She's always been undoubtedly beautiful, which ensures she acquires the attention of every male in the room, but when my eyes locked in on her wearing a dress on par with her million-dollar smile, all I could imagine was seeing her in nothing but black stiletto shoes with expensive diamonds draped around her neck. The image was so riveting if we weren't attending this court session with the hope of having her charges dropped, she

wouldn't have made it out of the hospital room with her dress still intact.

My attention is diverted from Isabelle when the beep of a cell phone bounces off the stark white walls of the courtroom. I shake my head when my eyes roam over the abhorrent man seated across from Isabelle and his expensive Mr. Porter Kingsman suit. If Mr. Marco wants to survive the corrupt, unethical world he's immersing himself in, he needs to be more inconspicuous. Displaying your achievements with lavish articles is fine if you can show you acquired your wealth legally, but wearing a suit and watch that costs thousands of dollars makes you look like a fool when you slide into a car that's older than the woman you're falsely prosecuting.

If he's secured my interest with all the mammoth tasks I've dealt with the past month, it means he has also gathered the attention of others in my industry. He may see that as a positive until he realizes what his request for a golden handshake fully entails. No favors are imparted in this industry without a ripple effect. It's like throwing a stone across a pond—some skim along the top where others may sink.

Even the rock that immediately sinks still creates a wave on the surface of the water. Something that seems as simple as a signature on a document can quickly turn into an unscrupulous demand. If Lucas truly loves his family as his public image portrays, he needs to learn that his ideas about this industry are both unbecoming and incredibly inaccurate.

The bailiff snarls when Lucas's cell buzzes again. "All phones are to be turned off."

"Sorry," Lucas grumbles as his hand digs into the pocket of his trousers. "I thought I turned it off."

When he pulls his phone out, his eyes bulge. He yanks it in close to his chest as his wide eyes dart around the courtroom. His expression is panicked, his mouth formed into a large ‘O.’ I drop my eyes to my shoes to ensure he doesn’t spot me in the back row when he scans the courtroom.

My interests pique when Hunter muffles his chuckles by pretending to cough. “One more, just for fun.” Hunter fiddles with a black device. It isn’t a cell phone but more like a small computer tablet. No doubt something he designed.

The bailiff’s annoyed growl booms through the courtroom when Lucas’s phone buzzes for the third time. He stomps toward Lucas with an angry scowl fettering his face. His steps are fast and furious, reaching Lucas before he can read his latest message.

When he snatches the phone out of Lucas’s hand and glances down at the screen, his cheeks hue. His lips move like he’s attempting to speak, but no words escape his mouth. Lucas’s throat works hard to swallow, but he remains quiet, frozen in shock. The only noise heard is his heavy pants of breath along with Hunter’s muffled laughs.

Hearing Hunter’s chuckles, Regan turns around to face us, snarling when she notices me in the back row. Incapable of withstanding her wrath, Hunter excuses himself from the courtroom before he rushes for the hallway.

My attention diverts to the front of the courtroom when the bailiff announces the judge’s arrival. Relief washes over me when I notice it’s the same judge who presided over Isabelle’s arraignment. I have an inherent knack for reading people, and his eyes show he’s a good man with strong ethics, but he also can offer amnesty.



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Within five minutes of the evidence-admission hearing commencing, I'm sitting on the edge of my seat, fighting the urge to strip Lucas of his sheep's clothing in front of the court he's using to cloak his wolf teeth. His statements about Isabelle don't steer far from his description weeks ago. He calls her unhinged, psychotic, and an agent with a hero complex who goes above her pay grade to unleash personal justice on innocent civilians.

"Every word Mr. Marco has spoken is explicitly biased and based on nothing but false allegations and testimonies from people who should be sitting in the chair my client is sitting in," Regan remarks, her tone firm. "We have unmistakably demonstrated that a majority of the evidence in this case does not even pertain to the murder of Megan Shroud."

"That remark is negotiable considering the evidence was stripped from a reputable FBI agent to be processed by a long-term friend of Ms. Myer's client."

"Calling Ms. Veneto a reputable agent would be like calling Hitler Mother Theresa," Regan fires back.

The judge slams his gavel onto the top of the polished wooden podium he's seated behind. "Ms. Veneto isn't on trial, Ms. Myers, so please keep your opinions on her work ethic for when you're not in my courtroom," he suggests. "If you wish to file a proceeding for the malicious prosecution of your client, you can, but not in my court."

Regan screws up her nose but still nods.

Lucas smirks, feeling victorious. “The ridiculous notion that Ms. Veneto has a personal vendetta against Ms. Brahn is blatantly false. Ms. Veneto was the agent who gathered the evidence at the murder scene because she was the agent who *discovered* the scene.”

“Because she was *supposedly* there to arrest Ms. Shroud for the murder of her father. But please, Mr. Marco, explain to the judge one time where you’ve heard of an Internal Affairs agent serving an arrest warrant on a civilian.”

When Regan glares at Lucas with her arms crossed in front of her chest, he fumbles out a string of mumbled words.

Smirking, Regan devotes her attention back to the judge. “Mr. Marco can’t recount a single time that has happened because it doesn’t happen. Internal Affairs’ agents are simply that, internal. Their jurisdiction does not extend to external matters outside of their agency. Ms. Veneto was only on the scene because her soon-to-be brother-in-law was identified as the officer who processed the initial request from the Sheriff’s Office at Parkerville for Ms. Shroud’s arrest.”

When she’s granted permission, she hands the judge two official police reports and photographs from an article in last week’s newspaper announcing Theresa’s younger sister, Ella, is soon to marry Officer Tate in February. When walking back to stand next to Isabelle, Regan audaciously winks at the DA. Even though he’s fuming with so much anger that steam is billowing out of his ears, he still flushes from Regan’s taunt.

From the photos Hunter presented to me yesterday, there’s no doubt Mr. Marco has a fascination with powerful blonde women, but a woman with a stature like Regan’s is way above his pay grade, even when it comes from dirty blood money.

The judge places the documents onto the podium before his eyes lift to Lucas. “After perusing these documents, I have to agree with Ms. Myers. There was no legitimate reason for the evidence in the murder of Ms. Shroud to be collected by Ms. Veneto. But, even if there were a legitimate reason, none of the evidence you’ve presented me with is admissible. With that in mind—”

“Ms. Veneto’s interest in Ms. Shroud’s case came about when she was investigating the illicit affair between Ms. Brahn and Mr. Isaac Holt, a man whom Ms. Brahn was brought to Ravenshoe to assist in a special undercover FBI operation of, not fall into bed with.”

My teeth grit, angered over Lucas’s fictitious allegations. Isabelle was assigned to the team in Ravenshoe to investigate me, but it was under false assumptions. She was unaware of the malicious ruse they were trying to force on her.

“And what does that investigation have to do with this case?” the judge questions, gaining my attention. “Ms. Brahn isn’t in my courtroom under the presumption she’s on trial without a jury of her peers for the murder of Megan Shroud. She’s also not here to answer questions on her *alleged* affair with Mr. Holt. We’re here to discuss the premises relating to the gathering of evidence in this case. Evidence that Ms. Myers has demonstrated was not amassed, documented, or processed with due diligence, which leaves me no choice but to side with Ms. Myers.”

Lucas scoffs while nervously fumbling with papers on his desk. He looks like a petrified man, like having the charges against Isabelle dismissed is a matter of life and death. Only now do I realize how dirty his hands are. I have no doubt Theresa and members of her family are deeply embedded in

Lucas's new venture into corruption. Now, he has no chance of escaping their malevolent clutches.

"You'll let a murderer off scot-free because of a few missing signatures on the chain-of-evidence documentation? That's the most absurd notion I've ever heard." Lucas's eyes widen when he realizes his statement was loud enough for the judge to hear.

The judge's gaze narrows as his lips set into a firm line. "I'll be more than happy to continue our discussion on absurd reactions in my chambers once this hearing is over, Mr. Marco."

His gaze shifts to me sitting in the back of the courtroom for a few seconds before his eyes turn down to Isabelle. "My wife hates the inventor of donut holes. Not a small dislike, she hates, hates him. Does that mean I should seek harm on their creator because she cries when she can't fit into her favorite jeans? No, it doesn't. Millions of people fall in love every day. That doesn't mean they wake up the next day and choose to participate in a crime."

He stands from his chair and leans over the podium. "With any arrest, the evidence must show an objective, factual basis for believing the defendant committed a crime. In this case, I do not find probable cause. All charges against Isabelle Brahn pertaining to the murder case of Megan Shroud have been dismissed. You're free to go, Ms. Brahn." He slams his gavel down onto the podium three times before exiting the courtroom.

Isabelle shakily stands from her chair at the direction of the bailiff. When the judge exits, she wraps her arms around Regan's neck. A large smirk curves on my mouth when her

excited gaze shifts back to me. A huge grin is stretched across her face, and happy tears are welling in her eyes.

Now that nothing is standing between us, it's time to take my girl home.

## CHAPTER 9



## ISABELLE

All the weight I've been carrying on my shoulders is suddenly alleviated with three bangs of a judge's gavel on a wooden podium. Sweet relief washes through me as I bite the inside of my cheek, fighting hard to keep my tears at bay.

"All rise," requests the bailiff.

I stand to my feet, my knees wobbling so much they clang together. An excited and immature squeal escapes my lips as I wrap my arms around Regan's shoulders when the judge leaves the courtroom. Regan is taken back by my over-friendliness.

"Thank you," I whisper into her ear.

"I'm not the one you should be thanking."

I don't need to spin around to know who she's gesturing her head to. I felt his presence the instant he walked into the courtroom. A man with an impressive aura like Isaac doesn't need an introduction. His stature exudes from him in imperceptible waves. Even without seeing him, my body is conscious of his every move.

When my head flings to the back of the courtroom, dizziness clusters in my brain. Not just from my foolhardy

movements but because of the mouth-watering smirk carved on Isaac's perfectly etched mouth. The fiery spark that was kindled in his eyes earlier is even more paramount. No doubt, he's feeling the same serene sentiment I'm experiencing. All the obstacles that were impeding us being together have been removed, clearing the path for us to create a stable, solid relationship that will survive any storm.

My breathing labors when Isaac scoots out of the bench seat and ambles toward me. His long strides close the distance between us quickly. After banding his arms around my waist, he pulls me in close to his body. All the nerves juddering my insides soothe when he presses his lips against mine. His kiss is possessive and claiming while also passionate. He nips my lower lip before his tongue soothes the sting of his bite, not caring that we're standing across from a man who mere minutes ago accused me of only bedding him in an attempt to net him in an elaborate FBI sting.

When the false statement fired off the DA's tongue, I nearly vaulted from my chair, wanting to vehemently deny his claims, but then I remembered Isaac knows me, he knows me better than anyone ever has, so he'd never believe a word dribbled from the vindictive DA's tongue.

When Isaac inches back, my heart is bursting at the seams, and my panties are drenched. It's so surreal he can calm me while turning me on at the same time. No man has ever had this type of power over me, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I love him so much, I feel like I need him in my life just to breathe. Even when he is this close to me, it's hard to rein in my desire to be possessed by him.

“Are you ready to go home?”



Just him speaking has my insides aching for him to kiss me again, but I nod instead.

A few moments later, we're following Regan out of the courtroom door. I've just notice Alex standing at the side, talking on a cell phone when Ryan steps into view, startling me.

"Sorry." His smiles, exposing the dimples in his top lip.

Isaac and Ryan greet with a shake of hands before Ryan devotes his attention to me. "I was wondering if I could have a minute of your time?"

Before I can answer, Isaac jumps back into the conversation. "What's this regarding? Does Isabelle need a lawyer present, or—"

"No, it's not related to any prosecution of Isabelle." Ryan's tone lowers to ensure the people milling in the hallway don't overhear his next comment. "It pertains to her kidnapping yesterday."

Isaac's stance stiffens before he gestures for Ryan to lead the way. Regan follows closely behind us, her composure altering from friend to kick-ass lawyer the instant Ryan requested to speak to me.

We end up in the room I was initially taken to after my arraignment. It's as cold and unwelcoming as it was back then. When Ryan gestures for me to take a seat at the table, I remain standing, trying to portray a strong front. It would be better if I could stop fidgeting.

Isaac stills my hand fiddling with my dress by enclosing it within his. Just his skin against mine appeases my agitation.

"Can we get this over quickly?" Regan folds her arms in front of her chest before cocking a brow. "My client has been

through a traumatic weekend, so she wants to go home to recover.”

Ryan nods as his eyes turn to me. “The gentleman who kidnapped you has agreed to give us the name of his abettor and other vital information if you’ll speak with him.” His eyes shift from me to Isaac. “He wants to talk to her alone.”

I nod to Ryan’s request at the same time a stern “No” escapes Isaac’s lips. His tone makes it clear there will be no further discussion on the subject, but I still peer at him, pleading for him to reconsider.

He deems Enrique a threat to my safety, but I know there’s something more to Enrique’s motive for kidnapping me. Besides, I won’t be able to move on from my ordeal until my questions are answered, and the only man who can answer them is Enrique.

“Isaac—”

“No, Isabelle. This is *not* negotiable. You’re not speaking to him.” His tone is low and dangerous as his anger rises.

“He will lead us to the police officers who assaulted Isabelle if she talks to him. We’ll be able to bring their bodies home to their families before Christmas.”

My eyes dance between Ryan and Isaac, shocked by Ryan’s confession. “What bodies?”

The longer they remain quiet, the more tears burn my eyes. I don’t know what hurts more—the fact Isaac is still harboring secrets from me, or that he doesn’t think I can handle the truth. I’m stronger than Isaac thinks I am. My uncle raised me to be a strong, opinionated woman, and it’s time for him to learn that.

“I’ll talk to him—”

“No, Isabelle!” His voice is so loud, he startles Regan.

“I love you, Isaac.” My admission immediately dampens the fury burning in his eyes, but it makes what I say next ten times harder. “But I need to do this. I need to trust my intuition didn’t steer me wrong. Not just with Enrique but with you as well.”

He takes a step back like he was slapped by my words. My throat tightens, upset that I’ve caused him distress. I love him in a way that’s completely unexplainable, and to some, I’m sure it appears to be nothing but lust, but its more than that. I love him for the way he protects me and keeps me safe. I love that he guards me as if I’m his most prized possession and that no harm will ever come to me when I’m with him, but I need to do this to prove my intuition was right. To prove what my gut was telling me was true. Not just with Enrique, but with Clara as well.

“Please let me do this,” I beg, stepping in front of him. “You can stand right outside his door. If anything happens, you’ll be there in an instant, but I need to do this, Isaac. I need to trust my gut. It’s never steered me wrong before, so I want to prove it wasn’t wrong this time either.”

---

Forty-five minutes later, we’re in the hospital corridor outside of Enrique’s room.

“Don’t get within touching distance of him, Isabelle.” Isaac’s tone is rough and stern like how he reprimands his staff members. “You can kill a man in seconds just by using your hands—” He suddenly stops talking as his grip on my hand tightens. “I changed my mind, you’re not doing this.”

When he drags me back down the hallway we just walked, I dig my feet into the sparkling marble tiles, trying to stop his furious steps. My efforts are fruitless. Someone of my height and weight is no contest for a man with impressive strength like Isaac.

“Stop, Isaac,” I demand when his yanks on my arm become painful. “You’re hurting my arm.”

The instant the word ‘hurting’ seeps from my lips, his abrupt strides halt, and he relinquishes my wrist from his firm grip. As his pupils widen, his eyes drop to my arm, seeking any damage. “Jesus... did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m fine.” I want to rub the pain in my arm, but I lace my fingers instead, hating the devastation flooding his eyes.

“Isabelle—?”

“I’m fine.” I step closer to him. “But I want to do this. I won’t get within touching distance. I’ll stay in your line of sight at all times, and I’ll be in and out within five minutes, tops.”

His eyes dart between mine for several heart-thrashing seconds before he peers past my shoulder. Ryan is standing outside of Enrique’s hospital room door. His pistol is holstered on his hip in plain sight, and the clasp on his holster is unlatched, prepped, and ready if he needs to draw his gun quickly.

“Five minutes, then we can go home.”

Isaac’s gaze rockets back to me. The anxiousness veiling his usually stout eyes lessens, replaced with the spark of interest. As the veins in his neck thrum, his nostrils flare when he inhales deeply. My knees curve inward as desire melds

through my body, clustering in my core from the wickedly sinful smile etched on his mouth.

“Five minutes. You’re not to move from the end of the bed, and you must leave the door open. As soon as this is done, *we go home, together*. My house, my bed, my ru—”

“This isn’t a negotiation, Isaac.”

His curling lips have my pulse racing. “No, it isn’t a negotiation. These are a set of terms you must adhere to if you want to talk to your brother.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest. “And if I fail to *adhere* to your rules?”

My breathing stills when he takes a step toward me. “I’ll take you over my knee and spank you until you do submit.”

*Holy cupcakes, I think my womb just combusted.*

I know he’d never intentionally hurt me, but behind closed doors is an entirely different story. My inner vixen is a little more deviant. She provokes him until his dominance is unleashed. She loves having his unbridled fury released on her in the bedroom. The bites, the hard slams of his cock, the demanding control, she basks in it all. I’m a strong and independent woman, but I happily surrender all my power to Isaac in the bedroom because the rewards for my submissiveness are earth-shattering.

“Okay,” I whisper, shamelessly allowing my hankering to overrule my rational-thinking brain. “Five minutes, then *we will go home*.”

My panties dampen from his provocative smirk. He moves closer, catching my wrist before lifting it to his mouth. My heart drums against my ribs when his well-carved lips kiss my

palm before he places it on his chest. His heart's thumps almost match the intense throbbing between my legs.

Ryan smiles uneasily as we stride toward him. "Don't get too—"

"Too close. I know," I interrupt with a roll of my eyes.

Ryan grins. "If you feel you're in any danger, cross your fingers behind your back, then I'll move in."

My lips set into a hard line as I nod. I need to remember that Ryan and Isaac are looking at Enrique as a kidnapper and possible murderer, whereas I'm looking at him as the five-year-old boy who played with cars on the dirty kitchen floor while I prepared us a bowl of stale cereal for dinner.

I smile to erase the anxious lines carved in Isaac's forehead before walking through Enrique's hospital room door. Sensing my presence, Enrique lifts his head. I don't know how I missed our similarities at the beginning, but there's no doubt he's my brother. The bone structure of his face is similar to mine but more cut and manly, his hair is the same shade, and he even has a lone dimple in his cheek, instead of the two most people have. My uncle always joked that it was where I was shot in a previous life.

The only difference between us is Enrique's eyes. Although they appear identical to mine, his are colder and unreadable.

"They said you wanted to speak to me." I fight the urge to roll my eyes for how timid my voice comes out. I'm stronger than this. I was raised stronger than this.

"Come closer."

My gaze shifts back to the window partition Isaac is standing behind. "No, I'm fine here."

His brows furrow. “I won’t hurt you, Isabelle.”

“You drugged me, kidnapped me, then tied me to a chair. You’ve already hurt me.”

Metal hitting steel bounces around the room when Enrique scrubs his hand across his face. My teeth grit as I shake my head. They have him handcuffed to the bed, yet they’re still worried about him hurting me.

“If Col arrived at the warehouse without you being bound, he would’ve never believed you were there against your will.” Enrique’s tone is stern yet full of sorrow.

I nod. Col’s file portrays he was paranoid about being infiltrated by undercover agents. Apparently, he never worked out that Tobias was an agent.

Enrique’s eyes study my body before assessing my face. “Did he raise you right? The man who bought you?”

My heart squeezes. “You knew I was sold?”

“No,” he replies with a shake of his head. “Not until Col arrived in Las Vegas a few months ago. I could see the excitement on his face when he requested to see Vladimir. He looked like a man who had discovered a genie in a bottle. He thought you were his pot of gold under the rainbow.”

“But Vladimir didn’t care that he’d found me. He wasn’t interested.”

Enrique’s lips twist. “He had already made his money from you.”

Surprisingly, his words don’t cause any sting. Over the years, I learned what type of man Vladimir is. That’s why I appreciate every day that my uncle saved me from that life.

“If Vladimir weren’t interested in what Col had to offer, why did you come to Ravenshoe? Why were you helping Col?”

“I wasn’t helping Col,” he rebuts, his tone flat and angry. “I came because I wanted to see if Col’s ramblings were true, or if it were just the incessant gibberish of a man past his prime. The instant I saw you, I knew what he said was true. You’re identical to our mother in every way.”

“Except my eyes,” I murmur, recalling Col’s taunting words.

“Yes,” he confirms with a nod. “When I saw you, it made me wonder if the other rumors I’d heard circulating were true... the ones about our mother. Col was getting sloppy, taking uncalculated risks. It was the perfect opportunity to finally discover the truth.”

He inhales a big breath that puffs his chest before locking his dark eyes with mine. “I would’ve never let him hurt you, Isabelle. I had no intention of letting him take you. I just wanted to know the truth. I asked family members about our mother all the time. All they said was that she was dead, and that was that.”

A dull ache spreads across my chest. His eyes reflect the pain of a little boy who grew up without a mother.

When I take a step closer to him, Isaac moves into the doorway. “Isabelle.” His tone is a clear warning that I’m breaking our agreement.

I stop pacing and lace my fingers together.

Enrique’s eyes dart between Isaac and me. “*On vash zashchitnik.*”



My brows furl. My Russian is so poor, I can only understand the first half of his sentence, which was, “He is your,” but I don’t understand the last word he’s saying.

“*Druzhok.*” I gesture my hand to Isaac.

Enrique nods. “*On khoroshiy chelovek.*”

I smile. “*Da. Ochen’ khoroshly chelovek.*” I cringe when my pronunciation comes out sounding like a first grader reading words from a Russian translator dictionary.

Enrique swallows as his gaze shifts to Isaac. “I knew using Isabelle as a lure would be the only way I could force Col out of hiding. I unearthed his intentions for her from the two officers who assaulted her during her arrest. Col had a bounty on her head. The only stipulation on the contract was that she had to be brought in alive.”

Isaac steps into the room. “You were the anonymous caller.”

Enrique nods. “Yes, I’d been following Isabelle for a few weeks when I witnessed her arrest.” His lips set into a straight line as his eyes turn to me. “Vladimir may forget you have his blood running through your veins, but I can’t. You’re still my family, even if you don’t have the Popov name.”

I scrub a rogue tear off my cheek. “But they didn’t deserve to die for what they did.”

The officers who arrested me were an unfortunate misrepresentation of the men and women who serve our country every day, but that doesn’t warrant their death.

Enrique’s eyes darken as his gaze shifts between Isaac and me. He runs his hand across his brow before his eyes settle on me. “They’re not dead. They had useful resources that kept them alive.”

“Such as?” Isaac’s tone is low, but his stature is still impressive.

“They know who framed Isabelle for murder.”

I inhale a sharp, quick breath. I was under the assumption Col was the person who initiated those false claims.

Before I can reply, four heavily guarded riot officers enter the room. They uncuff Enrique from his bed before hoisting him to his feet. Two additional guards fasten shackles on his ankles and wrists before walking him to the door.

“Where are the officers?” Isaac’s voice is stern yet panicked. “Where did you house them? I need to know who was framing Isabelle.”

Enrique smiles. “*V vashey yakhte.*”

When Isaac turns to me, wanting me to interpret what he’s saying, I nervously chew on my lower lip. I have no clue what he’s saying.

“In your...” I fumble out.

“*Yakhte,*” Enrique repeats.

I shrug, wordlessly advising I don’t understand what he’s saying.

“*Lodka,*” Enrique says as the guards continue dragging him toward the door.

Just before they exit, Enrique’s smiles. I eye him peculiarly, surprised he’s so calm while flanked by guarded officers.

“Don’t worry, Isabelle. *Ya idu domoy.*”

In a matter of seconds, he’s ushered to a waiting elevator at the end of the corridor. The last thing I see is his broad smile

before its covered with a black hood roughly yanked over his head.

Isaac cradles my tear-stained cheeks with his large hands, so his thumbs can clear away my tears. Once they're taken care of, his remorse-filled eyes stare into mine. "Did you understand what he said? Where the police officers are?"

Ryan's eyes float up from the floor, but he remains quiet, happy to leave the interrogating to Isaac.

When I nod, more tears spill from my eyes. "I didn't understand *Yakhte*, but I know what *Lodka* means." I swallow to relieve my parched throat before murmuring, "They're in your boat."

Isaac's curses under his breath before he strays his eyes to Ryan. "The police officers who assaulted Isabelle are in my yacht at the Vela De Keys Marina."

Ryan's lips set into a sardonic line as his nostrils flare.

"I already told you it wasn't me," Isaac snarls, clearly pissed. "Enrique advised Isabelle of their location."

"And why would he do that? Why would he share information with a woman he kidnapped? Are you trying to say he suddenly got a case of the guilts?"

Isaac's jaw muscles spasms as his fists clench into tight balls.

"Enrique is my brother."

Isaac cranks his neck to me. "You don't have to explain anything to him, Isabelle."

"I know that, but I'm sick of all the secrets. My whole life has been one huge secret. It's time to wipe the slate clean, so I can start afresh."

Ryan's brows lower. "The man who just left here is Enrique Popov," he says like I must be mistaken on his identity. "As in son of Vladimir Popov."

"I know."

A heavy set of wrinkles indents his forehead. He looks utterly baffled.

Isaac tries to ease it. "Isabelle was raised by her uncle after being sold to him by Vladimir when she was six years old. Her Uncle Tobias isn't really her uncle."

Ryan is shocked, but he maintains his cool-cat composure. "Can you speak Russian?"

I grimace. "Not very well."

"Did you understand what Enrique said in the corridor when he was leaving?"

I twist my lips. "I don't remember what he said. I was too flustered over his arrest to pay proper attention."

Air whizzes out of Ryan's nostrils as he struggles to stifle a chuckle over my daftness. When I glare at him, he pulls a small black recording device from his pocket. After fiddling with the gadget, Enrique's voice bellows out of the speakers.

"Don't worry, Isabelle. *Ya idu domoy.*"

I cringe, hoping I don't make a fool of myself. "I'm... going..." I lift my gaze to Ryan. "Can you play it again?"

When he plays it for the second time, the fog clouding my brain scatters away, and his sentence becomes readily distinguishable. "He said 'I'm going home.'"

Ryan stiffens, his pupils widening before he sprints into the corridor. Isaac and I quickly shadow him. The air is

forcefully removed from my lungs when my eyes lock in on the elevator at the end of the hall. Four heavily guarded riot officers are lying unconscious on the elevator floor.

Enrique is nowhere in sight.

## CHAPTER 10



## ISAAC

*I* slide my cell out of my pocket and move to a window. After ensuring Ryan and a handful of police officers milling around Enrique's room aren't paying attention to me, I flip open the screen.

### *Done.*

It's the simplest word, but it causes the largest grin to stretch across my face.

When I enter the corridor, Isabelle's head lifts to glance at me. She's sitting between two female officers who are no doubt asking her a flurry of questions responsible for the tired expression on her face. Even exhausted, she's as ravishing as always.

I raise my finger into the air, requesting a minute. When she nods and smiles, I hit the speed dial on my phone and walk around the corner. Henry answers on the very first ring.

"Isaac, how is your Katarina?"

A smirk etches on my mouth. "She's good. Safe."

Isabelle has spent the past three hours giving statements regarding everything that transpired this afternoon. The police have nothing. No leads. No witnesses. Not even any surveillance footage. All they have is Enrique entering the

elevator with the officers, then the frame freezes for not even five seconds. Once it's restored, the four police officers, although unconscious, are unharmed and lying on the elevator floor.

"Your men are good."

I hear Henry's cheekbones rising over the line.

"Are we good?"

"We're good," he replies without pause. "You know good people, so I trust your instincts."

"He was raised by a monster, but he had good intentions. He just went about it the wrong way."

"Perhaps I should have sheltered him under my wing instead of shipping him off to Russia."

I smile. "He'll be safer there."

"No extradition," we say in sync.

After Isabelle fell asleep in my arms last night, I investigated her brother as I stated I would. The two-hundred-thousand-dollar payment Enrique secured from Col for kidnapping Isabelle was wired into Isabelle's bank account yesterday afternoon. If he'd intended to harm her, he would have never transferred the money to her account, or he wouldn't have gained access to it.

Hunter also discovered that the bullet that killed Col Petretti was not from a government-issued pistol. It was from the gun Enrique had pointed at me. I have no doubt the forensic reports will show Col's gun wasn't even fired before he was shot by Enrique because he wanted to protect his sister as stoutly as Isabelle fought to defend him last night.



What Enrique said about needing to use Isabelle as a ruse to force Col out of hiding was true. Col's usually impenetrable qualm was gravely faltering. He was making sloppy rookie errors that gained unwanted attention from his unforgiving competitors. His desire for revenge was nearly as great as my desire to protect Isabelle, but it was his recklessness that blinded him from seeing who Enrique really was.

After talking to Regan, she advised that the DA would only consider a plea bargain if Enrique gave them everything on Vladimir. That would have made him a dead man walking, even with an offer of protective custody. Talking from personal experience, Enrique wouldn't have lasted a week before someone in Vladimir's crew found him. That's why I invoked Henry's favor that's been precariously dangling between us the past seven years.

Although hesitant in working with a member of the Popov entity, Henry agreed to get Enrique out of the country. He supplied him with a passport, a new identity, and a healthy bank balance to get him established in his new hometown in Russia. Cooper snuck into Enrique's room last night to finalize the documentation. He must have mentioned details of the ruse to Enrique because Henry generally keeps the finer details on the down-low. "The less you know, the less chance you'll have of incriminating yourself" is a saying he regularly quotes.

"Even though you've handed in your last card, you're still my family, Isaac. Don't become a stranger." Not waiting for me to reply, Henry disconnects the call. He may be a mob boss, but just like in any industry, there are good and bad people. He's one of the rare good ones.

I shove my phone into the breast pocket of my jacket while walking around the corner. Isabelle has her shoulder propped

up against the wall. When she notices my approach, a smile spreads across her weary face. I was hesitant with her wanting to talk to Enrique this morning because I was unaware of Henry's intentions, and I needed to ensure she wasn't around when his plan was executed.

I also couldn't guarantee how much Enrique knew about my business dealings with Vladimir. Although I'm planning to disclose everything to Isabelle when I can, at the moment, some things can't be fully divulged until they're set in stone. Isabelle doesn't need more instability in her life.

I increase my pace, eager to get Isabelle away from this perilous lifestyle she doesn't belong in. My life has never been anything close to ordinary, but Isabelle instills balance. She keeps me level and reminds me that my empire isn't the most important thing in my life. She is.

My brows furrow when I stand next to her. Her gaze is hazy, and she's a little unsteady on her feet. "Are you okay?"

After I brush away strands of hair that have fallen in her face, she nods. "Yeah."

I arch my brow and peer into her glassy eyes.

She swallows again. "I'm a little bit dizzy."

Once I have all the hairs removed from her sweat-drenched face, I press the back of my hand on her forehead. She doesn't have a fever, but she certainly doesn't look well. Suddenly, her pupils widen as her hand shoots up to slap her mouth. When she spots the women's restroom halfway down the hall, she pushes off the wall and paces toward it. Her strides are wobbly and slow.

I scoop her into my arms and clutch her close to my chest.

“I’m going to be sick,” she mumbles through the hand covering her mouth.

“I know, baby.”

A young nurse wearing hospital scrubs with tongue compressors and stethoscopes printed on the faded material peers at me with bulging eyes when I enter the bathroom. She takes one look at Isabelle’s ashen face before advising she’ll return with a doctor. I kick open the stall door and hoist the toilet seat up with my shoe before shrugging off my jacket to lay it on the tiled floor.

Isabelle drops to her knees and leans over the bowl, her back bending harshly as she heaves the minimal amount of food she snacked on while issuing her statement. I hold her hair back with one hand, while the other rubs in a circular motion on her back. Goosebumps follow the trail my hand makes, but I’m too worried to pay them any attention.

Once her stomach is empty, Isabelle leans back until her bottom is resting on the balls of her feet. I rip off two squares of toilet paper from the roll then hand them to her. “Thank you.” She runs the paper along her bottom lip before dumping it into the bowl and flushing the toilet.

By the time I have gathered her back into my arms, Jae enters the bathroom. “From the student nurse’s description, I thought it sounded like you.” Her eyes drop to Isabelle. “Has she rested at all today?”

“No. She had court this morning and now this—”

Sighing, she shines a flashlight into Isabelle’s massively dilated eyes. “She was severely concussed, Isaac. If she won’t rest, I’ll admit her again.”

“It’s not Isaac’s fault,” Isabelle mumbles, her voice relaying her queasiness. “I insisted on coming here.”

Jae’s lips twist as the sternness in her eyes eases. “Have you taken any pain relief since this morning?”

The strictness returns to her face when Isabelle shakes her head. Any excuse I attempt to formulate is cut off from Jae’s wry look. She is usually a happy-go-lucky type of woman, but she’s a stickler when it comes to matters relating to personal health.

“Let me complete a more thorough examination of her in my office. If she passes those tests, you can take her home. If she fails, I’m going to admit her.”

## CHAPTER 11



## ISABELLE

*A*n hour later, after having a full check-up by Dr. Jae and an impromptu visit with Hugo, I'm bundled into the passenger seat of Isaac's car. I don't need to ask him where we're going. I can devise a response just by looking at him. His every desire and want is pouring out of him, making the interior of the car sticky with a damp mugginess, while also making my insides quiver with anticipation.

When we enter the I5 highway, Isaac slips his hand into the breast pocket of his jacket, producing a folded-up piece of paper. I eye him inquisitively when he gives the document to me. As I carefully open it, his eyes shift between the road and me.

Air traps in my throat when my eyes lock in on the picture. It's a photo of Enrique entering a private jet. The date illuminated in orange in the bottom corner of the frame is time-stamped an hour after he was ushered out of his hospital room.

My tear-filling eyes lift to Isaac. I don't need him to confirm he helped Enrique. The truth is relayed in his beautiful, unique eyes that are watching me cautiously, worried I'll take the news of his involvement in an illegal activity well.

Although I once declared I'd never get my hands stained, I lied. I've learned since that day that when you love someone, you do anything in your power to protect them. I haven't seen Enrique in twenty years, but that doesn't mean I don't love him. When I looked at him, all I saw was the little boy with big chocolate eyes and a dirty face that stared up at me in awe.

“Where's he going?”

“I can't tell you that, Isabelle.” Regret is heard in his tone. “There are still some things I can't disclose yet, but I guarantee you he's safe, and once I can give you more details, I will.”

I nod before lowering my gaze back down to the photo. Enrique is smiling because not only did Isaac save him from prosecution that might have earned him twenty years in jail, he saved him from the clutches of our father. It might have been twenty years after I was saved, but from the huge grin on Enrique's face, I don't think he cares. He looks happy and free.

“Thank you.”

When I lean over to press a peck on his unshaven jaw, Isaac's cheekbones rise. “You're welcome.” He nudges his head to the glove compartment. “There's a lighter in there. I need you to wind down the window and burn the photo. We can't have any proof we know what happened to Enrique.”

I eye him suspiciously. “Who are you, *really*?”

He doesn't answer my question, but the most delicious smirk carves on his mouth. I open the glove compartment to remove the lighter and destroy the evidence as requested. Burning papers float through the air like a scattering of fireflies in the fading night sky. It's a surreal experience, like

all the negative energy is floating away in tiny sparkles of orange, red, and yellow embers.

The remainder of the trip home is made in silence, but I'm feeling more alive than I have the past month. The fact Isaac is inviting me back into his personal space has my heart swelling. Him bringing me back here means he's rebuilt his trust in me.

I love Isaac, he owns every piece of my soul, so I believe my intuition when it says I can trust him too. Our relationship was built on a rocky surface of lies and deception, so it never had the chance to be strong, but if we wipe the slate clean and start again without the secrets, I truly believe we will build a relationship that will weather any storm.

I turn my gaze to Isaac, who is inputting a security code in a box on the wrought iron gate that surrounds his property. "Do you want to play a game?"

He flashes me a flirty wink.

"Not that type of game." I roll my eyes. "Sex fiend."

He chuckles a hearty laugh. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't need to," I retort, elbowing him in the ribs.

The blood surging through my heart spills over when he grabs my wrist so that he can kiss my palm. He then rests it on his thigh before guiding his car up the long driveway of his home. "What game do you want to play?"

"Hugo said the best way to get to know someone is by playing twenty questions."

"That sounds like something Hugo would say. Did you two play?"



“Yes, but we only made it through three questions. I thought his *baby* was a safe question. It wasn’t.” His thigh muscles bunch when I slide my hand up his trouser-covered leg. “That was really sweet of you to do.”

Remaining quiet, he parks his car in the multi-car garage, then assists me out of the vehicle. Accepting praise isn’t a strong point of his. My heart whacks my ribs when he opens the carved French doors of his home, then gestures for me to enter before him. My eyes eagerly absorb the foyer and hall as I step inside. If I hadn’t witnessed the damage with my own eyes, I would have never known the FBI had destroyed his property during their horrific search.

“Do you want to go first or shall I?” Isaac assists me out of my trench coat before storing our jackets into the coatroom. “Is it twenty questions each or in total?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe we should just keep asking questions until we have nothing left to answer?”

He stops undoing his cufflinks. “All right, but you have to understand some things I can’t answer yet.”

His body language reveals he isn’t happy about needing to be evasive, but I trust that he will be honest when he can.

I smile while nodding. “That’s fine, but that means I get to ask the first question.”

His strengthened posture relaxes. “Deal.” He grins before grasping my hand in his. “But first, we need food and an expensive bottle of wine.”

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The first handful of questions are the standard generic ones most people generally ask. What was your favorite subject in school? What pet did you have growing up? How many siblings do you have? What music do you like? Etc. etc. But as the night moves on, and the wine bottle is emptied, our questions get a little more daring.

I've been relishing every second we've spent together. I love that I'm one of a rare few who get to see Isaac like this—so raw and open. He's a guarded man who keeps his cards held close to his chest, but the more time I spend with him, the more information he's sharing. I discovered why he's so fierce in ensuring his brother is safe and protected and how he met Cormack. I even got small snippets on how his empire started from the investments he made fighting in the underground fighting ring.

I snag a handful of grapes off the cheese and fruit platter on the coffee table, needing something to distract myself from getting all teary-eyed and sentimental. I pop a grape into my mouth as Isaac ambles into the room with a new bottle of wine. He's donning the same suit he was wearing this morning, except no jacket, vest, or tie. The top three buttons of his shirt are undone, showcasing his smooth, tan chest, and the front is crinkled from me lounging over him the past three hours.

“How do you even know Regan has a sex swing?”

A grin tugs his lips as he fills the spot next to me. “Who do you think arranged to have it installed?”

I screw my nose up. “That's only slightly odd. *Hey, boss, I want a sex swing, can you arrange it for me?*” My impersonation of Regan's voice sounds more like a twelve-

year-old hormonal boy than the sexy, throaty purr I was aiming for.

Isaac laughs. It's a husky chuckle that has my toes curling and my libido awakening. "She didn't ask quite like that. I own her apartment, so she sought my approval before she had a support beam placed in the roof."

I pop another grape into my mouth. "You need a support beam installed?"

"Oh, yeah, if you're doing it right, you do."

Energy crackles between us, sparking the air with the pungent aroma of lust. My throat burns from swallowing the grape whole when I catch his searing gaze staring at my lips. Even though he's only had a few glasses of wine, his gaze is misty and glistening like he's tipsy. It isn't alcohol causing the glimmer in his eyes, though. It's the drunken haze of lust.

Feeling playful, I pop another grape into my mouth, chewing it slowly before delving my tongue out to lick its juicy residue off my lips.

Isaac growls. "You'll pay for that tease later."

"Oh, yeah, if I'm doing it right, I will." My tone is laced with cheekiness since the wine heating my blood is making me more daring than normal.

Isaac shifts his position so he's sitting nearer to me. "If Jae didn't enforce a no physical-activity stipulation on your discharge paperwork, I would have had you bent over this couch with your perfect ass high in the air, plunging my cock deep inside your greedy pussy well over an hour ago." I bite the inside of my cheek, fighting hard not to squirm from his lusty gleam when he moves in even closer. "But since I'm

under strict doctor's orders not to touch you, we better continue with our game."

I huff, my lower lip dropping into a pout. Isaac smiles, happy he returned the sexual frustration baton back to me. We've been playing a game of ping pong with it all afternoon. Little teases, flirty comments, and brief touches have my inner vixen begging for him to touch me, but no matter how many times she pleads, Isaac remains at a safe distance.

Surprisingly, the score in our provocative game is even. It's enthralling knowing a man with such tantalizing sexual appeal as Isaac's finds plain, little old me as arousing as I find him.

Isaac sets down his glass of wine. "Since you asked two questions, I'm going to ask you two sets of questions."

"Okay."

My breathing stills when he glides his index finger down my arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in the wake of his touch. "Do you want to install a sex swing here?"

My pulse quickens as my pussy clenches. While nodding, I return his lust-riddled gaze, ignoring the hollering my insides are doing.

"Say it."

"Yes." I squeeze my thighs together, lessening the intense throb between them.

"Okay. I'll arrange it."

The thump of my pussy grows dangerous. His sexual prowess has always been astonishing, but the idea of trying something new with him has my inner vixen gyrating in excitement.

“You have one more question.”

In an instant, his composure goes from teasing to driven. The mask I’ve seen him wear several times, usually during business meetings, slips over his face. Blood teems through my veins, wondering what’s caused his sudden shift in demeanor. The sparkle of lust is still in his eyes, but something more antagonizing is dulling them.

Not requesting permission, I climb onto his lap and straddle his splayed thighs. After draping my arms around his shoulders, I stare into his clouded gaze, offering him quiet comfort. I feel his pulse surging through his veins from our closeness, but it has nothing on the thump of my heart when he asks, “Marry me, Isabelle?”

My nose tingles as moisture rushes in my eyes. “What?”

“Marry me?” he repeats.

The words ‘it’s too soon’ are sitting on the tip of my tongue, but no matter how many times I try to force them out, my mouth won’t relinquish them. Denying his request is the logical thing to do, but my heart doesn’t want to listen to reasonings. It knows when Isaac and I are together, time doesn’t matter. We don’t notice if an hour, a week, or a month has passed. It’s just us—two people fighting against a world wanting to tear us apart.

While returning his penetrating stare, I realize it isn’t drive sparking his eyes. It’s fear. Fear that he’s opening himself up, and that I’ll shut him down by saying no. Fear that I’m not bound to him as tightly as he is secured to me. Fear of living his life without me.

With that in mind, I cup his cheeks, ignoring the tremor encroaching my hands, then nod.

Relief floods his eyes. “Say it.”

“Yes.” My voice trembles with excited nerves. “I’ll marry you.”

In the blink of an eye, his mouth covers mine. The saltiness of my tears I didn’t know were falling flavors our knee-wobbling kiss. When I feel his thickened rod bracing against the seam of my sweatpants, the wetness in my eyes dry as the fire of passion warms my veins.

I slide my hand underneath his shirt, wanting to feel the smoothness of his skin under my hand. A grin tugs on my lips when his cock twitches from my meekest touch, then my nipples bud when his hands follow my expedition. After slipping it under my shirt, he tugs me closer, deepening our kiss.

He stands from the sofa, taking me with him, not once relinquishing my mouth from his. He walks us down the long hallway that is once again lined with expensive, one-of-a-kind paintings. I inwardly cheer, my effort to seduce Isaac into breaking doctor’s orders finally worked.

My cheers subside when he walks us into the bathroom instead of the master suite as I was anticipating. When he places me down on the expansive marble vanity, memories of the previous times we’ve bathed together rush to the forefront of my mind.

My first bareback ride was in that tub.

Isaac’s smooth, long strides have him reaching the tub quicker than a heartbeat. He turns on the faucet full blast, adding small amounts of bath products before spinning around to face me. Just like the first night we bathed together, his gaze is not only filled with lust but something else as well. The only

difference between that evening and tonight is that I now recognize the additional spark in his eyes. It's love, and it's focused on me.

As the room fills with steam, Isaac unbuttons the remaining buttons on his crisp blue business shirt before shrugging it off his shoulders. My pussy tingles when he lowers the zipper in his trousers so his erect, heavily-veined cock can spring free from his black boxer briefs. I stare unashamedly at the glorious cock that's sent me to the brink more times than I can count. Now, after agreeing to become his wife, I'm the only one who gets to experience its earth-shattering capabilities ever again.

I lick my lips to relieve their dryness before raising my eyes to Isaac's. My body is aching, shamelessly begging to be consumed by him. When he paces toward me, a wicked grin curls his plump lips. He removes my shirt, deliberately taking his time like a child on Christmas morning who doesn't want to unwrap his gifts too quickly, so the surprise isn't over before it needs to be.

His pupils dilate when he unclasps my bra, guides it off my shoulders, then drops it to the floor. I raise my bottom to assist him in removing my gray sweatpants and panties down my quaking thighs. Once every article of my clothing is removed, he takes a step back, so his heavy-lidded gaze can rake in my body. I fight hard not to squirm on the spot, trying to pretend I have some sort of control when I'm around him. When his eyes lift from my nipples to my face, I know he's calling my deceit.

He holds me in close as he moseys to the bathtub. The water is nice and warm, but it has nothing on the blood

scorching my veins from his closeness. When he slides us into the tub, he positions me so my back braces against his torso.

Wanting to be closer, I spin around to face him. Water splashes over the rim of the overfilled tub from my hasty movements. “Isabelle,” he growls in warning when I slide my slick skin along his until my throbbing pussy is hovering just above his erect cock.

“What?” I say, faking innocence. “I’m just making sure you’re clean.”

“By using your body to clean me?”

I smile while nodding.

“That’s what they invented shower puffs for.”

He snags one off the tiled rim and throws it at me. I dip it into the water before drifting it over his torso, nurturing him as he usually does me. His eyes close when I increase the pressure to knead away the tension he’s carrying on his broad shoulders.

His body is pure perfection—smooth, tanned, muscled, but not those overly imposing ones that are too veiny and horrid—but perfect in all the right places. Add his mouth-salivating body to his strikingly handsome good looks, and you have a lethal combination that drives lust-hungry women crazy.

It’s the parts of him I’m still unraveling that are more appealing to me—the way he takes care of his family and friends, how he knows when I need him to assert sternness to keep me balanced, and how he cocoons me with safety, making me feel both cherished and protected at the same time. All those things show he’s just as handsome on the inside as he is on the outside.



His eyes pop open when my nurturing technique veers to the lower half of his body. I whimper when he seizes my wrist just as my hand wraps around his throbbing cock. “Please,” I shamefully beg, staring into his eyes. “Pretty, pretty please.”

“Isabelle.” His growl displays his usually impenetrable composure is faltering. “Jae said no exhaustive activities.”

“There are *activities* we can do that don’t require excessive levels of movement.”

My pulse quickens when he smirks a succulent smile. “But that isn’t how my girl likes it. She likes to be fucked, not handled like a delicate flower.”

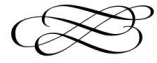
I grimace and flop onto his chest. After being sexually teased for hours, my orgasm is teetering dangerously on edge. The smallest touch from him will have me free-falling into orgasmic bliss.

“You’re being mean,” I mutter as my inner vixen stomps her feet like a child.

Isaac grips my chin and hoists my face up high. “Believe me, if I were able to touch you and know I could stop before things got *excessive*, my head would be buried between your legs, eating your greedy pussy for dessert.”

*Oh god.*

## CHAPTER 12



## ISAAC

Isabelle groans against my sweat-slicked chest. It's not a moan of sexual pleasure but the cry of frustration. She isn't the only one frustrated. My cock is aching to be buried into her tight, wet pussy, but I'd be devastated if I harmed her in the process. The guilt I feel knowing I caused her concussion is eating me alive, so I refuse to risk hurting her further.

The Isabelle who emerges in the bedroom is more adventurous than the regular Isabelle most people get to experience, which means she taunts until my urge to dominate overwhelms me. Normally, I wouldn't hesitate to fulfill her every fantasy, but for now, until all symptoms of her concussion are gone, our hot and heavy make-out sessions will revert to a pre-college level.

Suddenly, Isabelle's head shoots off my chest. Her eyes squint as she's overwhelmed by dizziness, exposing why I'm endeavoring to stick with Jae's recommendation. I arch my brow when she moves to sit at the opposite end of the tub. Her big chocolate eyes are weighed down by tired eyelids, but they're still full of lust.

"Remember our phone call?" Her voice is a husky purr that has my cock stiffening. "That didn't cause any *excessive*

movements.”

Her pants of breath increase as her shaky hands slither up the smooth planes of her stomach. She cups her generous breasts and kneads them together. My cock jumps when she pinches her nipples between her thumb and index finger. The real-life visual of her pleasing herself is ten times better than the one I imagined that night.

“I love your tits,” I inform her when she pays dedicated attention to her pert pink nipples. “I’m going to fuck them, then smear my cum all over them, marking you with my scent. I’ll make sure every man knows you’re taken, not just from having my ring on your finger, but my scent on your body as well.”

I’ll admit it. I freaked when I asked her to marry me, not because I didn’t want to ask her, but because I was undertaking the biggest negotiation of my life. Hours of acquisitions and prerequisites were a walk in the park compared to waiting for her to respond.

I had a whole speech planned to refute her statement that it was too soon, so I was astounded when she merely glanced into my eyes and said, “Yes.”

Not one asset I’ve acquired, not how many millions I have in my bank account, or even how many collectible cars I’ve bought over the years compared to what I felt the moment that word seeped from her lips. Just like my feelings for Isabelle, the sensation was phenomenal and unexplainable.

My attention diverts back to reality when a throaty purr tumbles from Isabelle’s lips. My balls clench when she dips one of her hands below the surface of the water. A growl emits from my throat when the water impedes my vision of her beautiful pussy. I scoot down the tub and grip her glorious ass

in my hands before tilting her hips higher, so her pussy is no longer submerged underwater.

She digs the pads of her feet into my thighs, arches her back, then plunges two fingers inside her glistening mound. A carnal growl rips from my throat, the visual stimulating. I've never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

Isabelle maintains a steady pace, finger-fucking herself with one hand while the other teases and caresses her perfect tits. Over time, the slickness coating her fingers grows as her race to climax intensifies.

"Please, Isaac," she begs breathlessly, her eyes fluttering open to stare at me. "I can't do this without you."

My chest puffs high, smug her body has already become so dependent on me she can't bring herself to climax without needing me to guide her over the final hurdle.

"What do you need, baby?"

"You," she whimpers between pants, "Anywhere."

My first thoughts go to tasting her deliciously fragrant pussy, but I know once I taste her, I won't stop. Instead, I secure a firm hold on her hips with one hand before lifting the other to her throbbing clit.

"Eyes, Isabelle."

She secures a tight grip on the tub, making her knuckles go white before her heavy-lidded eyes meet mine. All it takes is one swipe of my thumb over her clit to have her free-falling into ecstasy. Her toes dig into my thighs, her body quivers, and the most seductive fucking noise in the world bounces off the bathroom walls.

I've changed my mind. The sight of Isabelle amid of an orgasm is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Once she stops juddering, and her body sinks back into the water, I gather her into my arms and stand from the tub. When I place her on her feet to snag a towel off the heated towel rack, she sways uncontrollably like a leaf blowing in the breeze.

"Did you hurt yourself?" My eyes dance between hers that are a little hazy. "Are you dizzy? Do you have a headache?"

"I'm okay."

I arch my brow, calling out the deceit her eyes are reflecting.

"My head is a little achy."

I scoop her into my arms and hold her into my chest, all possessive and guarded. After placing her on her side of the bed, I stride to the living room to collect the pain medication Jae prescribed. She said if the sharp headaches that have been plaguing Isabelle since her concussion don't settle, she should take these tablets. They'll make her groggy, but considering it's nearly nine o'clock, that won't affect her too much. They may even help lessen the chance of her having a nightmare.

After gathering a bottle of water from the fridge, I pace back to my bedroom. A smile curves on my mouth when I discover Isabelle lying on her side, snuggled into my pillow, fast asleep. I set the water and tablets on her bedside table before moving to the drawers at the side of the room. As much as sleeping next to a naked Isabelle sounds riveting, I won't get a wink of sleep. I'm already struggling to restrain myself from touching her as it is, let alone sleeping next to her enticingly bare body all night.

I slip a short sleeve t-shirt over Isabelle's head before pulling her damp hair out of the collar, then I slip into a pair of cotton pajama pants. I walk to the door with the plan of finalizing some acquisitions I've been working on, but my plans alter when a faint whimper scuttles out of Isabelle's parted lips. Her face contorts with pain as her knees curl upward.

I pull back the comforter and glide into my side of the bed before gathering her in my arms. The lines indenting her forehead ease when she snuggles into my chest. Within minutes, her breathing returns to a regular pattern, and the harshness hampering her face softens.

My gaze lifts to the twinkling lights of Ravenshoe shining through the arched window in my room. My residence was built around that view. I wanted to see the world I planned to rule from the moment I woke up. It's what urged me to fight harder to achieve the goals I set for myself.

Now, none of it matters.

The accomplishment I felt when I amassed my wealth doesn't compare to what I feel when I have Isabelle in my arms.

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I don't know how many hours pass before Isabelle groggily lifts her head off my chest. Her eyes are cloudy, and her cheek is crinkled from where she was resting on my shirtless torso.

"Hey." Her warm breath flutters my lips. "Did I fall asleep?"

I chuckle. "Yeah, only for a quick nap."

She elbows me in the ribs before scooting up the bed, mimicking my position with her back braced on the headboard. “It’s a beautiful view.”

“It is.” *But not as beautiful as you.*

After admiring the view for a few more minutes, Isabelle’s eyes drift to me. An adorable smile stretches across her face, and a gleam is brightening her eyes. “If I recall correctly, I’m owed three questions in our game of twenty questions.”

My brow arches. “And how do you figure that?”

“Did you hurt yourself? Are you dizzy? And do you have a headache?” She ticks off the three questions on her fingers. “You asked three questions, which means I get to ask three questions.”

I shake my head before gesturing for her to go ahead. Nothing she could ask me would shock me more than she was when I asked her to marry me.

She swallows before her big brown eyes lift to mine. “Why did Ophelia watch the fight between you and her brother?”

Except that one.

I scrub at the scruff on my jaw while sucking in a big breath. I grew my beard with the intent of discovering if it added sexual stimulation for Isabelle and if I could smell her scent for hours later, but ever since I grew it, I haven’t tasted her against my mouth. I guess, like everything in life, sometimes the best-laid plans don’t always pan out the way you expect.

“Ophelia didn’t know I was fighting in the underground fight ring until the night I fought CJ.” I stare at nothing in particular. “It wasn’t until I arrived at the warehouse did she discover what I really did for a living.”



I turn to face Isabelle. Her chin is resting on her knees, peering up at me, waiting patiently for me to continue. Her face is void of the judgment I expect people to have whenever I imagine sharing my story.

“I was in the locker room warming up for the fight when she begged me not to do it. She said if I fought, I wouldn’t be the man she fell in love with.” I stop talking as the memories of that night filter through my brain. Even though it was six years ago, the images are still crystal clear in my mind. “That was the first time Ophelia told me she loved me.” I lift my gaze to Isabelle. “It was also the first time I said it back.”

Tears well in her eyes, but she smiles, encouraging me to continue.

“I adhered to her pleas, but only when we were leaving, and when we were stopped by Col, I discovered I wasn’t the only one harboring secrets. I didn’t know Ophelia was Col’s daughter until that night.” I drag my index finger down the crinkle in her nose. “But just like you, it wouldn’t have made any difference who her father was. You don’t choose who your family is.”

A smile tugs her lips higher as she nods.

“I either had to fight Col’s best fighter or give up Ophelia. I chose to fight. I only found out it was Ophelia’s brother once we walked between the bleachers.” I peer back out at the twinkling lights of Ravenshoe. “Just as I entered the ring, Ophelia dropped another bombshell.” I swallow harshly, my gaze facing forward. “Her period was over a week late. Suddenly, the stomach flu she’d been suffering the previous two weeks made sense. I think she thought her confession would have changed my mind about fighting. It did the opposite. It made me more determined to ensure she and my

baby weren't trapped in Col's ruthless clutch any longer than they already had been."

I suck in a deep breath that expands my chest. "I just never fathomed the last image I'd have of her was her tear-drenched face begging me to stop. If I'd known, I would have put more thought into my decisions that night."

## CHAPTER 13



## ISABELLE

*M*y heart shatters into a million pieces from the devastation on Isaac's face. When I asked my question, I truly didn't know if he'd answer it. He hates talking about his past and anything associated with Ophelia, but I was inspired to push him to see if he'd open up to me. Even though his confession hurt to hear, it settled a lot of my confusion, and certain quirks he has now make sense. Like why he can't stand seeing me cry, why he doesn't tell me he loves me by using words, and why he guards his heart so fiercely.

Isaac stiffens when I crawl onto his lap, but I continue my pursuit. I cradle his hips with my knees and burrow my nose into the crook of his neck. Inhaling deeply, I fight the sob attempting to escape my quivering lips. Now is not the time for my tears to fall.

While pressing my lips to the throbbing vein in his neck, I tighten my arms around his shoulders. I mold my body as close to his as possible, making us become one. His heart pounds beneath my heaving chest, which is struggling to contain my emotions. As the first tear leaks from my eye, Isaac pulls me in close till not one ounce of air exists between us.

"I'm sorry that happened to you."

“Don’t apologize, Isabelle. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Guilt makes it hard for me to secure a full breath. “I shouldn’t have asked that question. I shouldn’t have forced you to share. I’m sorry, Isaac.”

He pulls me back by the shoulders, the pain in his eyes doubling when he spots the tears cascading down my face. He treks his fingers across my cheeks, removing my tears before locking his eyes with mine. “Instead of being sorry, I need you to remember I was hurting when I made my next decision. When I made it, I never thought someone like you would come into my life. I never thought I’d have these feelings again.”

Pain maims my heart from peering into his unguarded eyes. He’s the most vulnerable I’ve ever seen—unguarded, open, and raw.

“Promise me you won’t run.”

“I’ll never run from you.” *I’m tired of running.*

“Promise me.” His eyes relay his command is more of a plea.

The ache in my heart amplifies. “I promise. Whatever it is, we’ll survive it. We can survive anything.”

We’ve already survived death threats, a deranged stalker, two arrests, an alleged affair, and a kidnapping. If we can survive that, we can survive anything.

He lifts my hands to his mouth and kisses each palm before placing them over his heart. “I love you, too,” I reply, finally intuiting what his gesture means.

The last time he spoke those three words, the woman he loved died, so I understand and accept he may never articulate that he loves me, but his actions will more than make up for it.

“When Ophelia died, no one knew about the baby, only me.” He looks up at me, “And now you.”

My heart warms, pleased he trusts me enough to share guarded secrets.

“I never wanted to experience that type of loss ever again, so I took measures to ensure there were no possibilities of it happening again.”

My brows furrow, confused by his statement.

It takes a few moments staring into his remorseful eyes for lucidity to hit.

*Oh, my God.* “You’re sterile?”

“Yes,” Isaac replies with a curt nod of his head. “That’s how I met Jae and Avery. Jae refused to do the procedure until I underwent an extensive psychiatric assessment since I was under the age of twenty-two and not a father. Avery was the doctor assigned to my case. Several heated arguments later, and the procedure was completed according to my wishes.”

We sit across from each other, staring, but not speaking. I try to formulate a response to his confession, but I’m stumped on how to reply. Am I hurt he kept this from me? That’s a tough question. Half of me says yes, he should’ve been upfront and honest from the beginning, but the other half says no because it doesn’t change the way I feel about him. And if I’m totally honest, even if I knew from the very beginning, nothing would have kept me away from him.

I wasn’t raised by my father, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t loved. My Uncle Tobias was a wonderful man with a

ginormous heart. He loved me enough that I didn't need anyone in my life but him. Also, what Hugo said weeks ago is true. Family doesn't necessarily mean people who are blood-related. It's the people you choose to be a part of your family who are the most important.

I capture Isaac's cheeks in my hands and stare into his hardened eyes. "Thank you for being honest with me, but it doesn't change anything between us. There are thousands of children in the world who need a loving family. One day, if we decide we want to have a family, there are plenty of options available for us. If not, I get to keep you all to my greedy self." I say the last sentence over-dramatically, wanting to wash away the worry marring his handsome face.

He laughs and firms his grip on my waist. "There's only one greedy orifice in your body, Isabelle. It isn't your heart."

I screw up my nose and stick out my tongue, immaturely denying his bold statement. When I feel him stiffening beneath me, I realize his declaration is entirely accurate. I can't help it. I'm beyond being helped when it comes to him. My body craves his touch, his attention—every inch of him.

I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing. Our sexual chemistry isn't our only connection. If it were, we wouldn't have made it over all the hurdles we've endured the past few months. We would have cut our losses and moved on, deciding it wasn't worth the effort, but we both know our relationship is worth the sacrifices we've sustained, and we'll only grow from here.

"You have two questions left," Isaac says, breaking me from my thoughts.

I purse my lips while trying to think of a less imposing question than my last. He waits impatiently, tapping his index

fingers on my backside.

“What’s the longest period you’ve gone without sexual contact?”

The instant the question escapes my lips, I want to ram it back down my throat. Jealousy has always been a curse of mine. Just thinking about him with another woman has my claws out and ready to be sharpened.

Isaac coughs to clear his throat. “What’s the longest we’ve been separated?”

“Thirty-four days.” *Thirty-four days of pure, gut-wrenching hell.*

His shoulders square. “Thirty-four days.”

I groan in disgust before I attempt to move off him. Jealousy is hitting me in the gut, brutally wounding me. He grips my thighs and pulls me back onto his lap. Huffing, I shift my gaze to the side of the room, striving to rope my jealousy back in. Even though it’s illogical to believe there was no one before me, I prefer to live with my head in the clouds when it comes to stuff like this. I hate the thought of Isaac with anyone else. *Hate it.* I can’t stand the idea of anyone experiencing what I’ve experienced with him.

Isaac grips my chin to carefully angle my head back to him. “You wanted to open this bag of worms, so we’re opening it.” He glances up at me with remorseful eyes. “I didn’t know you existed. If I had, I would’ve never stopped looking until I found you.”

The truth of his statement is relayed in his beautiful eyes. It eases my agitation and spreads warmth blooming across my chest.



“This will make me sound like a chauvinistic pig, and rightfully so, it should.” He inhales a quick breath. “Before you, they meant nothing. I simply saw women as a vessel for pleasure. Although they left my apartment satisfied, I wouldn’t have been bothered if they didn’t. I wasn’t with them to create memories. I was with them to release tension. When I achieved that, I left, leaving Catherine with the chore of kicking them out.”

You’d think his statement would cause virulent jealousy to resurface, but it doesn’t. His eyes are full of remorse, and he looks genuinely embarrassed for the way he behaved. I can also appreciate that he is not being evasive, even knowing he isn’t portraying himself in an amiable manner.

He’s never hidden the fact he wasn’t looking for a relationship, so it’s understandable he saw sex as just that—sex. He wasn’t issuing false promises. He didn’t offer commitment. All he proposed was his body for the night. So although there may have been women before me, from now on, there will only be me.

“And I’ll never want or need anyone else,” Isaac mutters to my quiet ramblings. “I have a hard enough time keeping up with your insatiable demands to add anyone else into the mix.”

I cock my brow, faking annoyance. “I never heard a complaint seep from your lips.”

“And you never will,” he replies in a deep, provocative rumble.

Pleasure dashes down my spine when he tilts his hips, grinding his cock against my bare pussy.

“Your body was built to be pleased, Isabelle, and I’m going to make sure it’s every whim and desire is taken care of

for the rest of my life. This...” he gestures his hand between us, “... is different than anything I’ve experienced before. I *want* to pleasure you. I *love* pleasuring you. I’ll *never* stop pleasuring you.”

My heart skips a beat as my pussy pulses. “Can we start that pleasuring now?”

He smirks. “Is that your third and final question for the night?”

“If your answer is yes, it will be.”

He chuckles against my mouth before sealing his plump lips over mine.

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The following morning, a groan erupts from my mouth as I lift my arms out of the comforter to stretch my tired muscles. My aching joints aren’t from sexual exhaustion. They’re from sexual frustration. Although Isaac’s kisses alone have my orgasm dangerously dangling off a cliff, I crave more, but no matter how much I plead, Isaac won’t take our usually combustible encounters to the next level, afraid I may experience more of the side effects I’ve been suffering from since my concussion.

My muscles are aching because every fiber in my body is coiled tight, ready to snap, eagerly anticipating being unraveled by his talented fingers, tongue, and formidable male appendage. Before Isaac, sex was available, but I never saw it as a necessity. I could go months without it, and my inner vixen wasn’t hankering to seek out a mate. Whereas now, it’s like I’m a sex addict. I’m just not addicted to sex. I’m addicted to Isaac.

Dragging my fingers through my hair, I secure it into a messy bun before ambling out of the room to find Isaac. Unsurprisingly, I find him in his home office talking on his cell phone. He's dressed down in low-hanging blue jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. His feet are bare, and his hair is wet and overdue for a trim. When he spots me leaning in the doorjamb, his eyes rake my body before he gestures for me to enter. The spark of lust in his eyes has my pulse quickening and my steps hurried.

"Henry, I have to go. I'll work something out and get back to you before the end of the week."

Not waiting for Henry to reply, Isaac disconnects his call and throws his cell onto his desk. He looks tired, but I know it isn't from lack of sleep. We secured eight hours last night. It's stress from all the tumultuous tasks he's undertaking.

I move around his desk, skirting past the hand he's holding out in offering to stand behind his office chair. I knead my palms into his shoulders, hoping to massage out some of the knots formed there. A tingle runs down my spine when a low growl seeps from Isaac's lips.

"Does it feel good?"

He moans. "It always feels good when you're touching me."

A smile tugs on my lips as I continue working on his tension. Over time, the tightness of his shoulders lessens, and the worry lines on his face fade.

A girly squeal whizzes from my lips when, in one swift movement, he spins around, seizes my wrist, and pulls me onto his lap. All immature giggling halts the instant he seals

his mouth over mine. His kiss is lush, deep, and toe-curling good.

“I’ll have to start working from my home office more often,” he murmurs over my tingling mouth.

When he runs his index finger along the hemline of my cotton t-shirt, goosebumps track the path his finger makes. Our combined groans echo around his office when his finger slips off the material to fleetingly brush my bare pussy.

“I’m definitely working from home more often,” he reiterates, licking his lips.

Since I was eager to find him, I didn’t bother putting on any panties, leaving his room in only the short-sleeve shirt he dressed me in last night. When his eyes lift to mine, my libido awakens. There’s an avid gleam in his eyes, exposing his usually impenetrable qualm is faltering.

I swivel my hips, shamelessly grinding my ass on his thickening cock. My head falls to his shoulder when his finger sinks into my pussy in one fluid motion. He keeps his strokes at a leisurely pace—gentle, yet tantalizing. Every hair on my body bristles, ecstatic he’s finally touching me. It’s been weeks since his talented fingers have tightened the coils of my womb, so I’ll take them any way I can get them.

His kiss steals my soft pants when his tongue delves into my mouth in a rhythm matching the grinds of his finger. I drink him in, absorbing his tasteful mouth. Our kiss is slow and enticing, surging my excitement to new heights. This may sound crude, but when Isaac and I have sex, we generally fuck. This is different—today he isn’t fucking me, he’s making love to me—with his fingers.

I grind my backside along his throbbing cock, wishing I wasn't seated in his lap so I could return the arousing experience. The pad of Isaac's palm adds a nice amount of pressure to my clit, sending a shiver of pleasure through my body that clusters in my needy sex. Every slow and precise thrust of his fingers has the excitement of my imminent climax sweeping through my body. My heavy pants increase along with the rhythm of his fingers.

The louder I moan, the faster Isaac's pumps become. And so, the vicarious cycle commences. I pant harder, and he finger-fucks me more viciously.

My orgasm is hanging by a thin string, every fiber in my body coiled and ready to snap when a doorbell buzzes in the distance. *No!*

"Fuck," Isaac mutters under his breath before slipping his gifted finger out of my body.

I freeze when his primal, lust-riddled eyes stare at me. "Did I hurt you? Do you have a headache? Are you dizzy?" His voice is deep, rough, and sexy as sin, but his tone relays his disappointment at not being able to rein in his usually unshakable presence.

"I'm fine." I'm inwardly cursing obscenities at the top of my lungs, but I'm fine, nonetheless.

He arches his brow as his eyes assess mine, seeking any untruth in them. Relief filters through them when he realizes the only injury I'm concealing is a bruised ego.

He stands from his chair, taking me with him. "I arranged for Jae to come and assess you before she starts her shift at the hospital." He places me on my feet before his gaze lifts to

mine. “But it slipped my mind when I *somehow* got distracted.”

My core clenches when his heavy-lidded gaze runs down my body. The intense tingle of my pussy amplifies when he pops his finger into his mouth to lick off the evidence of my arousal. A growl rumbles from his throat when he tastes my excitement on his tongue. His composure slips before my eyes as rampant hunger clouds his gaze.

Just as he steps toward me like a panther on the prowl, the doorbell shrills again.

## CHAPTER 14



## ISAAC

A doorbell buzzing momentarily breaks the intangible spell Isabelle always incites when she's in my vicinity. My astuteness falters the instant she enters the room. The power she has over me is astounding, and if I'm being forthright, utterly frightening, but last night proved without a doubt that asking for her hand in marriage was one of the most intellectual endeavors I've ever undertaken. I revealed snippets of myself to her that nobody else knows, and instead of being judgmental, she was supportive and understanding like she comprehended why, at that time in my life, I made the decision I made.

Which once again corroborates my claim that she knows me better than anyone. She's unraveling me one layer at a time, and even when she exposes parts of my life that are clouded in a dark shadow, she evaluates the situation instead of making a hasty decision. Once her curiosity is satisfied, we move on, then her pursuit of unmasking me continues.

My eyes stray to Isabelle. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes are wide, and she's fiddling with the hem of her shirt, attempting to pretend she wasn't just sitting on the brink of a climax.



“Go get dressed, then come meet Jae and me in the living room.” My voice is rough as I fight the urge to claim her body on my desk.

“That’s not fair.” She places a kiss to my mouth. “Tell Jae I’ll be a few minutes,” she whispers against my lips, staring up at me. “Because *I* need to finish what *you* started.” She grins a wicked smile, baiting me and my gigantic ego.

Unable to leash my domineering nature, I seize her wrist, then pull her back to me. Any protests attempting to spill from her mouth are halted when my tongue lashes her gaped lips before it plunges between them. A husky moan rolls up her chest when she tastes herself on my tongue. When I band my arms around her waist, the heat of her pussy has my cock jumping in my jeans.

A whimper seeps from her swollen red lips when I inch back from our embrace. I stare into her glistening eyes, my chest puffed high. “Every moan that flows from your lips, every orgasm that shreds through your body, and every drop of cum from your greedy pussy belong to me.”

Her breathing hastens as the scent of her arousal filters in the air.

“This mouth...” I kiss her plump cupid’s bow lips, “... belongs to me. These tits...” I thrum my index finger over her erect nipples budded against her shirt, hard and begging to be touched, “... belong to me.” When I cup her pussy, her knees buckle, and a moan seeps from her lips. “And this, and any pleasure it craves, most certainly belongs to me.” I stare into her heavy-lidded gaze. “Say it, Isabelle. Say it, then I’ll let you come.”

“It belongs to you. It all belongs to you. I belong to you.”

I spin her around, pull her luscious ass back until it's pressed against my stiff shaft, then slip two fingers inside of her, ensuring I find the sweet spot that causes the most earth-shattering screams to be torn from her throat.

After circling my thumb over her clit, I muffle her cries of ecstasy with my hand, not wanting her screams to startle Catherine, who arrived earlier this morning. I pump in and out of her on repeat while whispering dirty thoughts into her ear. I tell her how I'm going to fuck her, where I'm going to fuck her, and how long I'm going to fuck her as soon as Jae gives her the all-clear.

A few moments later, her pussy clenches around my fingers and my hand slicks with her arousal. Her thighs quiver as a ferocious orgasm shreds through her body so hard and fast, her knees buckle. I sink my teeth into her shoulder blade before slowing the pumps of my fingers, guiding her down from her toe-curling orgasm with a tenderness I didn't use to bring it on.

Once her cries of ecstasy lessen, I scoop her into my arms before striding to the master suite. After placing her on the bed, I enter the bathroom to get a washcloth.

While cleaning the residue of her arousal off her thighs, and internally battling not to sink my stone-hard cock into her glistening pussy, Isabelle's back lurches off the bed. "Jae!" she shouts, suddenly remembering we have guests.

I chuckle, glad I'm not the only one who loses all restraint when we're together.

"It's okay, Catherine would've let her in."

"Catherine's here, too?" Her eyes widen before she flops onto the bed. "I'll never look them in the eyes again if they

heard me... *orgasm*,” she mumbles under the hands, hiding her flushed cheeks.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Isabelle. It’s my job to ensure your every whim is taken care of. If that means you want me to fuck you in the middle of the day, on the kitchen counter while a staff member is sitting in the other room, I’ll do it. I pay my staff very well for their discretion, so I won’t tiptoe around my own house.”

The color on her cheeks intensifies, but it isn’t from embarrassment—she’s aroused by my statement. My desire to claim her overwhelms me when her seductive scent filters in the air.

“And unless you want them to hear you for the second time today, I suggest you stop looking at me like that.”

She swallows harshly before she accepts the sweater outfit I’m offering.

“Stupid, traitorous body,” she mumbles under her breath as she ambles to the chest of drawers to retrieve a scrap of material she calls panties. My cock twitches when she slithers the tiny strip of white lace up her smooth thighs and tugs her shirt over her head dropping it to the floor, exposing the generous swell of her breasts. The only thing stopping me sinking my cock into her needy pussy is remembering that Jae is downstairs waiting for us. That’s all the reminder I need that Isabelle is supposed to be on bed rest, not servicing my cock.

Once she’s dressed, I enclose my hand around hers and walk down to the foyer. My lengthy strides halt when her clutch of my hand firms when we’re halfway down the stairs. Following her fretful gaze, I discover the amused face of Ryan and a hardened-with-anger Alex.

“Oh. My. God.”

Isabelle’s cheeks inflame to a level I’ve never seen before. I’m torn on how to react. Half of me is smug, glad they heard how aroused I can make her with only my fingers, but the other half is pissed they heard Isabelle in ecstasy. Those sounds solely belong to me.

I straighten my shoulders, and my lips set into a hard line before I continue down the stairs. The color in Isabelle’s cheeks increases with every step we take. Ryan offers me his hand in greeting, but Alex keeps his fist at his side.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Ryan’s voice is courteous while also laced with cheekiness, confirming what I already expected. They heard Isabelle’s cries of ecstasy. “We have a few questions we need to ask you regarding the investigation on the police officers who were kidnapped and held in your yacht.”

“*We?*” My suspicious eyes bounce between Ryan and Alex. “Since when did the FBI and the Ravenshoe Police Department become allies?”

“When *we* found a subject *we* have common ground on,” Alex answers, turning his narrowed gaze from staring at Isabelle to glare at me. “The police officers were found bound and gagged in *your* yacht. The same yacht *you* chartered out of the Vela De Keys Marina on the *exact* afternoon they were kidnapped.”

My lips crimp. “Not everything is black and white. There’s a whole heap of gray no one pays any attention to—”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. There’s a logical reason for everything.”

Air whistles between my lips when I attempt to stifle a chuckle. “Now it all makes sense.”

I step closer to Alex, ignoring Isabelle’s tug on my arm, trying to keep us apart. I continue until I come face to face with the man who has been relentlessly pursuing me for months. I’m impressed when he maintains my eye contact when I stare into his blue eyes. Not many men have the confidence to stand across from me and not balk.

“What makes sense?” Alex queries, unable to suppress the need to know what my remark referred to.

“Why you’ve been so persistent in investigating me.”

Alex’s top lip curls into a snarl. “I’ve been *persistently* investigating you because you’re a criminal.”

I adjust my position to block his view of Isabelle when he turns his eyes to her. “It has nothing to do with me being a criminal. You’re only investigating me because you’re jealous.”

Alex chuckles a deep, snarky laugh. “Jealous? Of what? Everything you’ve *ever* accomplished in your life was achieved with money tainted in blood. I’d rather be poor than live with low morals like you.”

“Alex, that’s enough.”

A smug grin curves on my mouth, pleased Isabelle is defending my integrity. Her cheeks are still inflamed, but now it’s from the anger surging through her veins, not embarrassment. I glide my thumb over her hand, refocusing her attention from glaring at Alex. Her eyes switch from being angry to remorseful the instant they lock with mine. I smile and wink at her before returning my focus to Alex.

“You’re not jealous of my accomplishments, my power, or my wealth.”

Alex’s chest puffs high, and an arrogant mask slips over his face.

“You’re jealous because Regan chose me over you.”

Isabelle squeezes my hand so hard her nails dig into my palm. Alex tries to suffocate the look of possessiveness on his face, but he isn’t quick enough for me to miss it. Now everything *does* make sense. Regan lived in Ravenshoe for years, but suddenly, not long after the FBI rolled into town, she moved back to Texas.

Regan is a strong, take-no-shit-from-no-one woman, but she wasn’t always like that. She uses her high-strung attitude as a shield to protect herself from the hurt she endured when she was younger. It takes one hell of a man to get her to lower her barrier, and obviously, Alex accomplished that, but from the look of repentance in his eyes, I can tell he’s also the reason she converted back to her hard-shelled exterior.

“If you believe her decision was based on anything but professional obligation and friendship, then you’re more foolish than I first thought.” I shift my eyes to Ryan. “I’ll have my lawyer schedule a time for me to come to the station to answer any questions you have, but for now, Isabelle and her health will remain my number one priority.”

Ryan nods, and any remark from Alex is interrupted when a doorbell rings through the foyer. Lifting my gaze, I spot Jae standing outside the glass French doors with an antique brown leather doctor’s bag in her hand.

“Go with Jae into the living room. I’ll join you in a few minutes after I see Ryan and Alex out,” I instruct Isabelle,

peering at her.

An egotistical smirk curls my lips high when Isabelle bids farewell to Alex and Ryan with a quick smile before she does as instructed without protest. Once she and Jae enter the living room, I face Alex and Ryan head-on. “Did you arrest the second assailant who kidnapped Isabelle?”

Ryan nods. “Yes. The information supplied by Enrique was extremely accurate. We netted his assailant and another four members of his crew earlier this morning.”

“Do you have any leads in the disappearance of Enrique?” I keep the same panicked tone to ward off any suspicion.

Alex’s lip set into a hard line. “No, but rumors are Vladimir was grooming him to take over the family business, so I wouldn’t be surprised to discover this is the work of Vladimir’s crew. We put a ban on all travel, but by the time it was processed through all the appropriate channels, Enrique was long gone.”

I nod to conceal the smile curving on my mouth. “Have you questioned the police officers regarding who framed Isabelle for Megan’s murder?”

Ryan grimaces. “No, they were admitted to Mercer Hospital for dehydration, exposure, and for psychiatric evaluation. Until they’re given the all-clear, the union reps won’t let me close to them.”

I glance into Ryan’s eyes, snubbing Alex and his furious glance. “You have your suspicions on who it is?” Ryan is like an open book, easy for me to read.

“I have my theories. I just need proof.”

When I arch my brow, requesting further information, Ryan cranks his head to Alex. Alex’s top lip twitches as he

runs his hand over his head. He huffs before shrugging, giving permission for Ryan to divulge additional confidential information.

Ryan's gaze returns to me. "One of the captives was Rodney Parvok."

My nostrils flare when I inhale a big breath. Rodney was a rookie officer working alongside Theresa the year before she was removed from her position of detective at Ravenshoe PD. He falsely testified during her incompetency hearing, trying to save the woman he was secretly infatuated with. It was fortunate that the security in my apartment is impeccable, so I had surveillance evidence to corroborate my claims against Theresa.

"The other was Chase Springfield."

The muscle in my jaw tenses. "What more proof do you need than that?" My tone is dangerously low as my eyes drift between Alex and Ryan. "Theresa's minion and her cousin were the two men who brutalized Isabelle during her arrest. Enrique said he learned of the plot to kidnap Isabelle from them, and that he only kept them alive because they had useful information on who framed Isabelle. I think it's pretty obvious who set her up for murder."

"Anything Enrique said to Isabelle is hearsay. It will never hold up in a courtroom—"

"I don't give a fuck what will hold up in court. If you stopped wasting police resources pursuing a spiteful grudge against me, you wouldn't need to worry about *hearsay*. You could have squeezed the information directly from the source. Instead, you're walking around with your head stuck up your ass because your ego got bruised by a woman *way* out of your league to begin with."



A narcissistic smirk curves on my lips when Alex steps closer to me. The veins in his neck protrude as his face reddens in anger. I sniff, purposely baiting him, hoping to force him to react to my taunt, so I can finally wipe the conceited expression right off his obnoxious face.

My gibe is working until Ryan steps between us. “You really think coming to blows will help Isabelle?”

Just hearing Isabelle’s name quells some of the fiery heat scorching my veins.

“You have a week. If you don’t arrest Theresa by then, I’ll take matters into my own hands,” I inform them, my tone relaying the truth in my statement. Any reply from Alex is cut off when I shoot him a wry look. “If I’m going to be accused of something, I may as well do it.”

With that, I spin on my heels and walk toward the living room, not bothering to show my guests the way out.

## CHAPTER 15



## ISABELLE

“*A*nd how are the headaches?” Dr. Jae stores her portable blood pressure monitor back into her retro-looking hospital bag before shifting on her feet to face me.

I grimace. “I’ve been suffering from tired headaches the past few weeks, so I can’t determine whether these headaches are associated with the concussion or if they’re from the nightmares,” I whisper the last part, ashamed to admit I’m still being plagued by nightmares weeks after the ordeal at the Shroud farmhouse.

Dr. Jae’s eyes shimmer with concern. Her lips move, but no words escape her mouth. That may have more to do with Isaac’s impressive stature filling the doorway than a lack of words. His jaw is tense, and his fists are clenched at his side. He couldn’t be more riled up if he tried. I guess the remainder of his meeting followed the path it was on when I was there.

I was hoping Alex would have realized by now that Isaac isn’t the man his FBI file portrays him to be, but apparently, the truce was null and void the instant I was safely located. I was a coward when I fled the foyer at Isaac’s request, but I was embarrassed they heard me orgasm, so I took the

opportunity to escape the awkward situation when it was presented.

Isaac's stern eyes drift to Dr. Jae after running them over my face. "How is Isabelle?"

"She's well. Her blood pressure is a little high, and she's still suffering from headaches, but she's doing remarkably well for someone who suffered a stage three concussion."

The tenseness in his jaw amplifies when she mentions I'm still suffering from headaches. "I'll prescribe a sleeping pill to ensure the headaches are from a lack of sleep rather than the side effects of a concussion." She licks her lips and coughs. "These... umm... tablets will make any birth control you may be taking ineffective."

A smile tugs my lips higher, pleased at Dr. Jae's attempts to maintain patient-doctor confidentiality. After scribbling a prescription on a pad in her bag, she hands it to Isaac, then drops her eyes to me. "I'll come back tomorrow morning to check on you. Hopefully, with a decent sleep tonight, your headaches will lessen. If they don't clear in a few days, I'll order some additional tests at the hospital."

"Okay, thank you."

She glides her hand down my arm before moving to stand in front of Isaac. When his eyes lock with mine, wordlessly advising that he'll return once he shows Dr. Jae out, I nod. While he does that, I scan the space. The room looks as it did before Alex's team completed their search, except there are additional frames added to the collection on the mantelpiece.

My heart rate speeds up when my eyes zoom in on two very recent additions. I scurry off the couch to pick up the first photo. It's a picture of Isaac and me dancing at the fundraising

gala. Even with a large mask covering a majority of my face, I can still see the flushed expression impinging my cheeks, and my eyes are sparkling with lust. Isaac's arms are wrapped around my waist, and his head buried in the crook of my neck as he kisses my collarbone. The second photo is of me sleeping. It appears to have been taken in Regan's guest bedroom.

"How did you get this photo?" I ask when Isaac walks back into the room.

When his lips curve into a succulent smile, I grimace. "Please don't tell me you had Hugo sneak in and take photos of me sleeping."

The smile is wiped right off his face, so an angry snarl can take its place. "I took that photo," he answers, removing the frame from my grasp.

My brows scrunch as I stare at him peculiarly. "We've never been together at Regan's apartment."

His seductive smirk returns full force as he winks.

"Isaac..."

"It's not your turn to ask a question."

I place my hands on my hips and glare at him. "Yes, it is."

He arches his brow. "And how do you figure that?"

I stand on my tippy toes to press a peck on his sinful mouth. His growl vibrates through my lips when I refuse to open my mouth at the demand of his lashing tongue. It's hard denying him, but I'm trying to prove a point.

"Last night, I said it would be my final question if you said yes to pleasuring me." I purse my lips and screw up my nose.

“You didn’t say yes, and you didn’t put out, so that question didn’t count.”

“So you’re going to hold out kissing me until I answer your question?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

My defiance waivers when he curls his arms around my waist and tugs me in closer. My insides purr like a kitten when he places a trail of kisses along my neckline and across my jaw before sealing his mouth over mine. My mouth gapes open when he rolls my nipple between his thumb and index finger, and his tongue slips inside. He strokes and licks the inside of my mouth in a frenzied pace that soon has my knees buckling.

When he pulls away from our kiss, my breathing is labored and my eyes are wide, shamefully exposing my arousal. “Your kisses aren’t up for negotiation, Isabelle, and neither is your body,” he declares, staring into my eyes. “They’re not your bargaining chips. They’re *mine*.”

My knees violently clash from the sexy growl that accompanied his voice when he said “mine.”

“Okay?”

A smile curls on my lips. Even while unleashing the dominance I love, he still seeks permission. “Okay.”

He places the photo back onto the mantelpiece. “I snapped that picture before I left Regan’s apartment the morning after you called me during a nightmare.”

My brows scrunch. “I asked Regan the following morning if you were there. She said no.”

He shakes his head as air escapes his nostrils. “She told me she’d do that. She was worried you’d call every night if you

knew I came.”

I keep my mouth shut, knowing what Regan said is highly probable.

“How did you get in undetected? Hugo and I noticed a surveillance van outside the apartment the very first day.”

Isaac’s Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he scrubs his hand along his jaw. After sitting on the couch, he pulls me into his lap. A shallow moan seeps from my lips. He isn’t hard, but his well-endowed package doesn’t need to be stiff for me to notice.

When he lifts his gaze from my budded nipples to my eyes, my anxiety levels rise. His eyes are brimming with concern. I realize why when he murmurs, “I kissed Regan.”

I freeze as the air is forcefully removed from my lungs.

“If I had a sister, it would’ve been like kissing her. I swear to you, it was *nothing* like the images running through your head right now.”

I close my eyes, blocking out the painstaking visual filtering through my mind.

“It was the only way I could get into the apartment without raising suspicion. If I turned up at my... *fuck pad* without a... *companion*, Theresa would’ve realized you were staying in the building. I couldn’t run the risk of her hounding you there.”

Even though everything he says makes sense, it doesn’t stop the pain stabbing my chest.

“Isabelle...” his voice is croaky and full of hurt, “... please look at me.”

I exhale a long, shaky breath before opening my eyes. His reflects his genuine regret. “I had to know you were okay. I

had to know you weren't crying. I couldn't bear the idea that the last time I talked to you was when you were crying. The kiss was *nothing* like you're imagining, I swear to you."

The stranglehold on my heart eases when his eyes display the truth in his statement. His eyes can see straight into my soul, but that also means they're open and exposed, verifying the honesty in his words.

"Was there any tongue involved?"

An inappropriately-timed chuckle escapes his lips before he shakes his head.

His laughter immediately ends when my furious, narrowed eyes glare at him. "No," he answers more respectfully.

I sigh. A kiss without tongue can be construed as a friendly peck. If tongue were involved, there's no denying it was a sexual act. Although I'm not happy about him kissing Regan, I don't want to fight with him. I'm sick of fighting.

"While we're being honest and sharing..." my voice judders with nerves, "... Hugo and I may have cuddled a few times."

He stiffens as a furious growl roars from deep within his chest.

"It was nothing like you're imagining," I stumble out, using his words against him. "He was offering me comfort after a nightmare. It was nothing more than a *friend* offering another *friend* comfort."

Isaac remains quiet, his chest thrusting up and down with every inhale he takes. His eyes are staring into mine. Actually, they're more glaring into mine. His gaze is hot and brimming with jealousy—one of the sexiest stares I've ever been given.



“Show me.”

When I peer at him, utterly confused, he stands from the sofa, taking me with him. “Show me how he touched you—”

“*Comforted*,” I retort.

When his lips thin, I roll my eyes before wrapping my arms around his torso in a similar manner to how Hugo comforted me. My heart thumps against my chest when his seductive scent filters through my nose.

“Like that?”

“If you were Hugo, your arms would be *a lot* higher.” I nudge his arms until they’re at a more respectable level. In his current position, his arms are draped near my lower back, meaning his fingertips are brushing my backside.

Once his arms are replicating the position Hugo held me in, high around my shoulders, I say, “Like that.”

He steps away from my embrace. “Take your clothes off.”

“What?”

He strides over to close the double French doors. “Take your clothes off.”

I hold his gaze as I strip out of my clothes as requested, taking my time, purposely antagonizing the domineering ego beaming out of his heavy-lidded gaze. My seductive strip-tease has the effect I’m aiming for when I catch sight of the large bulge in his jeans. I lick my lips, praying that my punishment will include him using some part of his body against me.

When his darkened gaze locks and holds with mine, slickness pools between my legs. I can barely contain my

breathing when he prowls toward me. It's once again the tiger hunting his prey, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

## CHAPTER 16



## ISABELLE

“**S**eriously, if Isaac doesn’t touch me soon, I’m going to die.”

Harlow smiles a broad grin while lifting a lace bustier from the rack to dangle in front of me. I screw up my nose and shake my head.

“Darker,” I suggest, moving along the racks at the lingerie store we’re shopping in.

She returns the bustier to the rack before continuing our endeavor to find the perfect ensemble for me to wear under a dress for a cocktail party Cormack is hosting Christmas Eve.

“Is it too rapey for me to jump on him and take myself for a ride?”

Harlow’s boisterous chuckle echoes around the store, startling a handful of customers. She leans on the racks of the way-overpriced scraps of material before straying her mischief-filled eyes to face me. “If Isaac hasn’t touched you in days, why do you have a gigantic hickey on your shoulder?” Her brows waggle as her gaze zooms in on the love bite she’s referring to.

I balk before tugging up the shoulder of my loose sweater to hide one of the *many* hickeys on my skin. Isaac removed

Hugo's touch and replaced it with his own by marking any portion of my skin Hugo may have touched with love bites. I won't lie, I love being claimed by him, but my joy soon turned to misery when I realized the love bites were the only form of sexual contact I'd get from him that night and the three that followed.

Every time I try to provoke him into unleashing his dominance, I miserably fail. I haven't worked out whether I lack in the art of seduction or if Isaac's resolve is greater than I thought?

A girlie squeal emits from Harlow's lips as her hand darts into the rack of sale items in front of her. While biting on her bottom lip, she lifts a silk bustier with garters in front of me. My mouth gapes when my eyes lock in on the shiny material the shade of Isaac's gray eyes.

"It's perfect. What size is it?" I silently pray it's my size since it's the only one left on the sale rack.

Harlow doesn't grace me with a reply. She merely grabs my hand, drags me into the dressing room, dumps my satchel onto the plastic chair in the corner of the room, then demands, "Strip."

"You sound just like Isaac."

After slipping into the satiny material, I spin around to face the full-length mirror. "Holy cupcakes."

The satin bustier is a perfect fit, although I could use a little more room in the chest department since my cleavage is dangerously close to spilling over, but the rest of the glimmering material hugs my curves in all the right places.

"Holy shit," Harlow mumbles, pacing closer. "If that doesn't force Isaac out of his no-sex ban, nothing will. Izzy,

you look... *hot!*”

“Do you think it will be okay underneath a dress for the cocktail party?”

“Yes, it’s strapless and hugging, so it will go under anything.” She screws her nose up. “Unless you’re planning on wearing a midriff gown?”

Even if I were considering a midriff, I wouldn’t be now, not after the disgusted look that morphed on her face when she said it.

“How much is it?” I swivel around so Harlow can check the price tag dangling halfway down my back.

“Oh, look, it’s free.”

When she snaps the price tag off and shoves it into her clutch bag, my breath hitches. “You can’t steal it.”

She slaps my arm. “I didn’t mean I was going to steal it. I meant you weren’t paying for it.”

I eye her curiously, requesting for her to spill the beans. She’s my best friend, but her bakery has a stranglehold on her finances, so there’s no way she could afford, nor would I allow her to purchase this for me.

Smiling, she digs her hands into her clutch to produce a platinum credit card with Holt Enterprises emblazoned on the front. “Isaac said you refused to take it, so I accepted it on your behalf.”

I attempt to snatch the card out of her grasp, but she’s too quick. “Do you want to have crazy hulk sex with Isaac?”

I bite the inside of my cheek, hiding the smile unwillingly tugging my lips higher. “Hulk sex?”

She waggles her brows and nods. “Because the only way you’re going to get his monster busting out of his pants like the Hulk is with *that* outfit.” Her eyes zoom in on the satin bustier. “And a pair of sexy stilettos.”

I turn to face the mirror again. I really like this outfit, and I think Isaac will love it too. I still recall his excitement when I wore the strapless bra that was a similar gray to his eyes, but the darkness of this material matches his eyes to perfection.

“All right. I’m going to buy it, but if I don’t get crazy hulk sex, I’m returning it Christmas morning.”

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We finalize our purchases at the lingerie store before making our way to the boutique dress shop where we have a six o’clock appointment. On Point Boutique is so exclusive, it only allows customers with an appointment to shop here. Due to its famous clientele, they have extended shopping hours. Cormack had to pull a lot of strings to get us an appointment so we could find dresses for his fancy party. Generally, they’re booked out six months in advance.

My hand runs along the racks of beautiful, luxurious clothing as our personal shopper guides us to the vast dressing room at the back of the store. This boutique not only sells formal dresses, but it also has jeans, cashmere sweaters, trousers, skirts, and a range of accessories. From the price tags my eyes watered over while walking past, my budget couldn’t even stretch for half a scarf in this establishment.

“Mr. McGregor informed us that you’ll be attending a cocktail party on Christmas Eve. Due to the short notice, we won’t have time to make alterations to the dress you choose,

so choose wisely,” our personal shopper, Melinda, advises. “I’ll have my assistant bring in the first selection of dresses we have chosen from the measurements and color swatches you emailed us earlier today. If you don’t find anything to your taste from that selection, we’ll move onto the floor until we discover the perfect dress.”

Melinda is smirking a pleasant smile, but her nose remains high in the air, and her tone is snobby and condescending.

After filling two champagne flutes with chilled champagne, she attempts to leave with the bottle in her hand. “Leave the bottle.”

Melinda’s lips thin at Harlow’s request, but she leaves the bottle as instructed before exiting the oversized dressing room with a huff.

“Did you see the price tags on the dresses on the way in?” Harlow queries, her eyes bulging. “We need to drink at least ten bottles of champagne to recoup some of Cormack’s expenses.”

A small giggle escapes my lips from her boldness.

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By the time Peta, Cormack’s personal assistant, joins Harlow and me, we’ve consumed one bottle of the expensive champagne and are well onto the second bottle. I’ve spent the last hour giggling like a school girl while Harlow tried on the range of dresses the personal shoppers selected for her. The variety is enormous, ranging from puffy 80’s bridesmaid-looking dresses to ones that look like she was going to stand on the corner to bring in some extra cash for Christmas, but no



matter how many dresses she tried on, none of them matched her flamboyant demeanor.

Harlow picks up one of the hideous accessories that came with a dress and throws it at my head. “Stop giggling,” she requests with a huff. “Not all of us strike gold with the very first dress we try on.”

I scamper off the button-studded day chaise I’m sprawled on and pace toward Harlow, my footing unsteady in my inebriated state. “You have a personal shopper whose idea of a fun day would consist of having her poodle’s hair permed.” Harlow and Peta snicker softly. “So how can you trust her with finding the perfect dress that will have Cormack’s Hulk breaking out of his pants?”

“That’s my cue to leave,” Peta says under her breath while pretending to gag.

“You,” I say, slightly slurring when Melinda walks back into the dressing room with a hideous peach-colored silk dress draped over her arms. “Bring us every emerald green dress you have. Pronto!” I clap my hands, more brazen in my tipsy state. When she skedaddles away, I shift my focus back to Harlow. “With your beautiful auburn hair and green eyes, emerald green will have Cormack in a tizzy and his *Hulk* emerging.”

Confident I have her on the right track, I shift my gaze to Peta. “Oh, no. I’m only here to pay the final bill.”

“What do you think, Harlow? With her skin tone and unique eyes, I’m thinking... candy apple red?”

Harlow gasps. “Yes, definitely.” She eyes Peta with as much enthusiasm as I am like we’re about to play Barbie dolls with a real-life Barbie.

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By the time another hour passes, we've narrowed down Peta and Harlow's selection to two dresses each, and we've consumed another bottle of champagne. Both dresses are unique in their own right, but each has their own defining qualities that make it hard to choose between the two. Alas, at well over five thousand dollars a dress, they can only select one.

My eyes bug when a light bulb switches on in my head. "Can I borrow your phone? I know the perfect person to ask."

Harlow tosses me her phone, her brow scrunched. I dial a number I have memorized before raising her phone to my face. Hugo's broad grin fills the screen a few rings later.

"Hey, Isabelle," he greets me with his familiar drawl.

He was only discharged from the hospital yesterday afternoon. Raquel and another nurse, Monica, have been assigned as his home-care nurses in Regan's apartment until he recovers. Isaac and I have visited him every day since he was admitted. Thankfully, Isaac didn't mention the 'cuddling' incident, although his jaw did tick when I greeted Hugo with a brief hug each day.

"I need a favor."

Hugo chuckles. "Are you drunk?"

I roll my eyes and poke out my tongue, stunned he could determine that from only hearing me speak four words.

"You *are* drunk," he chuckles. "Where the hell is Isaac?" His eyes shoot around the phone screen as if he's seeking Isaac in the background.

“I’m not drunk-drunk. I’m just a little bit tipsy.” I impress myself by only slightly slurring.

When Hugo’s vigorous assessment fails to find Isaac, his eyes return to the front of the screen. “Who are you trying to get fired this week, Izzy?”

I screw up my nose. “Ha-ha.”

“I know there’s no way in hell Isaac would let you go out unattended, so who’s there with you?” His grin is so wide, my eyes hurt when I stare at it.

“Roger is standing outside.”

His boisterous chuckle barrels down the line. It’s so infectious, I’m soon giggling along with him. “He has as much personality as a wet blanket,” he says between fits of laughter.

“Tell me about it. I swear the only two words he knows is ‘Ms. Brahn.’”

My impersonation of Roger makes Hugo laugh so loud, his heart monitor sounds an alarm. There’s nothing more sobering than remembering he’s injured and lying in a bed because of me and my stupidity. Any warm fuzziness I was feeling from the alcohol simmers to a dull buzz.

Once Hugo assures Raquel he’s fine and not dying, his attention reverts back to the cell phone. “You better tell me what favor you need before Raquel confiscates my phone.”

“I need your *stellar* fashion advice.”

His vibrating growl rumbles through the phone. “Just in case you failed to get the memo, I got shot in the shoulder, Izzy, not in my cock.”

I giggle rowdily. “Please,” I shamelessly beg. “You made such a good choice last time. It’ll only take five minutes of

your time.”

Hugo rolls his eyes as his jaw muscle tenses.

“Harlow and Peta have their selections down to two dresses, but they can’t pick which one they like the most.”

His eyes widen. “Peta is there with you?”

Smiling, I nod.

His pupils dilate. “I think I should come down there and give my opinion in person. I can’t make an informed decision by looking at distorted images on a phone screen. I have to see the dresses up close and *personal*.”

Any reply I’m planning to give is halted when a box of tissues collides with Hugo’s chest.

“What?” He peers at someone past his phone, his face altering from playful to looking like a child being reprimanded for misbehaving. He mouths a silent apology before his eyes return to the screen. “Tell them to pick the dress that shows the most leg. Guys love legs. The shorter the skirt, the better.”

“Thank you,” I reply, my voice sugary sweet.

He grins. “You’re welcome. Now return the favor. Send me some pictures—”

Before his request can escape his lips, his phone is snatched out of his hand, and his deep, vivacious chuckle is the last thing I hear before our call is disconnected.

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Harlow and Peta adhere to Hugo’s advice and pick the dresses that show the most leg. Peta’s dress is a gorgeous one-shoulder silk, candy apple red dress with a slit that goes high on the

thigh, and the back drapes dangerously low. Harlow's dress is emerald green and is a fitted wrap design. When she put on her stiletto heels, her legs went for miles and miles.

I gather our bags from the lingerie store and my Burberry trench coat from the dressing room before joining Harlow and Peta at the cashier's desk to finalize our purchases. The air in my lungs is evicted when my eyes lock in on the person entering the boutique through the locked front doors.

Clara is wearing a cream sheath dress with a black wool coat and cropped boots. Her shiny hair is loose and cascading down her back like a satin waterfall, and her make up is perfectly in place. When she notices me standing at the side, gawking at her, her mouth curls into a bitchy snarl.

Since I've been living in an Isaac buzz cloud the past five days, any thoughts on the 'Clara incident' have been in the background of my mind. But seeing her standing in front of me, smiling like the vicious cow she is, makes all that hurt come streaming back in.

"I have to go," I tell Harlow, my tone weak as the feeling of deceit places a stranglehold on my heart.

Harlow nods before grabbing the bags off the glass countertop to follow me out. When I spin to walk toward the door, I nearly crash into Clara, who's now standing beside me. "Isabelle, what a pleasure to see you again." Her tone doesn't attempt to hide the snarl on her over-glossed lips.

"Pity we can't say the same about you."

Clara's narrowed eyes snap to Harlow. The angry scowl she's wearing intensifies when her eyes lock in on the boutique bags in Harlow's hands. "I see you're once again

spending money you didn't earn, draining my brother's bank balance one slutty dress at a time."

When Harlow steps up to Clara, I place my hand on Harlow's forearm. "She isn't worth it. Class and dignity aren't things that can be purchased. They're ingrained in you. So even someone with an impressive bank balance like Clara's will become a bitter, lonely old lady. Because not even the most expensive dress and a perfectly made-up face can conceal ugly insides."

A grin that beams of victory stretches across my face when Clara can't form a comeback to my taunt. *You can't deny the truth.*

I loop my arm around Harlow's and amble toward the door with my head held high, my brisk pace only halting when Clara sneers, "Save your self-righteousness for someone who hasn't slept with your *boyfriend*."

This time, it's Harlow holding me back from Clara. After giving me her I've-got-your-back, Harlow saunters toward Clara. "Can I ask you something, Clara?" Her tone is void of her earlier bitterness.

Clara rolls her eyes before gesturing for Harlow to go ahead like a queen permitting the pauper to kiss her feet.

Harlow grins an evil smile, looks her straight in the eyes, then boldly questions, "Is Isaac circumcised?"

Clara balks, her cheeks flaming with heat. She fumbles with her jacket, concealing the tremble of her hands as sweat mists her forehead.

"From what I've heard, you wouldn't miss a minor detail like that," Harlow comments, stepping even closer to Clara. "I

really shouldn't say *minor*. From what I've heard, nothing about Isaac is small."

A red, flaming rash spreads across Clara's neck as her eyes shoot down to her feet. "I'm not going to answer such an absurd question. That's personal and none of your business."

"Bullshit!" Harlow retorts, gaining the attention of a handful of ladies in the boutique. "You can't answer it as you don't know." Clara blinks excessively when she takes another step closer to her. "Only someone like Izzy could answer that question. Because she, *unlike you*, has seen Isaac naked."

Clara's eyes drift to me. While returning her stare, I take a step back, exasperated. I'm staring into the eyes of a child who just got caught with her hand in the cookie jar, undoubtedly proving the truth of Harlow's comment.

"You lying bitch." I trudge toward her, no longer able to rein in my fury. She flinches when I stop within an inch of her face. If she's worried I'm going to hit her, she can stop. What I'm about to say will maim her more than fists ever could. "I really feel sorry for you, Clara. Even inebriated, heartbroken, and belligerent, Isaac's standards still weren't low enough to sleep with a condescending bitch like you."

The personal shoppers gasp in sync when Clara raises her hand in an attempt to slap me across the face. Even tipsy, I seize her wrist before it strikes my cheek.

I smirk at her. It's a malicious and wicked smile. "As I said earlier, you aren't worth it because the more time I stand here arguing with you, the less time I'll have to make love to the man you're *supposedly* in love with."

I release her rake-thin wrist from my clutch, then spin around to face Harlow. "Thank you for everything, but I really

must run.” I throw my arms around her neck to hug her fiercely.

“You’re welcome.” She returns my embrace, squeezing me extra tight. “Now go unleash the Hulk.”



## CHAPTER 17



## ISAAC

“*I* don’t care what he told you, Parker. I paid to secure *that* asset. I want *that* asset,” I snarl angrily down the phone.

“Some particulars of their business altered the past week, leaving their crew floundering. Vladimir—”

“No more excuses, Parker. Get it fucking done.”

Not waiting for his reply, I snap my ancient cell shut and return it to the pocket of my trousers just as the creak of my office door opening resonates through my ears. I can feel Isabelle’s presence without needing to turn around. My body’s awareness of her has grown more paramount the past five days since it’s rare we’re not together.

We only separated this evening as Isabelle and Harlow needed to purchase a dress to wear to Cormack’s annual Christmas Eve cocktail party. I did offer to chauffeur them to their appointment, but Isabelle was adamant that she needed to spend some ‘girl time’ with her best friend.

My frustration over the phone call I just took pacifies when I pivot on my heels to rake my eyes over Isabelle’s beautiful, although slightly-more-covered-than-I’d-like body. She’s leaning in the doorjamb wearing her faded Burberry

trench coat and nibbling on her bottom lip. The club's strobe lights reflect off her dark locks that are hanging freely down her back, making them appear a shade lighter than normal, and her eyes are wide and full of lust.

A chuckle escapes my lips when she notices Cormack seated in the double sofa chair at the side of the room. We were discussing the possibility of turning Jacob's match into a charity fight to raise money for the Ravenshoe Private Hospital. Thus, not only saving my reputation from organizing a fight Jacob refuses to participate in, but also ensuring his name isn't forever tarnished in the professional fighting circle.

Spotting Isabelle's ruffled expression, Cormack rises from the couch. "We'll finish our discussion tomorrow."

He gathers his jacket from the coat rack next to the sofa, shakes my hand, then walks toward the office door. When Isabelle whispers something in his ear, he grins and nods before his steps quicken.

My brow arches when Isabelle shuts my office door before securing the lock into place. When she turns around to face me, she undoes the buttons on her coat. My eyes remain steadfast on hers until inches upon inches of her luscious legs become exposed. Usually, the smooth skin on her thighs is covered with jeans or sweatpants since we're in the winter months.

The thrill of the hunt scorches through my veins when she shimmies the coat off her shoulders. She's wearing the most provocative piece of lingerie I've ever seen. Nearly every inch of her gorgeous skin is exposed in her tiny dark gray bustier. Her black thigh-high lace-topped stockings are held in place with black garters, and her feet are encased in a pair of high, strappy stilettos. She's exposed and ready to be ravished.

My nostrils flare when I inhale deeply, cooling the heat roaring through my body as the urge to claim her overwhelms me. Every morning, Jae arrives to evaluate Isabelle, and every morning, Isabelle fails to be given the all-clear from her concussion. It's fucking killing me.

I unclench my fist to run my hand along my twitching jaw. I feel it throb even more when Isabelle bends over to gather something from her hideous satchel she ditched on the floor. The ache of my cock grows when I catch a glimpse of the tiny strap of material resting in the seam of her perfect ass.

Once she has a piece of paper clutched in her hand, she slowly saunters toward me, her eyes resting on mine the entire time. A growl tears from my throat when her tongue moistens her plump, nude lips. Her walk naturally seduces me. The swing of her hips and bounce of her ample breasts forces my usually unbreakable sharpness to wane. I want her more than anything—even air.

Her purrs vibrate my mouth when I seal my lips over hers, no longer able to resist tasting her. She tastes sweet and fruity, and the heavy thrusts of her chest enticing even more recklessness from me. I kiss her with everything I have, fucking her mouth as I wish I could her pussy.

It takes all my strength to pull back a few minutes later, but I must. It's the right thing to do. When Isabelle fiddles with the button of my trousers, I stop her hasty movements. "No *vigorous* activities until you're given the all-clear."

Not touching Isabelle is the worst form of torture, but my remorse for causing her concussion is forcing me to adhere to Jae's orders.

Isabelle thrusts the piece of paper she's holding into my chest before lowering herself onto her knees. Seeing her kneel

before me with her big chocolate eyes staring up at me makes all my inhibitions waver. It's not just the submissive pose that has me reconsidering my ban, it's the fact she sucks cock better than any woman before her.

“Dr. Jae gave me the all-clear tonight after a specially requested late-night consultation.” Her husky voice makes me even harder. “So I'm going to suck your cock, then you'll fuck me on your desk like I've been fantasizing about since I walked into your office months ago. Okay?”

My brow cocks high over her brazenness, but the hazy cloud in her eyes reveals why she's being more daring than normal. “Have you been drinking?”

She licks her lips, making my cock twitch. “Yes, but since I've agreed to be your wife, I think we can establish that the rules from your ‘player’ lifestyle don't apply to me. If you're never going to touch me when I drink a drop of alcohol, we'll have a very mundane relationship.”

I grin, loving her feistiness. “Since you got the all-clear from Jae, you're going to suck me dry like you love doing. Then I'll fuck you on my desk, in the shower, and against the wall of my office. So prepare yourself, baby, because your pussy is mine until I get my fill. Okay?” I use the same brassy tone she used earlier.

Her breathing turns excited as she nods, and even faster than that, she has the zipper of my trousers lowered and my cock freed from my boxer briefs. My knees bend when her tongue skates across my swollen crown, lapping up the bead of pre-cum formed there. Her movements are rushed, almost frantic like she can't wait any longer to taste my cum. I love that she enjoys pleasing me as much as I enjoy pleasing her.

Her eager sucks, purring moans, and efficient strokes have me racing toward release even while being fully clothed. When I weave my fingers through her hair to secure a tight grip on her shiny locks, her sucks become more urgent. I haven't sought release in weeks, so my race to climax rapidly builds with every greedy suck she does.

"Did you miss the taste of my cum, baby?" I ask a short time later, my voice low as the urge to come overwhelms me.

"Yes," she pants between sucks. "Please, Isaac, I want to taste you. I *need* to taste you."

She quickens her pace, kneading my balls with one hand while the other works on the sections missing out on her moist lips. When she takes me to the back of her throat, my mind spirals out of control. I rock my hips forward, feeding my cock in and out of her mouth at the pace I usually fuck her pussy. She takes all I'm giving her without a single protest, her moans encouraging me to go faster and harder.

When she grazes her teeth over the crest of my cock, a low growl rumbles up my chest as cum spurts from my cock, filling her mouth so much, it dribbles down her chin. Her pursuit to unravel me doesn't stop, though. She continues sucking and pumping until every morsel of my cum has been swallowed by her overeager mouth.

Once every drop is extracted, I scoop her into my arms. My cock is as hard as a stone, eager to be immersed in her tight pussy. It hasn't felt the squeezes of her walls in over three weeks. I lay her on my desk, so her legs are dangling freely, and her hips are perched on the very edge. When my eyes rake her beautiful body, my chest puffs high, proud that the glorious visual displayed in front of me solely belongs to me.

She writhes when I glide my finger down the damp, silky material hiding her pretty pink pussy from my view. Then, she purrs when I shred the flimsy material off her body. I slide the scraps of silk into my pocket, wanting to add them to my private collection before guiding my trousers and briefs down my thighs to bunch around my ankles. I'm too impatient to remove them fully.

"Please, Isaac, I can't wait any longer," Isabelle begs when the crown of my cock braces against the cleft of her pussy, proving I'm not the only one eager to reignite our fire-sparking sex life.

"I have to prepare your body, or I'll hurt you."

We haven't had sexual contact in weeks, so if she isn't fully prepared, I could tear her.

"I don't care. Please, oh god, I'm begging you. Please fuck me." Her massively dilated eyes stare at me, silently begging along with her pleas. "I can't wait. I *want* you. I *need* you."

Her pussy grows wetter when I lift her legs to position her ankles on each side of my head. When I rub my swollen knob over the seam of her pussy, coating it with her juices, hoping it will help lessen any resistance, Isabelle purrs like a kitten.

When I impale her in one quick motion, her back bends off the desk. I still, giving her body time to adjust to the girth of my cock as the sexiest fucking moan I've ever heard rumbles up her throat.

"You feel so fucking good, baby. So tight, so wet. *Mine.*"

She doesn't respond to my statement unless you count a moan as a reply?

A few moments later, she swivels her hips, telling me she's ready for me to move. I withdraw my cock to the tip before

slamming it back in. I do the same thing another three times, my balls constricting when her pussy massages my cock with every stroke.

Feeling no friction, I increase my tempo, keen to witness the glorious visual of her face in ecstasy. This position allows me to cram every inch of my cock into her while also giving me an unimpeded view of her body. I pound into her on repeat, my thrusts relentless. While claiming every inch of her, I heat up everywhere. The heat in the room is stifling, but it has nothing on the tension teeming between us.

“Oh, god. I love your cock. I love you *fucking* me.”

Growling, I increase my pace, ensuring I roll my hips with every pump. I'm eager to hear my name torn from her throat while her pussy milks my cock, but I also want this to last forever. I've never felt more at peace than when some part of my body is inside Isabelle.

Over time, the heat in my office turns so stifling, sweat beads at my temples before rolling down my face and dropping onto Isabelle's glistening mound. Her breasts jiggle with each thrust as her race to climax gains momentum. I can feel when she's close because her pussy gets real tight just before she freefalls.

A low, shallow moan vibrates from her chest when I grind my thumb over the swollen bud of her clit. “Oh, god.” Her eyes snap shut as her hips thrust higher, seeking firmer contact.

As my hips jackknife on repeat, I increase the pressure on her clit, flicking it how my tongue does when she rides my face. When she tightens around me, I growl. “Eyes, Isabelle.”



Her beautiful lusty eyes flicker open to stare into mine. They're brimming with admiration that she expresses with three short words. "I love you."

Her declaration of love causes hot, sticky semen to burst from my cock, flooding her already overfilled pussy. My release spurs on her pursuit. My name tears from her parted lips as her pussy tightens around me, greedily milking me for every drop of spawn. Her body quivers and shudders as she rides the intensity of her orgasm, all the while keeping her gaze planted on me. I continue pumping into her, ensuring she knows this is only the beginning of our night. I've got weeks of missed opportunities to make up for.

Once her shudders lessen, I slip my cock out of her still-clenching pussy, eager to move our exchange to its next location. "Shower next, right?"

After kicking off my shoes, I toss them and my trousers to the side of my desk. A carnal groan rumbles in my throat when I stare down at Isabelle's bare mound glistening with the evidence of our arousals. I scoop my sperm onto my index finger before pushing it back between the swollen lips of her pussy. Air rushes out of Isabelle's lips as her thighs relax, opening herself fully to me. She loves being claimed with my scent just as much as I love claiming her with it.

Once all my sperm is back inside her body—where it belongs—I lift her from my desk and stride into the bathroom. The thickness of my cock increases with every step I take, eager to once again be inside her. It won't matter if I've been inside her five times or a hundred times tonight, I'll never get enough of her.

## CHAPTER 18



## ISABELLE

“*I*sabelle,” whispers a deep, throaty voice to my side. “It’s time to go, baby.”

I shoo away the person waking me from my sleeping state, needing a few more hours of sleep, not to mention to recover. My heart warms when a deep chuckle echoes through my ears. It belongs to the man responsible for my near comatose state. It’s so rare, it has my eyes slowly cracking open. Exhaustion is forgotten when I spot the strikingly handsome face of Isaac staring down at me.

“What time is it?”

His eyes drop to his watch. “A little after three.”

I wearily rise from the double sofa I’m sprawled across. “And how long did you fuck me?”

A smile curls my lips when I discover his suit jacket draped over my body, cocooning me with his possessiveness instead of his body since we both can’t fit on his couch. I groan while stretching my overworked muscles. It isn’t a groan of disappointment, but one of appreciation, thankful that Isaac *finally* claimed me as his again.

Standing, Isaac snags his keys out of the drawer in his desk. “You’ve been asleep for a little over an hour.”

My eyes bulge. “No wonder why I’m so tired, we fucked for over four hours straight.”

“I had lost time to make up for,” he croons with a bold wink. After sliding his keys into his pants pocket, he drops his eyes to mine. “Do you want me to carry you?”

“It’s okay, I can walk. Although I’m once again walking out of your club sans underwear. I better be careful, or I might get a bad reputation.”

“The only reputation you’ll get is ‘if you touch her or say a bad word about her, you’ll be buried under six feet of dirt.’”

A grin etches on my mouth until I realize he’s serious. Isaac is a protector, and I don’t want to start a fight, so I don’t bother replying to his comment. After assisting me back into the Hulk-charming bustier and trench coat, he removes the smears of mascara off my flushed face with his thumbs.

Once every smudge is taken care of, he encloses his hand over mine, then guides us out of his office door. I’m shocked when music blares my eardrums. Even at three in the morning, his nightclub is packed with partygoers.

Like always, the crowd parts when they see Isaac coming, giving him a clear path to the polished mahogany bar. My eyes roll when Tina bats her eyelashes at him while prancing his way. Her fast pace slows when she notices me standing behind his shoulder. Her eyes slit after she roams them over my face. My flushed expression, wide eyes, and tousled hair should clue her in on what we’ve been doing the past four hours. If it doesn’t, I’m sure the hickey on my neck will.

“I’m going home for the remainder of the weekend.”

Tina’s and my eyes shoot to stare at him in sync. It’s only Friday night, well, technically Saturday morning, and

weekends are the busiest times for his nightclubs, let alone the fact Christmas is only two days away, so I'm shocked he's planning to spend the entire weekend at home.

"I'll be unreachable until the day after Christmas, but Roger is on standby if you have any problems."

"But... you never... you've *always* worked through Christmas. We worked *together*," Tina stumbles out.

"Things are different now." My pulse quickens when Isaac's beautiful eyes drop to mine. "Isabelle and I have new Christmas traditions to make?"

Since his comment is more a question than a statement, I nod.

After running his thumb over the dip in my top lip, he returns his focus to Tina. Her mouth gapes, finally clueing to the fact that I'm here for the long haul whether she likes it or not.

"Ensure that each day's revenue is stored in the safe. If all goes to plan, Roger will deposit the money into the bank Friday morning."

Unable to speak due to shock, Tina nods before accepting the key Isaac is holding out for her.

"See you in a few days. Have a good Christmas."

With a smirk, he guides me to his town car, which is idling out front.

"Thank you," I say when he gestures for me to enter before him.

My heart thumps against my ribs when his glide inside concludes with him pulling me across the cool leather seat until I'm snuggled under the nook of his arm. "How did you

get Jae to sign off tonight when she wouldn't do it this morning?"

My eyes widen as my throat works hard to swallow. The longer I delay answering his question, the louder the rumble in his chest becomes. I pop my head off his chest to peer into his furious eyes. His jaw is ticking, his entire composure switched from playful to infuriatingly angry.

"You lied to me?" His tone dangerously low, and it quickens my pulse.

"No."

His eyes narrow into thin slits, calling bullshit.

"Not one hundred percent."

"You either lied, or you didn't. Which is it, Isabelle?"

I exhale a shaky breath. "I didn't go *see* Dr. Jae." His whole body tenses. "Let me finish before you get all worked up. I didn't *see* Dr. Jae, but we had a phone consultation."

The tick of his jaw doesn't lessen from my admission.

"She said if I hadn't experienced any headaches all day and wasn't feeling dizzy, I was free to resume normal activities. Although fucking isn't a normal activity, it's as necessary as breathing to me."

He tries his hardest to hold in his smile, but the smallest one still curls on his lips. "And the letter you thrust in my chest?"

I grimace. "That was the bill from the lingerie store. I figured you'd want to know the price of the items you were planning to destroy before you shredded them."

When he doesn't smile at my taunt, I climb onto his lap and curl my arms around his shoulders, hating that I've made him angry. After resting my forehead on his, I glance into his unique, beautiful eyes. "I'm fine. I'm not dizzy. I don't even have the slightest bit of a headache. Because of you, I feel the most alive I've ever felt. Tonight was incredible, Isaac. Please don't ruin it because you feel inane guilt you shouldn't be feeling."

His thighs stiffen, but he remains quiet.

"You didn't hurt me. You saved me. And you continue saving me every day."

The pain hampering his eyes lessens from my admission.

"I love you," I declare breathlessly since I can't secure a full breath from being so close to his breathtaking face.

He gathers my hands from behind his neck and pulls them to his mouth. My heart skips a beat when he presses a kiss on their palms before placing them over his heart, allowing his actions to speak words he may never say—*I love you too*.

With the smile I was aiming for earlier, he brushes away a rogue tear spilling down my cheek with one hand while the other digs into the breast pocket of his jacket.

My heart stops beating when he produces a small, black velvet box. "I was planning to give you this for Christmas, but I can't wait any longer."

My breath hitches halfway between my lungs and my throat when he cranks open the box to reveal a beautiful princess-cut diamond solitaire ring. My eyes water when I notice its unique coloring.

"It's called violet gray. They're a very hard diamond to secure, but I notice you have a fascination with the color

gray.” His eyes drop to my bustier peeking out of my coat.

When he removes the ring from the box to slide it onto my ring finger, I bite my bottom lip hard, praying I don’t blubber like an idiot. Even in the shadows of the night, the purple and gray coloring of the diamond sparkles in the moonlight.

“Do you like it?”

I nod while grinning. “I love it.” I angle my mouth closer to his. “I love you,” I murmur over his lips before spearing my tongue between them.



## CHAPTER 19



## ISABELLE

*M*y steps into the master suite falter when I'm seared by a heated gaze. Isaac is standing in front of the full-length mirror near the walk-in closet, securing a light blue tie around his neck. He stops what he is doing so he can run his eyes down my body. When they return to my face, my pulse quickens. His gaze is hungry, demanding, and heart-clenching.

"You like?" I spin around so he can fully take in the dark blue lace half-sleeved dress I'm wearing. The skirt is a decent length, sitting just above my knee, but the lace adds an edge of sexiness to the everyday style of the design.

"I'd like to rip it off you."

I wink before sauntering into the closet. "There's no time for that," I mumble to myself while searching through his extensive collection of ties. We're already late to Cormack's Christmas Eve cocktail party after our impromptu romp in the shower.

Once I find the tie I'm looking for, I unknot the one he just finished securing. "This one matches my dress."

My knees meet from his sexy-as-sin growl. "Now the color of your dress makes sense."

A grin tugs my lips high. I knew he would understand my clothing selection the instant I handed him the tie. That tie is the one he used to blindfold me when we slept together in the private jet.

My sex pulses when he steps closer to me. “Are you trying to tease me, Isabelle?”

“No,” I barely whisper. “I just thought it would be good to have handy for the trip home.” I glance into his heavy-lidded gaze. “*If you can wait that long?*”

Okay, maybe I’m taunting him.

My breathing shallows when he glides his index finger down my arm, forcing the hairs to bristle to attention. “Can *you* wait that long?” His tone is cocky and assured. “I know how greedy your pussy is.”

Our flirting is interrupted when a doorbell buzzes through the room. Harlow and Cormack organized to pick us up in a stretch limo earlier today. They’ll take the limo with us to the record label headquarters, but only Isaac and I will return in it since they’re leaving for a weekend getaway Cormack organized for Harlow.

I snatch my cream clutch purse from the dressing table before making a beeline for the door. My excited steps stop when Isaac seizes my elbow. The hairs on my nape prickle when he presses his lips to my ear. “Remove your panties. *I* want your pussy bare for when *I’m* ready for it.”

While licking my lips, I do as requested. He grins a knee-clanging smile, relishing in my submissiveness. When he holds out his hand requesting my panties, hot blood sends a pink hue rushing to my cheeks. He doesn’t slip them into his pocket as I was anticipating. He lifts them to his nose and

inhales deeply, growling when he smells how aroused he can make me with only a thought.

After placing them into the top pocket of his charcoal gray suit, he holds out his hand for me. “Now I can smell you all night.”

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The trip to Destiny Records head office in Hopeton is long and torturous. Isaac ramped up our teasing game to a nail-biting level. His index finger has been tracing infinity circles high on my thigh for a majority of the trip, and his breathing is heavier than normal. I don't know if he can smell how aroused his little teases have made me, or if he's smelling my panties in his pocket—it may be a combination of both.

Harlow and Cormack sit across from us, completely oblivious that Isaac has my orgasm teetering on a very steep cliff. When Cormack is distracted by assisting Harlow in securing her gold hoop earring that has come loose, I return Isaac's tease. I cup his crotch and squeeze tightly, moaning when his cock turns to stone in my hand. When Cormack's gaze returns to us, I stray my eyes to the window, feigning ignorance.

Any chance of acting innocent flies out the window when Cormack's squinted gaze arrows down to Isaac's crotch. I shake as violently as his head when he turns his eyes to look at anything but Isaac, then I completely lose it when Harlow says, “I guess the rumors are true.”

Cormack glares at her, making her blush. She isn't flustered over Isaac's impressive manhood. She's all hot and bothered from Cormack's furious glance. I can't say I blame

her. It's pretty damn impressive. The heat in the limo turns to roasting from the energy firing between them. I always knew they were a good match, but witnessing their spark firsthand is awe-inspiring.

When Harlow whispers in Cormack's ear, the sternness hindering his gorgeous face slips away. Within seconds, they're playfully nipping and caressing each other as I wish I could Isaac. We don't need to hide our relationship anymore. I just can't control myself around him—even when we're in public.

Isaac remains quiet for the rest of the trip, only speaking when he instructs Cormack and Harlow to exit the limousine first. I give him a playful wink before scooting across the bench in preparation to exit. Just before I exit, he slams the door shut, secures the lock button into place, then yanks me over until I'm straddling his lap.

Before I can ask what he's doing, two of his fingers plunge into my sex. My nails dig into his shoulder blades as I shout his name, incredibly turned on by his dominance. His skillful fingers work me into a frenzied state that soon has me oblivious to the fact there are a handful of reporters standing right outside the door waiting for us to exit.

He toys with my clit as the hot pants of his breath bead condensation on my neck. He finger-fucks me so good, the coil he's been tightening all night is mere seconds from being snapped. As stars form in front of my eyes and my pussy clenches, Isaac withdraws his fingers.

*No!*

My bewildered eyes snap to his, demanding an explanation for his sudden withdrawal of contact. He just smiles and winks before nudging his head to the door I tried to exit minutes ago.

“We better get moving before Harlow wonders where you’ve disappeared to.”

After licking his fingers clean, he adjusts my dress, so I’m covered, then slides out of the limousine, taking me with him. My bewilderment intensifies when flashing lights hinder my vision, and a flurry of questions are screamed at Isaac and me.

While he holds me in close to his body, Isaac stops for the occasional photo as requested by the paparazzi and answers a handful of questions. I remain quiet like a deer trapped in headlights, still in an Isaac Holt lust haze. Only once we merge through the barrage of reporters does it dawn on me that he was returning my earlier tease.

Before I can form a reaction, I’m startled by a tiny pair of arms flinging around my neck. “Isabelle, I’m so glad to see you again.” Cate’s tone is a complete contradiction to the one her older sister regularly uses on me.

“Hi, Cate.” I return her embrace with as much eagerness. I like Cate. She’s cute and sweet and nothing like her big sister. “How long are you in Ravenshoe?”

“I’m here until the New Year.”

My brow pops up. “We should go out! Dinner? Maybe dancing?”

Cate’s eyes light up. “Sounds great! But I’m not twenty-one yet.”

“That’s okay. I’m sleeping with the owner, so I’m sure I can sneak you in the back entrance.”

“The Dungeon is an eighteen-plus dance club. You’re more than welcome there, Cate,” Isaac tugs me in close to his side. “Then, I can keep a close eye on you.” Even though he’s

looking at Cate, I know the last part of his statement was directed at me.

When I slap his chest, I feel his cell phone buzzing in his breast pocket. His jaw sets into a hard line as he pulls it out to check the screen. “I’m sorry, I have to take this.”

When I nod, he places a quick kiss on my temple before striding toward the entrance we just walked through. I loop my arm around Cate’s, then make my way to Harlow standing near a makeshift bar set up in the impressive foyer. The room has been done up in a Christmas theme with red and white being the main colors. It’s elegant while also being warm and inviting.

Harlow’s eyes shoot around the room while she pours three shots of tequila. “Bottoms up.”

She sneakily hands a shot glass to Cate who licks salt from her hand, swallows the tequila, then sucks on a wedge of lime like a real pro, exposing she’s done this many times before. I giggle before following suit, except my face screws up when the ghastly taste slides down my throat.

I eye Harlow with suspicion when she hands me a funky-looking tomato juice concoction. “A chaser.”

I arch my brow. “When did you become Ms. Party Queen?”

Cate giggles. “That’s my fault. I may have dragged her to a college party. There was a boy—”

Before Cate can share all her story, I’m engulfed by a broad arm. Their hold is so strong, my feet lift off the ground. My heart squeezes when I recognize the woodsy smell filtering through my nose.

“Hugo!” My squeal gains me the attention of a handful of strangers surrounding us.

After climbing down from his clutch, I step back so my eyes can assess him in full detail. Other than his arm being in a sling, he looks like the Hugo I’m used to seeing, including his customary black suit with a white dress shirt underneath.

“Is the sling required, or are you aiming for sympathy points from the ladies?”

Hugo laughs a full-hearted chuckle. “A little bit of column A, a little bit of column B.” His eyes shoot around the room as inconspicuously as Harlow’s did earlier before tilting in close to Harlow’s side. “Are you going to share one of those?” He nudges his head to the tequila bottle in her hand. “Since I’m not officially on duty and can’t get fired by Izzy misbehaving, I may as well have a little bit of fun.”

When I poke out my tongue, he chuckles before bumping me with his non-injured shoulder. Nodding, Harlow pours another four shots of tequila. When Cormack joins us, Cate’s bottom lip drops into a pout, frustrated her big brother is killing her buzz.

Harlow, Hugo, Cormack, and I clinch our glasses together. “Bottoms up.”

“Or not.”

Regan snatches the shot of tequila from Hugo’s hand before downing it herself. I’m impressed when her face doesn’t allude to the harsh bitterness sliding down her throat. She doesn’t even grab a lime from the counter. She just scrubs the back of her hand over her mouth before dumping the empty shot glass onto the counter.



Regan is dressed to impress in a one-shoulder Donatello red slip dress. Her hair is pinned back, exposing her delicate neck, which is adorned with a gorgeous diamond and ruby necklace that appears high-priced. She looks like Hollywood royalty.

“Come on, Regan, one shot won’t kill me,” Hugo objects.

Regan’s red-painted lips twist. “No, but Raquel might if she finds out you were drinking alcohol after taking pain medication.”

“If she stopped ramming them down my throat, I wouldn’t have to worry.”

The hairs on my neck bristle a mere second before an arm wraps around my waist, and I’m pulled back. I suppress a moan when Isaac places a kiss on my neck before he greets Hugo and Regan with a nod of his head. “How did you get out of Raquel’s clutches for the night?” he queries, glancing at Hugo.

“I didn’t.” Hugo rolls his eyes before settling them on Regan. “She sent her evil twin in her place.”

Air whizzes out his nose when Regan whacks him in the stomach with her clutch.

“Did you tell them?”

I peer up at Isaac and shake my head. When he angles his head, so his anxious eyes shift between mine, I rub the wrinkle between his brows. “I was waiting for you since it’s *our* news to share.”

The fretful mask on his face relaxes. “Do you want to tell them, or shall I have the privilege?”

“They’re mainly your friends, so why don’t you—”

“Holy crap. What’s that?” squeals Cate at the top of her lungs, scaring the living daylights out of me and anyone within a five-mile radius.

When I turn to face her, her bulging eyes are fixed on my diamond engagement ring.

Realizing our secret has been busted, I bite on my lower lip before raising my left hand into the air with a wiggle. “We’re engaged.”

My voice doesn’t come out rickety because I’m dreading the engagement. I’m ecstatic about that. I’m just worried about how Harlow will take the news since she’s been officially dating Cormack longer than Isaac and I have been a couple.

Any apprehensions I have disappear when Harlow hollers, startling me for the second time in under a minute, before throwing her arms around my neck to hug me tight. “I shotgun being maid of honor!”

“I wouldn’t want anyone else.”

Hugo smiles a gigantic grin before holding out his hand in congratulations to Isaac. After they shake, he gives me a sneaky cuddle, risking death when he holds on long enough that Isaac shoots him a stern glare. Regan remains quiet, but the sheen in her eyes reveals she is happy for us. Cormack offers quiet congratulations while Cate announces it to the world with a declaration loud enough for all to hear.

“Congratulations.”

This blessing is a little hard for me to swallow. I can’t see the person who issued it, but I know her voice—very well. It’s never missing bitter bitchiness. Gritting my teeth, I spin toward the greeter. My assumptions are proven on point when I spot Clara’s narrowed gaze. As always, she’s impeccably

dressed in a dark steel gray dress that matches the intensity of Isaac's eyes. Her hair has been recently cut into a daring shoulder-length, side-sweeping bob with bangs. With a light fluttering of makeup and her new hairstyle, she appears more her age of twenty-five.

She smiles, faking sweetness, before turning her eyes to Isaac. "Can I please request a minute of your time?"

Isaac remains quiet, but I can hear his teeth gnawing as he contemplates her request. I told him about my confrontation with Clara at the boutique. He was beyond furious, the angriest I've ever seen him. It was such an incredibly arousing experience, I should probably thank Clara for her devious act as my night was filled with memories I'll treasure for years to come.

Isaac peers into my eyes, requesting my opinion. He smirks an appreciative grin when I nod. As much as I dislike Clara, I need to learn how to control my green-eyed monster. Women are drawn to Isaac like moths to a flame, so stuff like this will be a regular occurrence during our marriage.

"I'll be back in a minute."

He kisses my temple before gesturing for Clara to follow him. My heart warms when he stays in eyesight, knowing it will appease my jealousy.

"So, I'm guessing you're officially resigning from the FBI?"

I raise my eyes to Harlow. "Yeah. I already have."

Her brows scrunch, clearly confused.

"I may have emailed my resignation to Alex this afternoon."

She slaps my arm, laughing. “Izzy, that’s worse than breaking up with someone via a text message.”

“I know.” I grimace. “But I couldn’t face him. He arrived at Isaac’s house the other day, right during...” I make a face that will express the words my mouth is failing to articulate. “He heard me *orgasm*,” I whisper the last word to ensure the people gathered around us can’t hear.

Harlow grins and waggles her brows. “He probably went home and stroked one out.”

I rib her with my elbow, mortified, while praying Regan didn’t overhear her. She acts like she’s not bothered by anything Alex does, but I know it’s all an act. I’ve seen the way the vein in her neck flutters anytime he is near. She has it bad for him. I get it, Alex is an extremely handsome man, but I’m also confused.

After darting my eyes around the space to ensure Regan is nowhere in sight, I tilt closer to Harlow’s side. “You wouldn’t say that if you saw Regan and Alex side by side. It’s like staring at a solar eclipse.”

Harlow stares into the distance. “Actually, I could imagine that. It’d be like watching Barbie and Ken mating.”

Our girlie giggles simmer when Cormack’s younger brother, Colby, saunters toward us. He looks dashing in a fitted, pinstriped black suit with a dusty pink dress shirt underneath. With no tie and the top two buttons undone, he has a group of ladies eagerly vying for his attention. He winks and smiles at them as he continues his efficient steps to us. His hair has grown longer since I last saw him, and his physique is more built, but he’s the same roguishly handsome boy I met months ago.

“Harlow, looking as ravishing as ever.”

“Colby,” she greets back, bumping him with her hip.

When he shifts his gaze to me, I greet him with a smile.  
“Hey, Colby.”

After a prolonged rake of my body, he wolf whistles. “If only Cate arrived after I had whipped it out and peed on your leg.”

I grin at his cheeky banter before adding to my greeting with a kiss to his cheek and a hug. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Prove it. Dance with me,” he whispers in my ear.

Once I inch back, I drift my eyes to Isaac. He isn’t looking at me, but I can tell he’s noticed Colby’s presence. He doesn’t hide his jealousy well.

“Come on, Izzy, one dance. We won’t even get sand between our toes this time.” Colby steps in the way of my view of Isaac to offer me the crook of his arm. “I’ll even keep my hands above your waist at all times.”

I smile, remembering the fun day we spent together at his beachside residence months ago. With that in mind, I raise my finger into the air. “One dance, but if your hands go anywhere near my ass, I’ll be forced to retaliate.”

He gasps, faking virtue. It isn’t a feature he can pull off. Giggling, I loop my arm around his before walking to the makeshift dance floor on the edge of the space. It’s surprisingly bustling with a few dozen people eager to burn off the calories in the spiked punch.

Any awkward too-close-for-comfort feelings are avoided, more due to the music having a club vibe than a gala event. Colby also maintains an appropriate distance, more than happy

to let his impressive dance swoon every single lady in the vicinity.

Not long after, we're joined by Harlow, Cormack, and Cate. We bob and weave around the dancefloor dancing like our veins are primed with more than one shot of tequila. The air soon becomes sticky with muggy dampness since the air conditioning can't accommodate so many people in the one space.

While lifting my sweat-drenched hair off my neck, I scan the area seeking Isaac. I sense his presence before I see him. The air in my lungs tapers out slowly as the hairs on my nape prickle. All the fibers in my body magnetize when his arms curl around my waist, and he crowds his body to my back. I lean into him deeper before cranking my neck up to glance at him. I'm taken back when his gaze doesn't reflect the jealousy I was anticipating. All I see is hunger, and it isn't a hankering for food.

Energy surges through my body, enticed by the beat of the music and the seductive dance moves of Isaac. Sweat mists my body, making me a hot, sticky mess, but I love every second of it. My excitement intensifies when I catch sight of Hugo dancing with Peta. I rib Isaac with my elbow before motioning my head toward Hugo. A grin forms on his mouth before his gaze shifts down to me. When I twirl around, wanting to dance with him face to face, the heat in the room reaches roasting point. Having his handsome face so close is almost too much.

We dance in our own little bubble since no one is brave enough to risk elbowing a man with a fierce reputation like Isaac's. It increases the intimacy between us, making it as electric as when we dance beneath the sheets.

As the club hits boom out of the speakers, Isaac and I get closer and closer. When I sling my arms around his neck, he cups my ass cheeks and pulls me flush against him. Our dance moves become more provocative—daring. My boldness is enticed by the rock beneath his zipper. We're dressed like we're attending a ritzy event, but we're sweaty and grinding against each other like horny teenagers in a gritty nightclub.

He grinds his erection against me, knowing there's only the smallest scrap of lace between him and my bare sex. He suffocates the moans vibrating my lips with his salivating mouth. His tongue makes love to my mouth in rhythm to the music thumping around us. I drink him in, absorbing and cherishing every plunge of his tongue, nip of his teeth, and the delicious taste of his lips.

By the time he pulls back, my head is spinning, blitzed by his intoxicating kiss. "Are you ready to go? Or do you want to stay a little longer?"

I grab the lapels of his jacket to tug him closer. "Take me home. *After* we christen the backseat of the stretch limousine."

He smirks a devilishly wicked smile that has my insides quivering in anticipation.

## CHAPTER 20





## ISABELLE

*I* press my thighs together, vainly striving to simmer the intense pulse between my legs as Isaac secures the privacy partition of the limousine into place. Once it's locked in, he begins unknitting my favorite tie. The air in my lungs snags when his darkened gaze strays to mine. Gone is the caring, devoted fiancé who was wining and dining our friends earlier this evening, replaced by the dominant lover who not only governs his empire with notable command but also rules my body with the same amount of authority.

“Take your dress off but leave your shoes on.”

With shaking hands, I do as requested with ease due to the additional room in the stretch limousine. Isaac's eyes remain fixed on mine as he undoes his cufflinks and removes his suit jacket. My nipples tighten when he leisurely unbuttons his white dress shirt, revealing his smooth, tanned skin.

Once his shirt is removed, he slides across the bench seat until our thighs are butted against each other. His pupils are massive, and his trousers are struggling to contain his mouth-watering erection. “Lace your fingers together.”

Pleasure glides through me, tightening my nipples more when he binds my hands with his dark blue tie.

“If this becomes too much, you say the word, and I’ll stop.”

“Like a safe word?” I ask when I remember all the books I’ve read over the years about needing a safe word when you’re doing bondage and submission.

“No, Isabelle. If you want me to stop, ask me to stop, and I’ll stop.” His dark eyes lock on mine. “No safe words required. Okay?”

I lick my scorched lips that dried from his heated gaze. “Okay.”

His seductive smirk has my insides purring.

“Scoot halfway down the bench, lie down, then raise your arms above your head.”

My damp skin clings to the leather seat when I move into the position he’s requesting. My breasts thrust high when I raise my arms above my head. When he crouches onto the floor next to me to secure the loose end of the tie around the door handle, my skin turns a hue of pink. I’m not embarrassed, I’m incredibly aroused.

I squirm when he guides his index finger down my arm, past my chest, then over the peaked buds of my nipples. “So beautiful.”

He fondles my heavy breasts, kneading and caressing them with precise dedication. Once he has my nipples stiff and begging to feel the warmth of his mouth, his gaze drops to stare unashamedly at my pussy. “Spread your legs.”

I loosen my clenched thighs before sweeping them open.

“Wider.”

He places his hands on my inner thighs and pries them apart until one of my legs dangles off the seat while the other is pushed against the leather backrest. Usually, I'd feel exposed in a pose like this, but from the avid gleam in Isaac's eyes, my vulnerability is disregarded just as quickly as my clothes were.

My thighs shake when he runs his index finger through the folds of my pussy. He coats his finger with my arousal before sliding it inside. The walls of my vagina clench around him, loving how full I feel even with it just being his finger.

When his finger stops a mere millimeter from the sweet spot inside of me, I thrust up my hips, demanding more.

“Patience, Isabelle.”

A shiver jolts down my spine from the deep rasp of his voice.

As his thumb hovers above my throbbing clit, his eyes command my attention. When he gets them, he says, “If your eyes leave mine, I'll remove all contact. Do you understand?”

I nod, my body thrilled and ravenous, dying for him to touch me, mark me, and claim me.

“Say it, Isabelle.”

“Yes. I understand.”

The urge to snap my eyes shut is overwhelming when his spare hand thrusts my sex onto his mouth so he can suck my swollen clit. I buck against him when his tongue dips deep inside, tasting me around his stationary finger. The leisured pace of his tongue is already driving me wild, so imagine how crazy it gets when his motionless finger begins thrusting at the same slow pace.

He takes his time, building my pleasure with every perfect stroke of his finger and lash of his tongue, devouring me as only he ever has.

“Whose pussy is this, Isabelle? Who does it belong to?” The vibration of his deep voice against my pussy lips makes my clit ache.

“You.” My voice is hoarse since it’s been strangled by lust. “It belongs to you.”

My thigh muscles tense when he nips my clit before his tongue soothes the arousing sting. After devouring me for several core-clenching minutes, his head lifts, and his dark eyes stare into mine. They’re beaming with the jealousy I expected earlier.

The darkness clouding his eyes deepens when he licks his lips, tasting the evidence of my excitement on his mouth. “Did you forget who it belonged to when you were dancing with Colby?”

Strands of my hair cling to my sweaty neck when I shake my head, denying his statement. I gasp when his finger re-enters me deeper until he finds the sweet spot inside. The walls of my pussy clench around his finger, greedily fucking his digit as my race to climax kicks up a notch. He’s abandoned his earlier pace. Now he’s finger-fucking me without restraint.

“You danced with him with your pussy bare, begging it to be touched, fucked, consumed.”

“I danced with him... as a friend. He didn’t... touch me,” I say between pants of breath.

He quickens his thrust, making my vision hazy and my stomach quiver in anticipation. A low, growling moan builds

deep within my chest when his thumb grinds down on my oversensitive clit. He flicks it three times, bringing me within an inch of the finish line.

“He wants to touch you, Isabelle. He wants to fuck you, to have you bare and naked in front of him like you are now.”

My brain is too clouded by the intense orgasm building to form a response. I’m too far gone chasing my climax to formulate words, much less an entire sentence. I’m so close to falling, one foot is already off the ledge, so you can imagine my anger when Isaac suddenly withdraws his fingers from my clenching sex.

My inner vixen screams vulgarities at the top of her lungs as my heavy eyelids flutter open. Isaac is staring down at me with his jaw set in a hard line and his nostrils flaring. It’s a panty-drenching visual that almost finishes what his fingers started.

“Do you want to fuck Colby? Are you wishing it was him between your legs right now?”

“No, never,” I respond breathlessly. “I’ll never want anyone but you. You’ve ruined me for anyone else. I’ll only *ever* want you.”

His jaw stays set, but the relentless tick inflicting it decreases. “That’s right. You’re *mine*. Every inch of you is *mine*.”

I nod. With my shrewdness blinded by lust, I’d agree to anything right now.

Isaac grins, pleased by my agreeing gesture before unfastening the button of his trousers and sliding down his zipper. My mouth waters when he fists his rock-hard shaft to give it a long stroke. The veins on his cock are bulging, and

his knob is glistening with pre-cum. He's the thickest I've ever seen him. I lick my lips while staring unashamedly at the awe-inspiring vision in front of me.

“Do you want to taste me, Isabelle?”

I eagerly nod. “Please.”

He lengthens his strokes until the tip of his cock is swollen and covered with a sticky goodness that has my mouth salivating. After gliding his thumb over the crest gathering the large bead of pre-cum gathered there, he rubs it on my top lip.

“My lips.”

I moan when his thumb dips inside my mouth. My tongue glides over his thumb, lapping up any liquid remaining before I suck down hard. My core tightens when a deep growl escapes Isaac's mouth, turned on by my frisky tease.

I increase the power of my sucks, teasing him as he earlier taunted me.

“Always greedy.”

“Yes, but only for *you*. I love tasting *you*,” I babble through his thumb thrusting into my mouth as eagerly as his cock usually fucks me.

Pleasure clusters in my core when he changes his position, so his gorgeous cock is displayed in front of me. “Tilt your head to the side,” he instructs. “I'm going to fuck your greedy mouth before I fuck your even more ravenous pussy.”

I press my ear against the black leather seat, then open my mouth. My lips burn to accommodate the girth of his cock when he plunges it inside. Since my hands are bound above my head, he guides the pace of his pumps. While his hand strokes the section of his cock that can't fit in my mouth, I

suck, nip, and lick the rest. He tastes so good—sweet, salty, and one hundred percent Isaac.

A whimper vibrates his cock when his spare hand returns to teasing my clit. He rubs it and strokes it until my thighs quake.

“I want you to come with me,” he commands a short time later, his voice showing he’s close to achieving release.

“Me and you, together, always.”

His hips buck when my tongue flicks the sensitive slit in his cock, lapping up every drop of his arousal. Sweat mists my forehead when he rocks his hips, fucking my mouth in a rhythm that matches his fingers plunging in my pussy. I suck harder, drawing him in deeper as excitement builds low in my womb.

“That’s it, baby, suck me dry.”

His cock muffles my screams when he circles his thumb over my clit. It’s the final push I need to reach climax. As my sex clenches around his fingers, spurts of cum missile out of his cock. Tasting him while riding the craziness of an orgasm adds to its intensity, skyrocketing it to a level I’ve never experienced before. My mind is overloaded, dangerously spiraling out of control in a lust-filled frenzy.

After his cum slides down to my gut, I lick my lips, gathering any spilled drops the withdrawal of his cock causes. Smirking, he rubs a bead of cum into my lips before jerking up his chin. “Now it’s time to fuck your greedy pussy. To remind you who it belongs to.”

A girly squeal seeps from my lips when he flips me over, so one of my knees is on the leather seat while the other rests on the floor. My face, which is mashed to the leather seat,

loves the coolness of the material on my flushed skin. He thrusts my ass high into the air, leaving me open and exposed, and incredibly turned on before he undoes his tie from the door.

“Hands behind your back.”

Anticipation scuttles through me when he teeters my hands behind my back. The climax I’m slowly climbing down from rebuilds when he braces the crown of his cock against the opening of my slit.

“Same rules, Isabelle. If you need me to stop, ask me, and I’ll stop.”

When I nod, indicating that I understand, an animalistic growl zooms out of my parched mouth. He hilted me with one quick thrust, filling me to the very brim. After gathering my wrists with one hand, he tilts back, ramming another inch of his cock inside me. I moan an inaudible groan, loving being the fullest I’ve ever been.

He uses my tied wrists as a tether to yank me back as he thrusts his hips forward, making the slams of his cock even more intense. The cabin of the limousine turns roasting as skin slapping skin is the only noise heard for the next several minutes.

When I crank my neck back, my breath hitches. His sweat-drenched muscles are tensing with every pump he does. It’s a glorious visual that has my knees fighting not to meet. When he catches my admiring glance, his pumps become harder, more carnal, almost uncontrolled. He screws me with everything he has, fucking me like an out-of-control beast, ensuring I’ll never forget being claimed by him.



An explosion of fireworks erupts through my body from the primal visual. My climax is long, mind-blowing, and so loud, I'm certain the commuters traveling amongst us heard my cries of pleasure.

"Mine, Isabelle. You're mine," Isaac grunts before the hotness of his spawn coats the walls of my clenching pussy.

## CHAPTER 21



## ISAAC

“*H*ey, Isaac, it’s Ryan. I wanted to advise you that Theresa Veneto was released on bail this afternoon to await trial in a few months.” He breathes harshly down the line before coughing to clear his throat. “Yeah... umm... anyway, have a good Christmas.”

My brows scrunch, apprehensive about the uneasiness in his voice. Ryan usually exudes cockiness. It’s a natural characteristic ingrained in every detective or police officer I know. I imagine their industry is no different than the one my empire is immersed in. You need to have very thick skin to survive this ruthless world.

I lower my cell from my ear and dial one to return his call. The phone rings several times before he finally answers, “Ryan Carter.”

“Did I wake you?” My tone eludes to the fact that I’m not bothered if I did.

“Not exactly.” His voice has more self-assuredness than it did in his voicemail. “You caught me during a *moment*.”

My brow arches over the slyness of his reply. “Opening an early Christmas present?”

He chuckles a full-hearted laugh. “Something like that.”

My gaze drifts across the master suite to a naked Isabelle sleeping peacefully. Her hair is a tousled mess, and mascara is smeared under her eyes. I've left her resting a little longer this morning since I spent most of the night in a jealousy-fueled rage fucking her senseless, wanting to ensure she knows precisely whom her body belongs to.

I tried to rein in my jealousy, to smother the rage burning me from the inside out. My suppression was working after spending nearly an hour dancing with her at the cocktail party, but it returned full pelt when she kissed Colby on the cheek when we were leaving. He brazenly winked at me before returning her gesture. My fist clenched, and my jaw muscle ticked over his foolish lack of judgment.

The only reason he left the party still walking was because Cormack eased my fury by reminding me that Isabelle was wearing my ring. He also assured me he'd speak to Colby on my behalf. Cormack is my closest confidant, and he handled the issues regarding Clara with due diligence, so I trust he will follow through with his pledge for Colby.

Cormack was the reason Clara requested to speak to me last night. Each member of the McGregor family are well known in the press as billionaires, but every penny they have is in Cormack's name. When his grandfather passed away, he left his entire fortune to Cormack.

Cormack despises the money nearly as much as he despised his father, but for the sake of his younger siblings, he maintains control of the McGregor entity. He allocated an extremely generous living allowance to his siblings, but he also encourages them to find their own place in the world as he did when he left the McGregor residence with nothing but the clothes on his back.

Clara believed Cormack's withdrawal of funds was solely based on her false allegations against me, but after speaking with Cormack last night, I discovered that wasn't the sole reason he cut her allowance.

Feet padding down the line interrupts me from my thoughts, while also reminding me I have my phone attached to my ear. I pace out of the master suite to ensure I don't wake Isabelle.

"Theresa secured bail?"

Ryan took his findings to the judge who presided over Isabelle's case the day following our *meeting* in my foyer. The judge agreed that Ryan had enough evidence to issue an arrest warrant for Theresa, giving him the pleasure of arresting her the following afternoon. She had been held in custody since then, awaiting her arraignment.

"Yes, but that was expected. Isabelle was charged with murder, and she was given bail, so it set the precedent that the person who falsely accused her of it would also be given bail." I hear him scrub his hand along his jaw. "We've hit a bit of a stonewall."

"How so?" My tone lowers as anger grips my body.

"The new DA assigned to the case agrees the evidence is compelling enough to convict Theresa, but he's worried the jury might feel compassion for her, considering everything that happened between you two."

My back molars grind as my grip on the phone tightens, but before I can speak, Ryan continues. "He thinks your refusal to dispute her claims makes you look guilty."

"Who told you what happened between Theresa and me?" The files on the court proceedings between Theresa and me

are sealed, so Ryan wouldn't be able to access them.

He coughs, clearing the rattle in his deep voice. "Alex."

Blood teems furiously through my body. "Those files are sealed. He wouldn't have access to them."

"He didn't. He found out via another source."

I stiffen. Only one other person knows about the incident between Theresa and me, but she's worked for me for years, so why would she betray me now?

"I have to go," I advise Ryan, anger echoing in my voice.

"Isaac!"

I press the phone back against my ear. "Yes."

"Give her the chance to explain. Not everything is black and white."

*Yeah, because there's always a heap of fucking gray no one pays any attention to.*

When I disconnect our call, I grip my phone tightly, fighting the urge to send it hurling across the room. The blood streaming through my veins is overheating my body with anger. I'm so worked up, I don't notice Isabelle sneaking up on me until her arms wrap around my torso, startling me enough, I yank away from her.

When I capture her tempting smell filtering through my nose, I curse under my breath, then spin around to face her. Pain grips my heart from the frightened haze in her alarmed eyes, but before I can soothe it, she rushes for me, stealing any apologies about to seep from my lips by enclosing her mouth over mine.

Her kiss is lush, mind-stealing, and devoted. By the time she pulls away, my earlier anger is a distant memory.

“That’s better.”

A grin tugs on my lips. This is another prime example of how she knows me better than anyone. I didn’t even need to speak, yet she offered me comfort.

After running her finger along my arched brow, she locked her eyes with mine. “Merry Christmas, Isaac.”

“Merry Christmas, Isabelle.”

When I grind my now stiff cock against the seam of her panties, her groan matches the grumbling of her hungry tummy. “Time for breakfast?”

She nods. “I’m starving... for you.”

I hit her with a flirty wink. “What did you think I’m going to feed you for breakfast?”

When she shudders in excitement, I increase my pace, eager to once again have her underneath me.

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Isabelle’s head pops out of the fridge when a doorbell shrills through the kitchen. “I’ll get it.”

She places a quick kiss to the edge of my mouth before marching toward the foyer. I invited my brother, Nick, his fiancée, Jenni, my nephew, Jasper, and my dad here for Christmas brunch. With Nick’s crazy schedule and all the mammoth tasks I’ve been undertaking the past several months, Isabelle has not yet met my family, so she’s beyond excited that they’re coming today.

Her excitement was even more paramount than when I gifted her a five-carat diamond-drop necklace for Christmas. My motive for her gift was a little cunning on my part as I fully plan on seeing her in nothing but her necklace and a pair of black stilettos later tonight.

I lower the temperature on the oven to ensure Isabelle doesn't burn the pastries and muffins Harlow made for her yesterday before I join Isabelle in the foyer. I stop frozen partway there when I discover who's standing in the entryway.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Isaac,” Isabelle interrupts, looking mortified.

My eyes snap to hers, bewildered as to why she's inviting Theresa into our home. Why in the world would she want any association with the lady who framed her for murder?

When she nudges her head at the lower half of Theresa's body, I realize why she reprimanded me for cursing. A little boy with dark brown hair has his arms wrapped around his mother's leg, hiding from my furious scowl.

“His only wish was to see his father for Christmas,” Theresa comments in a snarky tone.

As I battle to hold in my offensive language in front of the small child, Isabelle bobs down in front of him. Her nurturing chocolate eyes easily gain his attention, but if it didn't, I'm sure her smile will. “Hi, what's your name?”

“Jeremiah,” he answers, his voice quivering with nerves.

“That's a lovely name. I'm Isabelle. It's a pleasure to meet you, Jeremiah.” He moves a step closer to her, coming out from the shelter of his mother's leg when she asks, “Do you like cookies?”



His eyes widen before he eagerly nods.

After running her finger down the crinkle in his nose, Isabelle's eyes drift between Theresa and me. "I'll take him into the kitchen so you two can talk."

The incessant scowl Theresa regularly wears is firmly in place as she nods her head at Isabelle's suggestion. My jaw ticks, furious she can't even be polite when Isabelle is striving to save her son from witnessing an argument on Christmas morning.

When I nod, Isabelle guides Jeremiah toward the kitchen, her spare hand squeezing my shoulder on the way by. Her strides stop when I seize her hand from mid-drop to lift it to my mouth. When I kiss the edge of her palm and place it over my heart, her pulse thumps through her veins

"I love you too," she mouths before she continues into the kitchen with Jeremiah looking up at her in awe.

## CHAPTER 22



## ISABELLE

*I* lift Jeremiah to sit on the sparkling countertop before moving toward the fridge. “Would you like a glass of milk with your cookies?” I keep my tone friendly since he’s nervously fiddling with the hem of his Christmas sweater.

“Yes, please.”

I smile before grabbing the carton of milk out of the fridge. After snagging two glasses out of the drying rack, I pace to stand next to him. Jeremiah has big ocean-blue eyes and brown hair that curls around his ears. His rosy cheeks, plump lips, and small dimple in the middle of his chin make him utterly adorable. He’s one of the cutest kids I’ve ever seen.

“How old are you, Jeremiah?”

His hands tremble when he accepts the glass of milk I’m holding out for him. “Four, turning five.”

Even under the awkward circumstances of our meeting, a grin tugs my lips high when his sip of milk leaves a milk mustache on his top lip. I turn toward the oven when the timer dings, announcing the baked treats Harlow supplied me with for our brunch are ready.

Jeremiah's eyes bulge when I say, "The cookies are ready." I remove the three trays of baked goods to cool before placing four M&M cookies onto a white porcelain plate. "They need to cool a little."

He licks his lips while nodding his cute little head. My ears prick when Theresa's raised voice bellows into the kitchen. I'm not surprised when I don't hear Isaac's response. It's his low, calm voice that causes the most quivering response from me. That's when I know I'm in the most trouble. If his tone is low, that's when he's the most furious.

My eyes sling back to Jeremiah when he asks, "Is my daddy mad at my mommy?"

My heart clutches when I see tears welling in his eyes. "No, sweetheart. No one is angry. It's Christmas. Even the Grinch grows a heart Christmas morning."

"And Mr. Scrooge," he chimes in.

I giggle. "And Mr. Scrooge."

I check the temperature of the cookies, ensuring they're cool before handing one to Jeremiah. All the moisture in his eyes disappears when he munches on the cookie while sipping his glass of milk. As he fills his hungry tummy, I run my eyes over his face, searching for any similarities between him and Isaac. The cleft chin is the biggest indication that Isaac could be his father, but Isaac is sterile, so that places Theresa's claims of paternity into doubt.

A short time later, Theresa enters the kitchen. She's as obnoxious as ever. "It's time to go, Jeremiah."

Nodding, he locks his big blue eyes with me. "Thank you for the cookie, Isabelle." I smile from the way he stumbles out my name.

“You’re very welcome.”

When I help him down from the counter, the stranglehold on my heart intensifies when he wraps his arms around my legs to hug me tight. “Merry Christmas.”

Before I can return his embrace, Theresa yanks him away from me. My already faltering heart almost breaks when he stares up at Isaac, begging for a snippet of his attention. It does break when Isaac fails to respond to his silent pleas.

When our front door slams shut, my eyes drift to Isaac, who is leaning in the doorway of the kitchen. He’s dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeve shirt, but his standoff demeanor makes the visual not as glorious.

“He’s very cute and well-mannered—”

“He isn’t my son, Isabelle, and encouraging him to believe any different will only hurt him in the long run.”

Obviously, my face is showing my pain for Jeremiah.

“Are you sure he isn’t yours?”

Isaac pushes off the doorjamb and strides toward me. His steps are fast and efficient, and they have my pulse quickening. After sitting me on the countertop Jeremiah was sitting on mere minutes ago, he nudges my thighs apart so he can stand between my legs.

“He isn’t my son,” he repeats, his tone nothing but honest. “I had my procedure six years ago, and he isn’t even five. I never had sex without protection, even knowing I’m sterile. The timeframe is wrong for the time I slept with Theresa. Our... *affair* ended in March, he was born in February.”

“Then why is she telling him you’re his father? That isn’t fair to him. All he wants is the attention of his dad.”

“Because she knows I won’t fight her paternity claims.”

My brows furrow. “Why wouldn’t you fight them?”

“Because I’d have to give her my DNA.”

My brows furrow even tighter. “Yeah... so?”

He slants his head before cocking his brow. “Give my DNA to one of the most corrupt police officers in the country? Not only would she have it for any criminal activities she wanted to pin on me, but I also have no doubt she’d forge the tests to make it look like I’m Jeremiah’s father.”

He has a valid point. She didn’t even have my DNA, yet she still had me charged with murder.

“Is Jeremiah the reason she got fired from the police force?”

“No.” He halfheartedly shrugs. “Not exactly.”

I arch my brow, requesting further information.

“Theresa is...” He stops talking, unable to articulate a word to describe her.

“A vindictive bitch. Yep, I’m aware of that.”

He snickers. “Yes, that and a few other choice words.”

He steps closer to me until his breath flutters my lips. “She lost her position at Ravenshoe PD because she not only broke into my apartment on several occasions, she also used undercover officers for her personal benefit.”

My interests are immensely piqued, but I remain quiet, waiting for him to elaborate on his answer.

“She placed undercover officers in my clubs under the assumption they were to net me in a drug sting. She falsified documents, so it looked like she was investigating an illegal

drug circuit that was *allegedly* being run by my clubs, all to secure my DNA.”

I blink several times in a row, utterly confused. “What benefit would she get from that? Even if you were arrested, she couldn’t have requested your DNA without a legitimate reason. Drug trafficking isn’t a valid reason for needing DNA unless you were convicted of the crime. But even then, no judge would be eager to sign off on a warrant if you refused to supply your DNA. So putting them undercover was fruitless if her ruse was only to get your DNA.”

He coughs to clear his throat. “The undercover officers were all blonde and under the age of twenty-eight.”

My brows furrow even closer. “I still don’t understand.”

He arches his brow. “They were all attractive and *female*.”

Like the sun rising in the sky, lucidity forms. I swallow to clear the lump in my throat. “Did you... umm... sleep with the undercover officers?”

“No,” he replies with a swift shake of his head. “I have a knack for reading people, and I could tell something wasn’t quite right with them.”

I release the breath I’m holding in.

“But even if I weren’t suspicious, I would’ve never left a used condom lying around. I’m smarter than that. Well, I was, until you arrived in the picture. You completely blindsided me.”

He drags his index finger down my screwed-up nose. I should be angry we’re discussing his previous sexual encounters, but I’m not. Even though I hate the idea of him with anyone else, I appreciate that he’s being forthright and honest.

“How did you find out they were undercover officers?”

“Hunter,” he says like that one response should answer all my questions.

I stare into his eyes, still confused.

“He’s a brilliant researcher and hacker.”

*Oh.*

“Have you ever considered arranging your own paternity test?”

He nods. “Yes, but not because I believe Jeremiah is mine, but because I want to refute Theresa’s claims. Theresa never attended the appointments I scheduled. She always had an excuse. Jeremiah was sick, he had a temperature, or she had to work. After the fifth attempt, I gave up.”

“She made excuses as she knew what the results would be.”

“That I’m not his father.” He brushes a wayward hair off my cheek before his eyes turn back to mine. “She thought she was clever. She designed one of the most arduous ruses I’ve dealt with. She even slept with a man with a cleft chin to make her ruse more believable, but I’m smarter than her, and I know without a doubt he isn’t my son.”

My heart aches for little Jeremiah. He’s caught in a battle he doesn’t belong in, but my anger on his behalf isn’t directed at Isaac. It’s wholly directed at Theresa. She’s his mother, his blood. She should be sheltering him from matters like this, not using him as a pawn to force a man to interact with her.

“I was a witness in Theresa’s incompetency hearing, but only on the agreement that my testimony was sealed. I didn’t want my personal information readily available to anyone who



has access to a computer. They were lenient on Theresa at my request because she was pregnant with Jeremiah. I had her sign a non-disclosure agreement that she could not discuss anything pertaining to Jeremiah's paternity case or the hearing on the agreement she resigned from her position. If I'd known she could join the FBI, I would've stipulated harsher terms to our agreement."

"So she doesn't know you're sterile?"

"No, my testimony was done in private. Other than you, Regan, Jae, and Avery, no one else is aware." His jaw muscles spasm. "Well, no one else *was* aware." Air escapes his flaring nostrils. "Ryan informed me this morning that Alex is aware of Theresa's claims." The tick in his jaw amplifies. "There's only one way Alex could have found out that information."

I try to suffocate the look of guilt on my face, but Isaac is too perceptive to miss it. His lips straighten as he glares into my eyes. "You know about Regan and Alex?"

I lick my dry lips, hoping some moisture will ease out my next set of words. "I witnessed an exchange between them a few weeks ago. It was obvious they knew each other... personally."

He stares at me, waiting for further explanation. He knows I'm holding back information because he has eyes that can see through to my soul.

"Regan said something about Alex using her for his own benefit. It was when we were discussing the discovery of Theresa having my phone tapped. Now, knowing about the paternity claims, it kind of makes sense why she was removed from your case, and Alex was assigned to her team."

Isaac's face reddens with anger. "So Regan broke lawyer/client confidentiality to help her boyfriend secure a more lucrative position. A position that was to investigate the man she *solely* works for."

"I don't believe Regan purposely set out to deceive you, Isaac. The instant she knew Alex was here investigating you, she cut all ties. She hadn't seen him since that day."

"That doesn't make her any less guilty of betraying my trust."

I cup his cheek. His anger is so paramount, the blood blazing through his veins warms my hand. "She couldn't help who she fell in love with any more than me falling in love with you. You can't help who you love. Don't punish her for opening her heart. Mistakes happen all the time. You've made mistakes. I've made plenty of mistakes. Regan made a mistake, and she's living with the repercussions of her error every day."

He remains quiet, silently contemplating. I try to get him over the fence.

"Regan cares deeply for Alex, but she gave him up because her loyalty to you was stronger. She's already suffering living without him. Don't punish her more."

Warmth blooms in my chest when he nods, agreeing with my statement. The energy in the room turns from somber to electrifying when he stares dotingly into my eyes. The spark of attraction has always been dominant between us, but there's something greater that tethers us together. It's an intimate string that's becoming sturdier with every moment we spend together. I didn't think my love for him could grow any stronger, but it astonishes me every day with how much it continues to bloom.

The ringing of the doorbell interrupts our emotion-packed stare-down. I try to hold in my excitement, but my anticipation at meeting Isaac's family is too great for me to contain.

"Only you would be excited about meeting the in-laws," Isaac mocks while assisting me down from the counter.

After lacing his fingers through mine, he walks us to the foyer. The thrashing of my heart increases with every step I take. I'm equally excited and nervous about meeting his family.

The first thing my gaze zooms in on is the tiny little baby nestled in the arms of the young lady I've only seen in surveillance photos. Jenni has gorgeous strawberry blonde hair, perfect facial features, and light blue eyes. She greets me with a massive smile stretched across her face.

"Isabelle, this is my brother, Nick, my dad, Harrison, my sister-in-law, Jenni, and my nephew, Jasper," Isaac introduces, his voice lowering when he introduced Jasper.

Now, I understand where Isaac gets his remarkable good looks. His dad is *gorgeous*. Even though he's at least twenty years my senior, my cheeks heat when my eyes roam over his handsome face.

After accepting a handshake from Nick and a hug from Harrison, I offer to take their coats. Once they're stored in the coatroom, we enter the informal dining room at the side of the kitchen. Jenni hands a sleeping Jasper to Isaac before coming to help me in the kitchen. My heart melts when Isaac nuzzles him in close to his chest before placing a kiss on the top of his head.

"You may not get Jasper back now," I tease Jenni, my tone playful.

She grins a beaming white smile. “He really loves Jasper like he’s his own son.”

“Yeah, he does.” And now I understand why. Isaac will never experience having his own children, so he’ll cherish his nephews and nieces even more.

Jenni assists in placing the baked goodies into baskets before gathering the juice from the fridge and the coffee from the percolator. “Did you bake these?”

When she gestures her head to the blueberry muffins and apricot danishes, I grimace.

“It’s okay, I’m still *learning* how to cook. Let me just say, it’s lucky we have smoke alarms installed, or we may not have had a house to live in.”

I laugh before sharing the story of when I set the toaster on fire. Even though she’s a few years younger than me, she has a great personality and is extremely friendly.

Once all the items are out for brunch, I take a seat across from Isaac. My cheeks inflame when my eyes dart between the three men sitting across from me.

Jenni laughs at my wide eyes before filling the seat next to me. “Don’t stare too long or your eyes will get burned.”

“It’s so odd Nick and Isaac are brothers. It’s like looking at night and day.”

Nick has wavy blond hair, Isaac’s is brown and straight. Nick has pasty white skin, Isaac has gorgeous tan skin. Nick is a little on the small side with an athletic runner’s build, whereas Isaac’s body is well-formed and over six feet tall, but they’re brothers without a doubt as Nick was created in a test tube to save Isaac’s life. This just proves you can’t judge paternity by similarities.

When Jenni giggles at my comment, Isaac's eyes lift to us. His stern glare has my pulse racing. Jenni's response is on the opposite end of the spectrum. When she catches his gaze, her cheeks turn the color of a beetroot, and she looks like she was informed she has to go to the principal's office.

I nudge her with my elbow. "Don't stare too long or your eyes will get burned."

---

Brunch was a raving success with every scrumptious goodie baked by Harlow devoured with numerous servings of coffee and bucket loads of conversation. Jenni and I are in the kitchen swapping contact information while the boys play pool in the den. Jasper is fast asleep in his stroller as adorable as ever.

"What's your Facebook name under?" Jenni queries, her brow scrunching. "I looked up both Isabelle Brahn and Izzy Brahn, but neither were coming up."

I place the empty cardboard boxes from Harlow's bakery into the bin before spinning around to face her. "I don't have Facebook."

She stares at me like I have two heads. "How do you *not* have Facebook?"

I shrug. "My uncle wasn't computer savvy. He relied more on notes to keep a record of his case files, so I never got into the whole Facebook, Twitter, dating sites craze."

Jenni thrusts her hand out, palm side up. "Give me your phone, I'll hook you up."

Smiling, I dig out the brand new iPhone Isaac gifted me this morning.

Within five minutes, my Facebook profile is set up—hideous profile picture and all. I grin when I glance down at the screen to discover I have one friend, Jenni. Over the next fifteen minutes, she gives me a rundown on how everything works, including sending friend requests, writing updates on my wall, and private messaging. By the time she finishes explaining everything, I feel like an elderly lady instead of the twenty-five-year-old woman I am.

“You’ll get the hang of it,” she assures upon spotting my mortified expression.

---

Several hours later, long after Jenni, Nick, Jasper, and Harrison have left, I’m scrolling through my Facebook wall. I now have four friends—Jenni, Hugo, Harlow, and Brandon.

“How come you haven’t accepted my friend request?”

Isaac stops strolling into the living area to peer up at me. “Because I have a marketing person who looks after all my social media sites.”

“Well, tell him or her to accept my friend request.” I crawl across the couch and snuggle into his side. “I can’t add a relationship status without someone to tag it with.”

“Yes, you can.” He removes the phone from my hand, fumbles his fingers over the screen, then hands it back to me. “See?”

My mouth gapes, not just because he’s tech-savvy, but because of the relationship status he put down. “We’re not married.”

“Yet,” he retorts with a smug look on his face.

I rib him with my elbow before scrolling down my wall of updates with him peering over my shoulder like a creeper not cool enough to have a social media account—pretty much me three hours ago.

“Who’s the blonde with Brandon?” Isaac asks a short time later.

I crank my neck back to peer at him. “That’s Melody, Brandon’s high school sweetheart.”

His lips purse before he takes another sip of his wine he returned from the kitchen with. He looks smugger now than he did when he switched my relationship status to married.

After awarding him a frisky wink, I continue scrolling. A lot of my ‘updates’ are old news since I don’t have many friends.

Not even five seconds later, my heart stops beating at the exact moment Isaac stiffens. I swallow harshly, eradicating a large lump in my throat before re-cranking my neck. Isaac’s jaw is set in a straight line, and he’s staring out into the distance.

My pulse rings in my ears as I lower my eyes back to my phone. A girl in a picture with Jenni is the spitting image of Ophelia in every way—same rich, brown hair with honeycomb highlights, tanned skin, light brown nearly translucent eyes. She even has the same turned-up nose.

Tears burn my eyes as panic plagues me. I can’t compete with Ophelia as a ghost, much less if she’s alive.

“She isn’t Ophelia,” Isaac informs me, his tone grim and flat.

Abruptly, he stands and walks out of the living room. After brushing away rogue tears on my cheeks, I take off after him. I

find him ten minutes later in the master suite peering out an arched window. A glass of whiskey is in his hand, and his posture alludes to his anguish.

My hesitant steps toward him halt when he mutters, “I know she isn’t Ophelia because I made sure of it.” Pain stabs my chest when he spins around to face me. His eyes are dark as memories from his past haunt him. “Her name is Emily. She’s Jenni’s best friend. When I first met her, I was just like you, convinced she was Ophelia. Her face, her eyes... *identical.*”

My heart shreds to pieces from the hurt in his eyes. I’d give anything for Ophelia to be alive, not just because Isaac loved her, but so the guilt of her death could stop eating him alive.

“Emily is only twenty, which means she was eighteen when we met, almost the same age Ophelia was when we began dating, so, understandably, I was mistaken. But when I look at Emily, all I see is Ophelia, even knowing she isn’t her.”

“That’s understandable, Isaac. Their similarities are uncanny.”

After scrubbing his hand over his jaw, he downs his whiskey with one gulp. His Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he swallows the burning liquid with ease.

“I had her investigated.” He chuckles a painful laugh. “Even knowing Ophelia was dead for years, I had Emily tailed for months, denying anyone’s advice she wasn’t her. I did things... stupid, foolish things to create barriers for her and her partner to force them apart.”

I remain quiet, unsure of what to say to ease his guilt.

“I truly believed she was her, or I wouldn’t have done it.”



I nod while taking a step toward him. Isaac isn't a monster. He cares deeply for his family and friends, so I'm confident he'd never intentionally hurt anyone.

I pad closer to him. "And now?"

His brows furrow, seemingly confused.

"Do you realize now that Emily isn't Ophelia?"

His gaze snaps back to the window. Seconds feel like hours as uncomfortable silence plagues the room. The pain in my chest intensifies from his passive silence. My heart bleeds for him. His pain is so intense, it suffocates the air of oxygen.

Even feeling like my heart is being stabbed with a knife, I want to comfort him, to erase his pain, to make him forget, so I pull my sweater over my head before sliding my jeans and panties down my thighs.

His breath hitches when I drop to my knees, but he stops my nervous fumble of his zipper by seizing my wrist. "No, Isabelle." His shaky voice reveals his levelheadedness is faltering.

"I'll wash it all away, Isaac. I'll take away your pain." I raise my eyes to his. "Please let me help you."

My heart thrashes against my ribs when he cups my cheek so his thumb can run over the cupid's bow of my top lip. Then I can barely breathe when he drops his whiskey glass on the floor so he can undo the button on his jeans and slide down the zipper. When his jeans slip down to his thighs, in a hurry, I release his thickening cock from his boxer briefs, not only eager to taste him but to ease his hurt.

Just as I'm about to lash my tongue against his silky-smooth crest, he plucks me from the ground, spins me around, then impales me from behind. My knees buckle as my hands

shoot out to brace against the arched window. My body is unprepared but delighted to accept his impressively girthed cock.

With one of his hands grasping my hip, the other slithers up my body to grip my neck. A husky breath escapes my lips, incredibly aroused by his dominant hold. The pumps of his cock are hard and furious, having me toppling into climax within a matter of minutes.

As I slowly return from a cloudy lust haze, Isaac reduces the pace of his pumps before releasing my neck from his firm hold. After sliding his hand down my sweat-slicked body, he tweaks my nipple into a hardened peak. Because the sun is setting in the distance, I catch parts of our reflection in the window, along with a pair of devoted, lust-filled gray eyes.

“See the world out there, Isabelle?”

I take in the glistening skyline of Ravenshoe. It’s a spectacular sight, but it has nothing on the reflection of Isaac making love to me in the window.

“I’m going to give it to you. Everything I have, I’m going to give to you. You gave me your heart, now I’ll give you the world.”

## CHAPTER 23



## ISAAC

“*I* can’t do this, Isaac. Not just as your lawyer but as your friend.”

Regan folds her arms in front of her chest, taking on a reinforced pose. Her face is her regular don’t-take-shit-from-no-one look, but her eyes are concealing her anxiety.

“I don’t pay for your opinions. I pay you to do what I ask you to do.”

“This could be financial suicide for you.” She braces her hip on the desk in my home office. “If you get divorced, you’ll be decimated. Izzy will get everything.”

“That’s the point! Everything I have, I want her to have.”

Regan rolls her eyes. “You’re smarter than this, Isaac. This won’t tie her to you. It won’t stop her from leaving you. Heck, it may even encourage her to leave, considering she’ll end up filthy rich and—”

Any further statement is halted when I shoot her a furious glare.

She exhales sharply before shimmying her shoulders. Once all her negative energy has been expelled, she drops her glistening eyes to mine. “A prenup is supposed to be a contract that protects *your* assets. It’s not designed as a bribery tool.”

I stand from my chair with my fists clenched at my side. Blood is roaring through my veins so fast, steam nearly billows out of my ears. “I’m not bribing Isabelle to stay with me.”

“Then what do you call this?” She throws the prenup I asked her to draw up onto my desk.

“It’s called showing Isabelle what she means to me.” My voice is hoarse as my anger waivers. “She’s been to hell and back because of me, yet, she still stands by my side.”

When I made love to Isabelle in front of the town I once wanted to dominate, I realized I’d give it all away in an instant for her. Everything I have, everything I achieved, meant nothing when she kneeled in front of me to offer me comfort me when I was haunted by my past. I’ve shared so many horrid things with her the past several months, yet she still looks at me with nothing but admiration and devotion in her eyes. She understands my remorse for what happened to Ophelia, but she doesn’t add to my guilt or wish I’d forget. She gets me.

She completes me.

I may not be able to articulate to her what she means to me, but I can show her. That’s why I had Regan draw up this prenuptial agreement. The agreement states if Isabelle remains married to me for five years, she gets everything I had coming into the marriage. This will make me sound conceited, but that is millions upon millions of dollars—way more than even Isabelle realizes.

Regan’s eyes drop to the prenup document for a second before she returns to my face. “You’re giving her everything, Isaac. She could financially destroy you. Everything you’ve worked so hard for will be gone. Years of hard work—”

“That could have been destroyed because of your inability to keep your mouth shut during pillow talk.”

Regan balks, and her pupils widen as remorse floods her eyes.

My abrupt change in topic is to reflect the focus off me, but I don't want nor need Regan's opinion on what I choose to do with *my* assets. I fought and bled for everything I have, so any decisions involving its distribution will be made solely by me. If I want to give it all away to Isabelle today, so be it—that's my choice to make. It's not up for discussion or compromise. It's *my* choice.

“How long did you know the FBI was investigating me before I worked it out for myself?” I glare into her glistening green eyes, my anger tapering so much from her tears. “Days? Weeks? Months? Years?”

She clutches her chest while taking a step closer to me. “Isaac... I—”

“Answer the question, Regan.”

“I didn't know he was here—”

“Answer the question.”

Her chest thrusts up and down as she tries to maintain a cool, calm demeanor. “Five months.”

“Five months from the start or five months before me?”

My teeth crunching together fills the silence teeming between us. It also increases my anger.

“Regan—”

“Five months before you.”

My eyes snap to hers. “And when did you share confidential client/lawyer information with him?”

I try to simmer the harshness in my tone when she brushes a tear off her cheek. In the years I’ve known her, I’ve only seen her cry twice, and that was a long time ago. The fact she’s getting upset proves what Isabelle said is true. She cares deeply for Alex.

After sucking in a big breath, she shakes her head. “I didn’t.”

“Don’t lie to me, Regan.”

Her tear welling eyes lock with mine. “I made a mistake I regret every day, but I *never* deceived you.”

“What type of mistake?” My harsh tone lowers as the truthfulness in her eyes diminishes my anger.

When a sob breaks through the tight clench of her jaw, I prop my hip on my desk next to her. Regan is my lawyer, but she is also my friend.

When I pull a couple of tissues out from a box on my safe and hand them to her, she twists them around her fingers. “My mistake was trusting him.”

I remain quiet, waiting for her to continue.

Mercifully, she doesn’t leave me hanging for long. “I fought my attraction to him. You know me, Isaac. After everything I’d been through, I never let anyone get close.” She lifts her eyes to me, her lips tugging into an apprehensive smile. “Except you.”

A small smirk etches on my mouth. It took a lot of work for me to get her walls to crumble, but I’m a fighter, and I never give up on a challenge.

Her smile lowers into a frown when her eyes flicker like she's recalling a memory. "I have to give it to him, he was very clever. Not only did he break down my walls, but I also believe he cared for me."

Alex does care for Regan. I could see it in his eyes during our exchange. He had the same unbridled rage that scorches my veins when anyone challenges me regarding anything associated with Isabelle.

"As the weeks went on, I got careless."

"Because you trusted him," I interject.

She nods. "Yes."

It was the same with Isabelle and me. I let my defenses down within a matter of days of making Isabelle mine, so I can comprehend Regan doing it in weeks. I thought my carelessness in being so trusting of Isabelle was my biggest downfall. It wasn't. It was the sneaky, underhanded tactics of people who were part of my life well before Isabelle arrived in the picture that deserved my suspicion.

"Are you certain it was him who deceived you?"

Regan's lips set into a firm line before she nods. "I went to take a shower one morning. When I came out, my laptop was open and turned on." Her nervous cough bounces around the office. "It was the laptop I had Theresa's files saved on. At first, I brushed it off thinking maybe he was checking his emails or googling movie times for a flick we were going to see, but it didn't take long for my suspicions to increase that he had looked through my files."

I cross my arms in front of my chest. "What caused your wariness?"



“He mentioned numerous times his dislike of his boss. He never said what he did for a living, but he shared stories about how she was underhanded and shady, and how he’d run things differently if he were in her position.” Her eyes lift to mine. “A couple of days after my laptop was open, he arrived at my apartment, beaming with excitement because she’d been removed from her position, and he wanted to celebrate.”

She smiles like she’s recalling a fond memory. “Not very often did Alex drink. He’s usually more controlled, but since we were celebrating, I encouraged him to loosen up. I soon realized why he doesn’t drink. After a few too many spiked drinks, his lips loosened up as well.” She cringes like she’s embarrassed. “With the snippets of information he shared earlier, it didn’t take long to realize what industry he was in. When he was asleep, I rifled through his belongings. I didn’t find anything concrete bar a locked cell phone, so I called Hunter.”

My brows arch high as my jaw muscles tense, but there’s no reason for my snapped response. “Hunter didn’t know what my request pertained to. I told him I needed to hack into a guy’s phone to send his wife pictures of her cheating husband. You know how much Hunter hates cheaters.”

I nod. Hunter won’t hesitate to ruin a man if he’s found guilty of adultery. He had great pleasure in ensuring Mr. Marco, the now ex-DA of Ravenshoe, was aware of his dislike of cheaters.

An angry scowl scours Regan’s face before she continues, “Hunter explained how I could gain access to Alex’s phone without needing the passcode. When it unlocked, not only did I find hidden emails corresponding to you and your empire, but I also found photos of Theresa’s files from my laptop.”

Her gaze shifts to the window as a pained grin crosses her face. “You know the stupidest part?” Even though she asked a question, she continues without waiting for my reply. “The passcode on his phone was my birthday. That’s how good he is. He played the devoted boyfriend act very well.”

She brushes off a stray tear rolling from her eye before returning her eyes to me. “I tried to lead him astray, but I think I made matters worse. Not only does he believe you’re the man your FBI file says you are, he thinks we—”

“Had an affair.” Her face morphs into shock, surprised I knew. “I gathered that after my run-in with him. He doesn’t hide his jealousy well. Is he the reason you moved back to Texas?”

She nods. “Yes. I didn’t want to run the risk of running into him.” She folds her arms in front of her chest. “I wanted to tell you. I tried a few times before I left, but I was ashamed I let him play me like a fool. If I honestly thought he had anything significant that’d hurt you or your empire, I would’ve told you, Isaac, but he had nothing. He still has nothing.”

I stay quiet, giving her time to regain her composure when her voice cracks.

Once the glistening in her eyes dampens, I seek her eye contact. “You don’t owe me anything, Regan. Me helping you wasn’t under the stipulation that you would owe me. I did it because you’d be an asset to my empire, not to gain your moral obligation for the remainder of your life.”

Her face scrunches up as new tears well in her eyes.

“If he’s your Achilles heel—”

Her eyes snap to mine faster than a bullet being dislodged from a gun. “He isn’t.”

“If he is, your loyalty the past seven years repaid any debt you think you still owe me, so don’t feel obligated to choose between your employer and the man you love.”

She stares into my eyes, silently pondering for a few seconds before whispering, “Even if I do love him, it doesn’t make a difference. He lost my trust. He can never get that back.”

“Hugo once told me—”

Regan chuckles. It isn’t a full-hearted laugh, but I’ll accept a small chuckle over hearing her cry any day. “Why is everyone suddenly taking advice from Hugo?”

I shrug, my smile picking up. “It was good advice.”

She releases a big breath. “All right, hit me with it.”

“He said, ‘Not all mistakes are unfixable. If you work hard enough, even the most broken things can be repaired.’”

She twists her lips and nods but remains quiet.

After what feels like hours, but is only minutes, she shifts her gaze from me to the prenup on the table. “She won’t accept it, Isaac. Isabelle will never sign that prenup when she notices the terms you have put in there.”

“I know.”

Regan’s brows scrunch. She appears utterly confused.

“I have *persuasive* techniques I can use to my advantage.”

She gags and rolls her eyes.

After snickering at her response, I seek her gaze. “Stop trying to reflect the topic back to me. Do I need to look for a new lawyer?” I keep my tone low and non-threatening, leaving the decision up to her.

“You’ll never find anyone as good as me,” she remarks with a hint of pompousness since sparks of her usual demeanor emerge.

“I know.” I stroke her ego a little more to help her usual attitude return.

As she straightens her shoulders, her professional kick-ass lawyer transformation emerges before my eyes. “Regan Myers has never officially worked for *the* Isaac Holt. I don’t see why that will change any time in the future.” Her eyes lock on mine. “If I’m still wanted?”

“Are you sure this is what *you* want? Because while Alex is investigating me, you can’t have a relationship with him.” I want to make sure she’s acutely aware of what she’s giving up.

She nods. “I understand.”

My lips tug higher. She’s a damn good lawyer, so her loss to my empire would have been immense, but I would have taken the hit if that was what she wanted.

“All right, then let’s get down to business.” I take a seat in my leather chair before raising my eyes to hers. “How long does it take to get a marriage license issued?”

## CHAPTER 24



ISABELLE

*From: Alex Rogers, FBI Division Officer — Ravenshoe*

*To: Isabelle Brahn*

*Re: Resignation from the position of Field Officer*

---

*Dear Agent Brahn,*

*Any resignations to my department will need to be made **in person.***

*You know where to find me.*

*Alex Rogers*

*FBI Division Officer — Ravenshoe*

---

**S***hit!* I should've known Alex would never accept a resignation via email. He hammered me when I requested a transfer to another department, asserting I signed a contract and that I was required to follow through on my

obligations until the contract agreement ceased, but there are extenuating circumstances this time around. Not only am I sleeping with the target his department is investigating, I'm also engaged to him.

My eyes shoot up to the clock in the microwave oven, noting it's 3:43 p.m. Isaac is in an important meeting with Regan for the rest of the afternoon, so I may as well get the inevitable over and done with.

Not wanting to disturb Isaac, I leave a note for him on the kitchen counter.

*I'll be back in an hour.*

*Calm down, I took Roger with me.*

*I love you.*

*Izzy xx*

After gathering my trench coat from the coatroom, I call Roger and request for him to bring Isaac's town car around the front.

"Yes, Ms. Brahn."

In under a minute, Isaac's town car pulls into the front stairs of his private residence. I lift the collar of my jacket before dashing to the car, trying to avoid the sprinkling of rain that started falling early this morning.

When I climb into the backseat, Roger greets me in his familiar flat tone. "Ms. Brahn."

I feel ridiculous sitting in the back, but Roger is a stickler for protocol. "Good afternoon, Roger. Can you please take me to 134 Chelsea Road?"

He curtly nods before beginning our journey. Roger would easily be in his sixties. His hair is silver with a scattering of black strands, and a thick silver mustache covers his top lip. From what I've heard, he's worked for Isaac since Isaac started his empire. Although he lacks personality, he has above par security skills, often quoting that he doesn't interact while on the job as it distracts him from performing his duties to the best of his ability. I can't really fault him for that, especially when his sole client is Isaac.

Since Roger isn't the talkative type, I keep my gaze on the scenery outside. Ravenshoe has so much of Isaac embedded in it. It's a strong community that's growing into a thriving city. With its growth overseen by Isaac, new housing and business developments are constantly under construction. It's large in size but not overly huge like big, overdeveloped cities.

Silly butterflies in my stomach take off in flight when Roger pulls in front of the office building I used to work at. "I'll only be a few minutes."

When I place my hand on Roger's shoulder, his dark eyes peer at me in the rearview mirror. "Yes, Ms. Brahn."

While gliding out of my seat, I exhale a shaky breath. I swear I wasn't this nervous the first day of my placement. A grin curls my lips from the hum of activity projecting from the small space when I stroll into the bustling office. Alex's team is small, but it's always been a hive of activity. There was never a dull moment—well, except when I was scanning my uncle's records into the FBI database with an outdated copy machine. That was as boring and tedious as it comes.

After hanging my wet trench coat on the coatrack near the glass door, I make a beeline to my old desk. An uprising of emotions hits me hard in the chest when I discover it remains



untouched. It still has the scrunched-up business card Isaac left for me at Harlow's bakery in the top drawer and a packet of Tic-Tac's sitting next to the keyboard.

Snubbing the tears pricking my eyes, my gaze strays to Alex's glass office. My breath snags in my throat when I catch his infuriating glare. His backside is propped on the edge of his desk, and his arms are crossed in front of his broad chest. I warily smile. He doesn't smile back.

I snatch Isaac's business card out of the drawer, shove it into my pocket, then hesitantly pace toward Alex's office. When I enter, he gestures for me to close the door. Nerves quiver in my stomach when the glass turns frosted. He only ever does that when I'm in trouble.

After releasing a handful of the butterflies in my stomach with a big exhale, I pivot around to face him. His eyes roam over my face before gliding down my body. I unclench my fists when his gaze stops at my balled hands.

While removing the sweat from my slicked palms onto my jeans, I take a seat in the chair across from him. Once I'm seated, he pushes off the desk and moves to sit in his chair in silence. My heart crazily palpitates when his stern blue eyes lock on mine. He waits for me to commence our conversation. It's an extremely long ten seconds.

"I'm here to advise of my resignation—"

"Shut up, Isabelle." My eyes bulge, shell-shocked at his bluntness. "For once, shut up and listen."

His anger quells my shakes by replacing it with unbridled fury, but before I can announce that, he continues, "Your resignation from my department has been declined. You

signed a contract, and you'll fulfill your obligation as stated in that contract."

I attempt to refute his statement, but my words entomb in my throat from the furious glare he directs at me. He's burning up everything because he just noticed the diamond on my ring finger. I thought he was angry before, but it has nothing on his fury now.

"You'll remain on unpaid leave until you've had time to *properly* evaluate the situation. Once you have all the *facts* and the chance to accurately formulate a decision on your position without Isaac influencing you, I'll consider accepting your resignation."

I cover my engagement ring with my right hand, protecting it from his bitter words. "Isaac isn't influencing my decisions. I made my own informed choice, and since I've *agreed* to become his wife, I can't ethically work for the department investigating him. It would be highly immoral for me to do."

"If you're worried about being immoral, then I highly recommend you remove the blinders you're wearing and take a step back. You're letting your feelings for Isaac blind your judgment. Lust and love are two very different things—"

"Like you'd know the difference."

His top lip twitches, advising that he heard my brash statement. "I'm not the enemy, Isabelle." He crosses his arms in front of his chest, then sinks low in his chair. "The man you're sleeping with is."

"You don't know him, so your opinion doesn't count."

"And you don't know him either."

"I know him." *I know him better than anyone.*

“Prove it,” Alex taunts, his tone condescending.

My mind spirals. How can I prove I know Isaac without breaking his trust? Everything he’s shared with me has been done in confidence, so I will not break his trust just to prove a point.

“I’m not falling into your trap. I’m not going to unwittingly incriminate Isaac.”

Alex twists his lips. “So you’re admitting he undertakes in criminal activities.”

“I didn’t say that.” My angry voice bounces off the whitewashed walls.

“You didn’t need to. The truth is all over your face. You know he’s a criminal just as well as I do.”

“You’re a real piece of work,” I snarl, rising from my chair. “First, you exploited Regan, a woman who *loved* you, all to get a fancy glass office, and now you’re doing the same thing to me. I’m not as stupid as you think I am, Alex.”

He abruptly stands from his chair with his fists clenched into balls at his side. “Sit down, Isabelle.” When I ignore his request by snagging my satchel off the floor, he shouts louder, “Sit down!”

His cheeks are bright red, his chest thrusting up and down with every inhalation he takes. He isn’t the only one angry. I’m beyond ropeable, blood roaring through my body so fast, my cheeks are flushed.

“This meeting is over. If you wish to speak to me again, you’ll need to go through Brandon, the union representative for our division.” My tone is surprisingly calm for how much my stomach is swirling.

My brisk strides to the door halt when Alex snarls, “Brandon doesn’t work for this division of the FBI anymore.”

“What?” I breathlessly question, peering back at him.

“Foolish mistakes cause statutory consequences. You can’t side with criminals and not expect repercussions for your actions.”

Disbelief covers my face. “You’re making a mistake, Alex. You’re so blinded by jealousy, you’re not seeing things clearly.”

“I’m not the one blinded.” He steps around his desk. “I’m trying to stop you from making a foolhardy mistake. To get you out of his clutches before you’re buried so deep you’ll never get out.”

“It’s too late. I’m already in that deep. I love him, Alex, and nothing you’ll say will change that.”

He laughs his scary witch-like cackle that sends nerves scuttling through my body.

I roll my eyes and continue with my pursuit to the door, my fast strides stopping when he discloses, “Isaac is working with Vladimir Popov.”

I’m paralyzed in shock, my hand gripping the door handle for dear life. Surely, I didn’t hear him right. There’s no way Isaac would work with my father. He knows how much I despise him. He knows what a monster he is. He wouldn’t betray me like that.

“He made an illegal transfer to Vladimir’s enterprise for the amount of two point four million dollars.”

I pivot around to face Alex, my footing unsteady since I’m unable to secure a full breath. “Isaac doesn’t have any dealings

with Vladimir. You must be mistaken.”

The harshness in Alex’s eyes softens when he spots tears pricking in mine. He yanks open the bottom drawer of his desk to pull out an FBI folder. He hesitates for only a second before he hands me the document wallet. My hand shakes when I flip it open. There is a heap of surveillance photos inside. The first thing my vision zooms in on is Isaac sitting at a table across from a gentleman I’ve seen in many photos the past few months. His face is familiar, but his name has slipped my mind.

“That’s Albert Sokolov.” Alex’s tone has returned to a normal level. “He’s Vladimir Popov’s number two man.”

I nod, recalling seeing his face in the records I scanned into the FBI database. With my heart on lockdown, I flip past the photos to a document that shows a series of money transfers.

“It took a lot of work tracking their payments through the numerous channels they used. They kept the transfers under ten thousand dollars not to trigger an alert, but I linked the original transfers from business accounts of Isaac’s to an associate of Vladimir’s.”

Remaining quiet, I scan the information unable to form a response to what I’m seeing much less Alex’s comments.

The next lot of surveillance photos show Isaac climbing the stairs of a private jet. With the distinctive buildings in the background, it isn’t hard to unearth he’s in Las Vegas. My heart painfully squeezes when I take in the date displayed in the bottom corner. It’s the day I went to the gala with Brandon, the same morning Isaac was too busy to take my call when I was frantic about Clara’s allegations.

After snapping the folder shut, I hand it back to Alex. As my mind struggles to unjumble the information overloaded in it, I keep my gaze focused on a speckle of dust on Alex's desk. My breath snags halfway to my lungs when my engagement ring glistens in the afternoon sun. I twirl it around my finger, recalling the glimmer Isaac's eyes held when I agreed to become his wife. There has to be more to this story than what's displayed in front of me. Isaac would never hurt me like this. He loves me, and I trust him.

"Thank you for sharing this information with me, but I trust Isaac. He'd never hurt me like this." My words are strong even though I feel anything but.

Alex's top lip twitches. "Isabelle, don't be foolish. You need to get out of his stranglehold and investigate this more thoroughly."

"I will. I'm going to. Just not here." I gesture my hand around his office. "I have to go."

When I reach the door, Alex questions, "Did you know Isaac and Regan kissed?"

After inhaling a deep breath, I turn around to face him. "Yes."

He balks, surprised by my response.

"And if you stopped and evaluated the facts like you're requesting me to do, you'd realize why they kissed. Isaac isn't a threat to your relationship with Regan, Alex. Only you are. And if you wait too long, you'll lose her, and you'll regret it every day of your life."

With that, I leave his office without a backward glance.

---

Ten minutes later, I'm pushing the buzzer for Brandon's apartment. Brandon lives in a fancy apartment building on Tivot street. It's the reason he was on the scene so quickly when Hugo was shot. He administered aid to Hugo until the first responders arrived. Hugo's memories of the incident are fuzzy at best. All he recalls is chasing the white Range Rover, then waking up in the recovery unit at the hospital. Lucky for him, Brandon is well-trained in first aid.

When Brandon fails to answer the buzzer, I step out of the alcove and glance up at his window. The living daylight is scared out of me when I'm suddenly grabbed in a tight squeeze. When I spot the boyish face of the person responsible for shoving me one step closer to my grave, I slap his shoulder.

"Jesus, Brandon, you scared the shit out of me."

He smiles his infamous lopsided grin. "Sorry, Izzy." He's dressed down in designer jeans and a thick wool coat and is balancing a brown paper bag of groceries on his hip. "What are you doing here?" His tone is friendly but with a dash of apprehension.

"I just left Alex's office."

His lips etch into a hard line as he curtly nods. After placing a code on the security door and opening it, he gestures for me to enter first. When I slip under his arm and walk into the warm, inviting foyer, he scans the street before following me inside.

I work out why he's so cautious when he asks, "Does Isaac know you're here?"

I grimace before shaking my head. “He’s in a meeting. I left him a note.”

He nods but remains quiet. When the elevator arrives in the lobby, he once again motions for me to enter first. Our ride to the fifteenth floor is done in silence, which is surprising. Usually, it’s hard to get a word in between us.

I follow Brandon into his lavish, well-decorated apartment. His furniture is high-end, but it still has a masculine bachelor-pad feel with dark colors and glass and steel features. The living area is nearly double the size of the one in my apartment, and the kitchen is even bigger than that.

After placing milk and perishable items into the refrigerator, he offers me one of the beers in his hand. I scrunch up my nose and shake my head. “Beer has never been my liquor of choice.”

“What about a glass of red, then?”

Not waiting for me to answer, he snags a wine glass from a frosted overhead cupboard and pours a generous helping of merlot into it. He hands the glass to me before entering his large living room. I shadow him, silently pondering why he’s so reserved. I’ve never seen him so skittish—not even when Hugo had his gun directed at his head.

When he sits on a dark blue suede sofa, I fill the spot next to him. After folding my legs under myself, I curve my body so I can peer at his profile. “What happened?” I don’t elaborate on my question, certain he knows what I’m referring to.

He takes a swig out of his beer before mimicking my position, minus the legs curled under his backside. “We had opposing opinions on a matter.”



“We’ve all had that with Alex, but nothing bad enough to warrant him letting us go—”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not concerned about my position.”

My eyes snap to his, shocked by his abrupt reply. This isn’t Brandon. He’s the friendly, never-has-a-bad-thing-to-say-about-anyone guy. I’ve only experienced this side of him once before. It was the day he told me Megan drugged Jenni and was suspected of killing her father.

“What’s going on, Brandon?” I dip my chin, coercing his eyes to mine. When I get them, I say, “Something is bothering you. You seem off, upset even.”

He takes another swig out of his beer before placing it on the steel and glass coffee table. He stares into the distance for several heart-thrashing seconds while sucking in big breaths. When his gaze drifts back to me, I lose the ability to breathe from the anxious look hampering his normally carefree face.

“If you knew something would hurt your friend, but you also knew they’d never forgive you if you didn’t tell them, would you tell them?”

I swallow, intuitively conscious that his statement is about me. It isn’t just the fact I can hear his heart hammering against his ribs. It’s the sorrow in his glistening eyes.

“Yes.” My throat works hard to swallow. “I’d want to know.”

“Are you sure, Izzy? Because once you know, it can’t be undone.”

Ignoring the swirling of my stomach, I nod again. After he squeezes my hand, he moves to his leather satchel hanging over a chair in his dining room.

“Alex told me about the payment between Isaac and Vladimir today,” I share when he pulls out a replica of the FBI folder Alex handed me earlier.

Brandon isn't shocked by my admission, revealing he's aware of their dealings. “This isn't regarding that.”

He sits in the space next to me, except a little closer, so our knees brush. The remorse clouding his eyes has my nerves sitting on a very steep cliff. My heart is pounding so furiously, I'm shaking like I'm cold.

After removing a six by ten-inch photo from the folder, he apprehensively hands it to me. The air in my lungs is forcefully evicted when my eyes lower to the picture. “No.” I snap my eyes up to Brandon, soundlessly begging for him to tell me what I'm seeing isn't true. “It can't be.”

“I'm sorry, Izzy.” Terror grips my heart as my greatest fear comes to fruition. “It's true.”

## CHAPTER 25



## ISAAC

“**S**top searching, she’s just walked in.”

Not giving Hunter the chance to reply, I snap my cell phone shut and turn my furious eyes to Isabelle. She left a note on the kitchen countertop three hours ago saying she’d return in an hour. I wasn’t happy she left without saying goodbye, but since she took Roger with her, I appeased my anger.

When an hour and a half ticked by, I called Roger. Jealousy engulfed me when he said he dropped her off at Brandon’s apartment an hour earlier. I’m trying to learn to control the vehement jealousy issues I have when it comes to Isabelle, but once another thirty minutes went by, and she still wasn’t answering her cell, I had Roger knock on Brandon’s door.

He answered but advised Roger that Isabelle had left forty-five minutes earlier. As untrusting of Brandon as I am, Roger searched his apartment. He was telling the truth. Isabelle had somehow snuck out of Brandon’s apartment building without being detected by Roger.

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve been panicked out of my mind.” I stand from my office chair and march toward her,

my anger unmissable in my brisk strides. “I’ve had half my security team searching for you.”

“I’m sorry—”

“You’re sorry,” I retaliate angrily, yelling. “I’ve been going crazy, and all you can say is you’re sorry.”

She doesn’t respond. She just keeps her gaze planted on the floor.

“Isabelle...” I want her to look at me while I’m speaking to her.

Her lips quiver when her eyes lock with mine. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I said I’m sorry.”

The anger scorching my veins dampens when I spot the tears forming in her eyes. “What happened? Did somebody hurt you? Are you hurt?”

My eyes scan her face and body searching for evidence of any injuries that I almost miss the shake of her head. “I’m all right.”

She’s lying.

“I went for a walk. I needed to clear my mind.”

Now she’s telling the truth.

“Clear your mind of what, exactly?” I sound calm, yet I’m anything but.

As she adjusts her hideous satchel on her shoulder, her gaze dances around my office, unable to maintain my eye contact. Something doesn’t feel right. She’s never been so evasive before. She’s too quiet and skittish. She’s never acted this way around me.

After removing her satchel, I throw it onto the couch before gathering her in my arms and striding to my desk. The hard knot in my stomach lessens when she nuzzles her nose into my neck and inhales deeply. I sit in my office chair, then pull her in close to my chest, vainly trying to secure a grip on her since it feels like she's slipping away. I wait, impatiently, for her to talk. Isabelle can't control her need to know everything. She blurts out questions before her brain can process them because she communicates with words. Where I, on the other hand, express myself physically.

It takes several long, tedious minutes before she finally speaks, "I want to go back to Tiburon." When I stiffen, her head pops off my chest. Her eyes are even wetter now. "Not forever. Just for a few days or a week to finalize some things there."

My breathing resumes, although agitated from the cagey cloud hampering her usually bright eyes. "I can arrange for someone to do that for you. You don't need to go back there. I'll have someone in my team take care of it."

"I want to do it." Her eyes bounce between mine. "It's... *personal*. I don't want strangers going through my belongings."

I brush a stray hair off her cheek that looks like it's been stained by tears. "Okay, I'll arrange for us to go to Tiburon sometime in the new year."

Her pupils widen as she swallows harshly. "Umm... I was thinking about going this week."

I shake my head. "I can't go this week. The two weeks over the Christmas and New Year period are the busiest weeks in my industry. I can't just go away for a week. I'm sorry, baby, I can't."

She places her hand on her cheek. “It’s okay. I understand.”

Relief floods me. I want to give her the world, so I would have hated to disappoint her.

“I’ll go by myself.” When I glare at her, she stammers, “You’ll be so busy with your empire, you won’t even notice I’m gone.”

“Bullshit!” I notice when she’s gone for an hour, let alone days. “I only just got you back, but you want to separate us again.” Remorse clutches my heart when tears spill from her bursting eyes. “I’ll take you back to Tiburon. You just have to wait two weeks.”

“I can’t wait that long.”

When her eyes drop to my chest, I grip her chin and hoist her face back to mine. I scan her beautiful face trying to decipher what happened in the last three hours that caused such a shift in her demeanor. This morning, she was flirty and playful when we fucked in the shower. Now, she’s so cold and distant, I no longer recognize the eyes staring back at me.

“Why do you really want to go back to Tiburon?” I keep my tone neutral, even with my blood boiling, remembering she is my wife-to-be, not a staff member I can boss around.

“I shouldn’t need to explain to you why I want to go home, Isaac. I just want to go home.”

“Tiburon isn’t your home. This is your home. *I’m* your home!”

Her lips thin. “Don’t yell at me! I’m not your staff.”

“Then stop giving me pathetic excuses and talk to me, goddammit!”

“I am, I’m telling you what I want, but you aren’t listening. I want to go home.”

With my mind scrambled, my voice rises to an angry snarl. “Why, Isabelle? Why do you want to go?”

She squirms, attempting to move off my lap, but I hold on tight, refusing to let her go. I let her go once. I won’t do it again. She tries to stifle a moan when her backside grinds against my crotch, but I still hear it. Isabelle craves assertiveness and control. She needs it to instill balance in her life, to stop her spiraling out of control as she is now. Her submissiveness is like a light switch, easy for me to turn on and off. It’s also the only time she’s fully exposed, unguarded, and raw.

“Is that what you want, baby? Are you restless?”

I brush my finger over her pert nipple. It buds even more from my meekest touch. Isabelle loves sex. Her appetite is insatiable, and I love that her prowess is on par with mine. She’s the first woman who can send me to the absolute brink of exhaustion, and I keep going because I can’t get enough of her.

I’ll never get enough of her.

“Is your greedy pussy begging for attention, baby?” My voice is throatier as my grip on reality falters.

Isabelle’s breathing quickens as she slumps into my embrace. The tears in her eyes dry as lust overwhelms them.

“You don’t have to fight me for my attention, Isabelle. I’m yours. If you need me, you tell me.”

She bites on her bottom lip as fresh tears pool in her eyes. “I don’t want to fight with you.”



“Then what’s this all about? Why are you being so evasive?”

She mumbles something under her breath, but she’s quiet enough I can’t hear what she says.

No longer able to leash my dominant behavior, I alter my tactics, hoping to force a reaction from her. When I suck her nipple into my mouth through her thin cotton shirt, her head flops back. A whimper escapes her parted lips when I tug on her erect nipple.

And just like that, Isabelle is submissive.

I stand from my chair, taking her with me. While striding to the master suite, I rock my hips, rubbing my thickened cock against the seam of her black sweatpants. When she nibbles on the cropped beard hiding my jawline, her breath tickles my neck. Having a beard is exactly how I envisioned. Isabelle squirms more than usual, and I can smell her seductive scent for hours after I’ve devoured her.

When I place Isabelle on her feet, her hand goes straight to the button on my jeans. My cock pulses against my zipper from her eagerness, but I step back. As much as I’d love for her to suck my cock, that won’t force her to tell me what her earlier defiance was about. So for now, it will have to wait.

Hooking my thumbs into the hem of her sweatpants, I yank them down her shaking thighs. A rough growl seeps from my lips when the scent of her arousal filters in the air. Once her shirt is pulled over her head and discarded along with her bra, I loosen the tie in her hair, growling when her dark locks fall past her shoulders.

My cock aches when I drink in the beautiful specimen in front of me. Isabelle’s body was created to make men fall to

their knees. The heavy swell of her breasts, the smooth and succulent curve of her hips, and her glorious bare mound that tastes as sweet as honey has my cock fighting to break free from my trousers, dying to claim her, mark her. To make her mine.

Her breathing turns excited when I secure her favorite blue tie from the walk-in closet. “Same rules. If you want me to stop, ask me to stop.”

Nodding, she laces her fingers together, then holds her hands out in front of her body. Her eyes are bright and eager, her pussy is slicked with wetness. She loves this—forcing my dominance, being controlled—but this time is different. This time, her eyes are evasive and hazed with apprehension. They’re the most guarded I’ve ever seen them.

Let’s see how long it takes to break her defiance this time around.

## CHAPTER 26



## ISABELLE

“*I*f you want me to stop, Isabelle, say it.”

My nails bend harshly as I crawl across the sweat-dampened sheets, trying in vain to get away from Isaac and his torturous cock. For the past hour, he’s been relentlessly teasing me, but no matter how many times I try to fire the word ‘stop’ off my tongue, it won’t happen. My body can’t say no to Isaac, even when he’s torturing it.

A moan ripples from my parched throat when he tightens his grip on my hips. My knees dig deeper into the mattress as the pounding of his cock increases. Even irrefutably furious at him, my body relishes every precise thrust. My sex greedily squeezes him, sucking him in deeper, convulsing around every glorious inch.

“Tell me why you want to go to Tiburon. Why you want us to be separated again?” he asks for the ten-hundredth time since we entered the master suite.

I give him the same answer I’ve given him the past hour. “I need some time to think.”

He grunts, not believing me before adding an extra roll of his hips to his unyielding pumps. My eyes roll into the back of

my head as he screws me with such wildness, every nerve in my body is overloaded, sparked, and ready to explode.

When his hand slides between my legs, I inhale a sharp, quick breath. He slides his fingertips over the swollen bud of my clit, coiling my womb into a constrictive hold that has my mind absent of any thoughts but my race to orgasm. Every hair on my body bristles at the same time the pummeling of his cock stops.

“No! Please!”

“Tell me why you need time to think.”

I square my shoulders before shifting my gaze to the other side of the room. Because I refuse to answer his question, he remains perfectly still, ensuring that all signs of my climax dissipate to a small simmer.

My clit is aching to be relieved of the tension that’s been building there the past hour. I’m covered from head to toe in sweat, open and raw, and feeling the most vulnerable I’ve ever felt.

When Isaac flips me onto my back, I squeeze my eyes shut, refusing to look at the man who is making my blood boil with both anger and ecstasy at the same time.

“Eyes, Isabelle.”

My eyes pop open when his tongue skims across my sensitive clit, my chase to climax strengthening when they collide with his dark, commanding gaze. Once he has my devotion, he consumes my pussy like a man starved of my taste. He plunges his tongue inside me, fucking me with as much intensity as his cock does. Tightness builds in my aching sex as a tingle zaps down my back. I thrash against the sticky

sheets as sparks of lightning shoot through my drenched sex. I'm so close, I can practically taste my orgasm in the air.

"No." I repress a cry when he pulls his sinful mouth away from my quivering pussy.

"Talk to me. Tell me why."

"I need time. This is too much. It's too soon. We're rushing," I stumble out, so overwhelmed and overstimulated, my lips are spilling concerns I never want to be voiced.

A soundless moan tears from my throat when he enters me again, his pace slower and more controlled than earlier. My pussy ripples around his heavily veined shaft, massaging and caressing him, encouraging him to lose his impenetrable control, but he's so defiant and obstinate. His eyes are set and controlled, displaying he could continue with this pace for hours if required. He won't give up until I give him every detail.

Until I give him everything.

"I can't give you any more than I've already given. I've given you everything." My voice is scratchy as I battle to keep my emotions under control. A gnawing pit burrowing a hole in my heart since I left Brandon's apartment deepens. "I gave up everything for you, and it still won't be enough. I'll never be enough."

Isaac doesn't relinquish the tempo of his thrusts as he says, "You'll always be enough, you're enough. You don't have to give up anything."

"I already have. I already gave it up. You stole it away from me."

"What did you give up?"

His thrusts increase, tormenting me to talk more, forcing my lips to express words I don't want to speak, but now that my emotions have been unlocked, I can't hold them back.

"Everything." Tears slide down my cheeks, adding more dampness to the already wet sheets. "I gave up everything."

"Like what, Isabelle? What did you give up?!" He swivels his hips to ensure the wide crest of his cock finds the sweet spot deep inside me. "Tell me what I stole."

"Everything," I sob through a hiccup.

"Tell me!"

"My career, my dreams of having a family, nearly my life. I gave it all away, I gave it all away for you, and it still won't be enough. It will *never* be enough. All my dreams are gone. They've all been taken away."

As soon as the words escape my lips, I want to ram them back down my throat.

When Isaac recoils, physically winded by my harsh words, I shake my head, cowardly trying to deny my cruel statement. "Isaac, I'm sorry—"

Any further words planning to seep from my mouth are replaced with a long, grunted moan from him grinding his thumb against my throbbing clit. At the same time, he rocks his hips, hitting the sensitive spot inside me that only he can find.

From the long build-up, my orgasm completely shreds through me, leaving nothing behind. My body tremors, and his name comes hoarsely out of my gaped mouth. It's a long, fierce climax that leaves me exhausted and utterly breathless.

My body is so lax and unresponsive, it takes me a few moments to realize Isaac has stopped thrusting his hips. My heart clenches when I catch sight of the devastation in his eyes, then a whimper scuttles from my lips when he withdraws his still rock-hard cock and climbs off the bed.

When he stalks out of the room, I flop back onto the mattress and throw my arm over my face. The guilt I'm carrying on my chest makes it hard for me to secure a breath. Tears trickle down my cheeks unchecked as I'm overwhelmed with remorse. I never meant to say those words. I was frustrated and hurt, but instead of telling him why, I lashed out.

Two minutes later, through quiet sobs, I hear tires shrieking in the distance. I scurry off the bed and race to the arched window. My footing is shaky since my legs are still quaking from my mind-blowing orgasm.

The red taillights of Isaac's Bugatti shine through the black night sky a mere second before the vibration of its motor booms through my chest as he impatiently waits for the steel security gate to open. The instant it does, his car skids out of the driveway, leaving a dark cluster of smoke in its wake. His speed is so furious, he becomes nothing but a speckle in the distance within seconds.

Through trembling thighs, I dig my sleek black cell phone out of my satchel, then hit the speed dial for Isaac's cell. The death grip on my heart increases when my call goes unanswered. Isaac always has his phone on him—he never goes anywhere without it. That means he's purposely ignoring my calls.

I leave a message on his voicemail, pleading for forgiveness. I tell him that I love him and that I didn't mean



any of the words I said.

When another thirty minutes pass without a return call, I crawl into bed. New tears prick my already tear-drenched eyes when I smell his captivating scent in the sheets. I swaddle myself in them, trying in vain to pretend I didn't just ruin everything.

That I didn't just break us.

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My eyes blink, unable to register why blinding rays are streaming through the window. It's only when my gaze shifts to my phone I'm clutching do I realize I must have fallen asleep. I'm lying in Isaac's king-size bed with the bedsheets wrapped around my naked body. Isaac hasn't returned all night. I don't need to open my eyes to know that. A man with his aura is felt more than he's seen.

Eager to fix my mistakes, I scamper off the bed, then rush into the walk-in closet to get dressed, my toes gripping the plush carpet. Once dressed in low-riding jeans and a designer long-sleeve shirt, I throw my hair into a high ponytail, then saunter out of the room. I don't bother checking my reflection in the mirror. I can tell how horrid I look without needing to witness it.

The pain in my chest increases with every step I take down the long hallway. I can hear Isaac's deep, stern voice roaring down the hall he carried me down many times, but I'm also panicked, hating that he came home but didn't come to me.

My hand trembles when I imprudently swing open his office door. He's standing behind his desk facing the arched window. He's dressed in a dark blue three-piece suit and

polished dress shoes. He continues with his conversation on his cell like he hasn't detected my presence, but I know he's noticed me as the instant I opened the door, he took in a quick breath.

"Friday night will be fine," he says into his phone, stepping closer to the window, placing more distance between us. "I don't need time to prepare, Henry. That's fine. It will. I'll have Cormack contact you with the details of the foundation later today."

He disconnects the call and places his cell phone into his trouser pocket. Keeping both hands in his pockets, he pivots around to face me. My pulse races when my eyes roam over his face. His neatly trimmed beard is gone, exchanged for a clean-shaven face that doesn't have a chance in hell of hiding the furious tick of his jaw.

"Isaac, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean—"

His livid glare stops any further words seeping from my lips. His eyes thin into tiny slits before they flick to the corner of the room. Following his gaze, I'm shocked to see Hugo standing firm. He's wearing his standard work attire of a black suit with a white business shirt underneath. Unlike the last time I saw him, his shoulder is no longer held in place with a sling. His face is neutral, absent of its normal cheekiness, but it's the anxiousness plaguing his eyes that causes my greatest concern.

"Hey, Hugo," I greet him, my voice cracking since my emotions are so rattled.

"Isabelle."

His lips curl in an uneasy smile before his gaze returns to Isaac. His composure exposes that he isn't here in the capacity

of a friend. He's here on business. I can barely breathe when Isaac moves to stand behind his desk, ensuring that there's something between us, keeping us apart.

When he reaches his destination, he glances down at papers on his desk instead of me. "A chartered plane has been arranged to take you back to Tiburon this morning."

"Thank you."

I pad closer to him, wanting to thank him for the leeway in his usually unwavering domination. His furious gaze sears me in place, stopping my lengthy steps mid-stride. His eyes are dark and haunted, filled with pain. I lace my hands together to hide their shakiness before locking my gaze with his.

"Hugo has the charter information and documentation required. He will accompany you to Tiburon."

My brows scrunch. "I don't need Hugo to go with me."

His furious glance has my pulse quickening and my knees curving inward. "You take Hugo, or you don't go, Isabelle." His voice is clipped and stern. "This term is non-negotiable."

I nod. It would have taken a lot for him to agree to let me go to Tiburon without him, so I don't want to push his boundaries even further by refusing his request to take Hugo.

He works his jaw side to side before saying, "I'm giving you a week, but I can't give you any more than that. If you aren't back in a week—"

"I'll be back," I speak through the lump in my throat, and the hurt in his beautiful eyes relodge. "I don't need any longer than that. I'll be back within a week."

The cloud of pain hampering his eyes lessens, but his anger remains firmly in place. "You better go pack. Your plane

leaves in an hour.”

He takes a seat in his chair before pulling it in close to his desk, dismissing me from his presence without speaking a word. That hurts. I hold in my tears until I enter the hallway, but even then, I have to fight to keep them to a bare minimum since Hugo is pacing behind me.

I pack the barest necessities, wanting Isaac to be aware I’m planning on coming back. If he looks in our closet, it’s hard to tell I packed. I’m even taking a new toothbrush, so my current one stays next to Isaac’s in the ceramic holder on the vanity in the master bathroom. I want it to be a silent reminder to him that I’m still with him, and I will be back.

“Is that it?” Hugo queries when I hand him an overstuffed carry-on luggage bag.

I nod.

His lips curl into a rueful smirk. “All right. I’ll meet you in the foyer. Roger will take us to the airport.”

Not waiting for my reply, he heads down the stairwell. I exhale a big breath to settle my nerves before ambling back to Isaac’s office. When I enter, he’s once again on his cell phone, standing near the arch window. When he notices me leaning in the doorjamb, his gaze shifts to me. His brows furrow when he spots my tear-stained face. His clipped tone advises his caller that he’ll call them back before he disconnects and puts his phone away.

My pulse quickens when he shifts on his feet to face me. “If you cry, I won’t let you leave.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, giving it my best shot not to let my tears fall. As much as me going back to Tiburon will hurt my relationship with Isaac, I need to do this. I need

answers to a whole heap of questions hazing my mind, and the only place I can get those answers is in Tiburon.

Not giving him a chance to reject me, I finalize the last steps between us, then throw my arms around his neck. I burrow my nose into the crook of his neck and inhale deeply, absorbing the delicious scent of his skin. My heart hammers my ribs when he pulls me in close like he doesn't want to let me go. He's gripping onto me for dear life, afraid I might vanish.

I place a kiss on his ear, his ticking jaw, then his mouth. "I love you."

Feeling my composure slipping, I whisper a faint goodbye, then race to his door. Before I can exit, he seizes my wrist, yanks me back, then seals his lips over mine. The salt of my tears enhances the flavor of our kiss. It's a lush, mind-spiraling embrace that's packed with emotion. I project my sorrow for my cruel words as well as my love.

By the time he pulls away, I want to forget everything. I want to sweep it under the rug and act as if it never happened, but I can't. I need to do this, or our relationship won't be built on a solid foundation. It will be once again founded on lies and secrets.

When Isaac cups my cheeks so his thumb can rub away my tears, I urge my tears to stop falling. I can't leave him crying, or our time apart will hurt him even more—he doesn't deserve more pain.

I impress myself with how quickly I can rein in my tears when it's for Isaac's benefit. I've never been able to stop my tears flowing before, but I'd do anything for the man standing in front of me—even breaking my own heart.

The concern in Isaac's eyes lessens when he notices mine are no longer welling with tears. After rubbing his thumb over the cupid's bow of my lip, he places a kiss on my temple, then abruptly pulls away. His fluid strides have him standing back near his office window quicker than the blink of an eye.

“Go now, or I'll never let you go.”

Pivoting on my heels, I rush out of his office, not risking the chance of looking back because right now, if he asked me to stay, I'd never leave.

## CHAPTER 27



## ISABELLE

*I* grunt while increasing the pressure on the door. Because of the build-up of mail placed in the slot, it's jammed with envelopes and catalogs.

Hugo's soft chuckles echo through my ears before he pushes on the door with one hand, opening it with ease.

I roll my eyes. "Thanks."

Tears prick in my eyes when I walk into the place I called home for eighteen years of my life. It looks the same as it did when I left. Even the wooden leg on the dining table still has the drawing I made one evening when Uncle Tobias and his friends were playing poker. I was supposed to be asleep hours earlier, but I hid under the dining table when no one was looking. I learned a lot of new Russian words that night—none worth repeating.

After I confessed about where I learned my new words from did Uncle Tobias unearth my masterpiece. Ever since the day he discovered my family portrait of him, Dedushka, and me, the table was no longer adorned with a tablecloth. My uncle didn't want my artwork hidden by an ugly tablecloth. That day was over fourteen years ago, but it still holds a special place in my heart.



I motion my head to the hallway. “You can put your bag in the spare room. It’s the third door on the right.”

Hugo’s lips curl into a grin before he enters the hall with his overnight bag. He packed as lightly as I did.

Even after an exhausting day full of tears, fear, and heartbreak, I head straight for my uncle’s office in the garage in the backyard, not wanting to waste any time. The flight to this side of the country was horrific, but thankfully uneventful. Although I’m confident Hugo’s hands will forever have my nails embedded in them.

Dust filters through my nose when I crack open the glass sliding door of my uncle’s office. This was my favorite room in the entire Brahn residence, not just because it has beautiful views of Tiburon esplanade down below, but because anytime my uncle was home from an assignment, we spent the majority of our time in here. He’d assign me my own case files that I had to work on during school holidays. I was his personal assistant/partner. Here is where my love for law enforcement was ingrained into my blood, and my fondness for investigating flourished.

That’s why I blurted out those cruel words to Isaac yesterday. I wanted to be an FBI agent from when I was ten years old, but Uncle Tobias would never allow it. He said it ran too much risk of my real identity being discovered. The repercussions for people finding out my identity wasn’t a risk he was willing to take. That was the sole reason I didn’t join the FBI until after he passed. And even though I’ll always choose Isaac over my career, part of the dreams I had from when I was a little girl vanished when I agreed to become his wife, but he’s worth the sacrifice. He will *always* be worth the sacrifice.

Snubbing the tears welling in my eyes, I head for the locked side room where Tobias stored all his case files. It doesn't take long for me to work out the four-digit lock code that secures the door from prying eyes. It is the date he officially bought me.

“Holy cupcakes,” I murmur when the overhead tube lighting flicks on in the stuffed room.

Walls upon walls of document boxes stretch as far as the eye can see. Every surface of the single garage is covered with moldy, wet boxes. The glimmer of an orange hue on one of the boxes gives away the reason why the room has a moldy smell. A tile in the roof is cracked, exposing the room to the elements.

After shrugging off my jacket, I throw it over an office chair before moving the drenched boxes out from beneath the hole in the roof. The cartons crumble under my touch, ruined after being subjected to elements the past three years.

By the time I hear Hugo calling my name, I've saved half the documents in the first two drenched boxes. The other half is completely destroyed. They're nothing but soggy papers with smears of black ink swirled on them.

Hugo walks into the room with a grin etched on his face. “I was getting worried you were trying to get me fired again.”

When I stick out my tongue, his grin enlarges. The curve in his lips bends downward when he spots the soaked boxes. “What's this room?”

“Years of hard work wasted.” I drag a box of ruined documents out of the room to be dumped onto the curb for waste collection. “Uncle Tobias never relied on computers. He

said they were too risky. I guess he never met a cracked tile before.”

Hugo chuckles before he helps me lift another saturated box onto the office desk to rummage through.

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Three hours later, our hands are covered with black ink from salvaging the documents we could, and Hugo’s tummy is grumbling.

“I’ll climb up onto the roof tomorrow morning to patch the hole the best I can, but you might want to get a professional out to look at it.”

A smile tugs my lips high. “Thanks. I guess I should feed you then, to make sure you don’t fade away before tomorrow morning.”

He chuckles a hearty laugh. “I don’t think there’s much chance of me fading away.”

No, there isn’t. Hugo is so well-built, his physique can’t even be hidden in a long-sleeve shirt, jacket, and loosely hanging jeans.

“Give me a second to get the box I originally came in here for, then I’ll order us some pizza from Maria’s.”

As I pace toward the aisle of boxes, my heart beats faster with every step I take. I glide down the wall of documents seeking the right number. My uncle coded his files according to the names of his targets and the dates he associated with them. So my file from when I was sold would be I09P01 because my name was Isabelle Popov and he purchased me in September 2001.

My heart stops beating when I come face to face with the box I'm searching for. Through shaking hands, I carefully remove the box marked O01P14 and pace back to Hugo. His eyes flick down to the box for several heart-thrashing seconds before they shift back to me. A cloud of suspicion taints his gaze, but he remains quiet as he removes the box from my grasp and walks back to the main residence.

After calling in an order for two large pizzas to be delivered, I grab a quick shower to freshen up before sauntering back to the eat-in kitchen. My breath snags when I discover Hugo rummaging through my uncle's files. He has several FBI folders marked with a red 'Confidential' stamp opened and spread across the wooden dining table. His brows are pulled together so tightly, a deep crease has embedded in his forehead, and his hand that isn't grasping a document is fisted into a tight ball.

"What are you doing? You can't go through that. Those files are highly confidential." I rush toward him and snatch the documents out of his hand.

"Confidential?" His brow cocks high into the air. "You're invading his privacy, and you're worried about confidentiality. Is this why you came here? Searching for answers to questions he can't answer yet?"

I don't reply to Hugo's interrogation. I just gather the documents and photos spread across the table while ignoring the brutal ache stabbing my chest so painfully, I can't breathe.

"If you want answers, you should keep asking them, not go behind his back and investigate him."

"I'm not investigating him—"

“Then what do you call it, Izzy? You’re looking into his past, digging through his *personal* life.”

“I’m not prying into his personal life.”

I jump, startled when Hugo slaps down a surveillance photo of Isaac taken seven years ago onto the wooden tabletop, followed by another, and another, and another.

“You’re not prying into his personal life, hey, then what the fuck is this?” His voice is drenched with anger. “He isn’t a criminal, but you’re treating him as if he is, not the man you’ve agreed to marry.”

The pain in my chest amplifies when his eyes dart to the engagement ring on my hand. I inhale a big breath while slipping my hand into the back pocket of my jeans to remove the photo Brandon gave me yesterday. The pulse in my neck thrums as I carefully unfold the picture. Hugo remains quiet, but I hear his jaw ticking in the uncomfortable silence.

When I hand him the photo, my hand rattles. His brows scrunch as he absorbs the picture, certain what he is seeing can’t be true. His breathing quickens as his eyes shift between the crinkled photo in his hand to the photos on the tabletop.

Once he thinks he has his facts straight, he returns his disbelieving eyes to me. “This can’t be true.”

“It is.” My lips quiver as I battle to hold in my tears. “This file proves it is. Ophelia is alive, and she’s been living in Tiburon the entire time.”

Ignoring the firm clutch on my heart, I place the photo Brandon supplied me with next to the photo of Isaac and Ophelia on a date at a café the night of her ‘accident.’ Even though Ophelia is older in the new photo, the similarities are identifiable—the turned-up nose, the light brown translucent

eyes, and the same shaped face, but the small heart-shaped mole in the crook of her neck is by far the most damning evidence.

I point to the white church in the photo. “I gathered she was here because that’s Old St. Hilary’s Church on Esperanza Street in the background. It’s a well-loved landmark of Tiburon.”

“Jesus Christ,” Hugo mumbles under his breath, his eyes lifting from the photo to me. “Does Isaac know about any of this?”

I shake my head. “No, I wanted to come and see for myself. I couldn’t risk hurting him if it weren’t true. If it weren’t really her.”

His nose screws up. “If it’s her, are you planning to tell him?”

I lift the latest photo of Ophelia off the dining table before nodding. The strain hampering Hugo’s face lessens from my agreeing gesture. “I just need to investigate everything first. To make sure I’m giving Isaac facts, not speculations. This photo is over four years old. When my uncle died, all updates on her also ceased. I can’t even guarantee she’s still in Tiburon, let alone if she’s still alive.”

My voice wavers on the last part of my statement. I know Ophelia is alive. I can feel it in the gnawing pit twisting my gut. You know that feeling you get when you’ve lost something, and you know you’ll never find it again. That’s what I’m experiencing right now. The more I investigate this, the more I risk losing Isaac, and I may never get him back.

Hugo takes in the mountain load of papers stored in Ophelia’s case file. “What do you need me to do, Izzy? What

can I do to help?” His eyes lift to me, briefly stopping at my engagement ring on the way by. “What can I do to make this easier for you?”

“Just remind me that he loves me,” I murmur as the first lot of tears splash down my face. “And that I’m doing this to ease his pain.”

I love Isaac so much, even knowing I could lose him won’t stop me from thoroughly investigating this. He deserves to stop living with the guilt of Ophelia’s death. He deserves to know the truth, and I plan to unearth exactly that, even if my heart gets shredded in the process.

## CHAPTER 28





## ISABELLE

“*A*re you sure this is the correct business?”  
Hugo huffs. “Yes.”

We’ve been sitting at the front of a family-owned pharmacy on the outskirts of Tiburon for the past hour and a half. This address was the only piece of correspondence we found in Ophelia’s case file. Hugo and I spent the majority of the night rummaging through the documents relating to her case, seeking any evidence on Ophelia’s current whereabouts. Since she was twenty when she was *saved* from her father’s clutches, she didn’t need to live with a family. From her file, we deciphered that my uncle set her up in her own residence. She had a rookie undercover agent assigned to her case in the weeks following her ‘death.’

All dates, times, and addresses have been redacted from the extensively-noted documentation, except for one small handwritten envelope. Inside the white envelope was a Christmas card. It didn’t have anything distinctive like names or addresses mentioned. It simply had two words written on the inside—*Thank you*. Although it could have been placed in the folder by accident, my intuition tells me the card was from Ophelia. After seeking assistance from Hunter, we determined the card was mailed from a postal box located on the sidewalk

of this pharmacy, so we've been sitting in a rental car for the past hour and a half praying for a miracle.

Hugo's apprehensive gaze shifts to me "That card was sent over four years ago, Izzy. She may not even live in this area anymore."

"I guess there's only one way to find out."

I unlatch my seatbelt and throw open the car door. I'm halfway down the concrete sidewalk before Hugo catches up with me. He doesn't say anything, but I can see the apprehension on his face. The blood rushing through my veins overheats my body, coating me in sweat, so the heating in the pharmacy is ghastly upon entering.

A lady in her mid-fifties greets us with a smile when she hears the bell above the door chime. "What can I get you folks today?"

"I'm not here to purchase anything. I'm here searching for a friend."

The suspicion in her eyes grows, but she remains quiet. I remove the most recent photo of Ophelia I have from my pocket and hand it to her. "I met her at a mutual friend's wedding at Old St. Hilary's Church four years ago." I use my knowledge of the local landmarks in Tiburon to my advantage. "It was a beautiful wedding with the views of Tiburon, Belvedere, and San Francisco in the backdrop. I snapped that photo before we went to the wedding reception at the Arts and Garden Center. The restored cottage there is to die for."

Hugo smiles at my posh voice, but it's working as the suspicion in the pharmacist's eyes dampens more with every word I speak.

“We exchanged contact details, but before I knew it, I was married myself.” I lace my fingers with Hugo’s, shocking him. “And four years just flew by.”

“Oh golly gosh, time does fly when everyone starts having babies and getting married. I remember when I was—”

“Yes, so as you can imagine, I’m dying to see her again,” I interrupt when she gets that gleam in her eyes that says she’s ready to give us her entire life story. “So, if you could help us reconnect, I’d be eternally grateful.”

She smiles. “Of course.”

When she gestures us to follow her to the counter, I squeeze Hugo’s hand before shadowing her. “Thank you so much.” My voice is laced with both excitement and graciousness. “I can’t wait to reconnect with Ophelia again.”

Her hasty movements halt before she pivots around to face me. My breathing lowers when I notice her eyes are once again tainted with suspicion. After crossing her arms in front of her chest, she glares at me. Her stare is so white-hot, a sweat mustache forms on my top lip.

“Ophelia?” she questions, her brow raised.

I try not to balk when Hugo bands his arm around my waist and pulls me into his side, but the slightest bit of hesitation crosses my face. “Her name wasn’t Ophelia, sweetheart.” He presses a kiss to my hairline, muttering for me to follow along. “Sorry, you must forgive her, she’s pregnant, and even though she’s only three months, the baby brain is already kicking in.”

I slap Hugo on his chest, feigning daftness. My act must be convincing as she appears to be accepting Hugo’s bogus claims.

“Congratulations.” She sighs as the glint I referenced earlier returns stronger than ever. “When I was pregnant with my first child, I had baby brain horrendously. For months and months, I couldn’t even remember my own name, let alone a friend I met years before.”

I force a fake smile on my face when her story drags for another ten plus minutes. Once she finalizes her brain-sucking story, she cranks her neck, then shouts, “Olivia, there’s a lady here requesting to see you.”

Hugo tightens his grip on my waist to stop me from tumbling to the ground in a heap when Ophelia emerges from behind the pharmacy counter. She’s wearing a white pharmacist coat with Olivia stitched on the top right-hand side in black thread, but I know it is her.

That feeling of loss I was experiencing earlier overpowers me when my eyes scan her face. She’s even more beautiful in real life than her photos showed. Her smile is bright and heartfelt. Her eyes are unique and dazzling, and her skin is even clearer since she’s no longer in her teen years as she was in the photos I regularly scanned of her.

Her eyes flick between Hugo and me, seemingly confused. “Hello.”

I can’t breathe, much less formulate a response to her greeting. I’m standing across from a woman who has more influence on the man I love than I do. This can’t get any worse.

The longer we remain quiet, the more Ophelia’s brows join. Thankfully, the awkwardness inflicting our gathering weakens when a little boy with dark hair charges across the room. “Mom, you should see the size of the fish we caught! The water was so freezing, the fish was frozen with its mouth

open.” He stops talking to pull the face of a fish out of water. “Pa tried to make me kiss it, but fish are disgusting. It smelled so bad, I wasn’t going to kiss it.” He talks so fast, his words come out in a mumbled slur.

My chest weighs down with heaviness when it dawns on me that he’s calling Ophelia his mother.

“You shouldn’t kiss fish.” Ophelia scrunches up her pointed nose while running her fingers through the boy’s messy hair. When she glances behind my shoulder, her eyes narrow into slits. When I follow her gaze, I spot a gentleman in his mid-fifties pacing toward us. “Pa shouldn’t be encouraging you to kiss fish.”

The gentleman laughs a hearty chuckle before he places a kiss on the pharmacy tech’s head. “I was just ensuring he got his daily dose of fish oil.”

Ophelia giggles, making the stranglehold on my heart intensify. “We have vitamins for that.”

I remain quiet with my eyes flicking between the little boy, who I’d guess is around the age of six, and Ophelia. The swirling of my stomach kicks up a gear when I recall Isaac sharing information about the night he fought Ophelia’s brother, CJ. About her being overdue for her period and having a stomach bug the two weeks before the fight.

I suck in shallow breaths, weakening the dizziness making my footing unsteady before shooting my eyes back to the little boy. When he glances up at me with a smirk etched on his plump lips, I can no longer hold in the contents of my swishy stomach.

After excusing myself, I dart out of the single glass pharmacy door.

“Oh, poor dear, she must still be suffering from morning sickness. When I was pregnant...” is the last thing I hear before I lose my frosted flakes breakfast in the waste receptacle on the sidewalk outside of the pharmacy.

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I use the sleeve of my shirt to wipe away the remnants of vomit off my chin when Hugo gathers me in his arms. His woodsy smell helps to settle the flips and turns my stomach is doing, but nothing eases my despair.

Not a word seeps from his lips when he sits me into the passenger seat of our rental car, buckles my seatbelt into place, then jogs around to hop into the driver’s seat. I try to formulate words, to articulate something about what just occurred, but my words stay trapped in my throat, refusing to be relinquished.

I’m not surprised when Hugo drives us straight to the private airstrip we flew into yesterday afternoon. We agreed last night that as soon as we unearthed what really happened to Ophelia, we’d immediately inform Isaac of our discovery in person. My agreement was the only way I stopped Hugo from calling Isaac last night.

When we pull into the airport hangar thirty minutes later, Isaac’s private jet is on the tarmac, warm and ready to go. The crew was advised that the plane must be ready for departure with minimal notice required because Isaac didn’t want any delays separating us longer than necessary. My heart was initially warmed by that statement, but now it’s full of panic because every mile I get closer to Isaac means I’m closer to losing him forever.

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For the past three hours, Hugo has aimlessly flicked through outdated magazines. He's not reading any articles. He's too busy eyeballing me to pay attention to anything else.

I put his gawking to good use. "How old do you think Ophelia's son is?"

He sets down the magazine to scrub the five o'clock shadow on his chin. "Five or six," he replies, his voice uneasy.

"So the dates could add up. He could be Isaac's son."

Since my comments are more statements than questions, Hugo doesn't respond. He just wearily smiles before moving into the spare seat next to me. Fresh tears prick in my eyes when he drapes his arm around my shoulders, offering me silent comfort, but even devastated, I don't shed a tear. I'm out of my quota of tears for the day.

"You can't fight fate, Izzy." The deepness of his voice vibrates right through me. "But that doesn't mean you should give up. Isaac gave you an engagement ring as a promise. He's never spoken those words to another woman before, so that alone shows your importance to him. You need to have faith that things will work out the way they're meant to."

I inhale a lung-filling gulp of air before nodding. After everything Isaac and I have endured the past few months, I believe our relationship is strong enough to pass the most strenuous tests. But this time is different. I'm not going against a woman who wants to compete for Isaac's heart. I'm battling a woman who already owns a portion of it. It doesn't take a genius to know that this will be one of my hardest fought battles, but that doesn't mean I won't give it my best shot.

## CHAPTER 29





## ISAAC

“*T*he transfer of assets has been approved as you requested.”

I press my cell phone closer to my ear, ensuring I can hear Parker over the roaring chant of the crowd. “Is it the original asset I secured?”

“Yes. I informed them that you wouldn’t be willing to accept anything less than what you purchased.”

“Good. I’ll have the transport information and logistics forwarded to you by tomorrow afternoon. This sale needs to remain confidential. I can’t run the risk of anyone finding out about my business dealings with Vladimir.” *Especially Isabelle.*

“I understand, and the transport team has been debriefed on the situation.”

“Good, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

I disconnect our call, then place my cell into the gym bag at my side. Cormack’s amused but guarded gaze follows me when I stand from the bench seat I’m sitting on. He remains quiet as I do a set of reps to ensure my muscles are firm and warm, meaning they’ll be less likely to sustain damage from any blows that may be inflicted on them.

Six years has passed since I last undertook this warm-up routine, but it feels like no time at all. The only difference this time around is Ophelia isn't fretfully pacing.

"Are you sure you want to do this? You aren't as young as you were back then." Cormack hands me a white towel to run over my sweat-drenched head since I've finalized my thirty-minute routine. "You're still as cocky, but that doesn't mean you're as fast as you once were."

My chuckle echoes in the quietness of the locker room. "Are you worried about me getting hurt? Or you losing your twenty percent cut since all the proceeds go to charity?"

Cormack's brows furrow. "I guess I better cut back on the cigars and whiskeys at your restaurant next week to save me some coin for a rainy day."

I laugh even louder. He could never work a day in his life if he wanted to live off his family inheritance. But just like me, everything he has in his life, he's achieved himself.

My chuckles die down when I catch the live broadcast of the pre-fight banter on a color television hanging in the corner of the room. Ever since Henry Gottle, Jr. announced a charity match between the current heavy-weight contender for our region and me, I've been inundated with requests for interviews.

Most people are unaware of how I gained the capital to start my empire. The main rumor is that it was funded by drug trafficking, but drugs have never, and will never, run through my empire. Due to the lack of knowledge, fight commentators believe I'm going into this charity match blindfolded. I've seen fake eulogies of my death, cartoon artists have sketched me with my head removed and dangling from The Constrictor's hand, and the fight commentators are remarking

that tonight's match will be a prime example as to why a businessman should stick to business proposals and not boxing rings. Their taunts have made me determined not to walk out of that ring until their ideas about my reputation have significantly altered.

In all honesty, I only truly considered Cormack's suggestion after my encounter with Isabelle. And while I'm being totally forthright, I'll admit hearing Isabelle say I stole her dreams cut through me like a hot knife through butter.

I want to give Isabelle the world. Everything I have, I want to share with her, so it killed me to hear that she abandoned her dreams to be with me. If I were a better man, I'd let her go so she could live her life the way she envisioned, but I can't. Although her statement cut me raw, everything she said was true, but I'm a selfish man, and I refuse to give her up. I'm struggling being away from her the past two days as it is, let alone for a lifetime.

It's taken all my restraint the past two days not to charter a jet to Tiburon and bring her home kicking and screaming against her will. But I gave Isabelle a week to work through whatever neuroses she's having about our relationship. If she doesn't return in a week, I'll go to Tiburon and bring her home myself. Isabelle is mine, and I have no intention of ever giving her up. We've already walked through the gates of hell, and our relationship came out the other end stronger, so I'm confident this latest battle will only make our relationship even stronger.

My attention is diverted from the two fight commentators on the screen when I become aware of Isabelle. My pulse increases as my eyes lift to the entrance of the locker room. I'm not surprised when I find the doorway empty. It's been my

lingering wish the past thirty-six hours that Isabelle would miraculously appear, leaning in the doorway of my home office like she has every morning since we became engaged, to have her sleep-weary eyes absorb my body before she kisses me good morning like she's starved of my taste. I've gone two mornings without experiencing her endorphin-inducing kisses and forty-eight hours since I've had her beneath me. Although it has only been two days, it feels like a lifetime.

Isabelle is the main reason I agreed to participate in this charity match. I need to bang my chest, to show I'm still a man who should be feared. Because although Isabelle has defrosted my cold insides, making me appear less ruthless than I once was doesn't mean the reputation I fought hard to achieve should be disregarded. If anything, it should create more caution. As now, I'm not just protecting my empire, I'm defending something much more valuable. Something I'd never allow anyone to harm. Something I'd kill for just to be safe. There are no boundaries to how far I'd go to keep Isabelle protected. That, in itself, should be greatly feared.

I've just finished securing a pair of black gloves to my hands when a fight promoter enters the locker room to advise it's time for the match to begin. I shoot Cormack a cocky wink before I follow a bursting-at-the-seams Henry Gottle, Jr. down the corridor. This charity match has created such a buzz in the industry, they're looking at expanding it to other regions. Ticket sales alone increased thirty percent from the regularly-scheduled events. It's the hype Henry has been actively seeking since he became a promoter three years ago.

Unlike his father, all Henry's dealings are strictly above board, even when you're evoking a favor. Just like Isabelle, Henry doesn't believe your hands need to be stained to make an impact in the world. Although I'm sure his logic was

severely tested when handling his divorce from Delilah Winterbottom. That woman would easily provoke any man to stretch his limitations on what was classed as morally ethical.

The roaring chant of the crowd intensifies with every step I take toward the ring. My blood turns potent, spurred on by the adrenaline coursing through my veins. I've always quoted that my time in the underground fight circle was purely to gain enough capital to establish my empire, but in all honesty, I fought because I relished it. The rush of adrenaline, the challenge, and the thrill of a win kept me coming back week after week. If it was all about the capital, I could have stopped fighting within six months. I didn't. I continued fighting for nearly two years as I savored it. I was in my element.

I'm *in* my element.

---

"You're still one crazy son of a bitch," Cormack chuckles as he shadows me down the corridor after my match against The Constrictor.

Although the fight went on a little longer than I'm accustomed to, it was a decent match that kept the spectators sitting on the edges of their seats. The Constrictor is a well-built brute of a man. His shoulders are nearly double the width of mine, but that brought up the notion, 'the bigger they are, the harder they fall.' And he hit the boxing mat on numerous occasions throughout the night. Call me conceited, but I wiped his arrogant smirk right off his abhorrent face, and I loved every minute of it.

"Is this going to become our regular Friday night schedule again?" Cormack's tone is full of sarcasm.

He can be playful. It isn't his body he's putting on the line. Although I'm walking away with my undefeated title still firmly in place, I'm sporting a few bruises and a possible cracked rib I didn't have earlier. After sitting on the bench seat in the locker room, I remove the tape from my hands. My body is flushed with heat, the blood pumping through my veins as hot as the sun. There's only one other thing that can cause this much adrenaline in quick succession. That thing is Isabelle. My Achilles heel. My hardest fought battle. *Mine*.

---

An hour later, after being given the all-clear from the medical team, I drive through the gates of my private residence. When I exit my Bugatti, I feel Isabelle's presence before I see her. She's leaning against the French doors of my home, wearing a pair of super-tight denim jeans and a black ribbed sweater. My cock hardens when my eyes roam over one of the most captivating faces I've ever seen. Sexual energy crackles between us, making my blood even more potent as the thrill of the hunt scorches through my veins.

In the corner of my eye, I catch the quickest flash of a grin from Hugo before he jumps into his Chevelle parked in the shadow of the night. He tears out of the driveway, leaving the scent of burning rubber in his wake.

Isabelle nervously fiddles with the hem of her sweater as my lengthy strides span the distance between us. Although her eyes are still guarded, they're sparked with lust. She's yearning to be touched. Consumed. Devoured.

"Isaac." The huskiness of her voice has my cock stiffening more.

“No, Isabelle. Not now, not yet.”

I crowd her against the door, leaving not even an inch of air between us.

“We need to talk.” Her voice is barely audible over the roaring of my pulse in my ears.

“I know, baby, but not now.”

I seal my mouth over hers, not giving her the chance to protest. It’s been too long since I’ve tasted her delicious lips. My body is still pumping with adrenaline from the fight, but seeing her again has sparked a new type of adrenaline to streak my blood.

Within a second, her determined stance goes lax, and her arms sling around my neck. When I grope the back of her thighs, her legs curl around my waist. Her switch from resolute to submissive is quick and complete.

I rock my hips, ensuring she can feel the effect she has on my body. She isn’t the only one who becomes lost when we’re together. My astuteness, my levelheadedness, my ruthlessness, it all becomes null and void when her mouth is on mine.

My kiss steals every whimper escaping her mouth as my stiffened shaft rubs the seam of her jeans. I don’t know if any of my staff are still in the vicinity, and in all honesty, I don’t care. No one else matters when Isabelle is on my radar.

Not a soul.

My blood thickens, enticed by the mass injection of endorphins from Isabelle’s mind-blowing kiss. She makes me feel invincible like nothing could ever stop me from achieving my dreams, and I want it to be the same for her. That’s why I spent the last thirty-six hours doing precisely that, ensuring I decipher how she can have both her dreams and me. Once all

the pieces of the puzzle are in place, I'll show her that I didn't steal her dreams, they were just hidden from view for a few months.

When I pull back from our embrace, Isabelle's eyes bounce between mine. She doesn't need to speak. Her eyes are expressive enough. Her sorrow for her harsh words and her silent pleas for forgiveness are all relayed by her rich chocolate eyes. No words need to seep from her lips for her to articulate her remorse.

I press a kiss to her palm before placing it on my heart, soundlessly forgiving her.

Tears form in her eyes as she replies to my declaration of love with words. "I love you too."

Her breaths quicken when I walk us down the long hallway of my residence. She intakes a quick, sharp breath when I swing open the bedroom door at the end of the hall, her arousing purr hardening my cock.

When I push my lips to the shell of her ear, the hairs on her neck prickle. "If you ever try to leave me again, I'll tie you to that swing and never let you leave this room."

She shudders in my arms as her thighs strengthen their grip on my hips. I snap my eyes shut and inhale deeply, relishing the smell of her skin mingled with the scent of her arousal. Once I've had half my fill, I pace us toward the sex swing hanging in the middle of the room, my lengthened strides only stopping when Isabelle murmurs, "Ophelia is alive."



## CHAPTER 30



## ISABELLE

Other than Isaac stiffening, I would assume he didn't hear my statement. On the flight back to Ravenshoe, I envisioned ways of telling him more judiciously, but my plans flew out the window when I saw the determination set in his eyes—the yearning to claim and mark me as his, to ensure I was aware I belonged to him. His dominant nature beams out of him. It's as natural to him as breathing, but I don't want him to claim me when he's not aware of the extenuating circumstances that may change his mind about whom he wants to claim.

I love Isaac, but even I know that may not be enough anymore.

My initially devised tactic already altered once tonight when I arrived at the arena where Isaac was preparing to participate in a charity fight. When I saw him sitting on the bench with his head hanging low, deep in thought, I knew I couldn't share my discovery with him in that environment. Tonight was the first time he's stepped foot into the ring since Ophelia's 'accident.' That, alone, showed he was emerging from the dark cloud that's been plaguing him since her 'death.'

Even knowing Ophelia is alive, Isaac needed to go through that process to help him heal. Although I bit my nails the

entire time, I watched his fight from the side of the arena. The instant I spotted his succulent smirk, I knew I made the right decision. He loved every second of the match, even getting battered and bruised.

My gaze turns down to Isaac, waiting for some reaction. He remains quiet with his darkened eyes flicking between mine. My heart bleeds when he places me back onto my feet, then takes a step back. His eyes are clouded with confusion, and his ruthless businessman mask is secured firmly in place.

“My uncle saved her from her father’s clutches.” My voice comes out trembling to match the flipping of my queasy stomach. “She was never in an accident. She’s been living in Tiburon the entire time.”

A look I’ve never seen crosses over his face before it vanishes as quickly as it came. He stands across from me, completely motionless. His shoulders are square and taut, and his lips are etched into a harsh, thin line.

“Say something.”

His silence is cutting deeper than any words he could possibly say, proving people who claim ‘silence is golden’ have obviously never been in his presence when he’s staring at you like you’re a stranger, where mere minutes ago, he was peering at you in awe. He’s never been a communicator, preferring to use his body to express himself rather than words, but his silence weighs heavily on my chest, amplifying the pain crippling me.

The clutch gripping my heart firms when I take a step toward him, and he shakes his head, soundlessly rejecting me. Realizing he most likely needs answers, I dig the photo Brandon gave me out of the pocket of my jeans. After smoothing out its wrinkles, I hand it to him. The tremor

zapping my arm makes the picture shake like a feather in a hot summer breeze.

“Her name is now Olivia. She’s a pharmacist in a town on the outskirts of Tiburon.”

The darkness in Isaac’s eyes changes when they dart down to assess the picture. I balk when he snatches it out of my clasp to appraise it. His eyes flick as he ticks off each of Ophelia’s unique features. I did the same thing when my eyes first absorbed this photo—same nose, same eyes, same face, same heart-shaped mole.

I lick my lips, soothing their dryness so I can continue with my story before I lose the nerve. “She has a child. A little boy.”

The temperature in the room turns roasting when Isaac’s eyes rocket back to mine. Sweat beads on my neck before it trickles down my spine.

“How old?” His voice is the deepest I’ve ever heard it.

“At a guess, I’d say around six.”

Knuckles popping echo around the room before he makes a beeline for the door. I stand frozen for a beat, my mind unable to comprehend what’s transpiring. After several heart-thrashing seconds, I snub the stabbing tearing my heart in two and take off after him. My lungs stop working when I discover him in the master suite packing an overnight bag. Every nightmare I imagined comes to fruition as I watch him move around the room, gathering enough necessities to last him a minimum of three days.

I sit on the bed, not wanting to impede his quest to pack quickly. My heart aches and my stomach is churning, but I predicted this exact reaction.

I just wish it didn't hurt so much.

As he secures the zipper on his bag, his eyes float over my face for the quickest second. His brows furrow, seemingly surprised, like he's already forgotten I'm here.

“Isabelle. I have to go. I have to do this.”

Unable to speak through the lump in my throat, I simply nod. The air is sucked from my lungs when he crouches down in front of me. Having his gorgeous face this close is just cruel when I'm seconds from losing him. After cupping my cheeks, he presses a quick peck to the edge of my quivering mouth, stands, then leaves without so much as a backward glance.

The rumbling of his engine sounds through the eerie quietness of his house a few minutes later. Then not long after that, the silence matches the sentiments of my heart—empty and hollow.

I crawl into a ball in the middle of our bed and sob, hurt he could leave me so quickly, and how easy it was for him to forget the promises we've made to each other the past few months.

I cry and cry until there are no tears left.

---

The next morning, the devastation of my loss is still twisting my stomach, but as the day goes on, it's joined by the piquant grasp of anger. My annoyance is so paramount, it visibly shakes through my body, flushing my skin with a hue of pink.

---

Ignoring the pain shredding my chest into pieces, I pad to the walk-in closet and find the sluttiest outfit I have before preparing my makeup for a night out on the town. My spur-of-the-moment decision to go dancing with Cate has been incited by Isaac's lack of communication all day. He maintained complete radio silence. Not a text. Not a phone call. Not even a Facebook message. *Nothing*.

Once I have my face perfectly made up, I guzzle down the last mouthful of chardonnay in the bottle before making my way downstairs. My footing is a little rickety, not just because of the dangerously high stilettos I'm wearing, but because I've had a few glasses of liquid courage to ensure I can leave Isaac's residence unaccompanied and for the last time. Even though my levelheadedness evades me whenever I'm in Isaac's presence, I'm smart enough to know only a fool would remain living in a man's house that she no longer has any claim to.

Pain grips my heart when I snag my clutch purse from the kitchen counter and amble toward the front door. I place my cell phone and engagement ring into the crystal bowl on the entry table, along with a handwritten note for Isaac, choosing the coward's way out. I'm too much of a chicken to confront him in person, and this way, I won't have to witness seeing him with Ophelia. My heart would never survive seeing that.

After one final glance of the foyer, I head outside to wait for the taxi I called an hour ago, my heart cracking more with every step I take.

---

Cate greets me at the front of The Dungeon parking lot with a big grin. She's wearing a pink, sleeveless sequined dress that

showcases her petite body in a fitting light. Her shoes are sparkly and black, adding a few inches to her short stature, and her tangy citrus smell engulfs me when she throws her arms around my neck.

“Izzy, you look like a naughty little devil,” she playfully chides when she takes in my super tight, black lace mini dress that leaves nothing to the imagination. I was aiming for the naughty devil look, so her comment gives credit to my outfit selection.

“Hi, Cate, you look ravishing.”

After wrapping her arm around the crook of my elbow, she guides us toward the entrance of the nightclub. “We better get you inside before Isaac catches sight of you in that dress. He’ll lock you up so the drove of men can’t charge at you.”

I stiffen for only a second. Thankfully, it isn’t long enough for Cate to notice. I’m not surprised to observe the line to enter The Dungeon stretches for as far as the eye can see. That can be expected, considering it’s New Year’s Eve. That’s the reason my anger is even more supreme today. Isaac only told me days ago that he couldn’t take any time off during this time of the year. But last night, he left without a word being spoken to any of his staff members. After fielding calls from Roger and Tina today on his home landline, I soon realized they’re as much in the dark as I am to Isaac’s current location.

I know where he is. My heart just chooses to ignore the facts displayed in front of it.

“Travis, this is Cormack’s sister, Cate. Cate, this is Travis.” My voice only slightly slurs during my introduction since the last few glasses of chardonnay are pumping into my veins.

“Wowzers, your head is nearly as big as my whole body.” Cate’s eyes bug before they appreciatively scan the monster-size bouncer in front of us.

I snort before my panicked eyes shoot to Travis, wanting to gauge his reaction to Cate’s jibe. I’m surprised when I notice his beaming white smile. This is the first time I’ve seen his smile.

I gag when Travis mutters, “That’s not even my biggest body part.”

“That’s disgusting.” I drag a shocked-faced Cate into the jam-packed nightclub. “He’d snap you in half.”

Cate’s chuckle gains her the attention of a handful of men. “Isn’t that the point?”

Now, I understand why Harlow has become Ms. Party Queen the past few months. I’ve only spent five minutes with Cate, and I can already tell my night is going to be interesting, indeed.

---

After an hour of dancing to the latest club hits, I head to the bar, wanting to replenish the fluids I’ve lost bumping and grinding with Cate. The Dungeon has always been popular with the younger crowd due to its ‘eighteen-plus’ drawcard, but tonight, it’s so packed, I wouldn’t be surprised if the fire department arrives to shut them down for being over-capacity.

When the good-looking male bartender serves me the margarita I ordered, I move down the bar hoping to find a spare stool to rest my tired feet. A grin tugs my lips high when I spot a vacant spot right down the very end.



“Excuse me, is this seat taken?” I ask a gentleman in his mid-twenties with long blond hair. I have to shout to project my voice over the thumping music blaring out of the speakers.

He stops talking to his male companion and turns to face me. He grins as his green eyes scan my body. After his vivid assessment is finalized, his eyes return to my face. “Not at all, please take a seat.”

I plop into the seat before shifting my gaze to seek Cate amongst the swarm of sweaty bodies moving in sync to the bass of the music. She wanted to continue dancing with a group of guys and girls her age when I said I was going to order a drink.

The glimmering of her sequined dress is the first thing I spot, closely followed by her broad smile. I was apprehensive when she texted me this morning about going out tonight, but now that I’m here, I’m glad she encouraged me to let loose. It’s nice to have a distraction from the twisting pain in my heart.

My attention is diverted from the dance floor when the blond man next to me drags his stool close enough, his heated breaths fan my earlobe. My focus shifts to him just as his friend whispers something in his ear. The blond’s eyes widen, and he nods before he excuses himself, leaving a vacant chair next to me.

I shrug at his weirdness before continuing with my love of people watching.

---

Thirty minutes later, the snarky chuckle of Tina booms through my ears. I stop slyly sniffing my armpit to lift my

confused gaze to her. She snarls arrogantly before she continues serving patrons demanding service.

“You don’t smell,” advises the male bartender who served me earlier.

“Are you sure?”

For the last thirty minutes, I’ve been sitting in the same position with two spare stools on each side of me. The bar is so packed, everyone should be scrounging for a chair, but numerous partygoers have chosen to remain standing instead of occupying the free spaces next to me. I was sweating profusely on the dance floor earlier, but I wasn’t aware my perspiring smell was *that* off-putting.

The bartender replenishes my cocktail glass before his hazel eyes peer into my self-conscious gaze. “Isaac put out a warning.”

My brows scrunch. “A warning?”

“Yep. If any guy gets too close to you, they’ll cop the wrath of his fury.”

“Pardon me?” My tone is breathy from my heart rate kicking up a notch.

He cranks his head to check Tina’s location before he places his cocktail mixer onto the glistening countertop. The muscles in his arms flex when he stretches across the bar. “You probably don’t remember me, but we danced a few weeks ago in the VIP section of Isaac’s club in Hopeton.”

My eyes widen so they can adequately scan his face. Now that he mentions it, I do remember him. Although, unfortunately, his dancing skills aren’t on par with his strikingly handsome facial features.

When he sees my pale cheeks, he chuckles. “I don’t usually dance like that. That night, we were instructed on how we could interact with you, including how we could dance,” His face screws up in disgust.

“We?”

He nods. “Everyone in the VIP section but you and your friends were employees of Isaac’s.”

I choke on my drink. “Are you *shitting* me?”

He shakes his head. “Ever since that night, you’ve become known as the ‘untouchable girl.’ No man in this town is game to sit next to you, let alone dance with you, after the warning Isaac issued.”

My mouth gapes more and more with every word he speaks, and my earlier anger rushes back to the surface. “So if I wanted to find a dance partner right now, I’d be rejected? Is that what you’re telling me?”

His lips twist before he nods. “They’re too scared to go against a man like Isaac.”

“Then why are you telling me this? Aren’t you scared Isaac will find out?” I take another sip of my cocktail, needing something to calm the anger building like an out-of-control wildfire in my gut.

He chuckles. “I’ve just finished my doctorate and am moving to California in the new year. This is my last shift here.”

I slant my head to the side and cock my brow. “So, do you have a dance partner for when the clock strikes twelve?” My tone is full of wittiness since the cocktails are mixing nicely with the earlier chardonnays.

He chuckles again. “You’re gorgeous, but I’m not that stupid. Even living on the other side of the country won’t stop Isaac from hunting me down.”

I huff and roll my eyes.

“But I’m brave enough to ignore his rules on how many drinks you can have.”

“He has rules on that as well?” My tone is lower since anger has placed a firm grip around my throat.

He nods and smirks. “But don’t worry, baby girl, I’ve got you covered,” he says with a cheeky wink as he refills my cocktail glass.

“Thank you...”

“Dante,” he fills in. After wiping off the condensation from his hand down his black-waisted apron, he offers it to me to shake.

---

Everything Dante said was true. For two hours straight, I’ve been propositioning men to dance. I’ve gone from eighteen-year-old boys whose faces are covered in pimples, to older, creepy looking men who are only hitting the club scene to secure a piece of eye candy for the night. Every time I’ve asked them to dance, they readily agree—until recognition dawns at to why I appear familiar.

Cate has been in hysterics watching my failed attempts at securing a dance partner, but mercifully, for the past half an hour, her attention has been rapt on a handsome young man sporting a large cowboy hat. Well, he was wearing a cowboy

hat. She knocked it off when weaving her fingers through his hair.

“No luck?” Dante chuckles while he places another cocktail in front of me.

“No. Anyone would swear I was asking them to donate a kidney instead of requesting a dance.”

I take a sizable gulp of my cocktail, wanting to wash away the images of Isaac and Ophelia that have been filtering through my mind nonstop since last night. By keeping my brain hazed with the buzz of alcohol, I can momentarily forget the cluster-fuck hampering my heart.

Once I’ve finished my latest cocktail at a record-setting pace, I place the empty glass onto the counter.

“Can I buy you another?”

My pupils dilate as my surprised gaze shoots to Dante. He purses his lips before roaming his eyes over the mysterious stranger standing next to me. When he nods in approval, I slant my head to the side. My eyes bulge when I’m met with a man whose strikingly handsome good looks are *nearly* as stellar as Isaac’s. His sandy blond hair is a little overdue for a trim, and his eyes are light brown. His jaw is strong and defined, and his nose is perfectly straight. If I had to guess his age, I’d say late twenties.

My heart flutters a little faster when he smiles at my avid assessment of his face and body. His smile is so big, two small dimples adorn his cheeks. “Umm... that will be great.” I gesture for him to sit in the spare seat next to me.

He does before ordering another Sex on the Beach for me and a scotch on the rocks for himself from Dante. I stare at

him peculiarly, trying to fathom why he's so much braver than any other man here tonight.

"Do you come here often?" I interrogate while sipping on my newly replenished cocktail since my head is spinning.

He takes a mouthful of his scotch before turning his gaze to me. "No, I'm here on business."

My brows arch as I take another sip of my drink. *Now I understand why he's so brave.* "Do you come to Ravenshoe often?"

"No, this is my first time here."

"Do you want to dance?" I query brazenly.

He smiles a panty-drenching smirk. "Sure."

Excitement beams out of me that I've finally secured a dance partner. When I jump up from my seat, I nearly lose my footing. He stabilizes me before downing his shot of whiskey and following me onto the dance floor.

---

The heat in the club reaches boiling point as the clock inches closer to midnight. My dance companion, Ayden, and I have been dancing to the latest club hits the past forty-five minutes. His dance moves have never gone beyond an inappropriate level, but he has ground his impressive crotch against my backside on numerous occasions—not by choice. There are too many people in one space to maintain an appropriate distance.

As the countdown to the new year merges closer, so do Ayden and I. Our dance moves become more seductive when the alcohol in my blood turns potent.

With only five minutes remaining in the year, Ayden wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me into his firm body. His hips swing seductively in time to the fast beat of the music as his fingertips graze the curve on my backside.

When there's only one minute remaining until midnight, the countdown on the large digital clock hanging over the dance floor commences. My excited, drunken cheers halt at forty-eight seconds when my arm is suddenly seized, and I'm dragged off the dance floor. My heart silently prays it's Isaac, but with the lack of a jolting zing inflicting my arm, my body knows it isn't him.

"What the hell are you doing, Izzy?" Hugo asks as his eyes dart between mine.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm dancing."

When I attempt to pad away from him the best I can in my drunken state, he grabs my wrist, stopping my hasty steps. "Dancing? You're not dancing. You're provoking Isaac, trying to force his hand."

I shake my head, causing a rush of queasiness to hit my stomach. "You don't know what you're talking about. He left, Hugo! He walked without so much of a backward glance. He left me. So I'm free to do whatever I please."

I squirm out of his tight grip before stumbling back to Ayden, my eyes flicking up to the countdown clock on the way. There are only thirty seconds left of this despicable year, and I fully plan on kissing it good riddance with the obligatory midnight kiss.

"Bullshit, Izzy." Hugo steps between Ayden and me. "You, yourself, had to see if the claims were true, but you don't expect Isaac to react the same? You're using that guy." He

hooks his thumb to Ayden, who is watching our exchange. “All because you want to antagonize Isaac. All because you want to force him to react.”

I arrogantly shake my head, denying his accusations.

“If it isn’t that, then why go to all this effort? What’s the purpose? A free drink? A grope on the dance floor? A stupid midnight kiss?”

“Yes!” I yell as anger maims my heart. “Because that’s probably what he’s doing with her right now. He’s probably kissing her right now.” *Or god knows what else.*

“That’s what you want? A kiss? All this heartache for a pathetic kiss on New Year’s Eve?”

I grit my teeth and angrily glare at Hugo. He can’t comprehend the hurt I’m feeling or know how hollow I feel since there’s a massive hole where my heart once belonged.

I angrily shake my head before pivoting on my heels and heading back to Ayden. Just as the clock commences its ten-second countdown, Hugo once again yanks me back his way. Before I can fathom a response, let alone articulate it, my mouth is engulfed by a pair of deliciously plump lips. The final five second countdown of the year chants through my ears as Hugo’s warm tongue licks the seam of my lips before it delves inside my mouth, sampling and tasting every inch.

When the clock strikes midnight, his fingers weave through my hair, and he tilts my head back, taking complete control of my mouth. I’m astonished when my body reacts to his kiss by kissing him with just as much vigor.

He kisses the hell out of me, not holding anything back, then it takes several long seconds for my inebriated mind to comprehend what’s going on.



*Oh god!*

I yank back before dragging my hand over my mouth, trying to rub away the kiss, pretending what just happened *didn't* happen. Hugo remains quiet, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as the reality of the situation dawns on him too.

“Isaac will kill you.”

Air puffs out of his nose as he curtly nods. “Yeah, well, at least I know what I'm getting myself into. That dumb fuck had no clue you were in the process of signing his death certificate.” He motions his head to Ayden, who is watching our exchange with his mouth gaped open.

When Hugo throws me over his broad shoulder, my hand slaps over my mouth as all the liquid I consumed tonight threatens to resurface. I'm so drunk, I'm not the slightest bit fazed by the amused faces of the patrons when Hugo strides past them with me flopped over his shoulder like a ragdoll.

“Cate,” I mumble through my hand covering my mouth. “I brought Cate with me.”

“Already taken care of,” he replies as he continues with his fluid strides.

The coolness of the night sky helps quell my swirling stomach when we emerge outside, but Hugo's smack to my backsides commences an entirely new worry.

“You better not vomit in my *baby*, Izzy. If you do, that smack won't be the only punishment you'll get,” he warns as he places me in the passenger seat of his car and fastens the seatbelt around my torso.

## CHAPTER 31



## ISABELLE

A rough grunt escapes my parched mouth as I return to the land of the living. My head is pounding like a mariachi band performing on the streets of Mexico. My throat burns like I swallowed car battery acid, and my eyelids are so heavy, they refuse to open. I feel like I'm in the process of dying.

When my hand stretches out to snag the spare pillow at my side, wanting to cover my eyes from the blinding sunlight making my pounding headache ten times worse, I do die.

A woody smell is invading my senses.

*Oh, shit. What did I do?*

My heart races as memories of last night trickle back into my head—the warning Isaac issued, the excessive drinking of any cocktail I could get my hands on, Ayden... *oh god*, and Hugo! The unnatural beat of my heart kicks up a gear when I taste Hugo on my mouth. As guilt weighs heavily on my chest, a guttural groan scuttles up my throat. Even though Isaac left me, Hugo still works for him. Isaac is his sole source of income—his bread and butter. A man with control issues like Isaac would *never* let a mere peck-on-the-lips kiss go without reprimand, let alone a kiss that was anything but simple.

Hugo and I have grown close the past several weeks, but even in my hungover state, I know our kiss was a spur-of-the-moment decision made without just cause. I can only hope Isaac remembers his quote on how haste decisions cause mistakes because when Hugo kissed me, he wasn't thinking of the repercussions of his rushed judgment—just like I didn't before returning his kiss.

With reluctance, I pull the pillow away from my face and apprehensively flutter open my eyes. Once my eye sockets are lubricated with fluid, they sweep the room. The thumping of my head intensifies when they take in a space I don't recognize.

I thought my days of waking up in strangers' beds were behind me.

Thick cream curtains are draped across a large window. A woven rug covers a majority of the dark, highly polished floorboards, and the bed is a four-poster design, but unlike Isaac's, the posts are dark and thin, without the wood-turning effects. A wooden desk is by the window, and a cream wing-backed chair is seated in front of it. The wall behind the bed is done in a wooden design of dark, light, and white woods skewed in a rustic pattern. The room is very manly but warm and inviting, just like its owner, Hugo.

*Could this morning get any worse?*

After groaning about my stupidity, my eyes shift to the other side of the room. A swear word seeps from my lips when my eyes lock in on Isaac's furious gaze. He's seated in a cream leather chair that blocks the entrance door of the room. He's dressed in a black three-piece suit, and he has a pulse-quickenning scowl marring his handsome face. His stubble-

covered jaw is ticking relentlessly, and his dark, livid gaze is rapt on me.

My head screams in protest when I lurch from the bed. As my eyes snap shut, my hands circle my temples, praying the contents of my stomach stay put.

I don't need to open my eyes to know Isaac has moved off the chair. The hairs bristling on my neck are all the indication I need to know he's standing at the end of the bed. Opening one eye only, I glance up at him. My libido awakens from its resting state when his narrowed gaze lowers down my body. The tick of his jaw ramps the longer he peruses me. I find out why when I follow his gaze.

*This day just got ten times worse.*

I'm wearing what I'm going to assume is Hugo's short-sleeve college shirt. I'm assuming it is Hugo's since it has a faded Rochdale Village emblem on the front.

Isaac's gaze lifts from my shirt to my eyes. "Get dressed so I can take you home."

Any protest preparing to whimper from my lips halt from his furious glare that sears me motionless. "Get dressed!" he demands in his low, knee-quaking tone.

My eyes scan the room, seeking the microscopic dress I wore last night. I find it draped over the master bathroom door handle on my left. With shaking thighs, I scamper off the bed, ensuring I hold down the hem of Hugo's shirt so it maintains a respectable length.

I slip into my tight mini dress as Isaac removes the heavy piece of furniture blocking the doorway as if it is weightless. Once I have the zipper in place, I hesitantly pad across the room. My breath snags in my lungs when Isaac pivots around

to face me. A deep, knee-clanging growl tears through his stern lips when he absorbs the outfit I wore in public last night. It's so skimpy, it could be classed as a piece of lingerie instead of a dress.

In silence, Isaac shrugs off his jacket, places it over my shoulders, then secures the three buttons into place. Once his jacket is covering half of my body, he encloses his hand around mine and strides to the door. His steps are so fast and furious, I have to jog to keep up with him.

When we enter the living room, I scan Hugo's apartment, seeking any sign of him. When my gaze comes up empty, I turn my eyes to Isaac. "Where's Hugo?"

His grip on my hand firms, causing pain to shoot up my arm, but he remains quiet. My eyes widen when we enter the hallway. The security personnel who work in the lobby of Hugo's apartment building are standing guard at the elevator bank, ensuring no one can access the elevator. I'm surprised the fire warden would allow them to block an entire elevator.

Suddenly, clarity forms. Isaac owns the building, so if he wants to garner an elevator for personal use, so be it.

The security officer warily smiles as the elevator doors snap shut, entrapping me in a small mirrored box alone with an infuriatingly angry Isaac. He's so mad, heat is radiating off him in invisible waves, making my hungover state even more noticeable. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, vainly trying to settle the swirling of my stomach.

They crack back open when the elevator dings and my arm is yanked. Isaac's fluid steps move us out of the elevator and into his awaiting town car at the speed of lightning. The swishing of my stomach amplifies when I see Hugo's *baby* still parked in his car space.

I duck into the back of Isaac's town car, slide across the seat, then raise my eyes to the rearview mirror. A sigh spills from my lips when I notice Roger's dark gaze reflecting back at me.

"Is Hugo okay?"

Isaac doesn't respond to my question. He just keeps his gaze planted on the scenery outside as we make the thirty-minute trip to his residence in complete silence.

"Your services will not be required for the remainder of the day," Isaac informs Roger when his vehicle pulls into the front steps of his private residence.

His dangerously low tone causes a shiver to tingle down my spine. He glides out of the back seat of the car before tipping his torso back in to assist me out. A highly inappropriately-timed grin creeps onto my mouth, pleased by his chivalry.

When we enter the foyer, my eyes dart to the entryway table. My engagement ring, cell phone, and the handwritten note are where they were last night, meaning Isaac is only returning home now.

With his hand still gripping mine, Isaac briskly guides me into the master bathroom. He walks me into the double-headed shower, turns the water on full pelt, then holds me underneath the freezing cold spray. My loud squeals shrill through my ears before clustering in my hungover head. I fight against him, wanting to adjust the water temp to a more acceptable level, but a person of my size doesn't have a chance in hell against a man with the strength of Isaac, much less when it's hardened with anger.

Once I'm saturated head to toe, he adjusts the temperature of the water to a more appropriate, non-teeth-chattering setting. Still clothed, he scrubs his thumbs over my lips, removing all traces of Hugo's kiss from my mouth. Remorse grips my heart from the devastated look in his eyes.

By the time he drops his hand, my lips are swollen, tingling, and raw. I figure that's the end of it, but the shredding of my dress proves we're only getting started. He shreds my dress right off my body, dumping it along with my black lace panties into the waste bin under the vanity sink.

“Hugo and I didn't—”

My words trap in my throat when he glares. “I swear to God, Isabelle, if you mention his name *one* more time today, I'll take you over my knee, and *he* will lose the ability to breathe.”

He stares at me, assuring I'm aware his threat isn't idle. Even though his comment is laced with viciousness, he appeases some of my concern by confirming Hugo is safe—for now.

I remain completely motionless when he uses his shower gel to lather my body in a thick coating of bubbles. Once the bubbles have been removed, his dedication turns to shampooing my hair. The slightest moan seeps from my lips when his fingertips massage the pressure points in my thumping skull.

My pulse quickens when his furious eyes dart down to mine. “This isn't for you.”

Once the shampoo has been removed from my hair, Isaac steps out of the shower, taking me with him. His saturated dress shirt, vest, and trousers cling to his body, showcasing the



spectacular ridges of his muscles as he drags a fluffy towel over my body.

Once I'm dry, he gathers me in his arms and strides into the master suite. Goosebumps form on my body from his wet clothes clinging to my bare skin, but Isaac is too steaming with anger to notice the chill.

After placing me on the bed, he removes his wet clothes, replacing them with a pair of running shorts and a white shirt. Even with my heart twisting in pain, my eyes can't help but run over his glorious body, absorbing every perfect dip, plane, and curve into my memory.

Once he's dressed, sans underwear, he gathers one of his dark blue shirts from the drawer and pivots around to face me. My teeth gnaw on my bottom lip when it dawns on me what he's doing. He's removing Hugo's scent from my skin by replacing it with his own. Because I slept in Hugo's bed in his shirt, his woody smell infused onto my skin.

My pupils widen as a thought smacks into me. *Why is he claiming me knowing Ophelia is alive?*

"You're *mine*, Isabelle," Isaac mutters under his breath while tugging his shirt over my head.

My eyes dart between his as confusion makes itself known with my gut. "But are you mine?" My tone is surprisingly strong for how much my heart is hammering. "Or are you hers?"

His silence remains as staunch as his composure, and it has my anger from the past two days steamrolling back in. I jump up from the bed, causing my head to get a rush of dizziness from my quick movements.

“Are you here because you’re claiming me as yours? Or because you want to ensure Hugo doesn’t stake a claim to your *possession*?”

He shoots me a wry glance that has my pulse hastening. His fury at the mention of Hugo’s name is marked all over his face, but it doesn’t lessen my anger in the slightest.

“You left, Isaac. You walked right out those doors without a backward glance.” I point to the doors of the master suite. “You rushed out of here, forgetting all the promises we made to each other. All the promises *you* made to *me*. That means you lost any right to claim me as yours.”

His face reddens as his furious eyes glare into mine. I reinforce my stance, showing him I’m not the daft wallflower he thinks I am. I’m the strong, independent woman my uncle raised me to be.

“Did you go to her? Did you see her? Her son? Is that why you rushed out of here so quickly?”

The stranglehold on my heart strengthens when he angrily mutters, “Yes.”

“And?” My eyes flick crazily between his. “Did you kiss her?”

Isaac chuckles a menacing laugh. “You’re going to ask me about whom I kissed, when you woke up in another man’s bed, wearing his clothes, smelling like him!”

“Yes!” I shout as my tears burn my eyes. “Stop skirting and answer the goddamn question. Did you kiss her?”

“Yes.” His darkened gaze connects with mine. “I kissed her.”

Pain shreds through my heart. “You son of a bitch!”

When I pivot on my heels and sprint for the door, Isaac growls my name. I ignore his threatening tone by racing down the hall as fast as my quivering legs can move.

Halfway down the hallway, my wrist is seized, and I'm yanked back, then my body is pinned to the wall by Isaac's imposing physique. A hiss whimpers through my lips, my body choosing its own response to his closeness. Even irritatingly angry, it can't deny its attraction to him. He owns my body, and everyone but me knows it.

"Why did you come back? Why didn't you just stay with her?" I sob as the first lot of tears splash on my cheeks.

The pain of seeing everything I'm losing up close is too much for me to bear. My heart feels like it's being torn in half, my head hurts, and my body is aching to be claimed by him.

"Because you're mine, Isabelle." He's so close, his warm breaths dry my tears. "You're *mine*." He crowds himself closer, leaving nothing between us, making us become one. "And I am yours."

## CHAPTER 32



## ISAAC

### Thirty-six hours earlier...

Can you imagine having everything you've ever believed suddenly stripped away from you? Every decision, every mistake, every choice I've ever made was altered when Isabelle whispered that Ophelia was alive.

At first, I assumed I must not have heard her right, that I must have misunderstood what she said. It was only when she continued speaking did the reality of the situation dawn on me. I placed her onto her feet and took a step backward, so I could gauge the veracity of her bold statement, unable to fathom a response to the truth in her eyes.

Every decision I made from the day Ophelia died ran through my head—my empire, my decision to make myself sterile, my inability to express my feelings to Isabelle. It all filtered through my mind on repeat. Its raucous cycle only stopped when Isabelle said Ophelia had a child, a boy whom she guessed to be around six—the age my child with Ophelia would have been if she weren't involved in her accident.

Blinded by shocked anger, I packed a bag, eager to seek answers to the questions hampering my astuteness. The cloud

consuming my mind lifted for the briefest second when I caught sight of the devastation marring Isabelle's beautiful face. Even knowing I was hurting her, my hesitation about leaving only lasted a second. Nothing would have stopped me that night. I needed answers, and Ophelia was the only one who could give them to me.

The flight to the other side of the country was tedious and uneventful. Even exhausted from not sleeping the previous two nights without Isabelle and fighting in the charity match, my ability to sleep still lacked. My brain wouldn't stop replaying the lead-up to Ophelia's death in my head over and over again.

By the time my private jet arrived in Tiburon, it was a little after seven in the morning, and the battery on my cell was sitting at twenty-three percent. In my haste to pack, I failed to grab a charging cable. Once Hunter advised the location he'd given Isabelle the previous day, I shut down my phone to conserve its charge.

My extreme speed in my rental car had me arriving at the family-owned pharmacy just before eight. Not surprisingly, the front glass doors were dead-bolted, and the sign displayed that the pharmacy wouldn't be opening until ten o'clock. I yanked my cell phone out of my pocket and fired it up, planning to call Hunter. I wanted to get the private home address of the pharmacy owners, too impatient to wait another two hours.

My lengthened steps to the rental car halted when my skin prickled with an awareness that I was being watched. When I lifted my gaze, the air was vehemently removed from my body. There standing before me was Ophelia. The first girl I ever loved.

As my heart thwacked against my chest, I scanned every detail of her face. She had the same turned-up nose, but her eyes were lighter than I remembered, her hair wavier, and the color of her skin a hue darker. But even with the small changes in her appearance, there was no way she could deny she was Ophelia.

“Isaac.”

She rushed toward me to throw her arms around my neck. When her familiar wild strawberry scent engulfed my nostrils, it was like the last six years had never happened. I was once again a college boy enjoying the thrill of the chase. Ophelia was the first girl to refuse my advances. It took me months of wooing before she agreed to go out with me.

I pulled her away from me to stare at her. My mind was spiraling, unable to grasp reality. I had wanted her to be alive for years, so when she stood in front of me, as beautiful as the day I first laid my eyes on her, I was speechless.

With a broad grin, she enclosed her hand over mine and guided us down the concrete sidewalk of the pharmacy. My brow arched when she took a left at the end of the path to follow it to a white cottage attached to the brick building. The inside of the house was basic but clean. The walls in the living area were white wood panels, and there was an open, brick fireplace in the middle.

Ophelia shrugged off her jacket before moving into the compact kitchen. As my eyes tracked her, they caught sight of a collection of photos on top of the fireplace. Pacing over, I picked up a photo of Ophelia with a small boy and a man with dark brown hair. My eyes scanned the young boy's face, seeking any similarities to me. He had his mother's light brown eyes, but no identifiable features of mine. Although my

brother is proof you can never rely on appearance to clarify paternity.

My brows furrowed when Ophelia questioned, “Are you still friends with Cormack?” like we were long-lost friends reacquainting after an extended period of absence, instead of her rising from the ashes.

I placed the frame onto the mantle, then joined her in the kitchen. Her plump lips slumped when I failed to answer her question, but she hid it by gesturing for me to sit in one of the chairs around her four-seater dining table. I remained standing.

Her hand shook when she gave me a mug full of double-strength coffee, surprising me that she still remembered how I liked my brew. She sat in the chair closest to me while sipping on a mug of tea. I placed my untouched coffee onto the kitchen counter, too shocked that she was sitting in front of me, uninjured, unharmed, perfectly fine to drink.

Several uncomfortable minutes later, her large gulp was easily audible in the awkward silence. After placing her half-empty mug onto the chipped tabletop, her eyes lifted to mine. They were definitely lighter than I’d recalled.

“I was so angry after your fight with CJ that I made a stupid decision.”

I remained quiet, still perplexed and silently brooding.

“An FBI agent named Tobias had been undercover in our family for a few years. We’d discussed the possibility of him getting me out of that industry numerous times, but since there was no real threat to my safety, and I was an adult, we never had any reason to act on it. Until the night of the fight.”

My heart was beating wildly, but my composure didn’t allude to it.



“My father was furious. Not just because you beat his number one fighter and still refused to fight under him, but because I disgraced the family.”

My jaw muscle tensed as memories of that night ran through my head.

“I was approached by my father a few months before you and Cormack arrived at Buck’s Diner for dinner the night we met.”

When she turned her gaze to the tabletop, I placed my hand under her chin and hoisted her face high, wanting her to look at me while she explained how I was left carrying the burden of her death the past six years.

“He wanted me to date you, to force you to fight for him.”

The smallest grin carved on my mouth as I shook my head. Henry, Sr. was right all along. He always said Ophelia was a ruse by Col to get me to fight under his entity.

“But I refused.”

My eyes snapped to her, seeking any dishonesty in her statement. She was telling the truth.

“That’s why I denied every advance you made because I knew what he was planning to do. I convinced him you weren’t interested in me. After three months, he stopped asking about you. I assumed he had given up.” A smile curled on her lips. “But you didn’t give up so easily. You were so darn persistent.”

Air puffed out of my nostrils as I stifled a chuckle. Even back then, when I wanted something, I never gave up. It’s part of my stubborn nature.

“Someone in the family discovered we were dating and informed my father. Hence, the arrangement of the fight that night. I don’t know what transpired after you left the warehouse, but Tobias overheard something and advised me that the only way I could get out safely was if we staged an accident that very night.” She exhaled sharply. “Since CJ already had extensive injuries, it made the story of an accident even easier to cover up. I don’t know whose body was in the wreckage, Tobias never informed me, but I’ve never been approached by anyone from my old life.” Her eyes darted between mine. “Until now.”

I stayed quiet, my astuteness scattered and reeling out of control. My bewilderment increased when a screen door creaking opened shrilled into the room. A young boy entered a few moments later, his eager steps into the kitchen faltering when he noticed me in the room. He studied me with just as much interest as I assessed him. He had a lot of the Petretti genes in him, so I couldn’t tell if he were my son.

Ophelia jumped up from her chair and raced to the front door, where she greeted a gentleman with strands of silver streaks at the sides of his dark hair and a heavy set of wrinkles. He balked and took a step backward when he noticed me standing in the kitchen. He clearly knew who I was.

“Thank you, Anthony.” Ophelia snagged the child’s backpack from his hand before ushering him out onto the front patio.

His brows furrowed at her abruptness, but I missed what he said since my attention shifted to the small boy tugging on my trousers. “Who are you?”

He gave me a stern look, impressing me with his gall. Most men quiver in their boots at the sight of me, but he stood

his ground, determined to protect his mother from the stranger lurking in her kitchen.

“Isaac.” I offered him my hand to shake.

His stern scowl deepened before he accepted my offer. “Bobby.”

When he moved to the fridge to remove a carton of orange juice, Ophelia glided past me to aid him with filling a plastic cup before giving him two cookies out of a jar on the counter. Even though her composure didn’t allude to any discomfort, the tremor of her hands conveyed her deceit.

“You can take your snack to your room, Bobby, and watch some TV.”

Bobby stared at his mom, seemingly confused before he shrugged his shoulders and ambled into the hallway. Once he was no longer in earshot, I questioned, “You named him after your brother?”

When she nodded, my throat worked hard to swallow the lump formed there. “How did you hear about Roberto’s death if you have no connection to your previous life?”

“My husband was in law enforcement.” She cringes. “*Is* in law enforcement.”

My eyes shot down to her left hand, even knowing it was void of a wedding band as it was the first finger my eyes zoomed in on when she enclosed her hand around mine.

“We’re separated.” Her right hand covered the missing ring on her left hand.

I jerked my head to the hallway Bobby walked down minutes ago. “Is he my son?” My tone was calm, even though I was anything but.

Ophelia's eyes glossed over, but she held my gaze. "No. Bobby is only five. He's just tall for his age."

An entanglement of emotions hit me at once. Relief. Unease. It all hit me. "I want a DNA test."

Ophelia's eyes darted between mine. Her lips moved, but no words came out of her mouth.

"You deceived me for years, so you can't expect me just to take your word that he isn't mine. That would be ludicrous." My tone came out harsher than I anticipated.

My breath hitched when the image that had been haunting my dreams for the past six years emerged in front of my eyes. Ophelia was crying.

I seized her wrist and pulled her into my chest. Her sobs were quiet, but the dampness on my shirt was all the indication I needed to know she was still upset. My heart pummeled my chest for every silent tear that escaped her eyes.

I don't know how long we stayed standing in the kitchen, huddled together, before she mumbled into my chest, "Bobby's dad was the FBI agent assigned to my case when I moved here." Her head popped off my chest to peer up at me. "Because Tobias was still undercover, he assigned a rookie agent fresh from the academy to my case. It was a real love-hate relationship from the get-go, but as the months went on, our relationship blossomed into something magical."

"Then why aren't you together now?"

Her gaze drifted down to my chest. "Because he wanted more than half a heart. He knew part of my heart still belonged to you."

She cupped my jaw, her eyes darting between mine, appearing just as surprised as I was that we were standing

across from each other, cuddled together. She was so close, her tea-scented breath was fanning my lips.

“It still belongs to you.”

Her eyes gleamed before she balanced on her tippy toes to seal her lips over mine. Her tongue stroked my lips before she plunged it into my mouth. My hand slithered up her back, pulling her closer before I weaved my hand through her hair to deepen our kiss. My mouth trapped the soft purrs that rumbled up her throat when I gripped her thighs to guide her legs around my waist.

With our lips attached, I paced toward the wooden table to lay her on top of it. When my eyes opened, I took a step back, startled when her light brown eyes peered up at me. Her breasts were thrusting up and down, and the golden highlights in her hair glistened in the morning sun streaming through the window. She was undeniably beautiful, but nothing could stop me from taking another step back.

I took another, and another, and another until I was back onto the footpath where our reunion commenced.

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I tilt closer to Isabelle, so close I can feel her blood pumping through her body. “I thought I wasn’t remembering her right, that my memories had failed me, but it wasn’t that,” I mutter into Isabelle’s ear. “When I was looking at her, all I could see was you. I was comparing her to you.”

Before Isabelle came into my life, all I could see in the women I liaised with was Ophelia. I constantly compared them to her, judging them on how closely they resembled her, and what she had that they lacked. It was only when my gaze

was roaming over Ophelia on the dining room table did I realize her eyes hadn't changed color, the swell of her breasts and the curve of her hips hadn't shrunk. She just lacked Isabelle's seductive curves, dark, straight locks, and big beautiful chocolate eyes. Although Ophelia was as beautiful as I remembered, she wasn't Isabelle.

She wasn't mine.

I've always said my feelings for Isabelle are prodigious and unexplainable. On the flight back to Ravenshoe, I realized why that is. I can't explain my feelings for Isabelle because I've never experienced them before. I was twenty when I began dating Ophelia. Our entire relationship was based on the thrill of the chase and what adventures we could undertake instead of establishing a proper long-term connection. We dated for months and never said those three little words to each other—not until the night of the fight. We could go days without seeing each other, and neither of us were bothered—it just seemed natural. But Isabelle is on my mind all the time. Every minute that she isn't with me, she invades my thoughts.

When Ophelia died, the guilt of her death clouded my perception of love even more. Although I loved Ophelia, only now do I realize it was more a fascination based on lust. It was nothing compared to the feelings I have for Isabelle.

Although my mind is still reeling as it tries to unravel everything that's happened the past forty-eight hours, there's one thing that isn't scrambled. It's as clear as the sun shining in the sky.

I am in love with Isabelle.

When I take a step away from Isabelle, unpinning her from the wall, her chest expands and deflates with every breath she

takes. Her eyes glisten with unshed tears as she stares at me in confusion, unable to comprehend what I'm telling her.

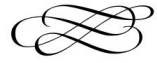
“You own me, Isabelle. Every inch of me is yours. Can you not see that? You've owned me from the day you ran into me at the airport. You ruined me. All I see is you. Every breath I take, every decision I make is for you. I'm yours, and you're mine.” I cup her cheeks then stare into her beautiful chocolate eyes. “I love you.”

I sweep away her tears with my thumb before sealing my mouth over hers. Her lips remain stiff for only a second before she laces her fingers through my hair and pulls me closer, strengthening our kiss while also binding us tighter together.

The heat of her bare pussy scorches my hardened cock when I step closer to her, pinning her back against the wall. When her hand slithers between us to stroke my rock-hard shaft through my thin shorts, a hoarse groan rolls up my throat. Every lash of my tongue in her delectable mouth has her stroking my cock faster, more urgent, almost greedy.

I grip her curvy ass, ensuring my fingers add the sting she likes, before hoisting her up higher on the wall, where I spend the next several hours fucking her senseless, marking her, claiming her, and possessing every inch of her, ensuring she's fully aware that I'm hers, and she is *mine*.

## CHAPTER 33





## ISABELLE

“*I*sabelle.”

A deep voice trickles through my eardrums before clustering in my core.

I groan before rolling onto my stomach. “Just a few more hours.”

My sex tingles when goosebumps follow the pattern Isaac’s fingertip makes over my naked body. He glides it over my shoulder blade, down my back, across my backside, and along my thigh, sparking my every nerve with the meekest touch.

I lift my head off the pillow and crank it to the side. The most seductive pussy-clenching smirk is etched on his handsome face, loving the effect his meager touch has on my body.

“A week still not enough for you to get your fill?”

I roll over to face him, exposing my naked breasts to his eager eyes.

“I’ll never get enough.”

He sucks my nipple into his mouth, drawing it in so deep, his name huskily escapes my lips. The beat of my heart

increases when he bites my nipple before his tongue soothes the sting, but I'm left disappointed when he pulls back.

I slant my head to the side, eyeing him curiously when I notice the quickest spark of hesitation firing through his eyes. When he notices my curious glance, his lips curve into a smirk before he moves to the walk-in closet, his steps fast and efficient.

My brows furrow when he returns with a pair of jeans, a long-sleeve shirt, and my Burberry trench coat. For the past week, he stipulated clothing was optional. Which, of course, means I've spent a majority of the last week naked, so I'm somewhat surprised when he lifts me from the bed and commences dressing me.

Even shocked, my lips still curve into a broad grin. I love how he nurtures and takes care of me.

“Once you're ready, meet me down in the foyer.” His low tone has stupid butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

I nod before heading into the bathroom to brush my teeth and hair. In my eagerness to discover what 's caused the sudden shift in his personality, I don't bother applying makeup.

My brisk steps down the stairwell falter when I spot Hugo standing in the foyer. Tears burn in my eyes when I notice he's wearing his standard work attire that consists of a black suit with a white dress shirt underneath. I haven't seen him since our kiss over a week ago. I was growing very worried.

After brushing a few tears off my cheeks, I rush down the stairs and throw myself into his arms. “Hey, Isabelle,” he greets me in his familiar drawl.

He places me back on my feet just as Isaac enters the foyer from the living room. I throw my arms around his neck as I just did Hugo, except this time, I seal my mouth over his. My heart thuds against my ribs when he deepens our kiss.

He kisses me so senseless, I forget we have company. If Hugo's deep bellowing voice didn't sound through my ears, I'd still be clueless. "I'll bring the car around." I don't need to look at him to know he's smiling. I can hear it in his voice.

The front door shutting bounces through the foyer before Isaac pulls his delicious lips away from my mouth. As he drifts his lips between mine, they speak the words his mouth is failing to articulate.

"Thank you."

Isaac fired Hugo the instant Hugo informed him we had kissed, not giving him a chance to explain. I proceeded with caution the past week while bringing up the subject of Hugo. I shared snippets here and there of everything Hugo had done for us the past few months without mentioning his name. Little comments about how he convinced me our relationship was worth fighting for, and that he was an asset to our relationship, not a hindrance. Even though I never mentioned Hugo's name, Isaac knew whom I was referring to, and if Hugo's return is anything to go by, he heard the message I was trying to put across.

"Roger will remain your main detail, though. Hugo will only work with me."

Not wanting to start a fight, and grateful he's trying to curb his jealousy issues, I smile and nod. His lips curve into a panty-clenching smirk, pleased with my agreeing gesture.

After enclosing his hand around mine, he walks us toward the door. My eye catches sight of the handwritten note sitting on the entryway table on the way. Although it's been read, it sits where I initially placed it on New Year's Eve as a reminder of everything we have been through.

*You deserve to conquer the world,  
to achieve your every desire and dream.*

*Thank you for showing me I deserve that as well.*

*I will always love you.*

*Isabelle xx*

Isaac assists me into the back of his town car but maintains his quiet, reserved composure. I don't mind. It gives me plenty of time to people watch.

My attention is diverted twenty minutes later when something taps my jean-covered thigh. Shifting my gaze, I'm met with a white envelope. My lungs take stock of my oxygen levels when the address on the top corner of the envelope registers as familiar. It's the laboratory that handled both of Isaac's paternity cases.

Since Theresa was arrested, she was required to give her DNA as part of the investigation. Regan secured a warrant for a sample of her DNA to be used for the paternity testing on Jeremiah. Ophelia, although reluctant, agreed to take her son, Bobby, to the same clinic.

My eyes lift to Isaac. He's staring at me, his expression unreadable. "What did it say?"

The pulse in my neck thrums when he replies, “I haven’t read it yet.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because I wanted you to be with me when I found out the results.” His eyes drop to the sealed envelope before he drifts them back to me. “No matter what’s in the envelope, nothing will change between us. You’re mine, and I’m yours. Okay?”

A smile curls my lips high. “Okay.”

My heart beats in an unnatural rhythm when he removes the envelope from my grasp to pry it open. I keep my eyes on him, seeking a reaction that would disclose the results without me needing to read them. Isaac keeps his cards held close to his chest, not displaying any clue on his strikingly handsome face.

My shaking hand rattles the paper when he passes the document to me. After shifting my eyes between his, I lower them to the document. The first thing my eyes zoom in on is the word **excluded** written in thick black ink on both documents, closely followed by the 0% in the probability of parenting.

“You’re not their father?”

Isaac shakes his head. “No, I’m not.”

I don’t know whether to be disappointed or happy. I’m happy Isaac doesn’t have illegitimate children, but I’m sad that he’ll never see a mini version of himself running around.

Isaac grips my chin before hoisting my face back to him. After his eyes flick between mine, he shakes his head. “Only you would be disappointed, Isabelle.”

I roll my eyes, hating that he can read me so easily, where I could study his face for hours and not extract a single fact he didn't want me to see.

Chuckling, he gathers me under his arm where I remain until we arrive at a private airstrip in Hopeton. I eye him warily when Hugo drives onto the runway before parking next to an industrial-size hangar. "Please don't say we're getting on a plane."

After Isaac took me against the wall in the hallway of our home, the next morning, he tried to bundle me into his car and fly us to Reno to get married. Thankfully, even blinded by lust, my levelheadedness resurfaced in enough time to gain back the shrewdness that always evades me when I'm in his presence.

Although our marriage license has been filed, and the wedding rings have been purchased, I'm holding off on setting an official date until I come down from Cloud Nine. I want to make sure this is what Isaac truly wants, and I'm not forcing his hand because he's unable to control his domineering nature.

Isaac slides out of the car before leaning back in to assist me out. I grip his hand tighter the closer we get to the private jet idling near the hangar. When we stop at the bottom of the stairs, the galley pop door opens. I inhale a sharp breath when my dance partner from The Dungeon's impressive frame fills the doorway of the plane.

As my heart thumps my ribs, I drift my baffled gaze to Isaac. His eyes are scanning my face, acting nonchalant. With my heart in my throat, I return them back to Ayden. Like I could get any more shocked, I'm taken aback for the second time when a little girl peers out from behind Ayden's thigh. At

a first guess, I'd say she's a toddler of maybe two years of age?

As Ayden walks down the jet's stairs, she remains cowering behind his leg, only peering out when Isaac crouches down to her level. When he holds his hand out for her, her big brown eyes peer up at Ayden for several heart-clutching seconds before she leaps for Isaac. Her brisk movements have Isaac sprawling onto his ass, but the most scrumptious laugh also bellows out of him.

After gathering her into his chest, Isaac stands from the ground. My pulse surges through my veins at a rapid pace as I stare at the little girl who just saw Isaac's soul from one glance into his eyes—just like I did with my Uncle Tobias.

Isaac removes the strands of hair fallen in front of her eyes before he twists her to face me. "Callie," he croons, his tone calm and nurturing, "this is your sister, Isabelle." I balk, shocked. "Isabelle, this is your sister, Callie."

Callie's head pops off Isaac's chest, so she can run her eyes over my face. I assess her with just as much eagerness. She has the same rich chocolate brown eyes that Enrique and I got from our father, the same small nose, but her skin is a shade darker than mine.

I drift my watering eyes to Isaac. "The money? Your dealings with Vladimir?" In my disoriented state, I can't form full sentences.

"Yes, I bought her." His gaze lowers to Callie. "When I saw her eyes, I knew without a doubt she was your sister." He returns his focus to me. "I couldn't stop wondering what would've happened to you if Tobias didn't buy you. Where you would have ended up? What monster would have owned

you? So I couldn't stand by and watch it happen to Callie knowing she has your blood running through her veins."

Tears gush down my face. I never thought I could love Isaac more than I already do, but he continues to prove me wrong every day.

"Callie turned three last month. She's a little small due to malnutrition, but Jae said she's very healthy. She's a fighter, just like you."

After adjusting Callie so he's holding her with one arm, he wraps his spare arm around my shoulders and draws me in close. My tears dampen his shirt, but the heat of Callie's admiring will quickly take care of them. She's staring at Isaac in awe like he's her knight in shining armor. In a way, he is. He did save her from the clutches of our father.

I don't know how long we stay huddled together on the runway. It could be minutes or it could be hours. It's impossible to tell because when I'm with Isaac, time doesn't matter. It just stands still.



# EPILOGUE



## ISABELLE

### Six Months Later...

“Are you ready?” Ryan’s tone is as cheeky as the sparkle in his eyes. “You know this is bound to happen, so you may as well get the inevitable over and done with.”

I roll my eyes before nodding. My sassiness is stripped from my veins when sirens bellow through the humid morning air. As my frightened eyes dart to Ryan, the beat of my heart turns dangerous.

When the dark blue sedan pulls to the side of the road as requested, Ryan waggles his brow before he exits the vehicle. “Remain in your vehicle with your hands on the steering wheel,” he advises the driver of the car, his tone stern.

I move to back him up, my legs quivering with every step I take. When the back passenger door suddenly opens, and Isaac curls out of the car, I freeze. Excitement dashes down my spine when I drink in his impressive body, which is concealed in an impeccably tailored three-piece suit.

When Ryan advises him to place his hands palm side down onto the trunk and to spread his legs wide, his jaw sets into a hard line, but he does as instructed through gritted teeth, of course. When Ryan gestures for me to frisk him, I shake my head. I could never.

Ryan glares at me before he motions his head to Isaac again, advising his demand is not a request. With my pulse shrilling in my ears, I glide my hands over the hard ridges in Isaac's torso before drifting them down his splayed legs.

"That's all me, baby," he croons when my hands float past the panty-wetting section between his legs.

Desire shoots through my body, making the pulse in my sex as rampant as the vein working overtime in Isaac's neck.

Once my search comes up empty-handed, I turn my gaze back to Ryan. "He's clear."

Ryan's lips twist as he huffs loudly. "Then I guess he's free to go... for now."

Mortified, I make a beeline for the unmarked police car parked behind Isaac's flashy ride. Halfway there, Isaac calls my name. When I pivot around to face him, my pulse quickens. He has the most seductive smirk etched on his ridiculously handsome face.

"Bring those handcuffs home tonight." When his eyes drop to the cuffs holstered on my hip, it's the fight of my life not to squeeze my knees together. "Catherine is collecting Callie this afternoon for a sleepover." His voice is drenched with sexual undertones that has my pussy moistening in anticipation.

After a wink that reveals he knows he has me on edge, he slides into the back of his town car. I stand still, frozen in the middle of the street as his vehicle merges into the dense flow

of traffic that always impedes Ravenshoe. Restless yearning rushes through my veins, overheating my body when my feverish imagination flashes up all the positions Isaac and I have discovered the past six months. Particularly, the ones in the sex swing.

I slide back into the passenger seat of Ryan's unmarked police car before cranking the air conditioning full force with the hope of concealing my flushed cheeks that are shamefully displaying my arousal. When Ryan's deep chuckle echoes around the interior of the car, my cheeks inflame even more.

My bottom lip lowers into a pout when he adjusts the level of the air-conditioning to a more suitable temperature. "Air conditioning privileges, choice of radio stations, and which donut stores we visit are off-limits for a rookie detective."

He winks before pulling his car into the dense flow of traffic. I keep my eyes on the crowd, people watching, while also maintaining an observant eye on my surroundings. I've become more immersed in my love of people watching the past month. My eagerness spurred on by my desire to seek my brother, Enrique, in the dense crowd.

A week ago, when I was leaving Isaac's club, I found a postcard slipped under the windshield wiper of my assigned town car. It was void of any postmark that would have alluded to its origin, but I know the card was from Enrique because it had the saying scribbled on the back that he quoted about Isaac in the hospital room when we first met.

*On vash zashchitnik.*

*On khoroshiy chelovek.*

After some research, I translated the second half of the first sentence. The note translates to:

*He is your protector.*

*He is a good man.*

Considering the postcard didn't have any markings, I'm assuming the card was placed there by Enrique himself. Even though I can't see him, I know he's out there somewhere, protecting both Callie and me from any threats that may arise if our real identities are unearthed.

My attention reverts to the present when the police radio crackling sounds through the air. Today is my very first shift as a detective for Ravenshoe PD. Surprisingly, Isaac was the one who suggested I put in an application. He said there was no reason why I shouldn't have both my dreams and him. It was the ideal situation because by applying for a locally-based position, we wouldn't run the possibility of being separated, and I also get to achieve my dreams of helping people the way my Uncle Tobias helped me. With glowing endorsements from Alex, Regina, and Ryan, I successfully gained a coveted position.

My plans were put on hold for the past six months so I could ease Callie into our lives. She's a little darling with a heart of gold, and she has Isaac firmly wrapped around her pinkie finger. If I thought his protectiveness of me was extreme, it's nothing compared to his protectiveness of Callie. I feel sorry for any boy who tries to come between them. No man will stand a chance in hell of dating Isaac Holt's daughter, let alone breaking her heart.

We officially adopted Callie three months after she arrived in Ravenshoe, using the fake passport, social security number, and birth certificate Isaac organized through Henry Gottle, Sr.'s contact, Cooper. Even though Callie isn't related to Isaac by blood, she's his family, and he treats her as exactly that.

My gaze shifts from the heavy foot traffic to Ryan, who's wearing a similar blue suit to the one he wore on our date. When I discovered he was my superior officer, I assumed Isaac would request for me to be transferred to another section, so you can imagine my surprise when I discovered Isaac invoked a favor to ensure Ryan was my superior. Even though the kiss Ryan and I shared still irks Isaac, he said Ryan is the best detective he's ever worked with, and the best should only work with the best.

That statement alone had me falling in love with him even more.

Feeling my heated gaze, Ryan glances at me. "You all right?"

"Yep." My grin is as mischievous as the one he was wearing when he pulled over Isaac's town car. "I was just wondering how you ended up in this crazy, mixed-up family?" I wave my hand to the residents of Ravenshoe milling on the sidewalks.

A broad grin curls Ryan's plump lips, exposing his two dimples. "With me vomiting on my brand-new shoes."

I remain quiet, waiting for him to elaborate.

He doesn't keep me waiting for long. "It all started when I arrived at the scene of an accident that claimed the life of a little boy..."

**The end!**

---

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*Please remember to leave a review of my book.*



*Cheers*

*Shandi xx*

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