



**EXPOSED**  
*to him*

L.AQUILA

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## CHAPTER

### *One*

#### *Prologue*

I pull up to my house, noticing the door is wide open. This is unusual, considering I live in a mini-mansion that for the most part has security around the clock. I squeeze my locket that always hangs loosely around my neck as nerves swarm my belly.

The first couple of steps I take I notice small drops of blood. Goosebumps cover my skin and a shiver runs down my spine. I'm about to backtrack and call Mom, when I see a shadow emerge in the doorway. Then the figure comes into view.

"Luca? What are you doing here?" You can hear the trepidation in my tone.

His eyes widen and then move up and down my body. He then grabs me by my shoulder, pulling me into the house. I gasp out loud, not fully understanding why my father's business associate's son is in my home alone. That's when I see my father lying on the floor. Dead and still, blood is surrounding his body, and his cold, dead eyes are wide open.

"What the hell have you done?" I scream, running over to my father, kneeling by his side, completely shocked he's dead.

“He fucked up and had to pay,” Luca says, showing no emotion. My throat feels like its closing in as air tries to break through my lungs. I start to cry and cry so much I can’t see him anymore in front of me. My vision is blurred.

“Now that he’s out of the picture, you and I will wed sooner. No fucking excuses and no running or I will find you, Erica, and I will kill you.” Luca is now bent down, whispering in my ear as I cry for my father who lies lifeless on the floor.

### *A Fresh start—One year later*

My mom and I drive down the road where you can smell the fresh ocean air as we make our way to the Ocean State. Rhode Island, here we come. It’s a long way away from California. The wind blows my long dark hair in my face, and I feel a calmness wash over me.

My mom and I have been through a lot this past year. After my father was killed, I was basically a slave to the Vasquez family. My mother fought as hard as she could to keep the peace, but they owned us. My father was in the Italian Mafia. We were the family who had it all until we didn’t. I was the mafia princess in California, soon to be wed to Luca Vasquez. Or should I say forced to be wed. I didn’t love him. I’m too young, and he’s a cocky asshole who will sleep with any woman who gives him the least bit of attention. I played my part for as long as I could until my mother and I could make our escape. The night we left the Vasquez home was the night we were free. Free of the evil fucking people who thought they could control us. I know what Antonio made my mother do, and I know she knows what I was forced to do, but we did it to stay alive and that’s why we are still alive.

I touch the locket on my neck. The gold oval shape is smooth on my thumb. The locket is engraved inside. It says ‘beating as one.’ My mother is a true romantic and she always tells me that I will find my real prince one day and our hearts will beat as one. I hold on to the locket and her words because I do want to find a man someday who will make my heart soar. Someone who will make me feel safe and truly loved, not afraid, used, and vulnerable.

My dad was the underboss for the Italian mafia. The people he worked for are lethal and extremely dangerous. We lived in a house that you can only describe as a mini castle. Now, we are left with hardly anything, barely scraping by as it is. I was once known as the mafia princess and now I'm a nobody. To be honest, I never liked the attention it brought. I had an arranged marriage that I thankfully escaped, but the damage that Luca caused is already done.

Luca Vasquez was not only the son of Antonio Vasquez, but he was pernicious in a way that scared the shit out of me. He's the tall, dark, and handsome type, but with the devil lurking behind his piercing gray eyes. I shiver just thinking about him. He took me when I didn't want to be taken. He used me and made me feel like I was an object. I am done with that life and I'm done with him.

"Sweetie, can you check how much longer we have on your phone?" My mom interrupts my thoughts.

"It says fifteen minutes," I reply, my tone staying neutral. I am trying my best to be brave for Mom, but I'm scared that Luca will find me or, worse, will kill me. We had to sell everything just to get out of the debt my dad put us in. That is just financially, never mind what would happen to us if Luca and Antonio found us. As much as I'm going to miss the money and privileges that came with my life, I'm happy to be free. Luca was adamant about marrying me and only me. That's why we have to do our best to stay hidden.

"We have to stay low-key. Try not to get too close to people, Erica. People in the mafia don't care; they will kill without hesitation," she says. I nod, fully aware of what she's saying.

A couple of lone tears fall when I think about what they did and how much I miss my dad. Even though he was the one who put us in this situation, he was still my dad.

"It will be okay, sweetie," my mom consoles.

"How do you know that?" I snap. "You weren't there when he forced himself on me. When he threatened my life if I left. We are dead if he finds us," I finally say with a whisper.



She visibly swallows while listening to me go off; I know saying it out loud is killing her, but I'm the one dying inside.

"Erica, I will never let that happen again. Not while I'm still breathing, do you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you." I sigh and sink lower into my seat, hoping we made the right decision in coming here.



As our old-ass Honda puttters its way through our new town. I dread the moment we pull up to our home. This house looks more like a cottage with its tiny, rickety front porch, chipped vinyl siding, and distasteful front door. The house is white with black shutters, and falling apart. The lawn is brown, and it's the end of August. School is starting soon, which is the last thing I want to be doing.

Mom has gotten me into a college not too far from our home. I was lucky enough to get a full ride at the university because of my grades. If it wasn't for my tutors and rigid education plan my parents laid out for me, I would be screwed.

I called about a job at a local diner, and I go in tomorrow afternoon for an interview. I hope I get the job. I have never really had a job before, but I'm a fast learner and I know I can do this.

My parents made sure I always had a good education, the best schools, top of the line in everything. This is going to be life-changing.



"This isn't awful," Mom says, and I cringe.

"Let's just get our things and get this over with," I mumble. The landlord was kind to let us move in on such short notice. We were lucky to have found this place.

As we make our way into the house the porch creaks and the door looks so old. Ugh, this place is frightening. But as

long as we are safe that's all that matters. I can't picture the Vasquez's finding us here.

I am not used to this lifestyle but I love my mom and I will do what I have to do to stay safe. I still feel bad she will be here alone while I'm at college, though.

Making our way in I see the house is tiny, the kitchen is off to our far left and has old wooden cabinets with laminate flooring.

Our living room is to our right, and it has an old beige couch smack dab in the middle, no TV or anything. An old built-in bookshelf is on the wall, and I smile at the memories of my library in my previous home. Luckily, I was able to bring my books with me, or I swear I would have completely lost my shit. I have a Kindle that I carry around with me as well. There is no way I can leave my house without a romance book.

I love the escape reading brings me, now more than ever.

"I am going to unpack, sweetie, so pick any room you want." Mom smiles at me. She is so calm about this entire situation, it's odd. It's almost like she has prepared for this moment her entire life.

My father was never really around much, and I knew Mom was lonely at times. He was a ladies man, and she knew he had other women on the side, but she stayed with him anyway.

"Okay, Mom." I trudge down the narrow hall and spot three doors. The one to my right is a shitty little bathroom, and then a bedroom to the left. This bedroom is small, I guess I'll take this one. It's already furnished with a full bed, dresser, and night stand.

It smells weird. I'll have to clean this place up. I'm kind of grateful I'll be living on campus now that I've seen this house. I collapse onto my bed and close my eyes, praying that this is all a nightmare and that I'll wake up and be back in my old home when there was no Luca, no Vasquez family breathing down my neck, and no worries.

The reality is, this is my life now and I can either live with it or not. Only time will tell, and we'll see if we made the right decision in moving here.



My mom and I are settled in the house, and I can see in her face that she's disappointed in herself. She wants only the best for me, I know this. The only thing I can do is continue to make her proud by doing well in school. If I didn't have a full ride, there is no way I would be going to college. I glance in the mirror. Long, wavy, dark hair past my shoulders, my big expressive green eyes on display... I have a nice body with a slim waist and just enough booty to fill my jeans, or so I've been told. I have a nice C-cup and always have had the best clothes. Up until now. My looks have always gotten me into trouble, though. Being pretty is not always what it's cracked up to be. Sometimes I would get negative attention from boys at school. As I got a little bit older I would get more and more attention, and it started to make me feel uneasy, and that's when Luca saw me one day. He confronted my father about wanting to have me, and the rest is history. Both families worked together, and I was the pawn in their game. Over the years I grew used to the abuse. I would take myself somewhere else. It all started when I was sixteen. I'm nineteen now. Luca was eighteen when we first met. I scurry downstairs in my dark fitted jeans and black tank top.

"Mom, I am going for a tour on campus today to check out my dorm and everything," I tell her while I shove a breakfast bar into my mouth. That's another thing that's been hard—not having money for a proper meal. We're not use to this kind of life, and I am really trying not to become bitter about it.

"Okay, sweetie, good luck. And Erica...just know how proud I am of you, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll be back later." I rush out of the house before I become emotional. This entire week has been life-altering. My dad was an asshole, but he did provide for us. And up until now I never really appreciated it. Regardless, he

did leave us with a colossal amount of debt and on the outs with the most dangerous people in the country.



As I pull up to the university in my piece-of-shit car, I realize how huge the campus is. It's embarrassing driving this car, but I'm trying to stay out of sight. It's not like we can afford a nicer one.

The school is beautiful, really. Tall brick buildings and green grass. Students are everywhere, with papers in hand, obviously trying to figure out the campus as well.

Mostly freshmen, I assume.

When I shut the car off I sigh and whisper to myself, '*Here goes nothing*'. I grab a hold of my gold locket, the inscription seared in my mind. I know one day I will have someone who will actually love me for me. Our hearts will beat as one, and I'll be happy again. Not afraid or alone. I am a fighter and I did what I did to survive. There's nothing to be ashamed of.

As I walk over to the main entrance, I get this strange tingling feeling like someone is watching me. I look to my left, then to my right. My heart is pounding out of my chest. All I see are a bunch of kids my age hustling about.

Shaking my head I continue walking to the building, trying to forget this feeling of being watched.

About an hour later, I have seen the entire campus, my dorm, and then some. I feel kind of giddy, knowing I'm going to be staying here. Maybe this will be a fresh start for us. My smile is wide as I continue walking, thinking to myself that I hope this fresh start is the beginning of a new, beautiful, peaceful life for us.



The next day, I start at the diner. It's not in the best area, but it's something. I'm a little nervous, but I have to step up and help Mom out.

Twenty minutes later, I arrive at the diner, and it's a shithole to say the least. I huff out a breath and make my way in. Well, I guess it's not too bad inside but nothing like I'm used to.

The door dings, announcing my entrance. A cute, chubby lady with a kind smile greets me. She has gray hair, and her name tag reads Darla.

"Hi, I'm Erica and I'm here about the job."

"Oh honey, you're hired! Look at you all cute and sweet. Kendra and Jessica both called out and I'm just swamped! Come here, sweetness, and put on an apron." She ushers me in and I can't even get a word in before she has an apron on me and a pen in my hand.

"Just ask them what they want and pretend to know what you're doing," she instructs, and then runs off. I'm left there, mouth wide open, in front of a couple who is smiling up at me and who heard that entire conversation.

"Don't worry, darlin', we'll go easy on you," the man says. He looks scary with his bald head, tattoos and leather jacket, but he has a kind smile. The woman he's with is also smiling up at me. I take a deep breath.

"Okay, then, what would you like?" I shudder, feeling a bit uneasy at first. But they order, making me feel comfortable.

I start to get the hang of it, and Darla gives reassuring smiles and taps on my shoulder. I'm making ok money in tips as I start to get a feel for the people and the place. Just when I thought my night was going fine the door dings, and when I look over in walks this man and when I say man I mean... holy mother of all hell, this man is drop-dead fucking gorgeous.

He strolls in without a care in the world. I see him lean down and plant a kiss on Darla's cheek. She then pats him on the cheek, and he gives her a small smile, and oh my god. I can't even move from my spot, and I think I'm drooling a little. Out of habit, I grab my locket and feel my heart rate speed up.

He has the darkest hair, with these sparkling green eyes. He also has on a leather jacket. I see some tattoos on his neck, and he walks with confidence that could only be described as powerful.

“Erica, sweetheart, come here!” Darla is calling my name and his eyes move to where I’m standing. When our eyes meet there is no emotion behind his, but I’m sure I look like a friggin’ lunatic staring him.

“Honey, are you okay?” she yells over, and I shake out of this stupor and clear my throat. When I start to walk over on shaky legs my face heats because I just looked like a total fool being caught ogling this man.

“Um yes, I’m fine, sorry,” I stutter.

“Well, honey, I want you to meet my best boy, Jared. He is my nephew, and is sweet as pie! Now you treat him good and he pays for nothing, you hear.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I quietly agree and clear my throat again. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Nice to meet you, Erica.” He puts his hand out for me to take and I’m still in awe of his damn deep, sexy, gravelly voice. I finally manage to put my hand in his and sparks fly. I swear I feel like I never want to let go of his hand. My stomach swirls and I retreat back a bit.

“Nice to meet you, too. Can I get you a table?” I query.

“Sure.” The corner of his lip tops up in attempt to smile and I start to feel more nervous. Just breathe, Erica. He’s just a man. A hot sexy, scary, beautiful-looking man, I say to myself.

“Here ya go,” I give him a menu and he just shakes his head.

“I know what I want, darlin’,” he says, and my face heats again. Of course he knows what he wants. He’s probably a regular and has been here a million times.

“Burger with fries and a coke please,” he tells me, giving me another panty-melting smile.

“Coming right up!” I walk off in a hurry. I said that too cheerfully and feel like a total idiot. I could have sworn I heard him laugh but I’m not certain because my head is already fucked from this man.

“He’s a looker, isn’t he?” Darla chimes, smiling ear to ear.

“He’s... He’s very nice,” I tell her, and she laughs out loud so loud that people turn their heads. Including Jared.

“Oh honey, if only you could see your face right now,” she whisper-laughes, and I shake my head.

“His order is already cooking, dear; go splash some water on your face, honey. You look like you are going to pass out.” She giggles again and I roll my eyes.

“Ha ha.” I smile back at this woman who I know will be a dear friend to me.

Darla then gives me a hug and I catch another glimpse of Jared, and he’s staring at me. He turns his head and I see his smile he’s hiding.



It’s late and my feet are killing me. Work is just about done. Darla thanks me repeatedly for helping and gives me more shifts, which I’m grateful for.

Walking out to my car, I see a motorcycle parked and a man next to it. He looks up and when I see it’s Jared I sigh in relief.

“You scared the shit out of me.” My voice shakes.

“Sorry, Darla wanted me to make sure you got to your car okay tonight.”

I raise one eyebrow and cross my arms.

“Did she now?” He walks over to me.

“What if she didn’t and I just wanted to see you again.” His deep voice rumbles through the night, coming face to face with me.

“Then I would say thank you, but no thanks. I’m just here to make some money while attending school. I’m not looking for anything,” I say in all seriousness.

He then raises his eyebrow in curiosity.

“I just wanted to make sure you got to your car safe.” He steps back and nods his chin for me to get in my car.

“I will get in my car because I have to go home, not because you told me to,” I retort, and he actually laughs.

“Okay, darlin’, whatever you say.” He grins at me and I get in my car. I roll my window down because he’s still standing there, waiting for me to leave.

“Thanks. You can leave now. I’ll be safe and sound in ten minutes,” I stubbornly tell him so he will stop staring at me like that.

“If you ever need anything you tell Darla and I’ll be there. You understand?” he says, and I’m a little taken aback by his possessive tone, but it’s also turning me on a bit.

“I can take care of myself, thanks though.” I start to drive away and as I look into my rear-view mirror, his eyes follow me into the night.



The next day I start my shift early. Darla had asked me to help out for the breakfast rush and I can’t afford to say no to the money. Another waitress, Maliaca, is working one half of the diner while I tend to the other half. We work well together. I have yet to meet the other two waitresses, but I’m sure I will soon. The morning goes by fast and it’s already noon. My feet and back hurt because I’m not used to this work, but I push through it. I probably slept three hours last night. All I could think about was Jared’s piercing green eyes and the way they studied my every move.

Every time the door rings I look to see if it’s him, and when it’s not I’m oddly disappointed.



“Honey, thank you for your help. You saved me once again,” Darla praises, and it feels good to be needed for once.

“Anytime, Darla. I could really use the money,” I admit softly, and she grabs my hand gently to sit at a corner booth.

“You will eat something now. You are withering away in front of my eyes.” I give her another timid smile because honestly I have curves in all the right places, and yes maybe I have lost a little weight since moving here, but I can tell Darla is just wanting to feed me and watch me relax a bit.

“Okay,” I say, and she smiles big and orders food for me.

“Now I don’t mean to pry, but are you all right, honey? Is everything okay at home?” My heart thuds in my chest. My mother’s voice rings through my thoughts. I can’t get close to anyone for fear of them coming after me and after anyone who associates with me.

“I’m okay. I live with my mother and she’s wonderful.”

“Your father?” she queries.

“My father is no longer in the picture.” I shake my head and look out the window. Tears fill my eyes because, as much as my father did get us into this mess, I did love him. He was a good dad for the most part. Suddenly I picture his cold dead body on the ground and my hands start to shake. I instinctively place them in my lap.

“I’m so sorry. Just know that Mama Darla is here if you ever need anything,” she coos, and gets up to leave me with my thoughts. A lone tear escapes my eye, and I’m really trying to hold it together.

The door chimes just as my food arrives, but I don’t look this time. My eyes stay glued to the pile of food in front of me. I honestly haven’t had a meal like this in what seems like forever.

My first bite of the warm fluffy pancake makes me groan.

“Oh, how I would love to be that pancake right now,” a deep voice rumbles, and I know it’s Jared. I swallow and look up at his face.

He changes his expression from playful to serious when he sees my appearance.

“What’s wrong?” he asks quickly, like he’ll kill anyone who made me upset.

“Nothing,” I rush. “I’m just tired is all. I haven’t been sleeping good lately, and this is the first good meal I’ve had in a while.” I don’t know why I’m telling him this but he seems to take in what I’m saying.

He sits across from me as I eat.

“Are you going to watch me eat this entire meal?” I quirk one brow up to challenge his response.

“I’m going to make sure you eat every last bite, then order you more.” I cover my mouth with a laugh.

“I couldn’t possibly eat anymore, Jared, but thank you. Darla is wonderful, she really is. She has been so kind to me,” I tell him, feeling extremely grateful having met her and her sexy nephew.

He then slides a card over to me. It reads ‘Vipers Motorcycle Club’.

“If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to go there,” he tells me in all seriousness.

I will never go there, but I nod and place the card in my pocket. I go to pull out some money for my food and he raises his hand.

“Your money is no good here.” When he says that I start to get pissed. Slapping a ten-dollar bill on the table, I get up fast. His eyes follow my every move.

“My money is good here. I pay my own way, Casanova.” I give him a glare and he gives me a grin. Rolling my eyes I leave him at the booth, grabbing a hold of my locket and repeating the words ingrained in my brain. “Beating as one,” I whisper. Hope fills my chest when I think of someone genuinely caring about me, and then the feeling is squashed when I picture Luca’s menacing face and how he used me for

his own personal toy. Men are pigs, I've seen what they do to women. I watched Luca and his friends and how they were.

Are there any decent men out there? Is there someone who can make my heart beat again? This locket is the only thing that helped when I was pushed into the darkness. I pictured a real man taking me and loving me for who I am. Someone who didn't force me, someone who let me be the person I was meant to be.

When I'm finished with school I plan on being a psychologist. I want to help people, but I know before I do that I need to help myself.



## CHAPTER *Two*

### *First Day of College*

The mornings are cool here in Rhode Island, but nice. I love it actually. It's quite a change from where I use to live.

It's my first day at the university, and I am dressed in dark, fitted jeans and a hoodie. I pulled my hair into a ponytail today. I did end up meeting my roommate the other day when I moved all my things in. She seems nice; maybe a little quiet, but I like her. Her name is Shannon. She has short blonde hair, is pretty, and looks like she is a bit of a loner. Which is fine with me. Honestly, I would rather have a roommate that is quiet and keeps to herself than a party animal.

When I walk in Shannon is already there, reading what looks like a flyer.

"Hey Shannon, what's up?" I smile and she looks up and smiles back.

"Oh hey, Erica." She nervously put the paper down.

"What's that?" I go to grab the paper and she gives me a timid look. This girl is completely unsettled.

The paper says there is a party tonight on campus at one of the fraternity houses.

“You want to go?” I raise an eyebrow and she shakes her head no.

“Why not? Could be fun,” I admit, not really knowing if it would be. I have never been to a frat party before.

“I can’t go to parties; last time I went to a party it ended badly.” She sighs and sits down on her bed.

“What do you mean it ended badly?” I question.

“Long story short, there is this guy I like. He’s a junior, I’m a freshman now, but when we met I was still in high school. Anyway, I went to one of those parties and we hooked up. He never talked to me again after that night and my stupid ass can’t stop obsessing over him.” She groans.

“Like I literally think about him all day every day and it’s becoming a borderline obsession and I hate being this way. I really do.” Her voice cracks and my heart actually hurts for her.

“Shannon, you can’t let him control your life. Anyway you know what they say, right? The only way to get over someone is to get under someone else.” I smile and she laughs for the first time, and I know that Shannon and I are going to be great friends.



Hours later we are both staring at our laptops, not really working, so I shut mine. “Come on, let’s get dressed up and go. There is no use sulking around here. Let’s go have some fun.” I give her a big smile, hoping she budes. Shannon huffs out a sigh and I know I’ve won.

“Okay, I’ll go with you, but if I see him I might want to leave.” I nod.

“Of course, but just remember what I said. Maybe if you meet someone else you will get over him.”

“Erica, he was so perfect; so attentive. I woke up the next morning alone in his bed. When I walked out of his room and ambled down the stairs there he was, shirtless, in the kitchen.

He was silent and wouldn't make eye contact with me as he drank his coffee. It was humiliating. I knew then he just used me, and I felt like a fool." I can't believe such a beautiful girl can be so hung up on one guy.

Shannon may be quiet and reserved, but she's beautiful.

"I'm sorry that happened to you; trust me, I know the feeling. But you need to move on. He isn't worth it."

"I know, I know," she grumbles in her hands.

"Come on, let's go get ready," I suggest, and she follows.



Two hours later we are showered, shaved, hair and makeup done, looking at each other in the mirror.

Shannon is wearing a tight black dress that hugs her small frame, and high heels. Her shoulder-length blonde hair is pin straight and she is wearing minimal makeup but her skin is so perfect she really doesn't need much.

I am wearing a red dress I found on clearance at a thrift store. It's tight around the bust and then flares out. Shannon comes from money, like most of the kids here, but I was her once and I know what it's like to be on other side, and right now it kind of sucks.

"Girl, you look hot with that red dress and red lipstick," Shannon compliments me, and I smile.

"You look hot, too, bitch; now let's go." We both laugh, making our way out of our dorm. I am starting to feel good about my decision in coming here as I walk to the party with my new friend.

Loud music vibrates in the air when we reach the front. The smell of stale beer and sweat hits me in the face as I take in all the party-goers.

"Wow, this place is packed!" I shout over the music, and Shannon gets that look she had before.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, and she starts to step back a couple of steps.

“I don’t know if I can do this, I’m not ready,” she stammers, and I grab her by her shoulders and make her look at me directly in the eyes.

“You will stay at this party and fuck someone if you have to! Do you understand me?” I shout loud enough for at least ten people to hear. Her face turns cherry red and I can’t help my smile as it grows. She then busts out laughing so hard and I follow. She gives me a hug and I squeeze her back.

“Thank you, Erica,” she whispers, and emotion clogs my throat. I feel extremely grateful that I found a friend here.

“Now let’s go get a drink and have fun,” I say, and we make our way to the kitchen.

We sip our warm beer, which is disgusting. Shannon seems to be scoping out the place, drinking the warm beer, and all I can think is for rich kids they sure don’t give a shit about the quality of little things like drinking a nice cold beer. I shrug my shoulders, and moments later I’m being pulled onto the dancefloor.

“Let’s dance, I’m feeling this song right now!” she tells me, and I feel like tonight is going to be life-changing.



I follow her to the dancefloor and we start to move our bodies to the music. I close my eyes and lift my hands over my head, enjoying the feeling of being free. Here I feel I can be someone different from Erica Castello. I can be anyone I want, and it’s liberating. Moments later I feel two hands wrap around my middle and pull my ass to his rock-hard front. Right now I couldn’t care less who it is, because I feel good and I’m not letting anyone ruin that.

When I open my eyes I see Shannon dancing with someone. I slowly spin around and I’m met with hazel green eyes. He’s handsome enough, with his dirty blond hair and pearly white teeth. He looks like a typical college kid.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he slurs, and I sigh.

Great, he’s drunk. That’s so unattractive.

“Hi, bye.” I roll my eyes and turn around to escape, but his hands have other plans. This guy has the nerve to grab my waist hard and pull me to his front. His lips crash to mine and I try to push him away.

Then he’s gone. His body is being lifted in the air and smashed to the ground, an angry-looking Jared pummeling his face.

“Jared! What the fuck are you doing?” I scream, but it takes more than my mouth to stop him. A couple of guys come out of nowhere and pull him off the boy that is now bleeding profusely on the ground. How the hell did he know I was here?

I look at him in confusion when his frantic beautiful eyes land on mine. He stares at me with rage masking his handsome face. His fists clench tightly to his sides and he’s breathing heavily. Jared is in his mid-twenties, maybe early thirties. There is no way he was already here partying with these people. Everyone shuffles back like they’re afraid to approach him. Like he’s some vicious creature that will rip their throats out without a second glance.

“Erica! Are you okay?” Shannon stumbles over to me.

“I’m fine,” I say, still staring at Jared’s wild expression, and walk off quickly to the bathroom.

Shannon follows me and I turn towards her when we make it in the bathroom.

“What the hell was that?” she screeches.

“I have no clue.” I splash some water on my now-hot face.

“Well, I think that Jared Knox, the infamous leader of the Vipers MC, wants a piece of my friend and I’m about to tell him to fuck off.” I start to laugh at her banter and look at her face in the mirror.

“Jared is not someone you mess with. That guy who was dancing with you is as good as dead,” she admits, and my eyes widen in horror.



“That guy was trying to kiss me and I didn’t want him to. He saw that I was in distress and helped me. That’s all.”

“Whatever you say, girl but I think he wants you. And if he wants you he’s going to have you. Nobody says no to Knox,” she exclaims, and my stomach twists with nervous energy.

“Trust me, Shannon, I do not like him in that way,” I lie, because the truth is I kind of think I do...



Shannon leaves the bathroom and I start to make my way back to the party, when I’m pushed into a room with a hand covering my muffled scream.

It’s Jared. I sigh in relief and then it turns to anger.

I push his body off of mine and yell,

“You scared the shit out of me!”

“Sorry, I just wanted to talk to you in private. Are you okay?” he asks, his voice sounding gruff.

“Oh my god! I’m fine. Will you please stop?” He holds his hands up.

“I saw him forcing himself on you and I completely lost it. I can’t explain it, but ever since we met I can’t get you the fuck out of my head.” He points to his head, exasperated.

I give him a forgiving expression.

“Thank you for pulling him away, but you didn’t need to beat the shit out of him. I’m not yours to claim.” My tone is steady as I watch his eyes roam my body. He takes a step closer and I give him a curious look.

“Were you following me?”

Jared’s entire body covers mine up against the wall and I whimper in his hold. I wish just one look didn’t make me feel this crazy, but it does. Everything about this man is making me foolish.

“Jared, what are you doing?” I whisper, not even recognizing my own voice. His husky voice returns with, “What I should have done the moment I laid eyes on you.”

Before I know it his lips crash on to mine and, oh my, they are so soft. He tastes like mint and he smells divine.

He makes a growling noise while he frantically kisses me. I open for him and allow his tongue to massage my own, and all I can think about is, wow I have never been kissed like this before. Passion is surrounding us. Our bodies are drawn together. His dominance overpowers my body.

Heat pools between my thighs and I can't help the ache that I need relieved so badly.

I push my front to meet his and he tightens his hold on my hips.

He starts to lift my dress, and I don't even care anymore. All rational thoughts are out the window as his hands move my panties to the side. He shoves two fingers inside me roughly and I ride them shamelessly.

“You are so fucking sexy.” He kisses my neck then he's on his knees, lifting my leg over his shoulder. One swift lick to my aching core and I'm shaking and yelling with need and want. “You taste so fucking sweet.”

“Don't stop,” I whisper, grabbing his hair and pulling him closer. His tongue is punishing and we are a mess of heated breaths in this moment.

He continues to eat me like I'm his favorite dessert and I pull his hair again, and that just makes him more aggressive. Which has me shouting his name over and over again.

“This is so beautiful! Pulsate all around my mouth, baby,” he says, and then continues his mission to make me lose myself.

I can't hold on any longer, and I let go and shout his name so loud I pray no one heard over the music. As I start to come down from the best high of my life he continues to lick me clean as my legs shake, coming down from the aftershocks of

my orgasm. Jared kisses my inner thigh and gently pulls my dress back down.

His hooded eyes land on mine, and I'm still so turned on right now I can't even see straight. This feels so wrong, yet so amazing at the same time.

In my mind I'm thinking, why not? Why not have some fun and forget about all the drama in my life. All I want to do right now is feel.

"You need to be mine," he groans, licking his lips with my arousal glistening his mouth.

"My turn," I rasp, and he is already unbuckling his pants. I grab his length, and holy shit he is huge. My eyes widen and I can see the victory on his face.

"The door is locked, darlin'. No one is coming in here." I nod, not even caring at this point. All I want is to feel something, and in this moment it's him.

"I just want to be inside you so badly," he groans, and lifts me up as I wrap my legs around his waist. He carries me to the bed, and in seconds we are both naked. His body looks like an athlete's. Six-pack, toned, and oh my goodness so sexy with tattoos up and down his arms. His hair is a little long on the top and short on the sides.

I see a softness in his eyes I haven't seen before. It's usually a cocky smirk I get, and then I think of what Shannon said about him and shake it off. I am using him just as much as he's using me in this monumental moment.



He is as hard as a rock when I pull him on top of me. Feeling him skin to skin is making me feel things I shouldn't, so I push that thought towards the back of my mind.

He grabs a condom, which I'm grateful for, and not seconds later he slams into me with such force I scream his name. Our moans fill the room as our slick bodies move in sync together.

“Jared! You feel so good. Harder!” I shout.

“Erica, fuck! Baby, you’re so fucking tight.” He grunts, and licks my breasts while hitting all the right spots. I have never been so turned on in all my life. I should be embarrassed about how wet I am, but I’m not. He feels so incredible and I never want him to stop. I have only ever been with one person and that was Luca. Jared is older and more experienced, that’s for sure.

He pulls out, flipping me onto my knees, and slams into me from the back. When he grabs my hair and slaps my ass I just about lose it completely. It stings but it also feels good.

“You will think twice before letting another man touch this sweet body,” he demands, and I can’t even form words as he smacks me hard again. I yell out in pain, mixed with pleasure.

“You will answer me. Say you will never let any other man near this body,” he growls, and yanks my hair back ever so slightly.

“Fuck, you feel like heaven! Fucking take all of me, baby. Can you feel what you do to me?” he says, and I just yell for him to keep going.

“Whose body is mine tonight?” He grunts, and as I continue to enjoy the feel of him he pinches my nipple and I yelp.

“I asked you a question. Whose body is mine tonight?” he repeats.

“Yours! My body is yours.,” I weakly say while riding this high of the best sex of my life.

He slaps my ass again and I yell his name. I can’t believe I’m having sex with someone I barely know, but I don’t give a shit.

“You will let go when I tell you to,” he whispers in my ear, and I’m sure he can feel me trying to hold back but I don’t think I can. He is dominating and sexy as hell right now.

“I can’t hold it!” I shout, and he lightly slaps my most sensitive area and I let go feeling him do the same as we come

together, reaching the best orgasm of my life. He doesn't stop slamming into me as he finishes, and I am on the verge of another one. I've heard of multiple orgasms, but never experienced one. I continue to pulsate around him as he caresses every inch of my body, tenderly kissing every inch until I'm finished.

When he pulls out I can't even move as I lay on his bed. He goes to his bathroom and shuts the door, and all of a sudden I feel like a cheap whore. With my heart pounding erratically I start to go over tonight's events, and all I can feel is shame suddenly. This is so unlike me.

What the hell did I just do? I frantically gather my dress and shoes. My body is humming with sexual aftershocks. I toss my clothes on before he comes out. I hear the sink turn on and make a beeline for the door.

I don't know what I was thinking having sex with Jared, but now I'm embarrassed to face him for some reason.

I quietly shut the door and run through the house. I spot Shannon and her eyes widen at my appearance.

"Erica, oh my god! Did you just have sex with someone?" she says, her mouth agape. The music is still blaring.

"We have to go or I have to go," I say, and shuffle to the front door. I hear her following behind me.

"Wait, what happened?"

"I'll tell you when the house is out of sight," I explain, and she doesn't speak as we continue to walk back to our dorm.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"Are you going to judge me about what happened?" I retort, and she stops me from walking.

"I would never judge you, Erica. Just tell me," she says.

"I had crazy wild monkey sex with Jared." I put my hands on my face, afraid of her reaction.

Her hands pull mine down so now we are looking at each other.

“So he was that good, huh?” She grins and I laugh.

“There are no fucking words,” I say as we walk the rest of the way to our dorm. My body is still humming and I feel like I’m on cloud nine. My body may feel sated and content, but mentally I feel like a huge slut.

I am somewhat regretting telling her because she wants to know every detail, and I really don’t want to talk about my failure in willpower when it comes to Jared.

I can still feel him and smell him on me. I shiver as I remember his hands all over my body and how he took me so hard. I am not expecting anything to come of this with him, but I can’t help that feeling in the pit of my stomach. It’s like deep down inside my soul I wish I was his.



Back at our dorm Shannon is passed out sleeping already, and all I can think about is Jared. The way he spoke to me, the feel of him, the smell of him. I didn’t want to shower but I did. Now he is nothing but a memory, because I know that can’t happen again. He is not boyfriend material and, to be honest, I’m not ready for a relationship with anyone.

There is no way it could work between us. I clutch a hold of my locket and close my eyes. He’s the infamous Jared Knox, and has probably been with countless women. Why would I be special to him in any way? A part of me craves what Jared and I had for that brief time we were together. Luca would never make me feel that good. I would usually end up in tears when he was done with me. No one has ever pleased me quite like that before.

Minutes later I hear a knock on my door.

“Who the hell is this at this hour?” I mumble.

“Erica, open the door now.” I hear Jared’s voice boom on the other side, and he sounds pissed.

Why would he be mad at me when I gave him an out by leaving?

I'm in my tank top and booty shorts when I answer. He looks out of breath, with his white t-shirt and jeans wrinkled from when he tossed them on the floor. His leather jacket no longer on him with disheveled hair and wild eyes.

He pushes through the door and locks his eyes with mine. Jared closes the door with his foot and pulls me to the wall gently. I gasp when his lips crash to mine. He aggressively kisses me like I'm his drug and he needs to feed his addiction. It's as if he's claiming my mouth.

I whimper in his hold as the kiss becomes more dominating, more passionate, than I've ever been kissed. When he pulls back he looks at me and his hands grip my face softly.

"You leave when I tell you to leave, don't ever do that again," he murmurs, and I nod because that's all I can do even though I should tell him to stay the hell away from me. I can't bring myself to say those words.

"Good," he says and kisses the tip of my nose, then walks out of my dorm room without another word. My legs are weak and I feel lightheaded, but in the best possible way. Butterflies continue to soar around in my stomach. Looking out the window, I watch him leave and think to myself, what the fuck am I doing?

That night I did end up sleeping like a baby.



## **CHAPTER** *Three*

### *Start of a New Day*

The next morning I awoke with a smile on my face. I feel satisfied and different about what happened last night. Maybe he does care about me? I know I like him perhaps more than I should. I realize we just met, but I feel an instant connection to him already. If I see him today I'm going to tell him that it can't happen again. There are people after me, and he can't get mixed up in my shit. There is no room to be selfish.

I'm starving but I have no time to eat before my first class. I get dressed quickly and make my way towards campus.

Dressed comfortably in my fitted, long sleeve, black shirt and fitted blue jeans I make my way to my first class. I am studying psychology. I find the human brain fascinating and want to learn more about it.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I smile when I see it's my mom.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey, sweetie. How is college life so far?"

"It's actually been quite interesting so far." I smile.



“Oh yeah? Have you seen that boy from the diner again?” she queries, and I can almost see her smile from here. Yes, I told my mom about Jared at the diner, so she knows all about him and how wonderful Darla has been to me.

“Maybe...” I giggle, and she laughs with me.

“Oh honey, how I wish to be your age again.” She huffs and we talk for a couple more minutes. She seems happy. She has a couple of interviews today so I hope something comes up for her.

As I walk through campus I feel good so far about the start of my day.

I make my way into my class.

There are about twenty people here already. I take a seat in the middle and pull open my laptop that I made sure not to sell because I knew I would need it.

More people start to gather inside the school and the classroom is now full. A shadow emerges over me and when I look up I see it's a blonde girl, giving me a dirty look. This is just great.

“Erica, right?” She sneers and I meet her eyes, showing her I'm not intimidated in the least when in fact I couldn't feel more inferior. She is dressed like she's going out for the evening, and I want to sprinkle some ugly dust on her and run.

“Can I help you?” I retort, and she narrows her eyes at me.

“I'm Stephanie. You need to stay away from Knox; he's mine, not yours.”

“I didn't know he was anyone's property, I'm sorry. Are you his girlfriend or something?” I say in the most sarcastic tone I can muster. If she is, I will feel like this biggest slut on the planet. My stomach starts to churn at the thought.

“I may not be his girlfriend yet but I'm the one he always comes back to, so stop right now before you get hurt. Poor girl.” She laughs and everyone follows, making my face turn cherry red in embarrassment and anger.

“Get the hell out of my face before I make you regret your next words,” I threaten, standing up and facing her, not backing down.

She gasps sarcastically. Who does she think she is?

“You better watch your back.” She then turns to make her way to her seat and the entire class is staring right at me. How the hell does he know this girl? This is going to be a long day.



After class I rush out to the courtyard in a hurry. I want to get the hell out of here. Everyone is staring at me like they know I had dirty filthy sex with the president of the Viper MC, and I'm mortified.

When I make my way to a tree far enough away from the campus grounds I slide down, closing my eyes. What the hell did I do? First night I'm here I make a stupid decision which ultimately labeled me for the next four years. “Fuck!” I shout, then I hear my phone buzz in my pocket. When I go to check it I have a text message from an unknown number.

**Unknown-I'm taking you to lunch.**

**Me-Who is this?**

**Unknown-It's Jared. Who else would it be?**

**Me-How did you get my number?**

I smile as I'm texting him, thinking about how much I really want to see him. I program his name into my phone as Casanova. Although he doesn't have five wives and multiple mistresses like the real Casanova; I hope not, anyway. He is the ultimate bad boy, that's a given.

**Casanova-I want to feed you. Meet me out in front of your dorm.**

**Me-Ok**

Well, how am I going to say no to a free meal? I'm actually starving. Excitement starts to bubble in my stomach

as I make my way to him. I make a mental note to ask him about that girl, Stephanie.

I walk over to my dorm and there he is, looking like a badass on his motorcycle. Oh my god, I actually get to ride with him? This just makes him all the more sexy in my book.

He smiles at me; he is wearing his leather jacket and sunglasses, and I just about melt on the spot.

“Get on, beautiful.” He hands me a helmet and I hold up my finger saying I’ll be right back.

“I have to go put my stuff in my dorm first.” He gives me a sexy grin.

“Don’t keep me waiting too long,” he orders, and my stomach flutters excitedly. I run up to my dorm with a smile on my face and change my clothes fast. I brush my teeth and my hair. I have a tight fitted white crop top and fitted blue jeans on. I have a jean jacket; it’s not leather, but it will do. I add some lip gloss and put on my signature Converse sneakers and I’m ready.

When I make my way outside he’s leaning against his bike, staring at me.

“Come here,” he demands, and I walk towards him slowly. He pulls me in between his legs and grabs my neck softly then his lips meet mine. It’s soft and sweet at first. Then his hands squeeze my hips firmly as he hums in my mouth. Our tongues massage each other’s as the kiss becomes more aggressive, more demanding.

When he pulls back, I whimper from the loss of his lips.

Jared’s eyes shine with lust and with need.

“Wow,” I whisper.

“I want you on the back of my bike, babe.” He smirks and places a small helmet on my head. The thought of riding on this bike with him makes me nervous, but excited at the same time.

“Okay.” I give him a small smile. I feel like I may be walking into the lion’s den with this man, but I don’t care. He

can take me anywhere he likes as long as he keeps talking to me like this.

“Where are we going?” I shout through the rumble of the bike as he revs the engine.

“My bar; the Vipers MC, babe!” he shouts as we make our way out of the campus lot. He tells me to hold on tight and I can feel his toned stomach through his shirt. I feel him laugh when I hold him tighter. He is going really fast, but I love it and trust him. I don’t know why, but I do. Something about this man makes me feel and do things I never thought I would.

When we pull up to the location it screams biker bar with its bright signs and motorcycles lined up along the property.

“Um...are you sure you have the right place?” I murmur, afraid to get any closer. He gives me a heart-stopping grin.

“This is my place, and I promise that when you’re with me no one will bother you.” His reassurance makes me feel safe. I believe his words. He exudes dominance and authority. Much like Luca did, only Jared wears leather and Luca wore suits.

Also, Jared doesn’t frightened me in the way that Luca did. Luca never made me feel safe or cherished. When I’m with a man, I want to feel special. My mother always told me never to settle. This is something my father and she disagreed about. My dad was trying to merge the families together and was willing to basically sell me off to Luca. All my father ever wanted was a name for himself. He became a selfish prick in the end.

“You didn’t bring me here to kill me, right?” I joke and he barks out a loud belly laugh that I wish I could bottle up and save.

“Babe, if I wanted you dead you would be dead. Now bring your fine ass over here.” He grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together. His large hands are callused around my small soft one, and my mind is reeling, sending signals to my brain, saying, ‘He is going to break your heart’.

But in my mind I’m also thinking, *Is this for real?* I have never felt so desired in all my life just by one look from this

man.

We enter the bar and, as I assumed, it is a biker bar more or less. Jared gives a couple of head nods to some scary-looking men playing pool.

He ushers me over to a corner booth. He motions for me to slide in and I do. Instead of sitting directly across from me he scoots in next to me. With his leg touching mine and his arm resting towards the back of my seat, that's when I start to feel hot all over. His dominance is overpowering in a way I never thought I would crave.

He makes me feel special. Like I'm the only person that matters to him in this very moment.

He smirks at me and waves the waitress over. This particular waitress looks to be fresh out of a strip joint with her boobs on display, crop top shirt, and shorts that show her ass cheeks. Literally. Her long blonde hair is set in soft waves and I instantly feel jealous when she makes direct eye contact with Jared. Her smile seems genuinely kind and Jared seems to know her well, which sends another pang through my chest.

Why am I acting like a jealous girlfriend? We just met. I shake my head to get out of my stupor.

"What can I get y'all?" she kindly asks. Wow, she even sounds pretty.

"I'll take whatever is on draft. Babe, what do you want?" He turns towards me. But for some reason I keep looking at the waitress, waiting for this all to be a joke. Why would he think I would want to come here?

"Um...I'll take the same," I sputter, and she gives me a soft smile and sashays off.

"Hey, you okay?" He grabs my hand, kissing the back. I don't want to be rude because this is obviously a place where he frequently resides.

"I'm okay, I'm just drained from class." Which is a lie because school comes way too easily for me. I think he can tell I'm lying but he doesn't call me out on it. Come to think of it, I've always been a shit liar.

“Who’s Stephanie?” I don’t hesitate, and his face stays neutral like my question is inconsequential.

“Stephanie is a whore that hangs out at the bar and sleeps with everyone. If she told you that we were together she’s lying.” I visibly swallow, because now he sounds irritated.

“Okay,” I reply, because what the hell am I supposed to say to that?

“What else do you do besides own this bar?” I ask him, changing this awkward subject and he looks the other way.

“Are you asking me if I do anything illegal?” He turns to face me and I blush.

“Listen, Erica, I like you. I know you are not used to this lifestyle, but I enjoy hanging out with you. I don’t want these women at the bar. They’re not my type if that’s what you’re worried about,” he admits, and I sigh.

“Last night was one of the best nights I’ve had in a long time, and I’m not just saying that to get in your pants again.” He squeezes my leg and I have to close them to keep from tackling him and kissing the shit out of him in front of everyone.

“Mine, too,” I whisper, and he then leans in to kiss my lips. It’s a soft kiss at first then when his tongue brushes mine ever so delicately I whimper in his hold. His hand covers my cheek.

“Fuck, you taste so good.” He pulls back and licks his lips, looking at me with hooded eyes.

I notice our beers have been placed down. I didn’t even see her come back.

“My friend says you are trouble, in so many words.” I laugh then take a sip of my beer.

“Your friend has been misinformed.” He becomes serious again.

“I mean no disrespect. This is just a fling, I know. I’m teasing,” I rush out, afraid that I may have crossed the line.

“I don’t enjoy being judged by people who don’t know me. I know we rushed things the other night and I’m sure I may look like a player, but I’m not. Sure, more than one girl has tried to get with me and, yes, most were one-night stands, but no one has ever grabbed my attention quite like you did.” I flush crimson red.

“I don’t usually sleep with a guy I just met, and I feel cheap about doing so. But I don’t regret it.” I shrug.

“That’s because it was meant to be. That night was epic, babe.”

“It sure was.” I nudge his shoulder.

“Where are you from anyway?” he asks, and my face instantly falls. I want to tell him the truth, but I don’t really know him.

“Florida,” I lie again, and try to change the subject.

“Hey Prez, who’s the chick?” a big guy with muscles upon muscles, tattoos, and a beard comes over and says.

“Her name is Erica and she’s my girl, so fuck off.” he bluntly tells him, and the scary man puts his hands up.

Jared seems to be the head honcho in this bar by the way people act around him.

“I mean no disrespect, just never seen you with a woman here before.”

“Well, get used to it and keep your eyes up here when you speak to her.” The man laughs and slams his hand on the table. I jump in response.

“This is great!” the scary man admits. He’s still looking back and forth between Jared and me.

“Nice catch, man. Damn, if only I was ten years younger.”

“Watch it,” Jared warns.

“Okay, okay. I’m leaving. Nice to meet you, Erica; my name is Grady, by the way. We’re all family here, darlin’, so if you ever need anything you just holler.” I nod, unable to form

words for some reason. Grady walks away, still laughing, and Jared shakes his head.

“He’s a harmless pain in my balls, but he’s my boy.” Jared grins.

“Wow, um...he’s nice?” I smile, and that’s when I see Jared’s expression change from fun to downright serious.

“You will come to me if you ever need anything. No one else. Understand?” He brushes his hand across my cheek.

My eyes close at the feel of his hands on me. He gently kisses my forehead, and it’s such a warm gesture coming from him.

We talk for a little while longer.

“What about your family?” he asks, and without really thinking I blurt out the truth.

“My dad is dead and I live with my mother.” I don’t know what’s come over me. I probably shouldn’t have told him that considering there is a possibility people are still after me. In fact I’m 99.9 percent positive Luca is looking for me.

His eyebrow rises and then his expression changes with understanding. Thankfully it’s not pity. I hate when people feel sorry for me. I’m sick of hearing ‘I’m sorry for your loss’. That is one good thing about moving away from California. No one is here to say shit, and I like that.

I’m starting to feel guilty about my lie.

“Please keep this between us. I’m from California, but I’m not supposed to be telling you this and I’m not even sure why I just did.” I put my head in my hands, feeling all sorts of vulnerability right now.

If he says anything to anyone it could ruin all we worked for to get away from those people.

“What exactly are you so afraid of? Is there someone you’re running from?” He pulls my hands away from my face.

“Who do I have to kill?” he growls, and my eyes widen at his statement.



Unshed tears are in my eyes and his face turns more serious.

“Tell me what it is and I’ll make it go away.” My stomach flutters at his admission, because I wish he could. I wish that he could take my pain away and end the people that could be after us, but he can’t. They’re dangerous, and if anything ever happened to him because of me I would never forgive myself.

“No, there’s nothing you can do or help me with. What’s done is done, Jared, and I shouldn’t even be talking to you.” I see his fist tighten.

“Tell me now, Erica. I’m not going to ask you again.”

Just as he says that my phone rings.

“It’s my mom.” I hold up one finger. He nods and sits back in the booth.

“Hey Mom, sorry I didn’t call you back.” I start off with a smile and then my body turns to ice.

“Hello, Erica. It’s been a while since I’ve heard from you, my love.” Oh my god... it’s Luca.

Instant panic takes over and Jared notices my change in behavior right away.

“Please don’t hurt her! I’ll come back! Just don’t hurt her!” My voice is raised and I motion for Jared to let me out of the booth. He does and starts getting his friends to move. I can’t catch my breath; I’m gulping in air that’s not air. It feels like dust. I can’t breathe as panic grips my throat.

I hear a scream and I know it’s my mother. I know he’s killing her. I know that her life is ending because we weren’t careful enough. I should have stayed and married him. I should have listened when they threatened me. I should have been good and obeyed.

My hands shake and the phone drops to the floor. Jared is yelling something I can’t exactly make out. I’m nodding back and forth as I scream incoherent words.

“Babe, breathe!” He takes me in his arms. He then grabs the phone.

“Who the fuck is this?” His face contorts in anger and I know he can hear the screaming, because that’s what they do. They torture the ones that have crossed them.

My dad died brutally and the thought of them doing the same to my mother makes me want to vomit. Which I do, and I don’t even care enough to be mortified by my actions. I am spilling whatever I have left in my empty stomach. My life is being ripped to shreds and there is nothing I can do about it.



## **CHAPTER** *Four*

### *Despair*

I must have blacked out, because there is more than one scary man surrounding me. Grady, Jared, and three other men are hovering over me.

Jared's face is filled with worry.

"Where's my phone?" I shout

"I have it, babe; you need to relax for a minute before you end up in the hospital."

"I can't fucking relax! Oh my god!" I wail.

"He killed her!" I choke out a sob. My cries turn into hard sobs and I'm being carried over to his bike.

"I need to go," I gulp.

"Who killed her?" he asks, and I can't even believe this is happening.

"The man who's after me." I cry, and watch Jared's face turn red with rage.

"Where is your mom?" he enquires, and thank god he is here to help me because I can't even function.

I give him my address and I tell him we can't call the police. He nods in agreement, like he understands my situation, but how could he possibly know?

He barrels down the road and my hands are gripping his middle so tightly but he doesn't seem to mind it. He sets one of his hands on mine reassuringly. That one motion makes me feel a sliver of hope, but in all honesty I know I'm about to walk into a murder scene. Just like in California.

When we pull up to my house I jump off the bike and hurry inside.

"Erica, wait for me!" he orders, but I can't stop my feet from moving.

The first thing I notice and smell is blood. Lots and lots of blood. Jared barrels through my home like a madman on a mission. He has a gun pointing in all directions. How the hell did I not notice him carrying a gun? I am scarily unobservant.

"Mom!" I scream. "Mom, where are you?"

The house is trashed. I follow the blood trail, shaking and crying, scared to death that I'm going to find her dead.

I hear moaning as I reach the back hallway. She is lying naked in a pool of her own blood, and all you can hear are my screams. I check her pulse. It's weak but it's there.

I see a note on the floor. With trembling hands I read 'I will be coming back for you, wifey.'

I dial 911, not even caring about the consequences I may have to pay and pray that my mom will survive this. Jared is kicking doors open and searching for someone. When he makes his way over to me, his face contorts in anger. Jared bends down to my level, gently taking the note from my hands. When he reads the words on the note I can't help but feel guilty that he may think I'm actually married, when I'm not.

Pure rage radiates off his body as he moves towards the ambulance pulling in my driveway.

I run to grab a blanket, covering her naked body. Tears are streaming down my face when reality hits. Luca was here and he wants me back.

This is how it always goes with him. Luca gets what he wants when he wants it. If my mother dies tonight, I will make him regret it.



I fucking hate hospitals. Everything about them. I still have blood all over my clothes from my mom. I called Shannon to tell her what happened and she's on her way. I'm glad Jared is here just in case my mom doesn't make it. I really don't know what I would do.

"Erica!" I hear Shannon yell for me in the waiting room.

When I stand she rushes over to me; her hands fly around my neck to pull me close. I cry hard on her shoulder when the thought of losing my mom hits me hard.

She was obviously assaulted in the worst way by the looks of her. Will she even be okay after this, if she survives?

"What happened?" Her worried eyes meet mine and I tell her everything. She is shocked when I finish telling her tonight's events, with tears in her own eyes. I make the story out to be as if it was just a regular break-in, but I know eventually I'm going to have to tell her the truth. We sit and wait in the waiting room for hours. Mom's in surgery, and they are not sure if she is going to make it.

I stopped crying because now I think I'm in shock. The cops asked me questions and I told them nothing about my involvement with the mafia. They have cops on their payroll, and if I know anything at all I know there is nothing I can do or say. They are going to question the neighbors right away to see if they saw anything suspicious, but I already know who did it and there is nothing that's going to stop Luca from having me. If he would go to the lengths of killing my mother, then there is no stopping who he will hurt next. Shannon or

Jared could be on their hit list for all I know. My life as I know it is going to change.

Jared nods at Shannon, acknowledging her presence but not uttering a word. He's pacing the waiting room, on his phone. Who the hell is he talking to?

Shannon asks me some questions but I can't find any more words.

I just continue to nod, unable to speak anymore. Moments later the doctor comes out, a look of pity on his face. He looks like a sweaty mess as he wipes his forehead.

I don't dare move from my seat as I shake my head back and forth, muttering "No no no...Please, no."

Tears are cascading down my face and I hiccup a sob.

She's gone, I just know it. Then the words I fear the most come crashing down on me.

"I'm so sorry, but she didn't make it."

The next few minutes are a blur. "I think she's in shock," I hear someone say.

"Erica! Erica! Can you hear me, baby?" I think that's Jared, but everything is muffled. Then my world turns black.



The sound of beeping wakes me up. My eyes are heavy and there is an IV in my arm. Shannon is staring at me with tears in her eyes. She doesn't say anything and I silently thank her for not speaking. We sit in silence for a while. She grabs the nurse, who looks me over. They offer counseling and a bunch of other shit I can't even think about right now. Shannon tells me the police are outside the room, guarding the door. They offer to follow me back to campus if I decide to go back there, because my house is now a crime scene.

Shannon tells me Jared left and I'm instantly relieved because I was going to tell him we can't be together and that his life could be in danger as well.

“What did he say?” I croak.

“He said he had to take care of something and for me to not leave your side.” She looks at me thoughtfully. I close my eyes and contemplate my next move. What the hell am I supposed to do now?



Hours go by and I'm finally being discharged. They tell me to take it easy and gave me some Xanax in case I have another panic attack. We get into Shannon's car, and the smell of clean leather and crisp cool air hits me in the face. My window is down and my tears are dry. I must look like hell, but I don't care. I just lost my mother, and my life is now in danger.

“Shannon, I would stay away from me.” My voice is raspy.

“Not going to happen, sweetie.” I sigh.

“There are bad people after me, clearly, and I would never forgive myself if they got to you, too!” I cry.

“What are you talking about?”

“My father worked for the Italian mafia. I was to be married to a man shortly before I arrived here,” I admit, and Shannon stays silent.

“I am no good to be around, and just being my friend could get you killed. She was the only family I had left.” My voice breaks and more tears threaten to fall.

My heart rate starts to pick up and I feel a sudden sense of panic consume me. Heart wrenching sobs break out of me and she pulls the car over. We are on the side of the road, Shannon's arms around me as I sob into her shoulder. I shudder and shake and let all my grief out. My throat constricts and I feel like I'm in actual pain.

“Honey, I'm so sorry!” she cries, and it feels like my life will never be the same again.



A while passes and my sobs subside. She starts to drive again.

“I’m not going anywhere, and from here on out you have me. I’m your family.” I shake my head no as we turn towards the parking lot.

When we pull up we walk side by side up to the dorm. Jared is sitting on the steps and when he sees me his face says it all. Regret.

He thinks I’m mad because he left, but the truth is I’m not going to see him anymore.

“Jared, I’m sorry but you need to leave.” I walk past him. He grabs my arm before I enter the room. Shannon gives me a look to see if I’m okay and I nod yes. She walks into the dorm to give us some privacy.

“I will get revenge for your mother. You have my word,” he assures me, and I look to the floor. “Jared, you can’t help me. Just leave, please.” I start to walk to my room.

“I will let you get rest. But you’re mine, Erica. I will protect what’s mine.” I leave him outside my door. Everything feels like it’s suffocating, I feel like I’m falling and no one can catch me, and if they do I will break in half.

A while later I am under the covers, silently crying for my mom. Her ethereal personality and calming spirit made everyone content around her. She was a beautiful person inside and out. I can’t even fathom the pain she endured.

There is nothing I can do anymore...

## ***Jared***

I am enraged about what happened to my girl and her mother last night. Yeah, that’s how I have felt from the moment I laid eyes on her. She’s my girl now, and I will protect what’s mine. Erica is going to try and push me away, but I won’t let her. Whoever hurt her mother is dead when I get my hands on them. Whoever tries to get to her is finished. I will cut the motherfucker up who dares to touch a hair on her perfect head. The Italian mafia hasn’t seen the wrath of me. I found out more about her history and come to find out her family was



involved with Antonio Vasquez. I don't give a fuck how important he is. I will chew the mother-fucker up and spit him out. They haven't seen what my men and I can do yet, but soon they will find out that they fucked with the wrong girl.

My girl...



## *Erica*

My head is pounding the next morning. Jared is better off without me. My life is in shambles and I just met this guy. I will make sure to tell him that next time I see him.

“Hey,” Shannon says. She’s sitting on her bed with worry-filled eyes.

“Hi,” I rasp.

“There is some aspirin and a bottle of water on your nightstand. Jared left it for you and a note that he has business to attend to at the bar.”

“You let him in here last night?”

“He was very persistent, and he *is* the president of the Vipers MC. I’m not about to mess with him.” She gives me a soft smile.

“He was only here for a few minutes while you slept. He looked pretty upset with what happened, and I know you want to push him away, but he just may be the one you want to keep close.” I just nod.

“Do you need help with anything?”

“I’m fine, I just have to make some phone calls. Make the arrangements and figure out my classes.”

“Well, if you need help with any of that let me know.” Shannon walks over to give me a hug and leaves.

That’s my favorite thing about her: she knows when I need space. Right now I just want to be left alone.



After all the calls and arrangements, I'm exhausted. My eyes are bloodshot from crying and I look like shit. I text Jared to come over so we can talk, and he replies right away. When there's a knock at the door I know it's him.

"Hey, baby." He rushes to me, wrapping his arms around my middle. His comforting hug makes this even harder for me. I pull back and lead him over to my bed. Jared and I sit, and his concerned eyes stare into my tired ones.

"Jared, we can't see each other anymore." My voice quivers and my lips tremble. He sighs and lowers his head a moment before meeting my face again.

He's wearing a black shirt, leather jacket, and dark jeans. He looks so good it's hard to do this. I try to avoid his beautiful eyes when he gently lifts my chin to face him.

"Baby, I know what you're thinking. But trust me when I tell you I am the last person you need to be worrying about."

"You don't understand!" I cry. "I can't do this with you. I am supposed to be married to that man. It was arranged, and because I ran my mother is dead." I let out a small sob and he pulls me back into his arms.

"I just couldn't take the abuse anymore," I whisper, and his body goes rigid at my admission.

"Abuse? As in he made you do things you didn't want to do?" he growls, and I nod my head yes.

"I am going to kill him. We know people, my club and I, and we are just as lethal as those mother-fuckers. They will get nowhere near you when I am around."

I glance at him with my eyebrows drawn in confusion.

"What do you mean? Are you part of a gang?"

"It's not a gang; it's a biker club, but we protect what's ours no matter the cost. And you, Erica Castello, are mine."

“Jared, I’m already in too deep with these people. I can’t bring you and your friends along. I won’t do it.” I start to pace my dorm room and he stands.

“There is no way I’m going to let you do this alone. This is what we do. We help people if they need security and you, baby, need help. I fucking need to do this for you.” Tears cloud my vision. I start to protest, when he places a finger to my lips. He presses a gentle kiss to my neck, cheek, then lips. He starts to caress my mouth with his and we can’t seem to get enough of each other. He rips my baggy shirt and sweats off.

Admiring my naked body with lust in his eyes, he starts to move his strong hands to my core and brushes my center with his finger. I moan in response when he latches his mouth onto my breast as he rubs my sensitive nub.

“Jared, please, I need you so bad,” I whimper, needing to feel anything but the emotional pain I’ve endured.

“I am going to make you feel so good and you will come on my cock when I tell you to.” I nod, greedily pulling his pants down and grabbing his length to guide him to my center.

He tosses me onto the bed and lays his beautiful toned body over mine. His hands grip my wrists and he somehow manages to tie them to my bed. Where the hell did that come from? It doesn’t scare me; if anything, it only excites me more. The tattoos on his arms are on display and he looks so damn sexy. He has a skull on his upper left arm and some tribal signs I’ve never seen before.

“I love this,” I whisper, reaching up to kiss his tattoos, and he shivers at my touch.

“One day I’ll have your name here.” He taps his heart and my throat constricts.

“It sound like you want to keep me, Mr. Knox.”

“Fuck yeah, I want to keep you,” he murmurs. Jared lightly lifts my locket. “Beating as one,” he whispers, and my eyes widen.

“How did you know what it says inside?” My voice shakes, because my mom is the one who gave me this locket

and now it means more to me than anything.

“When you were asleep,” he admits guiltily.

“My heart beats for you, baby. Beating as one is us, Erica. I’m only twenty-five but I feel like I’ve been waiting for you my entire life.” His admission makes my heart quicken, because I think he’s right. I feel like with Jared by my side I can get through anything.

Moments later he slams into me so hard I cry out.

“Mine, baby. I will protect you now and forever.” He continues to whisper sweet, encouraging words as he picks up his pace. My hands are bonded together just like I am with Jared.

“Ohhh...more,” I moan, and he kisses me passionately while our bodies meet thrust for thrust.

“Fuck, you’re so tight as you grip my cock, baby. Shit, you feel amazing.” He slams into me harder than before and I can’t hold back any longer as I pulsate around him, screaming his name over and over again. He soon finds his release and we lay together, breathing heavily as sweat coats our bodies. He unties my arms and I weakly wrap them around his neck.

I needed that so much. To get lost in his touch. To get lost in him. To feel vulnerability and have a man take control in the right ways.

“Thank you for being here,” I say as Jared catches the tear that falls down my cheek.

“I will always be here for you. I care about you more than I have ever cared about anyone.” That comment makes me smile, and I hold this man so tightly. Lying there, I think of how easily I could fall in love with him.



*One month later...*

I’ve been working a lot and going to school. I’m starting to get overwhelmed, so Darla cut down my hours. Jared refuses to see me stressed out and he also refuses to make me pay for

anything. He has been amazing in every way. I am not sure where he gets his money from, but I have an idea. I'm not even sure I want to know.

He has been extra protective and possessive lately, which doesn't bother me as much as I thought it would. He has one of his men with me at all times. Today it's Glock. That's what they call him and I don't know why. I don't ask questions anymore. It seems they all have nicknames for each other except Jared, who they call Knox or Prez.

He's so damn sexy when he gets all protective. I know I made the right decision staying with him. He has helped me heal since my mother passed. I have no clue what I would have done if he wasn't here to help me.

He lifted me back up when I was at my worst. Losing my mother has made me look at life differently. Life is precious, and every day we wake up breathing we get another chance. I will take my life skills and learn from them. I still have my guard up in case Luca decides to pop up again. Just the thought of his hands on me makes me cringe. Jared's face contorts in anger when I mention him. At first he thought I was married, and when I told him I wasn't relief was apparent on his face.

Just the thought of being taken away from him has my nerves shot. I can't even imagine a life without him in it.

Tonight I'm at work. My shift is over and Glock and I are leaving the parking lot.

Jared is working tonight so that's why Glock is escorting me. He is a scary son of bitch on the outside, but he has a great heart. I turn to give him a small smile, and just as I do I see his face change into a worry-filled expression. What has his expression change sends fear coursing through my veins.

"Erica, run!" he shouts and my eyes widen in fear when I see an SUV come barreling down the street. Gunshots ring out and all you can hear is people screaming. I run as quickly as I can. I hear the truck speeding towards me and I have nowhere to go! There are a couple of bars to my left that I'm familiar

with but I'm worried that if I go inside they will shoot the people inside.

"Fuck!" I scream, panicking. My feet move faster than ever as I run down the street. Horns blare in the distance but the truck doesn't stop as it pulls up to me.

A man in all black jumps out of the SUV truck and grabs me. I kick and flail my arms, trying to remove myself from his grip, but it's no use. He's too strong.

All of a sudden gunshots ring in my ears and the man drops to the ground. I'm being carried again, only this time I'm going in the opposite direction of the threat.

I dare peek up, and thank god its Glock.

"Glock!" I bury my head in his chest as he runs with me in his arms like I weigh nothing.

"Knox, there are three men in a black SUV now headed down Point Street!" Glock roars into his earpiece.

"She's okay," he tells him as I'm being tossed into his vehicle.

"Knox wants me to take you to him. Are you okay?" He looks at me from his rearview mirror. My body won't stop shaking as I nod yes.

Minutes later we pull up to the bar and Jared is already outside, yanking my door open. I jump into his arms willingly. Instant comfort settles within me.

"Baby," he murmurs in my ear as I'm wrapped around him like a spider monkey.

"Good work, man." He praises Glock and I still can't stop my body from shaking.

"I will find those fuckers and kill them. I will kill them slowly and painfully for you. They almost got you."

I go to place my feet on the ground but he only holds me tighter. I notice he is taking me through the back of the bar. We end up in a huge office with a loveseat to the left which he takes me to. When he gently places me down everything

comes crashing around me. The thought of being taken away from Jared and forced to marry Luca is my worst nightmare. Forced to have sex with him and forced to be bullied into complying to his every need.

Jared kneels down, looking directly at my face. I can feel the anger radiating off of him.

“Baby, I’m so sorry. I thought we had a better visual of the threat, but apparently they were one step ahead of us.” His words hover in the air as I try to comprehend how my life as I know it is in danger.

“He’s never going to stop,” I whisper as I let myself fall into the couch. My hands cover my face and I groan.

“Jared, I can’t expect you and your men to protect me like this. I’m sure you have other business to attend to. I’m a burden and I know it,” I say, staring at his blank expression. He then grabs me to sit on his lap.

“Stop talking like this right now. I fucking need to keep you safe. My entire world is you, baby. He can’t fucking have you. You’re mine.” He growls in a covetous tone that ultimately is turning me on. I sigh while taking in his words. My hands lift to cover his cheek. I lean towards him and give him a kiss to show my appreciation.

“I don’t think you understand how badly I needed to hear that,” I whisper softly into his mouth. Our tongues collide and our mouths move together in sync as our souls become one. My heart flutters at the thought of this beautiful bad ass a man being mine and only mine.

He pulls back, panting.

“All I know is I need to keep you safe.” I believe him and his words. I just hope he can.

I am falling hard and fast for Jared. I never knew that love could feel this way. The passion is real. I have read many romance books but to have the actual man that stars in one is beyond anything I have ever dreamed.

Jared laces his fingers through mine as we walk out the bar to his bike.

“You will come and stay with me for a while. No arguments. I will have your things brought over to my place.”

I smile when he gently places a helmet on my head.

“Okay, Casanova, you win.” He laughs and slaps my ass. I yelp in response.

“Get on my bike, baby.”

I do as he says. My arms wrap around his middle and I feel cherished. Like no one can touch me with Jared by my side.





## CHAPTER *Five*

### *You Must Be Important*

We pull up to Jared's condo. From the looks of this place and location, only rich people live here. Which makes me smile because Jared is all big and scary in his leather jacket and dark jeans. He gives off that 'don't fuck with me' vibe.

The doorman greets him with a smile as Jared pulls out a wad of cash, handing it over to him. He whispers something to him and the man nods. Jared grabs my hand and takes me to the elevators. When we reach the inside I decide to ask what that was all about.

"What did you say to him?" I query.

Jared rubs his thumb against mine.

"I told him I don't want to be interrupted and to look out for anyone suspicious."

"He works for you, too?" I enquire. "You must be important." I raise one eyebrow.

"Baby, no one fucks with me. And if they do they end up dead. So yeah, you could say I'm important, but my job comes with great responsibility. I have to protect all of those around me, especially the ones I love." He gives me a kiss on my forehead.

Butterflies swarm all around my stomach as I take in what he just said. Did he just admit to loving me?

“What are you thinking?” he asks with a sexy smirk plastered on his face. The door pings open and we enter what must be the penthouse suite.

“Nothing.” I swallow as I take in the beauty that surrounds me.

He has a massive black leather sectional and flat screen TV over to the left. High ceilings, and actual Harley Davison sits on display in the nook of the wall with a light shining down on it. He has a classic motorcycle piece as a decoration. Wow.

“Your place is beautiful,” I murmur.

“I’m happy you like it, baby, because you will be staying for a while. So get comfortable.” He saunters into his stainless steel kitchen. White marble and grey invade this space with a large kitchen island and six bar stools. He grabs me a water and I thank him. I just never pictured him in a place like this but, now that I see his condo, it’s all him. Every single detail describes this man.

“Why me? You have so many women flocking to you, I’m sure.”

“I’m no innocent, and I’ve been with many women, but I found my piece of the puzzle I have been missing all along,” he admits truthfully, and I can feel my face heat. He walks over to the side of the island where I sit and pulls me in for a hug.

“I can’t even fathom losing you, Erica. You have to know how much I care for you.”

“I do,” I whisper, with emotion clogging my throat.

“You’re mine now, baby, and I protect what is mine.”

I see the sincerity in his eyes and choose to believe him. My facial expressions give him the reassurance he needs. He takes my hand and escorts me to his room, which is enormous and all male.

Dark grays and whites fill his space with his king-size bed and colossal window that looks over the city.

“Well, Casanova, whatever will you do with me now that you have me in your room?” I smile up at his gleaming eyes.

“First, I’m going to feed you. And, baby, now that I have you I am never letting you go. I will ruin you for any other man.” His words make my breath stall in understanding because I know for a fact he’s right about that. Jared has ruined me for any other man, and for some reason that thought doesn’t scare me as much as I thought it would.

I can truly picture myself being with Jared for a very long time.

We make love the entire night, and I have never felt so cherished in all my life.



The next morning my alarm on my phone goes off at seven. I feel groggy from yesterday’s events. I decide to see what Shannon is up to. I send her a quick text while Jared is still sleeping soundly beside me. Moments later I get a response from her. When I open the image I gasp out loud and then start laughing. It’s her taking a selfie, flipping up her middle finger towards a sleeping boy. It’s Sean!

I start cracking up, thinking, what the hell is she up to now? When she messages back saying she’s leaving him high and dry after she gave him the best sex of his life last night, I smile. Good for her. He was an asshole and I hope he feels what she felt that morning he did that to her.

I feel Jared move next to me. He groans and wraps both arms around me, tickling my sides. Laughing, I start to push him away. Which only makes him do it more.

“Okay, okay, I surrender!” I continue laughing with tears in my eyes. He stops and his face turns serious.

“I love you so much, baby. More than anything.” I gasp at his admission and feel my chest squeeze with happiness.

“I love you, too, Jared.” My voice sounds hoarse. Tears well in my eyes but I push them back. I am leaving myself entirely exposed to this man. I’m giving him my heart and soul. I just hope he doesn’t break it. If I could freeze this moment in time I would. Jared Knox is the other piece of me that I’ve been missing all along.



Later in the morning, Jared drops me off at my dorm so I can pack some things. I grab some clothes and necessities. Jared told Darla I will be taking a break, which only infuriated me because I need the money. He insists on paying for everything, and it’s making me feel helpless. I want to pay my own way.

I’ve learned this past year to never take anything for granted. Life is too short. I will never forget my mom and dad, but I know with Jared by my side I can conquer anything.

He’s protective, and it’s sexy as hell. I am the luckiest girl in the world to have a man like him who makes me feel so loved.

Walking out of my dorm room with my bag in hand, I bump into someone in the hallway.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” I rush out, and there is a strange looking man just staring at me. There is no way he is a student.

“It’s okay, darlin’. No harm, no foul.” He smirks, instantly throwing off some freaky vibes.

I clear my throat and mutter ‘no worries’, then make my way down the stairs.

That was odd. Maybe I should text Jared and let him know about that creepy guy.

I continue to walk down the stairs and I feel him hot on my heels. When I turn around to confront the man, a cloth covers my mouth. I try to scream but nothing comes out as I breathe in the toxic fumes. The next thing I see is black.



When I peel my heavy eyelids open I realize I'm in a room and my hands are tied to a bed post.

"Fuck!" I gasp, and start hyperventilating. That man took me. What the fuck? The only thought that runs through my head is he has to work for Luca and his dad. I was stupid asking Jared to take me to my dorm. He had a phone call, and when we pulled up I told him I would be a couple of minutes. He must be going crazy looking for me, and it's all my fault.

"Hello, beautiful," a voice intones from the corner of the room, and I scream. I had no idea someone was in here. Luca sits in a chair across from the bed I'm lying in. He leans on his elbows and gives me an evil smile.

"Looks like you and your boyfriend are not as smart as you thought. Did you really think you could get away from me, Erica?" His face is now serious.

"I...um..." I stutter, unable to speak. My throat clogs with emotion. All I can think about is now I'm stuck with this monster, and where is Jared?

He leans above me, placing his lips against mine. I try to push away but he has me stuck in place. His hands are holding my head as he moves his lips over mine. He trails kisses down my neck and groans. I see the bulge in his pants and I want to gag. My body is shaking and that seems to excite him even more.

"Oh how I've missed you, sweet Erica." He continues to assault my body with his lips, not going any further than my neck. When his rough hands squeeze my breast, I shout out in pain.

"Don't you ever fucking leave me again! I have been trying to get to you, but you have all those fucking bikers in the way. You are a fucking slut, you know that? Leave it to you to fuck a biker for protection." He insults me, but I don't care. I just want him to stop touching me.

"I will replace my touch with his and get back what's mine. This body belongs to me not him, bitch." He grunts and starts to pull my pants down. I try to buck him off of me but I

have no power over him. My screams and cries do nothing but make him more excited.

“Please stop!” And just as he touches my most private area, there is a knock on the door.

“What!” he hollers, and pauses his assault. I sigh in relief. Saved by the door.

“I need you, boss. It’s urgent!” someone shouts behind the door, and I’m praying he leaves.

“I will be right back, gorgeous.” He licks my cheek, leaving me bare and exposed in this room where I am about to completely lose myself again.



I’m not sure how long it’s been, but I must have fallen asleep. I’m still half naked when Luca walks back in.

“Where is Jared?” I get enough courage to ask.

“He’s been taken care of, so I suggest you get used to the fact you’re stuck with me and this life I’m so generously giving to you, princess. You will be my wife, Erica.” I instantly feel my heart split in two.

I didn’t even realize that he walked over to me. His mouth is close to my ear when he whispers, “You’re mine, not his, so get that the fuck out of your pretty little head.” When he leans in to kiss my mouth again, I cry out.

“I will let you rest, my love. I have business to attend to, but make no mistake: you will want me soon enough and be my queen. I will have you and own every inch of this body again.” He leaves the room.

When the door shuts I let out a sob and cry so hard. My soul feels like it has just shattered into a million pieces. My screams echo throughout the room. Jared is gone and it’s all my fault.



## *Jared*

“Yes, make sure they get to the location at 2pm to make the exchange. I have a ton of fucking money riding on this deal.” I end the call and make my way into Erica’s dorm building.

I climb the steps two at a time. My feet pause when I almost trip over something. It’s a bag. My heart rate starts to pick up when I realize it’s Erica’s.

“Fuck! Erica!” I shout, and start running to her door.

“Baby! You in there?” I start to bang on her door, feeling hysterical.

When I finally slam the door open, I realize she’s not in here.

Panic seizes my chest. I whip out my phone and call her.

Her cell phone goes straight to voicemail. That’s when I call Grady and my tracker. They both agree to meet here.

“Hurry up!” I roar over the phone. I will kill the person who took her, slowly and painfully.

“Prez, what happened?” Beefcake and Grady come barreling over to where I’m standing. I didn’t even realize they were here. I’m so sick with worry that I can’t even think straight.

“Erica has been taken. Look up Luca and Antonio Vasquez. I want to know everything about them! Where they eat, sleep, shit, I don’t care how you get it just do it now!” I order. Beefcake nods, running over to his car where his computer is.

“What can I do?” Grady, my right-hand man, asks. He can be almost as deadly as me.

When we care about someone, we care hard and with everything we have.

“You come with me. When he finds the closest location, you’re with me.” We walk over to where Beefcake is working his magic.

“It doesn’t look like they were covering their tracks at all from what I can see. They either are expecting you and it’s a trap, or they have no idea who you really are.” I smile.

“They have no clue who they’ve fucked with, but they will soon.” He grins when he twists the computer in our direction. The address from when they were last seen is plastered on the computer with a video of Luca Vasquez entering a gas station.

“This fucker is dead.” We all pile inside his truck and head in that direction.





## CHAPTER

### *Six*

#### *Pain*

It's been hours since Luca left the room, and I'm grateful because he scares the shit out of me. My eyes feel heavy from crying so hard. The pain I feel from losing Jared is almost unbearable. I can't eat the food they left me. All I can do is lie here and stare at the wall.

"Jared," I whisper-cry. Just the thought of never feeling him, seeing him, or even smelling him makes me want to curl up and die a thousand deaths.

When I hear someone enter the room my heart starts to beat rapidly, and sweat trickles down my back.

"I hope you have come to your senses," Luca's deep, menacing voice rumbles.

"You killed him?" I cry. "You want me to come to my senses when you killed the one person that was worth living for? Go fuck yourself, Luca!" I spit, and his face turns red. He stomps over towards me and grabs my throat, pinning me against the bedpost.

"I will fucking own you, bitch, and I have all the power here. So don't you dare disrespect me. I will make your life a living hell." I'm losing air but I don't care anymore. He took

away the one person that I loved more than anything. Tears are still cascading down my cheeks. He lets go, which leaves me automatically gasping for air.

“Kill me!” I screech. “I don’t care anymore!” I start to wail in emotional agony. He stands there and almost looks like he feels bad, then it’s gone.

“You will surrender to me. I don’t care how long it takes.” Luca then leaves the room. I continue to sob silently for the rest of the day.



## *Jared*

We arrive at the location of the gas station. When I make my way inside there is a clerk standing behind the counter.

“Excuse me, we need to get a hold of your outside cameras.” I ask the clerk, and he gives me a look like I’m insane.

“What for?” I’m about to knock his teeth out. The clerk can’t be more than twenty years old. Stocky kid with brown hair.

Grady and Beefcake stand behind me now and I show him my piece.

“Where are your security cameras?” I ask one more time.

“Um...uh...in the back,” he stutters, and we follow him to the back.

“Pull up the last hour of your outside cameras,” I instruct, and he starts clicking away fast.

“There! Pause that shit!” I bark. “That fucker, there he is,” I growl.

We write down the license plate number of the black Cadillac SUV.

“Beefcake, work your fucking magic and trace that plate. We will follow the tracks while you look. Let’s go!” I order,

and I throw the kid a hundred and his eyes widen.

“Keep your fucking mouth shut about this. Beefcake, delete the footage of us coming in here.” He nods and we leave.

“I’m coming, baby,” I say to myself, cracking my neck and knuckles, ready for bloodshed.

## *Erica*

It has been a little over a day and I haven’t eaten or drunk anything at all. I feel sick and emotionally drained. I don’t want to give up, but I do. I’m so full of mixed emotions at this point.

There’s a light knock and the door opens. An older woman with blonde hair in a bun and what looks like a maid’s uniform comes in.

“Boss wants you clean. I will untie you, but no funny business or I will have to call him in here,” she tells me in a thick British accent.

I nod my head in understanding, because I don’t want him back in here.

“I will escort you to the main bathroom where you will freshen up. Clothes and everything you need are in there.” I just shrug as she escorts me down the hallway.

“You must stay strong and eat something or he will dispose of you right away, miss.”

“I don’t care.” My voice cracks and she sighs.

“In you go.” She shoos me into the bathroom, which is enormous.

The massive Jacuzzi tub is already filled with steaming hot water. Robotically I take my clothes off and get into the hot bath. My skin burns, but I welcome the pain. It feels good and my muscles began to relax.

Minutes pass. I submerge myself and hold my breath. I stay under the water as long as I can hold it before I feel like

I'm on the verge of passing out. There's banging on the door when I emerge from the tub. Gasping for air, I yell out that I'm almost done.

"Are you okay, miss?" the woman yells through the door.

"Yes, I'll be right out!" I shout, and continue to get out while towel-drying my hair and body.

I look in the mirror. I look terrible. There is a bruise starting to form around my neck. I notice a clean bra, panties, and a yellow sundress. Black would be more fitting for my current mood.

I slowly get dressed. With my long dark hair still damp and a face free of makeup, I weakly sit on the floor with my back against the wall.

"This is my fucking life now," I whisper to myself, and again silent hot tears roll down my face. I wipe them and stand. My stomach growls loudly but I ignore it.

When I walk out of the bathroom, Luca stands there with his arms crossed.

"You haven't eaten. You will follow me to the dining area." I nod, not uttering a sound. I feel like a zombie on autopilot.

We make our way into the dining room. He places a hand on my back and I flinch. He leans down to my ear.

"You smell exquisite," he rumbles, and I shiver.

He gently pulls me against the wall. I gasp from the contact.

"Don't be afraid of me, for I can make you feel just as good as he did." He brings his lips to my neck. I start to lightly shake, not able to control myself. Luca kisses down my neck then places a firm hand on my waist. He squeezes my ass and presses his hard length into my stomach. I'm afraid he may do something to me right here. My heart rate kicks up once again, and I'm at the point of panic.

"Are you wet for me, Erica?" he mumbles, still kissing all the way down my body.

I close my eyes and pretend it's Jared; that's all I can do at this point. I will have a panic attack if I don't take my mind somewhere else.

"Your body is beautiful. You will give yourself to me." He intones, and I can't stop the hot tears from falling.

He lifts my dress and my mind pictures Jared and his beautiful face. Luca hisses when he touches my center with his thick fingers that don't belong there.

"Please stop," I ask, not wanting this to go any further than it already has. I'm trying my best to picture Jared, but Luca keeps talking.

"Are you thinking of him?" It's like he can read my mind.

"Yes." I whimper when he traces the line of my panties. "You will never own my heart," I tell him and he growls, taking his fingers away from my center and licking them clean.

"Tonight I will take what's mine again, whether you like it or not, and your eyes will stay focused on me. Do you understand?" I nod, afraid of what he may do.

He pulls away while adjusting himself, and I sigh. That was close. On shaky legs I sit down at the large dining room table. He sits diagonally from me and fills my plate with food. My mouth waters when I see the meat and vegetables steaming hot.

"No more tears, Erica. I will not have a wife who is weak." He says this as he stares at his food and clenches his fist around his fork. I look down and feel completely lost and alone. How will I ever marry this man? His light brown hair and grey eyes bore into mine. He's always presented in a suit that must cost at least three thousand dollars by the looks of it. None of that matters to me. Luca may be handsome on the outside, but he is evil in the inside and downright vindictive.

At one point in time I may have liked him just a little bit, but that was before he tried to force me into marrying him. No one should be forced into anything, especially a life-long

commitment. Now I absolutely despise the man before me. He killed my family. I hate him with everything I am.

“You can do what you want with me, Luca, but I will never love you. In fact, I fucking hate you. You killed my father, mother, and Jared.”

His cold, dead gaze latches on to mine, unmoving. There is something brewing there that I don't understand, and before I can think any further I hear something.

A loud bang erupts. I jump and then Luca is practically dragging me down the hallway, gun in hand. He places his finger on my lips and I stare at him in confusion.

“Stay quiet and get in this closet. Do not leave or you will be shot on sight.” He tosses me into the closet.

I fall to my butt and scurry to the back of the closet with my head in my hands, rocking back and forth. Shouts and yells are heard throughout the mansion. Gunshots start going off and I am trembling so badly at this point.

All of a sudden it goes deathly quiet. My body has not stopped shuddering, but I try my best to stay still and quiet.

When I see a shadow under the door I stop breathing. Two feet pause in front of the closet. I don't know how long I stare at the shadow but it disappears and I let out the breath I was holding.

“Erica?” I hear a familiar voice whisper. My eyes widen when I realize it's Beefcake. Oh my god! He came for me even though I got Jared killed. I shoot up off the floor and turn the doorknob. When I peek my head out of the closet there he is, his back facing me, gun pointing in all directions.

“Matt?” I croak, and he spins around to face me with relief apparent on his face.

“Erica! Thank fuck, darlin'. Come here. Are you all right?” He wraps his strong, protective arms around me and I weep.

“It's okay; you're safe now. We have been looking everywhere for you. Luca is somewhere, so stay behind me

and I'll get you out of here in one piece." I grasp onto the back of his shirt like he's my shield.

He starts to talk into his earpiece. "I have her; she's safe. I'll meet you in the back. Get the vehicle now," he orders, and my eyes cloud with unshed tears because Jared's men are still keeping me safe even after he's gone.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"No need to thank me, darlin'. You're family," he tells me, and I sniff.

"No more tears. You're going home," he assures me, and I just nod even though he can't see me.



## **CHAPTER** *Seven*

### *My Heart*

We finally make our way to the back of the house. The warm sun hits my face. He turns in every direction while still shielding my body.

All of a sudden I hear the cock of a gun and I jump to the sound. Beefcake swings his body around, pulling me safely behind him.

Luca is aiming his shotgun at us. He could kill Beefcake in one shot, and I can't have that.

"Just stop!" I shout. "Please don't shoot him!" I emerge and he shoves me behind him again.

"No! I can't have any more of you die because of me!" I sob. He's still looking at Luca, aiming his gun at him while speaking.

"What are you talking about, any more of us? Stay the fuck back, Erica!" he orders, but I don't listen. That's until I hear a voice from the heavens.

"Put your mother fucking gun down now or I'll blow your brains out!" Jared's voice fills the air and my mouth gapes at the sight of him.



His gun is pointed at Luca's head, and Luca starts to lower his weapon to the ground.

"You will die for this, Mr. Knox. She is mine and I will come back for her," Luca threatens.

"Over my dead body, fucker," Jared snarls, and pulls out a knife.

"I want you to look at that woman over there and apologize for hurting her."

"Fuck her!" he grunts, and Jared puts a knife to Luca's throat. My eyes widen.

"Last chance, fucker." Jared smirks like he's enjoying this.

"Okay, okay! I'm sorry!" Luca looks at me and my eyes widen when Jared takes his knife and slowly slits Luca's throat. He is gurgling and gasping for air. We all watch slowly as he takes his last breath. Jared is satisfied when he wipes his knife on Luca's suit jacket and walks over to me like he just went to the store and is done shopping.

His face turns soft when he reaches me.

"You're alive?" I sob, covering my mouth with my hand. I fall to my knees and cry, and I must look crazy but I don't care. Beefcake is trying to hold me upright and Jared's hands are holding my face. He makes me look at him.

"Did he tell you I was dead?" he growls, anger radiating off his body.

All I can do is nod. I can't speak as my breaths quicken and hyperventilation kicks in.

"Breathe, baby; I'm here. I'm alive and you're safe," he assures me, and I jump into his arms. He grunts then wraps his arms around me as I cling to him for dear life.

"He he t-t-told m-m-ee..." I can't even finish my sentence as sobs wrack my body.

"Shh, baby," he murmurs. Then I feel him pick me up bridal-style and carry me over to the car.

“Get someone over here to take care of the bodies and be on high alert for Antonio. He will be looking for his son,” Jared orders, and I feel his body shaking as well.

He places me gently in the back seat. He scoots in and picks me up again placing me on his lap.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” he asks in a concerned tone, rubbing my back. I whisper ‘no’, holding him tighter.

“Grady, call the doc. Have him meet us at the bar.”

“On it,” Grady replies, and the rest of the car ride is silent.



I must have fallen asleep from the lack of food and adrenaline. I can hear them talking but I choose to keep my eyes closed.

“Is she going to be okay?” Jared is speaking.

“It looks like she hasn’t eaten since she was taken a couple of days ago. She is very dehydrated and has bruises around her throat and between her legs.” That must be the doc.

“Bruises?” Jared stresses.

“They’re finger marks. She may have struggled with her captor. I will wait until she’s awake to ask her more questions.”

“Fuck,” he curses, and I chose to open my eyes then. I see a man in a doctor’s coat looking at Jared, and then both heads snap up to me.

“Baby. Oh thank god you’re awake.” He grabs my hand and kisses the back.

“I thought you were dead and I lost it. I’m sorry I didn’t eat or drink anything. I thought you were gone and I just couldn’t do it. He...he touched me and I let him without a fight. I tried to picture it being you. I was afraid he would kill me otherwise.” I cry into his chest.

“Tell me what that motherfucker did. I should have killed him slower.” Jared’s tone is deadly and I feel bad I’m telling him this.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t you dare apologize. None of this was your fault.” He practically growls when he tells the doctor to leave us.

When I pull back I’m sure I look like a hot mess.

“You came for me,” I state, and his eyebrows draw in confusion.

“Of course I fucking came for you. Baby, you’re my heart. Don’t you know that no one can touch me? I’m here for the long run. It’s you and me, baby, until the end.”

“I love you, Jared.” His face softens.

“I love you more.” He leans in to kiss my lips and I can’t help but melt into his touch, and I feel like my heart has been mended back together.



Jared brings me back to his place when I refuse anymore treatments from the doctor. I just want to rest.

“Babe, you need to eat something.”

“I’m just thirsty right now and I only need you. Please just lie here with me?” I plead, feeling the urge to be comforted by this man who saved me in more ways than one.

I look into his eyes as we lie there, face to face.

“When I found out you had been taken I felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest, baby. I have never been that scared in all my life.” I nod in acknowledgment.

“When I thought you were dead I felt the same thing. Please, Jared, I can’t lose you. It’s not over with Luca’s father still out there. He will want revenge for his son. These people are dangerous.”

“Not as lethal as me, baby. I will kill him if he comes near you, I swear it. Just like his piece of shit son,” he growls.

“He touched what’s mine.” His eyes draw tight and I curl into his body, feeling the effects of the past couple of days take

over.

Jared holds me the rest of the night and I finally feel like I can breathe again.



*It's dark where I am. My eyes are trying to adjust to the darkness. A voice echoes throughout the room as a chill runs down my spine.*

*"You didn't think I would let you get away, now, did you?" Luca's voice booms in my ears.*

*"Please leave me alone!" I scream, and cry.*

*"You're mine!" He then lunges at me as my screams ring through the space. His heavy body lands on mine and his large hands wrap around my throat. I claw at his hands to get him off me, but he won't budge. He laughs at my struggles and I know I'm going to die. Blackness clouds my vision as I see his menacing glare for the last time.*

I wake up gasping for air, knowing that was a nightmare. My hand reaches my neck and I can still feel his hands there.

Jared still lies beside me, sound asleep. I walk to the bathroom and lock myself inside. I hate how real that dream felt and wonder if I'm ever going to be okay again.



That morning I ask Jared to bring me to my dorm so I can see Shannon. I never told Jared about my nightmare. He doesn't need to know about it. Shannon is probably wondering where I am and my phone is still in my bag from the other day. Jared said he left it in my dorm room when he rushed out to find me.

I have decided not to say anything about what happened.

For one, I don't want to talk about it anymore.

Second, Jared and his men have the building scoped out and assured me it's safe to go in.

I arrive at my dorm room to find Shannon there with a big smile on her face.

“Hey, what are you so happy about?” I grin, and she starts laughing.

“Well, you can imagine the messages Sean is sending me now that I ditched his sorry ass!” We both start laughing and it feels so good.

She tells me all about last night and I’m loving every second of it. She has taken my mind off of things and I’m grateful for that.

Good for her. She played him like he played her and now he is the one blowing up her phone.

We continue to talk, and I laugh while listening to her tell me stories about Sean. It sounds like he has it bad for her now.

It makes me happy to see her happy. When Shannon leaves for class I lie down to stare up at the ceiling. My eyes start to feel heavy and then I’m falling into a blissful sleep.



*When my eyes crack open I’m not in my dorm room anymore. I’m outside in the woods and wiping off leaves from my body.*

*“How the hell did I get outside?” I say aloud.*

*I hear a rustling of leaves and turn around fast. There’s no one there, but I get this terrible feeling there is someone hiding and watching me. As fast as I can, I get up and run. I can barely catch my breath and my legs feel weak. I don’t feel like myself at all. I wouldn’t dare turn around to see who is chasing me, but I can feel that there is someone hot on my heels. As fast as my feet can carry me I sprint through the woods, catching branches in my face.*

*Moments later someone comes barreling into me. The air is knocked right out of my lungs. This person slams my head into the ground and I try to scream, but nothing comes out.*

*All I know is I must get the hell away from this person. This person wants me dead.*

*Luca's face emerges in front of mine as he spins me towards him. I kick, wail, and scream with all my might.*

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* That's all I hear. Banging and someone screaming. My body is shaking. "Ahhh!" I wake up to my screaming voice and someone slamming on my door.

"Erica, open the door!" It's Jared. He's yelling through my door for me to open up.

"Hold on!" I croak, and stumble toward the sound of his voice.

When I whip the door open he notices my expression and comes storming in the room, looking around. His gun is out and he's ready to attack.

"No one is here; I just had a nightmare." He sighs in relief.

Jared pulls me in for a hug and I let him. I need his comfort right now.

"I'm scared; I know this isn't over for me, and I'm terrified that I'm losing myself along the way. My mom is gone and I know I'm next." I pull back and look into his eyes.

He gently puts his hands on my face.

"I will do whatever I can to protect you and make sure you're okay. No one is going to hurt you ever again."

"Every day I feel less and less like myself. Like I'm just coasting by, and for what? I am so sick of feeling so helpless."

"The only thing I am sure of right now is you, baby. I love you." He admits softly. I feel so lucky to have him right now.

My heart thumps so loud I can almost hear it. There is nothing better than listening to this gorgeous, sexy man tell me he loves me.

His mouth meets mine like it was always meant to be there. The kiss starts off soft and steady, and my face is hot and I feel tingly all over. Heat pools between my thighs and I welcome it.

"Fuck, I need to feel you, baby," he says and I jump up on him. He catches me and I wrap my legs around his waist. He

rushes us over to my bed, our clothes pulled off one piece at a time. We are skin to skin and I could just stay here in this moment with him forever.

“I have never felt this way about anyone before,” I whisper while looking into his eyes. He’s so breathtaking.

“I feel the same, babe. No matter what happens I need you to know how much I care, and I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.” I reward him with a kiss.

Moments later he’s inside me. The feel of him makes me tingle all over. The love I feel in this moment is indescribable.

“Baby, you feel so good,” he tells me, and a tear rolls down my cheek. I know right then and there that Jared Knox will be a part of my life for a very long time and I will give him everything that I am. He can have all my faults and truths, because I am completely and utterly exposed to him.



## **CHAPTER** *Eight*

### *Perfect For Me*

When I wake I feel something warm. A smile fills my face when I see Jared sleeping peacefully in my bed. It's strange to see him look so vulnerable while he's asleep, but it's also nice because he always seems so self-assured. He's rough around the edges with everyone else, but I get to see this beautiful, vulnerable side to him. Just looking at his half-naked body sends my lady parts into a frenzy.

His arm is wrapped around me with my head on his shoulder.

I start to pepper small kisses on his chest as my hands roam his toned stomach. He makes this sexy sound and smiles. When his eyes land on mine they turn earnest.

“Look at you; even first thing in the morning you're as fucking beautiful as ever.”

My eyes begin to water then he starts to look solicitous about my reaction.

“Babe, what's wrong?”

“Nothing...absolutely nothing,” I whisper, and kiss the shit out of him.



There are no more words to be said as I show him how much I love him through my kisses.

His fingers graze my body and land exactly where I want them. When he inserts his fingers inside me I throw my head back in ecstasy.

“I love to watch you come apart, baby. Your body is so responsive.” He pumps his fingers in and out of me. I grab his length and do the same. I can’t wait anymore. I climb on top of him and slam down on his shaft. We both moan in pleasure. I ride him hard as he cups my breasts. He brings his mouth up to each one, licking and kissing, giving them equal attention.

I slow my pace down to savor him, not wanting this to end, not wanting this feeling of becoming one to ever come to a stop. I feel whole, complete, and so sexy. He makes me ache all over. His eyes zero in on mine as they stay there, pouring out desire and need. We may be undeniably attracted to one another, but it’s more than that. It always has been.

“Fuck!” He throws his head back in elation. His sounds make me crazy, his deep voice is yearning for me, making me feel deranged with lust.

“That’s it, baby, ride me.” I pick up the pace as his facial expressions make me start to lose my sanity. He’s as turned on as I am.

I can’t hold back any longer as I explode into a million exquisite pieces. Jared grunts and flips me over, ramming me from behind.

“Fuck, you feel so good; so tight,” he growls in my ear, and I smile.

I push back hard, meeting him thrust for thrust as he shouts my name over and over again. He lets go and it’s the most beautiful thing in the world to me, knowing I can give him such pleasure the way he gives me.



Jared and I walk hand and hand around the courtyard and it feels satisfying and familiar. A few guys come walking

towards us, one of them being Sean. I wonder where Shannon is.

Then I smile, thinking about her leaving him high and dry the other day.

“What are you smiling about, gorgeous?” Jared smiles at me then leans down to give me a quick kiss.

“I’m just happy,” I admit, and it’s true. This is the first time in forever I have felt this safe and content. With my mother gone it’s been arduous to say the least. I can’t even describe how it feels at night when I’m alone and I think of my former life and the only family I had left. She was taken from me way too soon. Life isn’t fair in that aspect. If not for Jared, I would think someone was playing a cruel joke on me.

Who would have thought I would actually end up alone at my age? I’m a college student with no immediate family, and no money besides a very little bit we had saved to move here. Luckily I have a free ride, but I still need to keep working to support myself. If my life wasn’t in such disarray I would be working more often at the diner.

Jared walks me to my class on campus. I’m sure it’s to stake his claim, but he should already know I’m fully and wholly his.

That’s when I see Sean walking towards us.

“Hey man, what’s up?” Sean comes over to us, giving Jared a nod. He smiles at me.

“Hey, I’m Sean.”

“I know who you are.” I give him a no nonsense glare.

“Whoa, kitten, put your claws away.” He laughs.

“We didn’t hook up, did we?” he asks, and I roll my eyes at his arrogance.

“Hey!” Jared barks at him. “She’s fucking mine, man.”

Sean puts his arms up. “Sorry, Knox; I mean no disrespect.”

“As long as you know your place, we’re cool.” They both nod as I continue to stare this player down. The other guys he walked over with are silently laughing at Sean looking uncomfortable.

“Shannon is my roommate and my best friend.” His eyes widen at my admission.

“Yup, that’s what I thought.” I give him a smirk.

“Babe, I need to go to class,” I tell Jared, then lean over to kiss his cheek. He smiles, telling me he will pick me up after class. He never lets me drive anymore. He thinks my mom’s car is unsafe.

I walk away, biting my tongue.



I’m typing my notes on my computer in class when I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. Pulling it out, I see I have received a message. I don’t recognize the number.

Opening the message, I freeze. My heart starts beating rapidly, feeling like it’s coming out of my chest. The message says: ‘I know where you are at all times. Do not try to run’.

My eyes widen and my hands start to shake. I close my laptop and pack my shit up. Everyone stares at me when I run out of class, but I don’t care. I feel like I’m going to be sick.

I run into the bathroom and barely make it into the stall before I throw up. When my stomach is empty I slide down to the floor. I bend my head to my knees and breathe in and out.

My phone vibrates again and a couple of tears fall.

“Shit,” I mutter.

When I pull my phone out I sigh.

“Where are you? Why did you run out of class?” It’s Jared, so I take a calming breath.

I text him where I am and that I need to show him something.

After I wash my hands and rinse my mouth I hear him come storming into the ladies room.

“Jared, you can’t come in here!” He takes one look at my face and pulls me into a tight hug. I welcome his warm and safe embrace.

“Babe, what happened?” He massages my head while still holding me. I muffle my response in his chest.

“I received a message and got scared.” Now his tone is all business when he pulls my face to meet his.

“Give me your phone. I can trace it.” So I do as he says, not even asking how he can pull that off and pray he knows what to do because I sure as hell don’t. It’s reassuring having someone like Jared on my side. We make our way out of the bathroom and start to walk down the hallway.

The one thing I can’t stand is that every girl we pass has her eyes on him, like they want him or have already had him. That thought alone makes me wince. He doesn’t even go to school, but everyone seems to know him.

I follow Jared down the hallway and then outside. He makes his way to his bike. He motions for me to get on, so I do. He is typing away on his phone, most likely to the person doing the trace. He takes my phone and does something with it while still typing away.

“The phone is twelve miles away. I need you safe while I check this out.”

“Oh, hell no! You are not going alone,” I state.

“Babe, I’ll call my men to help. But I need you protected, so you have to go somewhere.” He grabs my hand, kissing the back.

“I’ll be fine here; just go do what you have to do and please be careful.” I launch myself over to him and kiss him softly. He sighs when my body meets his and I know I have to leave before this escalates.

“Fine, but I’m sending someone to come here and keep an eye on you first.”

“That’s fine, babe, thank you.” I run my hands through his hair and he stares at me with lust in his eyes.

“I have to work tonight.”

“Okay; I’ll send Beefcake over to take you.”

“I can drive myself, Jared,” I huff out. “He can just meet me there.”

“No, he will pick you up and take you to work.”

“Fine,” I agree, knowing that will make him feel better.



When his friend arrives he leaves me. He tells me he’ll come by later and let me know what happened. Lately I hate being away from Jared, because I actually crave him.

I crave the smell of him, the feel of his hands on my body. He makes me feel desired, complete, and fully loved.

In my heart I know he is it for me, and no matter what happens I will fight for him. I will fight for us, and I will succeed in pursuing my dreams. This life that I’m living is mine, it’s no one else’s, and I’ll be damned if I let anyone take it away from me.



He sends Beefcake; I still think his nickname is hilarious. He tells me to stay hidden, and for me to do what I would normally do during my shift, and act like he’s not there. It’s not easy when an over-six-foot-tall man with huge muscles and tattoos follows you around everywhere. He looks beefy, so I guess that’s how he got his nickname. He is obviously the right man for the job, considering he saved me from Luca’s wrath. He’s very serious; he hasn’t even cracked a smile, but that’s okay. I feel pretty safe with him here.

As I pull into work he follows me; and I just ignore his presence, knowing he’s just doing his job.

Walking through the parking lot I hear a loud noise, like tires screeching.

“Erica, move!” Beefcake yells while running toward me, his gun aimed at something. It’s like everything happens in slow motion.

I spin towards the van that is headed straight towards me at an indescribable pace.

Gunshots are fired, so I start to run towards Beefcake. All I can think of is, ‘please, not again’. I can’t be taken, I just can’t. He’s shooting at the van and someone in the van is shooting back. My heart is pounding out of my chest. I feel hands grab me around the middle and all you can hear throughout the parking lot are my horrified screams. A shot is fired at my captor and he bellows in pain, throwing me into the van. I hear more gunshots and screams.

My body hurts from being tossed into the van so harshly. A man with a mask is holding my arms behind my back and covering my mouth with duct tape.

“Shoot him!” the other man yells as we speed away from Beefcake.

“Got him!” he shouts. I start to cry, not knowing if he actually killed him or not.

This is all my fault! I should have stayed on campus.

“Well, aren’t you a looker,” the man in the ski mask sneers. I start to shiver in fear.

“Boss said to not lay a finger on her,” the other man reminds him. They’re both wearing masks, so I can’t make out their features.

All of a sudden I feel a prick, I flinch and realize one of the men injected me with something. My eyelids start to grow heavy, then I see black.



I hear loud, angry voices. I feel cold and sore. Opening my eyes, I see that I’m in a room. There is a single bed and a

window with a chain lock on it. The door is straight ahead, so I shimmy towards it. My hands are still tied behind my back, as are my feet.

With tape on my mouth, I'm starting to feel claustrophobic. I try to control my breathing through my nose. The last thing I need right now is to have a panic attack. I have to get a grip and figure out a way out of here.

"I told you to stay the fuck out of that room. Leave her be until he comes to get her!" a man yells.

"Who the fuck is going to know if I go in there or not? Why not have a little fun with her while we can?" My heart literally feels like it's about to explode out of my chest.

Panic is making its way up my throat, and I'm not so sure how to stop it.

I am tied up and incapacitated, and if he comes in here I'm screwed. I start to struggle, but there's no use. I can hear footsteps coming towards the door. I decide to pretend I'm sleeping.

I hope my trembling body doesn't give me away. I do my best to think happy thoughts to calm myself down.

This had to be planned to get Jared away from me. Whoever texted my phone knew he would trace the location and go.

Jared's face appears in my mind, and I start to relax and do my best to take my mind somewhere else.

The door clicks open and someone is walking towards me. The man shakes my shoulder and I do my best not to react.

"I know you're awake; your body is shaking," he tells me, and I choose then to open my eyes.

I am met with hazel green eyes. This man is muscles upon muscles. He could most definitely snap me in half if he wanted to.

"I am going to take this tape off your mouth. You will not scream, because if you do I promise you will regret it." I nod in understanding.

He takes the tape off more gently than I imagined he would. My hair falls over my face and he pushes it back.

“Listen, I don’t know why he wants you or why you’re here. I’m just doing my job, so if you cooperate with me I promise you will not be hurt.” I nod again, unable to form words.

The man then starts to untie my hands and feet. There is no way I can take him. I could have had a fighting chance before, but not now.

“You won’t be here for long; he’s on his way.”

“Who?” I croak out, even though I know exactly who it is.

“Whoever hired me to kidnap you. I never met him.”

“He already killed my mother, and I know I’m next,” I whisper, and he just looks at me with no pity, no remorse whatsoever. It has to be Luca’s father. He wants revenge for his son’s death.

“Sit tight and I’ll bring you some water.” The man leaves. When he closes the door, I sigh. I make my way over to the window. It is literally bolted shut. There is absolutely nothing in this room besides a bed.

On instinct I reach for my necklace my mom gave me. When I’m feeling lost and alone I open it.

“Jared, please help me,” I whisper, praying he comes for me and he can help me end this never-ending nightmare.



I don’t know how long it’s been, but it seems like a while. The man walks back in with a bottle of water for me.

I shake my head no because I’m not stupid. He could have spiked it with something.

“Fine, I will leave it here.” He places the drink on the floor.

I notice he left the door open. When I glance over to it he catches my eye.



“Don’t even think about it,” he mutters.

“I won’t,” I retort, because I don’t have a death wish and I’m not that stupid.

The man stands there, talking with the other man I heard earlier.

“Dude, she is so fucking hot. We should just take her for ourselves.” His evil voice sends chills down my spine.

He peeks around the corner, but I can’t make out his expression through his mask. I back away into the corner of the room and silently pray.



Minutes go by and the two men continue to guard my door. At this point I would rather deal with Antonio than be subjected to that man’s crazed stare. He keeps looking at me and it’s freaking me out. He licks his lips and starts to make his way towards me.

I press up against the wall, ready to fight him off if need be.

“Dude, what are you doing?” the other guy says, sighing in defeat. Fuck, don’t give up on me. He’s the only decent guy in this house. *What happened to ‘don’t lay a finger on her’?* I think.

“What do you want?” I rasp.

“You even sound fucking sexy.” He groans, and I gasp when he lies on top of me. His huge body is suffocating me and I feel like I’m going to pass out.

“Please just leave me alone,” I beg, and his hand moves to grab my chin. He then forces his mouth on mine and I scream into his mouth. My knee automatically comes up and I get him right in the balls.

“Fuck!” He bends down to cover himself in pain as the other man runs in.

“Fucking bitch!” the man shouts, still holding himself.

“She’s fucking dead.” He launches himself at me, but the other guy is there in an instant, blocking him from getting to me.

“Chill the fuck out, man! You’re going to get us killed!”

“This bitch needs to be taught a lesson.” He gathers himself together and pulls out his gun.

First he points it at the other man. “What the hell are you doing?” he demands to know.

“Give me your gun,” he tells the man trying to protect me, and the guy shakes his head no.

“Dude, calm the fuck down and think about what you’re doing.”

“I *am* thinking! Now put your gun on the ground!” the creep shouts again.

The crazy guy grabs the gun off of the floor and pockets it. He tells the man to move over and let me by, which he does.

He then grabs me by my hair. I let out a scream when he slams my head into the wall. I hear his belt unbuckle and I start to buck off of him, but it’s no use. His gun comes smashing down on my head and I start to fall. He catches me and grunts as he does. My eyelids start to feel heavy and I know I’m on the brink of unconsciousness. I can’t pass out, because if I do he’s going to rape me. I just know it.

“Now you have no choice, bitch,” he snarls, and then I see black again...



I wake up to loud noises. My ears are ringing and my head feels like it’s going to explode.

Then I hear the voice I’ve been praying to hear all day.

“Don’t you fucking move!” Jared’s stone-cold voice echoes in the room.

The man wastes no time grabbing me and placing a gun to my head.

“I’ll shoot her!” the man shouts.

“No, you won’t. Because if you do you will be dead seconds after. Now put your fucking gun down before I give the command for my men to blow your brains out.”

The man turns towards the window, and there is a red dot on his forehead. He sighs in defeat, dropping his weapon. I run over to Jared and he pulls me behind him securely.

“You okay, babe? Did he touch you?”

“I don’t know.” I shudder, grabbing Jared’s shirt.

Seconds later, Grady is pulling me out of the house. I yell for him to let me go.

“Shh, relax. He needs to finish them. Now it’s personal,” Grady explains, but the way he says it it’s like just another day to them. I hear the two men inside screaming as the sound of bones being crunched is heard. Jared and whoever else is in there with him is beating the shit out of them.

I’m not frightened anymore. Not with these guys having my back. Jared comes out of the house. He locks eyes with me and I can see his anguish. His hands are bloody, so I run over to him. He catches me as I crash into his body. He kisses the top of my head then relaxes into me.

“What did you do?” I whisper in his ear. He pulls me back.

“Don’t worry about it. Are you hurt anywhere?” He starts to look me over to make sure.

“Just my head hurts, and I’m sore from being tossed into the van, but that’s all. They said he is coming to get me. It has to be Antonio.” My eyes start to water. I hate seeing Jared so upset because of what just happened to me, and the look on his face tells me he’s not giving up until he finds the man responsible for my hurt.

“You need to get looked over. Grady, get Erica settled in the car and call the doc and have him meet us at the bar,” he orders. I just follow Grady to the car as Jared makes his way back into the house.

“Is Matt okay?” I ask, and Grady grins.

“Just a flesh wound. That’s not his biggest problem, though; he failed to keep you protected and Jared is pissed,” he tells me.

“It’s not his fault; it all happened so fast.” My voice croaks.

“Let’s get you in the car, darlin’; come on.” He helps me into the car, and for some reason I’m just noticing my body is still trembling. I can see that Grady wants to help calm my nerves but decides against it, knowing Jared would dislike that very much.

“He’s coming, just hold tight,” Grady assures, and gives me his jacket.

“Thanks,” I whisper, and mold myself in his jacket as he blasts the heat. I’m sitting in the back, curled up in a ball with my eyes closed. Today’s events are creeping up on me, and all I want is to be wrapped in Jared’s warm embrace.

I’m not sure how long we have been in the car, but I hear a door open then close.

“Thanks, bro; she asleep?” Jared asks Grady.

“Maybe, I don’t know; but she was shaking so badly I gave her my jacket.”

“Thanks, man.” Just the sound of his voice sets me at ease.

“Babe, come here.” He lifts me up and lays my still-shaking body on his.

He rubs my arms while trying to keep my body from trembling.

“I’m so sorry,” I hear him whisper, and that’s all I remember as sleep brings me under.



When I open my eyes I’m in an unfamiliar place.

“Hey, Erica. I know we only met briefly before, but you were kind of out of it. I’m Paul, the doctor for everyone

around here. Your head was hit hard, so just lie down.” His kind, warm smile meets my eyes.

“Where am I?” I rasp.

“You’re at the bar. We’re in the back office,” he tells me. “Thank you so much for helping me.” I give him a small smile. His brown hair and green eyes are comforting. He’s not as big as the other men.

“Where’s Jared?”

“Oh, he’s in the other room with the guys. I told them to make sure they give us some privacy. He likes to hover over you too much.” He laughs, and I laugh with him even though my head is still pounding.

“I am going to give you some pain meds, but I need you to take it easy and someone needs to stay with you and wake you up every couple of hours. You could have a slight concussion.”

“Ok, thank you.” I lay my head back on the couch in Grady’s office.

He says goodbye, leaving me alone with my thoughts.



## **CHAPTER** *Nine*

### *It's Not Over*

I must have dozed off, because I'm woken up by strong hands caressing my head. When my eyes flutter open and I see Jared's messy dark hair. Worried eyes stare back at me, so my hand goes up to cup his cheek. He sighs and leans into my hand, closing his eyes. When he opens them, he grabs my hand and kisses my forehead.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"No need to thank me for anything." He visibly swallows when I caress his hair. His head makes its way to my shoulder as he settles on me, with his arm wrapped around my middle.

We lie like that for a while, me massaging his head, wrapped around him securely.

He makes me feel like I'm the only woman in the world. I'm all he looks at and admires. He may be overprotective in some ways, but that just makes me adore him even more.

His head lifts and he positions both arms around me. He starts to carry me out of the room, and when I protest he tells me to shush, and I smile.

"Jared, I feel ridiculous with you carrying me out of the bar," I protest while my hands wrap around his neck and I

nuzzle his shoulder. I close my eyes and let him take care of me, because I know this is what he needs.

He carries me out, ignoring all those around us. When we get to the car he rescued me in, he places me in the passenger seat to buckle me in.

I give him a soft smile when he closes the door. I take a deep breath when he gets in the driver's side.

As he starts the car up he turns towards me.

"I'm taking you to my place where I can keep an eye on you."

"Okay." I agree because the thought of being alone actually hurts.

The ride to his place is silent. We pull up to his beautiful condo. He seems too young to be living in a place so high-end by himself. But who am I to judge? I already know he does some shady shit with some questionable people.

I don't care, though, because he treats me well and I love him. Everything happens for a reason. I may have lost everything, but I also gained something. Or should I say someone.

I know that as long as I have Jared by my side, all will be right in my world.



We hold hands as he leads me to the elevator in his building.

"How long have you lived here?" I ask him, because I never thought to ask before and I'm curious. He squeezes my hand.

"A little over a year now." His voice sounds tired. I hope I'm not being a burden.

"You don't have to babysit me, Jared; I can go back to my dorm. I'm sure Shannon will be there."

"No way will I let you out of my sight," he rasps, and I just stare at the side of his face. His facial expression I can't quite

read.

“Come with me and I’ll run us a bath.”

“Oh, okay.” I almost trip on my own feet, I’m that excited to get into the bathtub with this man.

His bathroom is pretty large. He has a Jacuzzi tub and a glass shower with all white marble. What he doesn’t know is I used to be like him. I once was the girl with everything not too long ago, so places that scream money don’t excite me much.

Little by little we undress each other; he starts to go in first then helps me in to sit at his front.

When he wraps his arms around me I sigh in satisfaction. The water is nice and hot, and his touch brings goosebumps to my delicate skin.

He starts to wash my body as I lay my head on his chest.

“I used to be rich, too.” My voice sounds foreign to even me. He stops washing me a moment and then he continues.

“My dad was a big deal back in California. He worked for Antonio Vasquez. Obviously you probably have figured out he’s the biggest mob boss in the country.” My voice wobbles.

“Your father was Phil Castello?” Jared asks and I nod, trying to hold back my tears because he used to be a good dad. But money changed the man I knew when I was little. Money is the root of all evil, they say, and I have to agree with that statement.

“I did my research. I was just waiting for you to tell me yourself,” he murmurs. He starts to sit up to turn me around and face him.

Jared is a work of art. I could stare at him all day.

“I understand if you want nothing to do with me. These people are dangerous. You saw what happened today. Matt could have been seriously hurt because of me.”

Jared grabs my face lightly to get my attention.

“It doesn’t matter who he is or what he can do, because who I know and what I can do is worse. He’s the one who



should be afraid now, because Antonio Vasquez is a dead man.” His tone is serious, his eyes deadly as they stare back at me, laced with conviction.

I gulp, and for some reason I’m more turned on now than ever.

He leans in with hooded eyes. Jared’s full lips find mine and I can’t help but moan in his mouth. He pulls back and rests his head on mine.

“The doc said no physical activity, babe. You need to rest.”

“Ugh, way to ruin the moment, Casanova.” I smile and he does the same, remembering when I called him that the first day we met.

“Let’s get you dried off and in my bed.” He does what he says. This man that I love now more than ever is taking care of me, and I can’t help but wonder how I got this lucky.



The next morning I wake up wrapped around Jared. I slept better last night than I have in a long time. I feel better today; the pain pills the doc gave me really helped. Jared held me all night and it was amazing. Maybe it’s too soon to be this in love, but I don’t care. We have this undeniable connection.

I want to do anything and everything for this man. I am his and he is mine.

“Hey, babe.” Jared smiles wide at me, watching me watch him. He starts to shake with laughter.

“How long have you been staring at me?” I groan at his comment, embarrassed he caught me ogling.

“Come here.” He pulls me closer to him. “How is your head?” he asks.

“I feel better, actually; I think you can take me back to my dorm today. I have an afternoon class I would like to not miss. Are we going to talk about what happened yesterday?” I look at him, hoping he’s still in this with me for the right reasons. I

know he wants me safe, but this is the Italian Mafia we're talking about. It's no joke.

"There's nothing more to talk about," he murmurs, gently brushing my hair out of my eyes.

"So you're never going to discuss what you did to those men?"

"It's not for you to worry about. I grew up in this life, so I know how to cover my tracks. You will learn soon enough that nobody fucks with the people I love." My heart melts at his confession. I snuggle closer to him because this is all I need. I want to expose every inch of myself to Jared. That's what I have been doing. Leaving my heart openly exposed to him.



A week goes by and I feel one hundred percent better. Jared and I see each other every day. We both fell back into our normal routines. I still worry about where he goes some nights and if he will be safe. There is always someone guarding me. Not so much Beefcake anymore, which I'm kind of sad about. I liked him, and what happened to me wasn't his fault.

I know what Jared does on the side is dangerous. He proved that much last week. I'm concerned about how I'm going to be able to live this life with him. Jared prefers me to sleep in his bed, but sometimes I have to stay at my dorm or I would get zero work done.

Shannon and I have decided to go to a party tonight. Jared said he would be there at some point. I get the feeling that he's keeping something from me. I can't figure out what it is. I'm sure it has something to do with Antonio, and I'm scared Jared will get hurt.

I want out of this life, but I feel like I'm just digging a deeper hole for myself. Out of one Mafia family and into another.

I'm wearing a tight black tube dress and heels. My hair falls in soft waves down my back and my makeup is subtle. Just some mascara and lip gloss.

“You hanging with Sean tonight?” I smirk at my best friend, knowing she’s planning something.

“If he’s being a good boy I may give him a present later.” We both laugh while making our way into the party. This is exactly what I needed to take my mind off of things.

I feel safer knowing Jared has his men following me. Knowing Antonio is still out there makes me nervous. I know he’s capable of horrible things. I just want this nightmare to end.

The music is blaring and it’s packed with drunk, loud, college kids.

“Let’s go and get a drink!” I shout over the music, and she nods in agreement.

We hit the dancefloor and dance for what seems like forever. There is no better feeling than dancing and letting loose.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Grady watching me. He is looking at all of the guys dancing around us and I can see him glaring at them from here. He takes his job seriously and I’m assuming he was made aware not to let anyone near me. Guys start to rub up against Shannon and me while we’re dancing, so we back away and shake our heads no. But they don’t listen.

I mouth ‘stop’ to Grady, but he storms over anyway.

“Back up, guys. These two are off limits,” he says as calmly as he can even though he looks scary as hell.

“Chill, man; we’re just dancing,” some stupid frat boy says, and I think he must have a death wish.

“It’s okay, we were just leaving.” I hold up my hands and groan. Shannon rolls her eyes and starts to follow me.

“Nice work, gorilla man.” I can’t help but laugh and I actually see Grady’s lip lift, hiding his smile.

The cold air hits us in the face as we walk through campus.

“He’s hot,” Shannon slurs.

“Who?”

“Gorilla man!” she all but shouts, and I laugh so hard when I see Grady shaking his head back and forth. He’s basically on babysitting duty, and I find it kind of funny.

“Your man will be here soon and then I’m off. You two are trouble.” We both start laughing again.

Shannon wanders off to the dorm and I wait outside with Grady.

“I’ve never seen him like this with anyone before. He really cares about you,” Grady acknowledges, and I smile.

“Well, the feeling is mutual,” I say, and he nods thoughtfully.

“He will do whatever he has to do to keep you safe; we all will.”

“Thank you.” My voice clogs with emotion because I can’t believe I lost one family and then gained a new one.



When Jared pulls up I smile big and so does he. He is on his motorcycle, wearing a backwards baseball hat.

“Hop on, baby.” I do as he says, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist as we make our way to his place.



“Fuck, you smell and look amazing, baby.”

My hand goes up to Jared’s face and I pull him in for a kiss. This is not just a kiss. This is a kiss of passion.

“Shit; I need you in my bed, gorgeous.”

“Do women throw themselves at you at your bar, Jared?” I question, and he gives me a smirk.

“You jealous, beautiful?”

“Well, I’m really uncomfortable when other women look at you. You’re mine.”

“Fuck yeah, I’m yours.”

My hand wraps around his neck as I pull him down towards my mouth.

“Good answer,” I whisper.

“Take me,” I beg, and he does. We run hand and hand up to his room.

He closes the door and rips his shirt off. He stalks towards me like I’m his prey.

My hand goes up. “Go sit down on the bed.”

“Baby, I need to feel you,” he groans.

“I want you to picture me when anyone else comes up to you.”

He gulps, his eyes filled with lust.

When he sits down with just his jeans on I slowly make my way towards him.

I pull my dress down very slowly. He groans and grabs his length through his jeans. He starts to unbuckle his pants and his jeans are off. He sits there, gripping himself while watching me.

I am left in my heels and black lace panties, no bra.

I grab my breasts, massaging one at a time. Jared starts to pump himself faster while watching me.

“Fuck, baby, you’re killing me here.”

“Ah-ah-ah…” I smile.

My hand roams down to my panties and I insert two fingers, throwing my head back in pleasure.

“This is the sexiest fucking thing I have ever seen,” he grunts while pumping himself faster.

“Do you want me?” I ask him, and he visibly swallows. He’s looking at me still touching myself.

I start to walk over to him and pull my panties off.

He grabs me by the waist and I take his head and pull him towards my center. I want him down there so bad. He spins me around and I land on my back, my ass at the edge of the bed when his mouth meets my core. He licks, sucks, and devours me until I'm left shaking and trembling with need.

"Shit! Don't stop!" I plead, and he doesn't.

White spots start to cloud my vision as I explode into a million beautiful, sinful pieces. His mouth doesn't stop as he licks me clean.

He sits up to kiss me. I can taste myself on him.

I'm still a quivering mess when he slams into me so hard I gasp.

"Yes!" I shout.

"That's right, baby; I'm yours always and forever. Your perfect body is made for me." He groans, slamming in and out of me.

It doesn't take him long to let go, and I follow right along with him. He lies on top of me with his elbows on both sides of my head, staring into my eyes.

I start to think about Stephanie at school and how she wants Jared. I start to think of all the women that probably throw themselves at him.

My insecurities are on high alert and I can't help how I feel. Not only that but his job.

Lately it's been hard to see him putting himself in danger. Not that I really know what goes on, but I have an idea that what they're involved in is illegal. If Jared gets arrested or, worse, ends up dead...I could never come back from that. Am I better off just leaving him? Do I really want to continuously worry about his well-being?

I don't know why so many emotions are starting to swirl inside of me. I start to get anxious, and before I lose it I get up and run to the bathroom.

“Babe? What’s wrong? Open the door,” he pleads on the other side as I stare at myself in the mirror. One tear falls after the other and I feel all my emotions come crashing down on me.



I silently weep for the mother I lost and the girl I used to be. I think about all of the things that have happened to me and the thought of losing Jared. A feeling of helplessness takes over, which makes me even more upset.

“Babe, I can hear you crying. Please open the door.” He talks softly, and I can feel how worried he is about me.

When I open the door I’m back in my clothes.

“I think I’m going to go back to my dorm for a little while. You can have whoever you want tail me, but I just need some time to clear my head,” I say, not looking in his eyes. He then moves my chin up so my eyes have nowhere else to look but his.

“My lifestyle is something you should understand by now, baby. I know it worries you, I can see it, but you have to trust me.”

“Jared, the thought of something happening to you...” I pause to catch my breath.

“Let’s just pack up and go. We can disappear. Just us,” I plead, and he gives me a look like I’m crazy.

“Babe, you know I can’t do that,” he says, and I crumble.

“I’m sorry, I have to go.” I feel weak and I hate that. I want to build myself back up again and be the woman he deserves. I’m always afraid and I’m tired of feeling this way.

“Are you serious?” He sounds as defeated as I feel. I’m fucked up in my head right now. I don’t know what else to say.

“I can take you back.”

“Okay.” I don’t even bother to argue.

“I’ll give you tonight but rest assured you are mine, Erica. I can’t be anything without you.” I nod okay with watery eyes, then leave the room.

When he drops me off and walks me inside I collapse on my bed. I’m starting to feel anxious and confused. I was fine earlier, and now I’m full of mixed emotions I can’t seem to control.



The next morning I go for a run. I figure this will clear my head and get some exercise. Beefcake has been assigned to me, and I can’t help but laugh as he tries to keep up with my pace.

Last night things took a turn for the worse, and it’s my own fault. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m so confused right now.

“Erica? Is that you?” a male voice sounds behind me.

I turn around to find Jayden. He’s in one of my classes.

“Hey, Jayden. What’s up?” I stop and try and catch my breath. Beefcake practically collapses and I smile wide.

“So you and Jared Knox?” he questions.

“What about him?”

“Are you guys together? I mean, it looks like you are.” He sounds unsure of himself.

“Yeah, we’re together,” I respond.

“If you were my girl I would never let you out of my sight.” He laughs and I start to jog away from him, feeling awkward now.

“Technically, I’m not alone.” I point over to where a scary-looking Beefcake is eyeing Jayden up and down.

“I’m not even going to ask,” he stutters while jogging next to me.



“Don’t worry. As long as you don’t try to kill me you’re safe.” I laugh, and his expression changes to something I can’t understand.

We make it to my dorm. Jayden stops in the front of the building and turns towards me, placing his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. I shake my head and smile.

“Okay, this is me,” I tell him.

“Look, I would love to take you out sometime if you’re free.” His hopeful eyes stare back into mine.

“That’s really sweet of you but, like I said, I’m with Jared,” I repeat.

“Okay, fair enough. I can respect that. At least I tried.” He smiles.

“Okay, how about a study date for our project?” He smiles, knowing he’s got me there.

“Fine.” I smile and he joins me.

“How about tomorrow after my practice? I will pick you up around eleven.”

“Twelve is better for me, I have a class.”

“Twelve it is.” He grins triumphantly.

“See you tomorrow, Jayden,” I say as I walk away, feeling like maybe this wasn’t the smartest decision working on a project with someone who likes me.



Morning comes and goes. I just left my psychology class. I have always been very interested in human behavior. The mind is a powerful tool. It fascinates me.

Our project is on the fundamental principles of the mind. I have an hour to kill so I go to the library to do some research.

I always could find comfort in books; it’s one of the few things that kept me going after my mom died. I would disappear into the pages and escape for an hour or two.

Reading has been a huge part of my life. When I find a nice quiet place to read I start to feel content.

It's quiet over here except for the turning of the pages. A small chill runs down my spine and I get this feeling like I'm being watched.

Looking both left and right, I see no one.

Closing my book I walk over to the bookshelf, where I could have sworn I saw someone.

"Hello?" My voice sounds timid. I take my phone out and text Jared where I am, because now I'm scared.

Disappointment fills my chest when I think about last night. I could tell he wanted me to stay with him, but I just needed some time to think.

My thumb hovers over the message, but I can't bring myself to hit send. Ugh, this is so frustrating. I'm freaking out over nothing. What if he comes all the way over here for no reason?

When I walk back to grab my things there is a piece of paper on the table where I was sitting.

It reads: 'I'm watching you...'

My blood runs cold and my ears start to ring as I feel the panic start to creep up on me. My father left my mother and me to clean up his monumental mess. He had no problem marrying me off to that sleaze ball, and now I have to watch my back constantly. How much more power do they need? The Castello name ends with me. I am not moving forward with anyone in the Vasquez family. Matt, aka Beefcake, is with me today. He's outside the library.

I grab my shit and run outside quickly to alert him.

"Matt, I found this in the library." He takes one look at the note and opens his phone, most likely calling Jared. As long as Antonio is alive my life is at risk.

I start to walk now, feeling frustrated with everything. Matt follows me closely behind.

“Hey, Erica; wait up.” He jogs up towards me.

“Jared said to stick close by you until he can get here.”

“When is this going to end?” I say, not looking directly at him. We still are walking side by side when he answers.

“I don’t know, but Antonio is out for revenge because now it’s personal,” he states, and I stay silent.

“You were supposed to be the future mafia queen, Erica. You know how it works. You either do what they tell you or you die.”

I take a shuddering breath at his admission, because he’s right. I do need to kill or be killed at this point. If I get the chance to end Antonio, I will, but I have a feeling that with these men by my side I can conquer anything. I don’t want to be a mafia queen. I don’t want the money, and fuck them all for wanting to use me for power.

“Thank you for everything, Matt. You all have been so unbelievably helpful. I will never be able to repay you.” A few tears cascade down my face.

“Hey, don’t sweat it. You’re family, and we protect our family.” His words make my chest squeeze.

“Just let Jared know I have to meet up with a friend for a project. I have to do well in school. I’m here on a scholarship.”

“I’ll let him know, but I can’t guarantee he’s going to like it if your partner is a male.” He laughs and I roll my eyes.

“I think we are going to be great friends, Matt,” I murmur.

“I think so, too, darlin’,” he tells me, throwing his arm around my shoulder.



When I pull up to the restaurant where Jayden asked me to meet him, I see it is packed with people. Making my way in, I realize this must be where a lot of the kids from my school come to hang.

I spot Jayden right away. He really is handsome, but something about him seems off.

He gives me a big smile which is infectious on its own, and I smile back. He stands to give me a quick hug.

“So glad you made it. How was the library?”

“It was okay; I found some things we can use for our project.” My mind goes back to the note I found and my stomach feels sick. We go into work mode on our project as we sit and talk for an hour. We accomplished a lot today, and I love the fact my life can hold some normalcy still.

“Hey, do you want to come to a party with me tonight?” Jayden looks at me with hopeful eyes. I hate to turn him down. Even though we’re just friends, I kind of feel like I’m betraying Jared in a way.

He grabs one of my hands and I pull back.

“We can go as friends,” I suggest, and he gives me a small smile.

“Okay, I will take what I can get.” He laughs nervously.

“All right, let’s go.” I grab my things and we head back to campus.



When I walk into my dorm room I spot Shannon sitting on the bed, staring at her cell phone like she wants to crush it.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. I walk over to her and she hands me her phone.

It’s a photo of Sean and some random girl kissing.

“Shit.” I sigh. “He’s a prick. Shannon, I’m sorry. You can do better than him.”

“He said he cared about me. Then I get this picture of him sucking face with some bimbo!”

“Is that tonight? Let me see that again. Who sent this?”

“It’s unknown,” she replies.

“You know what? I’m not even going to entertain this. Fuck it. I’m going to the party and meeting some cute guy and I’m going to have fun,” she announces.

“Good, because I’m going with you,” I reply, needing to let loose as well.



We meet Jayden outside the frat house. I am a little adamant about going inside because I don’t want Jared to get the wrong idea about Jayden and me. Grady is with me tonight, and I know he’s going to tell Jared.

Shannon being here helps for sure. But either way, I should probably let him know so he doesn’t get pissed.

I send a quick text to him saying I’m at a party with Shannon and Jayden. He doesn’t reply. We walk in and the party is in full swing.

“You want a drink?” Jayden shouts over the music. I nod yes and he leaves for the kitchen.

“Where the hell is this dick?” Shannon mutters. “When I get my hands on him I’m going to kick his ass.”

“Just forget about him, Shannon; you can do so much better.”

“Speak of the devil, here comes Sean right now.” Shannon whips her head in his direction.

“Hey, babe.” He goes to give her kiss and she moves her face.

“What’s wrong?” he questions, and the look she gives him sure explains enough. She is pissed.

She takes her phone out and shows him the picture. His eyes widen in shock.

“Babe, I don’t even know who that is. This can’t be recently. I’ve only been with you.”

“Bullshit, Sean! I should have known from the moment I woke up and you left me that morning. You made me feel like

I was worth nothing. Then this?” She shoots him a death glare. “I will never forgive you for this.” She walks off and he follows her, begging her to listen. Her short blonde hair is all you see running away and I feel so bad.

“Hey, is she okay?” Jayden comes back with my drink.

“I hope so.”

“You want to dance?” he asks and I raise one eyebrow.

“Dancing seems a little to intimate, don’t you think?”

“Maybe, but you can’t blame a guy for trying.” He laughs.

“Jayden, I have to go to the bathroom,” I say, walking off, not even waiting on his response.

I see Grady storming over to Sean and I know shit is about to go down. Grady is six-foot-three with tattoos from his neck down to his arms. I have seen the way he looks at Shannon, and now I know my suspicions are accurate.

I quickly walk over towards them. They are nose to nose. Grady yanks Sean by his shirt and threatens him to leave Shannon alone, and if he ever hurts her again he’ll kill him.

Whoa.

“Grady, stop!” I shout. “Let’s just go look for Shannon. That seems to calm him down as he shakes Sean off him.

Tonight just got a hell of a lot more interesting.



## CHAPTER *Ten*

### *It's All My Fault*

Grady's phone starts going off.

He holds his finger up and goes to take the call outside. His face turns serious as he listens to the person on the other end of the line.

I look around for Shannon and Jayden, but they're nowhere to be found. I figure I'll take a walk around the house. I hope I find her, I can't wait to tell her that Grady looks like he wants to kill Sean.

I spot Sean and he still looks mad.

"Hey, have you seen Shannon?"

"No, I can't find her anywhere. She's pissed at me. I swear that picture is from a long time ago. I really like her, and I don't expect to be forgiven for what I did to her the first time we were together. But I do care for her." His admission stuns me.

"That's your business with her, now come help me find her. Maybe she will listen this time. I still personally don't trust you, for the record, and know damn well she can do better."

“Gee, thanks,” he grumbles.

“Hey, you did it to yourself.” And our conversation ends there.

As we walk around the house and check room after room. I look at my phone to see if she responded. She hasn't, and now I'm starting to worry.

“Sean, I'm starting to feel uneasy about this. Why isn't she responding?” I query.

He sprints into action and kicks open every door, shouting her name.

“Shannon!” he shouts over and over again.

Finally when he opens the far door to the left end of the house we find her. It's like in slow motion. I freeze in place as I take in the scene unfolding around us. We see Jayden on top of Shannon, trying to take her clothes off.

“Oh my god!” I scream.

“Fuck!” Grady bellows, and sprints into action towards Jayden. I didn't even see him come in here. Sean follows. Grady rips Jayden's half naked body off hers and beats the shit out of him. Punch after punch, he doesn't stop. Sean can't even get close because Grady is destroying him.

Shannon scrambles off the bed and into my arms. I wrap a blanket around her as she sobs on my shoulder.

Grady roars angrily, trying to get back at Jayden. But Sean tells him to stop because he's unconscious.

“Baby,” Sean croaks, looking at Shannon's tear-stained face wrapped in a blanket leaning on me.

She cries harder when he scoops her up like a child and holds her close.

“Shh, it's okay; I'm here now.” He tries to comfort her as her sobs turn into hiccups. Tears pour down my cheeks when I look at my friend and the pain she's in.

“I'll take care of this piece of shit.” Grady opens his phone and walks out of the room. I decide to do the same, not



wanting to disturb their private moment.

Grady ends the call and Jared soon comes barreling up the stairs. He comes over to me with worry on his handsome face.

“I knew there was something off about him!” Grady punches the wall, which makes me jump.

“Fuck, that could have been you!” Jared yells.

“But it wasn’t,” I whisper, and go to touch his arm. He leans away from my touch, which sends a searing pain through my chest.

“Don’t shut me out, Jared. Obviously he is a sick man. There was nothing you could have done differently,” I try to explain, but he just shakes his head back and forth.

“You don’t understand. I need to protect you, but I can’t because you’re too fucking distracting!” I flinch at his choice of words.

“Didn’t you even think there was something off about him? Come on, Erica. He wanted you and then you let him take you to a party! What the fuck did you think would happen?” he shouts and tears start to cascade down my face.

“If he even laid a finger on you...” He pauses.

“Grady, get that motherfucker and put him out of his misery,” he orders.

“Take care of your friend; Matt will be here soon.”

“So that’s it? We are done because you think you failed? This isn’t your fault, it’s mine! I came here with him. I am the one responsible for this!” I cry.

“Stop.” Shannon’s voice cracks behind us. “This is no one’s fault but mine. I led him on and when it started to go too far I tried to stop him, but he wouldn’t.” She shivers while Sean holds her close. She is fully dressed now, with mascara running down her horrified face.

“Baby, stop; you can’t put the blame on yourself. You told him to stop and he didn’t listen.” Sean’s voice is full of agony and pain.

Jared and Grady disappear suddenly. I'm not sure where he is now but I know he's angry with me and he has every right to be. I just can't believe I didn't see the evil lurking inside Jayden. I wonder how many girls he's done that to and, if so, how many times has he gotten away with it?



The next few hours go by in a blur. Sean and I have been waiting at the hospital while Shannon is getting looked over.

Sean's eyes are red from holding back his own tears. I have seen a different side to him now that Shannon has been hurt. Who knows how far Jayden would have gone if we hadn't walked in when we did.

"What if we didn't get there in time? He could have killed her," he rasps.

"Hey." I nudge his knee and he looks up at me.

"She's going to be okay, and she has you to help her through this." He looks at me, confused.

"I thought you hated me," he says.

"I don't hate you, Sean. But I need you to promise me you will never let her down again, because if you do I will personally kick you in the balls." He gives me a soft smile.

"I promise I won't ever betray her or let anything ever happen to her again."

Pleased with his answer, I turn towards my phone. No missed calls or texts. Jared is shutting me out. He did in fact tell Beefcake to accompany me, but he has stayed at a safe distance for the time being.

Minutes later the doctor comes into the waiting room.

"Shannon is ready for one visitor," the doctor says to us.

Sean whips his head towards me with pleading eyes.

"Go ahead." He sighs in relief and pretty much runs to the room. I smile at the thought of those two working it out finally, but unfortunately under horrific circumstances.



The drive home feels wrong, like I should be going to Jared's and not back to my dorm. I want to call him so badly and beg him to talk to me. He seems like he's really under pressure. I wonder what exactly he's doing. Is he working on finding Antonio? Is he safe? How did they 'take care' of Jayden?

"Matt, I want to go to the bar," I demand, and he shakes his head no.

"Prez wants you home."

"I don't give a shit what he wants. You are taking me now or I'll drive there myself." He sighs, knowing he can't win this one.

When we pull up to the bar I get a sickening feeling, like I'm not going to like what I see.

"Erica, wait!" Matt shouts, but I'm already in the bar and what I see has me stumbling back.

I think I just walked into an orgy.

"What the fuck?" I start looking around and I see slut after slut walking around naked like it's their own personal strip club.

Two people are having sex on the bar. To my left and to my right more couples are fucking. It's everywhere I look. Some women are dancing on tables, and I feel like I'm going to be sick.

My wide, frantic eyes look for Jared, and I swear if I catch him with another woman I will lose my shit right here in front of everyone.

"Fuck, Erica; you weren't supposed to see this," Matt says, but I hold up my hand to stop him.

I start to walk to the back of the bar where there are more tables. There he is, sitting there with his men, drinking and staring at some whore dancing on their table. Money is everywhere. Obviously this is one of the many business ventures he's into.

I see red. My face is on fire and I feel like I'm going to be sick.

"Prez, I tried to stop her." I hear Matt and I want to kick him in the nuts, too.

Jared looks at me and continues to sip his drink, not showing any kind of emotion. He continues to stare at me while some slut is dancing right in his face. His eyes leave mine and I can see he's a little drunk from the way his eyes are slanted.

Tears well up in my eyes, and even though he's not physically cheating it feels that way to me.

"You know what? I am fucking done." I turn to walk out of the bar, not giving a shit about where I'm going. I just need to get the fuck out of here.

"Wait!" I hear Jared order and I lift my hand up to flip him the bird. When I make it outside I fucking run for it. After what happened with Jayden and Shannon and then all the shit that's happened to me, I run and run and run.

I'm in the woods near campus. I hear the rumbling of motorcycles and my phone has twenty missed calls.

"Fuck them," I say to myself. What the hell kind of business are they running over there? A whore house? I want no part of that and no part of them. The moonlight is bright tonight between the trees. I'm sitting on the ground with my back up against a tree. I can see the campus from here but I don't move; I just enjoy the quiet and the cool air on my face.



My eyes pry open the next morning and my back is killing me. Shit, I slept outside all night. Great, Jared must be going bananas right about now. I shake off the leaves and some dirt. I probably look like a homeless person coming out of the woods.

My eyes are probably red from crying. I just want a shower and go to bed.

I receive a couple of odd looks on my way to my dorm but I don't care.

When I see his motorcycle parked, I stop. Shit, he's probably waiting for me inside.

Climbing up the stairs, I try to prepare myself for what's to come.

There he is, sitting on the floor with his head in his hands. When he hears me his head pops up and his eyes widen at my appearance.

He shoots off the floor and pulls me into his arms. I leave my hands at my side, not feeling very affectionate at the moment. I'm still pissed.

When he pulls back I see the anger brewing on his face.

"Where the fuck were you?" he says in a menacing tone that only pisses me off more.

"Don't worry about where the fuck I was! You!" I point at his chest. "Had a fucking slut dancing for you and your friends! How much did you pay for all those women, huh? Looks like a real tough job you have there," I say with sarcasm lacing my voice. I try to walk around him but he stops me.

"I don't touch the club whores. It's a business, that's all. Now you can either trust me or continue to be fucking stubborn as always." I glower at him, taking in his words.

"Fuck you." I walk to my dorm room and slam the door.

"Fuck!" I hear him roar, and slowly, with my back to the door, I slide down and close my eyes, regretting my decision in going there last night. Now all I see is my man around club whores and orgies.



An hour later I'm showered and changed. I'm still pretty mad about what happened, when I hear a knock at my door.

I look through the peep hole and see his handsome face filled with sorrow. The last thing I want is to end things

without an explanation, so I open the door because obviously I like to torture myself.

He moves into my room and slams the door with his foot. His arms wrap around my middle as he lifts me up. My legs wrap around him then he smashes his lips against mine.

“Baby.” He pulls back from the kiss. “It’s only you who I think about every second of every day. It’s you, Erica. I don’t want anyone else, and I’m sorry about last night, and I’m sorry for Shannon, for all of it.” I just hug him, because I believe him and love him.

“I was fucking stupid, going there to get drunk. Ever since I met you I haven’t been to any of those nights, and I swear I wasn’t going to lay a hand on another woman. You have my word on that.” I see the truth in his eyes. “You are my world, baby.”

“I’m sorry I ran off like that, I just...ugh, seeing you there was like a slap in the face,” I tell him, and he just looks me in the eyes like I am the most precious thing in the world. He touches my necklace and whispers, “You are my one.”

“Jared, I can’t live afraid that you might leave me one day. My heart can’t handle any more pain,” I admit.

“I promise you will never have to worry about that with me.” I want to believe him so badly. I tell myself to forgive him and give him another chance.

We get undressed and go under the covers. Our bodies are skin to skin as I lay my head on his heart. I kiss his chest then work my way up to his neck. He shivers in response and I smile.

His arms tighten around me.

“Babe, I’m so sorry I was a dick. You’re it for me. There’s no one in this world that has or can measure up to you.”

“I’m so torn every day. I’m trying to get through school, and I’m scared Antonio will find me, and then worrying about you. Jared, I just need to know if you’re in this with me or not, because if you’re not I have to leave.”

“I’m in it, babe, I swear. Just don’t shut me out, and if you feel upset or insecure just talk to me.”

“Insecure?” I raise my brow and he smiles. “Yeah, babe, you have no room to feel self-conscious. Just look at yourself. You’re every man’s wet dream, baby.” Jared kisses the top of my head and sighs.



An hour later I lay awake. Jared is asleep beside me and I think about my mom. I can’t help the tears that form.

I let them fall. I let all the loss and anguish flow through my soul. Jared is the love of my life, and he consumes me in a way I can’t even explain. He could be the one to completely fill me or utterly break me apart. The only thing left to do is hope that we can take Antonio Vasquez down somehow.

My mother will get justice. She left so abruptly. Her life was cut short, and I think that maybe if I was home she would have made it. I could have been there to save her. Maybe I should have just stayed with Luca and my mom would be alive.

My eyelids feel heavy and I can’t help the overwhelming feeling of fatigue. My eyes drift closed while strong, secure arms stay wrapped around my middle.



*I can smell the blood. I can taste what tastes like lingering metal on my tongue. Exasperated, I choke out a sob then the sob soon turns into a scream. My mother’s body is lying next to me. I am surrounded by a pool of red. It’s warm. I can’t lift my body. I can’t move; I’m too frightened to see what lies beside me. It’s just her I see, but I feel a presence hovering over my body. If I look he could see, if I move he will know I’m awake. I need to pretend I’m dead, that’s it. If I disassemble myself, maybe I can get him to leave. Why is she not moving? Why am I not moving?*

*When I blink her body disappears into thin air. She's gone, and now I am staring at myself lying in a sea of red. My pale skin is almost translucent and my eyes are shut. Bloody tears stream down my fragile face and this is it. This is the end of my being.*



I shoot up out of my bed with sweat dripping down my forehead. Nightmare. It was just a nightmare.

There's a note on my nightstand. Jared says he loves me and he didn't want to wake me and that he had some things to do this morning.

That dream that was the 'what-if'. I was thinking last night about how if I was with my mom maybe I could have saved her. That dream was my subconscious saying otherwise. I could have been dead right along with her.

That could have been me lying in my own blood. With shaky hands I prepare for my morning class. After I'm showered and dressed I call Shannon.

She answers on the second ring.

"Hey," she all but whispers through the phone.

"Hey, are you with Sean?"

"Yes, he's still asleep." Her voice cracks and I can tell she's been up all night, upset. Who wouldn't be? She just experienced one of the most traumatic things that can happen to a person. She was almost fully taken advantage of and used in the worst possible way.

"What can I do, Shannon? Please tell me, because I feel somewhat responsible and I'm dying over here," I admit.

"Erica, what happened to me was not your fault. I was being stupid and led him on. He should have stopped, but ultimately it was my choice to follow him up there."

"That still doesn't make it right," I say.



“No, it doesn’t, but there’s nothing to be done about it now. Grady seemed pretty upset,” Shannon whispers.

“Yes, he most certainly was. I think he’s quite taken with you, girl.”

“What?” she gasps.

“Erica, that man is... well, I can’t even describe how gorgeous I think he is.”

“I think someone has a love triangle brewing.” I smile and she groans.

“But I care about Sean, you know I do.” I can hear her turmoil.

“I know you do, but Grady really likes you. And again, Shannon, I’m so sorry. I really am.” My voice cracks and she tries to reassure me she’s not upset with me. We talk for another couple of minutes and she tells me how Sean was so protective of her last night and took care of her. That makes me feel better, knowing she has him.

After we hang up I cry for her; I cry for my friend who was put in a situation that could have been avoided. I cry for the girl I used to be. I cry for every fucking thing that has been hovering over my now tainted life. I vow to myself that I will be stronger. That I will learn to defend myself, and if anyone ever tries to fuck with me again it will be the last thing they do. In the end I hope everything works out, because I’m not sure how much more heartbreak and disappointment I can stand.



Over the next month I train at the gym, take self-defense classes, and start really working on myself. I feel stronger mentally and physically now.

I close my dorm room door and start to make my way down the hallway. Something catches my eye at the very far end. Or rather someone. There is a man standing with his back to me, just facing the stairwell. The only way to vacate the

building is to walk past him. He's tall and looks to be in nice slacks and a white button-down shirt.

As I get closer to the man, my stomach starts to feel queasy.

"Excuse me, sir? Do you need help?" The man slowly turns towards me and instant recognition takes place.

"Antonio Vasquez," I whisper, and he actually has the nerve to smirk at me. I will never forget his face. It's forever embedded into my brain. I kick him as hard as I can. He grunts, falling to the floor, which gives me the chance to flee. I throw my shit to the floor and spin around quickly, but seconds later I feel my head being yanked backwards. My scalp is burning from the way he just pulled my hair. I try to scream, but his hand covers my mouth. I bite his hand hard.

"Fuck!" He slaps me so hard across the face that I see stars and fall to my knees. Without thinking I scramble to my feet and try to escape, but he kicks me in the side. I let out a groan as the wind is knocked out of me.

"You didn't think I would let you get away with killing my son, did you? Next time I will make sure your little girlfriend is dead," he spits out, and that's when I realize maybe Jayden must have been paid off by Antonio to hurt my friend. I feel a slice of pain shoot through my heart, realizing I was the cause of Shannon's attack. I let out a scream, hopping to my feet, and start attacking him with all my might.

After getting a few jabs in, more hands are pulling me back and Antonio is wiping the blood from his lip. It takes two men to hold me back. A couple of students emerge, and they are instantly threatened to get back in their rooms or they're all dead. I know this is it, and I can't take on all three men. I'm being dragged to the back door, when something covers my mouth and I breathe in the toxic chemicals that make me pass out.

## *Jared*

She's not answering her phone. My heart feels like it's going to pump out of my chest. I promised to protect her, and now I

can't find her anywhere. With my men watching her 24/7 on campus, I thought she was safe. Fucking Beefcake has been parked outside her dorm since I left this morning. He claims to have not seen any suspicious activity.

He told me she said she needed to study, and would appreciate him guarding outside the dorm today instead of inside. Well, now that she's missing I am regretting my choice in security.

I clench my steering wheel as I call Grady. It has been almost three hours since anyone has seen or heard from her.

Shannon said she spoke with her this morning and she seemed okay.

"Fuck!" I shout, and punch my dashboard. I borrowed Grady's truck yesterday to take her home.

What if Antonio got to her already? The drive to the bar is fast. It's dead and no one is around. I sprint to my office to see him on a phone call. When he ends the call he gives me an odd look.

He seems pissed about something.

"They have her, Jared." My heart thumps wildly in my chest. I move to sit on my couch. He continues speaking, but I feel nothing but dread.

"We will figure out how to help her, but first there's something you need to know." He gives me a look of sympathy.

"Did they hurt her? Is she okay?" I ask, desperate.

"From what Antonio said she's fine, but you need to listen."

"You fucking spoke with him?" I roar, and he holds his hands up in defense. Now we are standing nose to nose.

"Now hear me out, boss!" he shouts.

"Tell me what that motherfucker said!"

"Antonio is her biological father." My eyes go wide in terror.

“Luca was his stepson. She was meant to marry him to keep the family name going. Both families were to be joined together. In order for his empire to grow they needed to be wed. Castello and Vasquez together would make them unstoppable. Now that Luca and the Castello family are dead, that only leaves her. He wants her alive to carry on the name. You know what that means, Jared.”

“Fuck the rules! This is Erica we’re talking about!” I shout, and slam my fists on his desk.

“You know the rules, Prez, and you can’t mess with family. Under no circumstances can we do that. She is his, and there’s nothing that can change the fact that her fate has been set.”

“No! I will not allow that for her! She doesn’t want that life, so there has to be a way around this. Screw the mafia law. I don’t give a fuck; I am going to find her and I will kill Antonio myself,” I growl and listen as he spouts nonsense, when all I want to do is tear the fucking town down to get my girl back.



## *Erica*

Deafening silence. I can’t make out a sound. It’s cold where I am, though. I’m shivering and I can just about make out the outline of this room. My eyes blur as I take in the scene around me. Blank walls, hardwood floors, a mattress on the ground which I lay on.

My body feels weak, tired achy bones. He took me; Antonio finally captured me, but for some strange reason I am still alive.

My hands are tied behind my back.

Sitting up I feel dizzy, so I lie back down and let the tears fall. I need help, I don’t feel right. Sweat runs down my back and my head is pounding.

Looking over to my left I see a window, but the window has bars on it.

Clever; looks like he thought of everything.

The one thing he is not getting from me is my obedience and loyalty. Luca is dead, and if I'm not dead already that means he needs me for something. I think that's a given at this point. So what is it he wants from me?

I hear the door jingle, so I sit up ready for whoever may enter.

"I see you finally woke up." Antonio saunters into the room like it's his mission to talk with me.

"I am going to untie you; as long as you behave you will stay untied." I nod yes in agreement. After he unties me he pulls up a chair and sits down, crossing his legs. He's dressed like the mob boss he is, in his expensive suit.

"So I reckon you want to know why I have been pursuing you again, Erica." He raises one eyebrow and looks me straight in the eye.

"Aside from the fact you were supposed to be wed to my stepson that your boyfriend killed, let me tell you the real reason you're here. Your mother... she was a beautiful woman, you know. Inside and out. Your father, on the other hand, was a piece of shit. He was trash that stole from me in more ways than one. He made me do things I've ultimately regretted, but had no choice in the matter."

"What are you saying?" My voice sounds hoarse.

"Do you remember when you were a little girl, and your mother and I were together?" he queries, and my eyes must bulge out of my head. "Of course you don't, because you were a baby." I gasp at his admission.

"You dated my mother?" I say in disgust.

"I did indeed. We had an affair. Your father was livid, and rightfully so. There was just something about her I couldn't resist." He smiles like he's remembering a moment they shared.

I internally gag when I think of my mother with this evil, vile, vindictive man.

“So why did you kill her? If you liked her so much, why would you hurt her?” I exclaim, and his face drops.

“Your mother defied me! She went against everything I am, and she was a conniving whore! She knew all along you were my child, but she failed to tell you so!” My mouth opens then closes. I have no idea what to think of this. There’s no way.

I shake my head back and forth.

“She would have told me! There’s no way she would keep something like that from me!” I shout, and he holds one hand out to stop me.

“She deserved what happened to her, and so did your fake father. They took what was mine and they did it without remorse. They thought they were protecting you, that you had a better shot at life without me in it, but he was just as bad! He was the scum of the earth. There are things he did that you couldn’t even fathom hearing.”

My shoulders start to shake. I will not show weakness with this man. My real dad is a mob boss. A high-level walking killing machine. And then there’s me, who had no clue my mother had such horrible taste in men.

“All I wanted was to get to know you, and I’m sorry my men got a little handsy in the process. I’m also sorry I had to hurt you, but you gave me no choice. As for my men, trust me when I tell you they paid for that.”

“I don’t need or want you in my life; I have been fine without you thus far.” My voice cracks and I’m on the verge of a complete meltdown.

“Your boyfriend ruined my plans by killing Luca. Now I have no one left for you to marry and merge our families. So now you are the future, my dear. That means other mafia families will get the word out of your true identity and want you for the Vasquez name, since Castello is no longer.

“I figured you should know the truth, and that your life could be in danger. I deal with some extremely dangerous people. Your mother’s husband not only stole from me but

stole from the Irish mob as well. I'm here to protect you. They will come for you and they will kill you in the most brutal way imaginable. Or they will force you to marry into their family. Now I can't let that happen, knowing you're my blood."

"What about Mom?" My lip trembles. "How come you didn't protect her?"

"She was as good as dead either way, and your safety comes before hers." His voice is firm, cold, so I get up.

"I want to leave and never see you again. I'll take my chances with the Irish."

"Now, Erica, I can't let you walk out of that door just yet. Your boyfriend, by mafia law, is not supposed to interfere with family, but I have a feeling the rules are not going to apply to you in his eyes. Trust me when I tell you I will make him pay for that. No one gets away with interfering with family." I can't help the lone tear that falls. I wipe it away quickly.

"Please don't hurt him. I'll stay if I have to, just please don't hurt him," I beg.

"There are no exceptions for breaking the rules. I didn't make them, my dear, but if you choose to stay and abide by my rules I will hold off on your boyfriend's demise the best I can."

"How do I know I can trust you?" I stare into his evil, gleaming eyes.

"You don't, but what I can give you is my word to hold off. And I never break my word. Just know this: if he tries to come for you he may die, and that is completely out of my hands. My men know the rules, and I can't give you any leeway just because you're my daughter. They have to respect me. The only thing I can promise you is that I will not seek him out, but if he comes for you I will not be responsible for my men and their actions." He gives me a look that sends shivers down my spine.

He scares me, and I don't want to stay with him, but what choice do I have?

“I’m not going to hurt you. I know I wasn’t there for you before, when your mother was alive, but I’m here now. Don’t you understand that she kept you from me?” He looks into my eyes and I see he’s speaking truthfully, but that still doesn’t explain why he had to kill her.

“You will become the strong woman you’re supposed to be with me. Not this weak, pathetic version of yourself that your mother has created.”

“I will never forgive you for what you did to my mother!” I spit, and his face contorts in pain.

“How do you know that I was the one to kill her? I said she got what was coming to her, not that I did it. You will be safe here for now. I’ll have some food brought in, and there’s a bathroom over there.” He nods towards the far end of the room.

“Where am I?”

“A secure location. Now stay put and I’ll be back soon.”

“You can’t keep me in here!” I yell as my real father slams the door and leaves me alone, to fade away into nothing but a dark abyss of mixed emotions and heavy thoughts.





## **CHAPTER** *Eleven*

### *Find Her*

#### *Jared*

The location Grady gave me is about an hour out of town. I am risking everything coming here, but I don't care. All I want is to hold her in my arms again. I have enough money to get us out of town and far away if need be. I have safe houses in many locations.

I'm in the middle of nowhere, when my car creeps up to what looks like an old abandoned house. There are no lights on, and no sign of any vehicles. I have men hidden around the perimeter of this property. I know the risk that I'm taking, but I don't care. She is worth everything I could lose.

This place looks abandoned. It's dark now as I silently leave my car.

I see a very expensive SUV parked in the back, pretty well hidden.

She needs me now more than ever. God knows what he may be doing to her. I know he's her father, but he's a very dangerous man. The most powerful man in the country has my girl.

Knowing he is her real father makes this all the more personal for the both of us.

The tables have turned and I'm not sure what to expect. Gun in hand, I make my way to the house.

I will do whatever I have to in order to get my girl back. Adrenaline is pumping through my veins when I think it's a possibility I could lose her today.

Any other job is like a walk in the park, but this time I actually have something to lose. The door is locked so I sneak to the back of the house. One of the windows has bars on it.

I hear crying and I know instantly it's her. I can tell she's alone, though, because she's trying to hide the sounds of her sobs.

"Put your weapon down, Mr. Knox," a voice intones behind me. When I turn I see Antonio has a gun pointed directly at me. I slowly lower my weapon and put my hands up.

"There's no need to shoot me. I just want her back."

He laughs. He actually fucking laughs. His face morphs into a grin when he speaks.

"She is no longer your concern, Mr. Knox, so you'd better get the fuck out of here before I shoot you. My men have your men surrounded. One signal from me and they are all dead with a bullet to their brains." My face must blanch at his words because he smiles.

"Jared!" Erica yells, and starts to bang through the window. I now see her wide, terrified eyes.

"Leave, Jared! Just go!" Her voice is laced with panic.

"You heard her, Mr. Knox. She wants you to leave." He smirks and my face is now red with rage.

"You are not staying with him." I look at her through the window and her expression turns sad then cold.

"Hey, kiddo, do you want to stay with me?" he asks her while keeping the gun pointed at me. I turn my head towards

her and that's when I notice her face change.

“Yes, I...I want to stay with my dad,” she stutters, and I know she's doing this to keep me alive. He's holding her against her will, and that doesn't sit well with me. I have a death wish apparently.



“I know what you're doing, babe, but you don't need to. I got this, just trust me.” She shakes her head ‘no’.

“I'm upset because I just found out he's my biological father. It's a shock, that's all. I want to stay with him.” She looks desperate to get me to leave, but I'm not going anywhere.

“Get him out of here!” Antonio orders, and two beastly men make their way towards me.

I put my fists up, ready to strike.

I throw the first punch, but the second man gets me right as I strike. Erica is screaming for them to stop as one man grabs my hands and pulls me back. He holds me in place as the other man punches me over and over again.

Erica's screams are ripping my heart out.

Finally Antonio orders them to stop. I'm bleeding from my face, but I don't give up as I struggle in the man's hold.

Erica's screams stop, but I can hear her whimpered cries.

“Now, for some strange reason my daughter is quite taken with you. So I'm going to give you a pass. This is a one-time pass, do you hear me?” He brings his face to mine as his men hold me back.

I stop struggling.

“I will never stop fighting for her,” I spit, and he doesn't hold back as his anger rears its ugly head. He punches me over and over again, first the stomach, then face, then the stomach again. He shakes his hand and gives me an evil smirk.

Erica is screaming again, and I'm so weak that there's no way I can get to her now.

"Please stop it!" she wails. Then Antonio rears his fist back one more time, knocking me out cold. My last thought is that I may never see her again.



## *Erica*

He falls to the ground; he's unconscious and I'm hysterical. I'm screaming so loud that my voice is now hoarse.

"He's alive, so stop your crying," Antonio says, but how in the hell am I supposed to trust him on that?

"How do I know that?" I query.

"Bring her to me," he tells his men.

Minutes later they are escorting me outside, where Jared's body lies on the ground.

I run over to him and drop to my knees. My sobs increase as I cradle his injured face up and place him on my lap. I can see he's still breathing as I cry on his face. I kiss every broken inch of him. He's still out cold.

"Don't let her out of your sight. Give her five minutes with him and then take him back to where he belongs," he orders, and I just rock him back and forth. "And get his men off my fucking property now! We will be moving to a new location. Send them a message by killing one of them." I rear back.

"No, please! Don't! I can't have you hurt anyone because of me." He looks at me, dead serious.

"Oh, sweet Erica. Don't you understand that when someone crosses me they never leave with their hearts still beating? They are getting a pass. One dies so the rest can go; that's all I'm giving you." He then gets up and leaves me in a pile of uncertainty. I'm beside myself right now.

“Please let me wait until he wakes up. I just want to say goodbye,” I plead and the henchmen look at each other then back at me.

“He has five minutes to wake up, then we have to take him.”

Minutes pass and I finally start to feel him stir, then he groans in my arms. I sag with relief that he’s okay.

“Babe,” he grumbles, and I shh him.

“It’s going to be okay. I am going to be okay. I need you to go and forget about me, Jared.”

He sits up and winces, but seems to be all right.

“I am not letting you go. I know what you’re doing, and you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“They will kill you, Jared; I have to go with him.” My lip trembles and I bury my head in his shoulder. “Thank you for everything,” I whisper in his ear. He grips me tightly, and as he holds me close one of the men grabs him and tosses him to the other guy.

“Stop! Give me one more minute with him, please!” I beg.

“Time’s up,” he sneers.

“Get the fuck off me!” Jared roars, and he’s fighting to get to me while the other guy is holding me back. We are both trying to get to each other. At some point they had managed to tie his hands back.

“Jared, I love you!” I shout as I’m being pulled away. Tears are streaming down my face uncontrollably. Just the thought of never seeing him again sends a searing pain through my chest. The man now picks me up and throws me over his shoulder.

“Erica!!” Jared yells.

“Let her go! Please, I’ll do anything!” He is yelling so loud and trying to fight to get to me, and that’s when I notice the man kicking him to the ground. He’s still hurt, and I don’t think I’ve ever felt this helpless in all my life.

I can still hear the lingering screams of the love of my life, and I just want to die.



Unimaginable pain, hopelessness, and brokenness.

These are all the things I feel. Antonio tries to talk to me, but I can't speak. He tries to make me eat, but I can't even imagine swallowing. I feel like someone tore my heart from my chest and stomped on it.

If this is what heartbreak feels like, I don't want it. I want to crawl into a hole and disappear. I wish I could close my eyes and go anywhere but here.

Imagine being able to just shut your eyes and go somewhere? Your mind can take you wherever you want. That's why I love to read so much, because whenever I need an escape I have my books.

All I have to do is open up the book and get lost in the pages.

I will do just about anything to get out of this mess. Antonio can't expect me to want to stay with him forever. This is inhuman, but I have to play this smart. I can't stay on his bad side. In order to escape your captor, you need to build a trustful relationship with that person.

Maybe it will take time, but what I do know is that I love Jared with all my heart and I will make my way back to him someday.



A week goes by and we have moved to a different location. I was blindfolded, so I have no idea where I am. What I do know is that Jared is smart, and if he says he's coming back for me then he is. I have faith in him. The look in his eyes when he was taken away from me is all I needed to see that he is not giving up on me. He almost died. The thought of Jared

dead makes my heart break. I can't imagine a world without him in it.

The house we are in is huge. I'm only allowed on one side, and guards are at my door 24/7. Antonio has come to see me because I refuse to leave my room. He talks and I listen. I still have not said a word to him since the day he and his men took Jared away.

I can barely eat, and forget about sleeping. Lately I've had nightmares that plague me. Every single time I close my eyes I see his face. He's yelling for me to come to him and I'm screaming for him to not leave me. I wake up a sweaty mess, alone and in my new room that I despise.

It's big and has its own bathroom, with over the top décor and antique furniture. I feel like I'm in a cold, impersonal place.

There is no need for me to be here. I will contribute nothing to Antonio's organization, so I still can't understand why he needs me. I would rather be dead than be a part of this.

He claims to want a relationship with me, but I just hate him.

I hate his face, I hate his voice, I hate every fucking thing about that man who calls me his blood.



My eyes drift shut once again before I hear a light knock on my door. Whoever it is does not wait to be asked in.

Antonio walks in like he has no cares in the world. He sits down on a chair near my bed. My long hair cascades over my shoulders and some in my face. I choose not to wear anything nice they have left me, choosing instead a tank top and sweatpants.

"I know you hate me, and rightfully so, but I need you to understand where I'm coming from here. I want a relationship with you, Erica. You are my daughter and I will not lose any more time with you," he says in a stern voice.

I choose this moment to finally speak.

“If we do this and I stay here with you for a while, will you eventually let me go back? After you get what you need from me? I just want to go back to my normal life.”

“There is no more normal life for you, Erica. The Irish are still looking for you. Don’t you see? You are in danger. Jared cannot protect you like I can.” I shake my head back and forth.

“That’s where you’re wrong. He can protect me. He has protected me this entire time. He saved my life, and without him in my life I don’t know how much more I can take. I am breaking, can’t you see that?” I look him in the eye and his face gives nothing away. I am falling apart little by little in this place. I feel alone and confused. I was doing just fine after Luca was taken out of my life. I thought I actually had a fighting chance.

Antonio is a cold, heartless man.

“You are not obligated to protect me. I don’t want your protection.” He starts to stand with a blank expression.

“You could have so much! It’s all at your fingertips and you’re just going to let it slip away? Do you even understand the power you have, Erica? Do you know what we could be as a family? Talk to me when you come to your senses.” He then leaves the room and slams the door.

“Ugh!!” I grunt in frustration.

That night I toss and turn, dreaming about Jared and wishing he was here.



## *Jared*

It’s been a week since I was beaten and dragged out of her life. They left me blindfolded and told me not to move. One of the men left me in my car and drove me a mile away from my house. The other guy must have followed and he took off with



him. For fear of getting shot, I waited a while to take my blindfold off.

One of my men was killed. Bullet to the brain. His name was Marcus. He was a prospect and working his way up to be one of us. Now he will never have that chance. The message was sent loud and clear, but I'm not giving up on her.

Fuck the mafia law, and the Italian's. I don't give a fuck what I have to do now. I will set a plan B in motion and get her back.

Luckily they called the doc to come and patch me up. He was worried about me, but also terrified for Erica. I guess they hit it off and have been friends since he helped her.

When I gathered my men to come with me back to the location, she was gone.

It was like someone punched me in the gut.

I fucked up. I should have known Antonio would be two steps ahead, and I underestimated him.

My men came to me and told me they have my back and will help me get her back no matter what. This is what brotherhood is all about. Grady is my second in command, so he thought what he was doing was the right thing. I should have slit his fucking throat for defying me, but I was too consumed with getting my woman back. When Matt and the other brothers said they have my back no matter what I felt relieved, because I need them for my next plan of action. Selling guns and trading is a whole different ballgame compared to what I'm going up against now. This is the real deal. These people are no fucking joke, but if I have more guys with me I have a better shot of getting to her.

They refuse to allow me to go alone again, and in that moment I felt the loyalty of my family in spades. They're my brothers and they look at Erica as if she's their sister, and that fills me with pride.

Grady, Beefcake, Glock, and four more of my men went with me to the last location. The place was cleared out.

Slate is a tracker. He has been a great friend of mine for years. He can track anyone down, as long as there is some sort of evidence lingering.

Between the tire tracks and fingerprints he was able to track down a possible location.

Slate worked for a very secretive security team in the Navy, so he knows his shit.

We ended up working together shortly after he was discharged. He came into my bar one night and I beat his ass in a game of pool. He hit it off with everyone and we have been cool ever since. We all have each other's backs, through thick and thin. It's like they're the family I had been missing.

"Hey, can we hurry this the fuck up? Obviously she's not here anymore. Gather all your information and let's get on with it," I demand in frustration. The more I'm away from her the more anxious I'm becoming.

When we find her, the first thing I will do is get her to safety. Then I'll kill those two men possibly slowly for what they did to me.

Lastly, I will take Antonio's head and mount it on my fucking wall for taking my girl. If I find out they harmed one hair on her perfect head, I will destroy each and every one of his men with pleasure and slowly.

Fuck the rules, fuck them all.



Slate gathers what he needs and makes his way to our truck. He messes around on his computer for a while.

"I think I have something." Three of my guys and I walk over to check it out.

"That's them," I growl when I see the two men that beat the shit out of me. Leaving me with no way to fight back.

"Looks like they are former military men. Supposedly, they have family not too far from here. Here are their

addresses.” He shows us and I order everyone to get in the truck and go.

“Listen up, we go to Kevin’s home then Scott’s. No children, just the wives. I want them in one piece. We are about to make a trade, and I have a feeling Kevin and Scott won’t give a fuck about Antonio and his plans when they find out we have their wives.”

The plan is set in motion, so let’s just hope this doesn’t backfire on my ass.



## CHAPTER *Twelve*

### *In Dreams*

#### ***Erica***

*He feels so good. His warm body is pressed up against mine. I can feel his hard, strong arms tightened around me.*

*I can smell his fresh, clean scent. He kisses me with such passion that it lights a fire between my thighs. Sweat drips off our bodies; his tongue grazes my nipples and I feel unbelievable pressure between my legs.*

*He is filling me wholly and completely. I can see his lips moving but I can't make out what he's saying. Jared rubs my breasts. His mouth slowly tortures my body in the most delicious way. I feel like I'm about to explode into a million sinful pieces, when I start to feel choked I realize his hands are squeezing my throat.*

*I beg for him to stop, but he doesn't. He just laughs like it's the funniest thing in the world.*

*I blink and then notice it's not Jared anymore. It's a faceless man. When I say faceless man I mean his entire face is a blur. I push and pull and struggle as best as I can, but*

*there's no use. He's going to kill me and there's nothing I can do about it.*

A strangled sound comes from my mouth as I wake up, gasping for air. Panic grips my throat and I run towards my bathroom. Splashing cold water on my face doesn't help, so I sit on the toilet and put my head between my knees and breathe.

Slowly but surely the panic subsides as I try to forget the terrible yet vivid nightmare and the things that occurred.

I feel lost and alone, and I don't want to be here. It's bad enough that I just found out that Antonio is my real father, but to be lied to my entire life takes the cake.

“Screw this shit. He can't keep me here forever. It's wrong on so many levels.” I talk to myself like a crazy person.

I know Jared is far from giving up on me. I just have to be patient and have faith in him. His friends are his family and they were also becoming mine, so I know they have my back, too.

If I have to kill Antonio, I will without hesitation. There is nothing here for me.

I wonder if Antonio is even telling me the truth. He could be just using the Irish as an excuse to make me stay.

There is a light knock at my door, then it opens.

“Are you decent?” I hear one of the guards say.

“Yes,” I reply, and stay in the bathroom.

“The boss requests your presence in the foyer.” I roll my eyes.

“I will come downstairs when I'm ready,” I snap, because I don't give a shit right now. He is one of the men who hurt Jared, and all I want to do is spit in his face.

“Very well,” he replies, and vacates the room.

***Jared***

Grady and my men captured the wives of Antonio's main guys. We kept our faces covered the entire time. The women were frantic, so we had to tie them up good. We drove to a secluded area and pulled over.

Turing around to face them in the back seat, I continue to explain why they're here.

Duct tape is secured on their mouths because I don't trust them not to scream. Grady is driving and I'm in the passenger seat. The other men are in the vehicle behind us.

"The reason you're here is because your husbands fucked up. They have someone we want, and until they give her back you two will be staying with us."

They both cry, and shake their heads back and forth.

"The last thing I want to do is hurt you, but I will. I will hurt you in a blink of an eye.

If they even so much as harm a hair on my girl's head, you two can kiss your families goodbye." They both continue to sob.

I take a picture of them and grab their cell phones that we confiscated.

Locating their husbands' numbers I use a burner phone to send both men the photos and wait for a response. It's almost instant when the pleading begins. I smile when I read the desperation in their texts.

"Jackpot." I look over to Grady and he pounds my fist.

"Let's go get her back." I tell him the location to make the exchange, and we're off.



## *Erica*

I just finished getting dressed when I hear a commotion outside my door. It slams open and in come the two guards that I despise.

“What the hell?” I shout, but the menacing look on their faces tells me they’re pissed about something.

One of the men storms towards me, pushing me up against the wall, and covers my mouth. His mouth is close to my ear.

“Your boyfriend has our wives, so we are taking you to him now. You will be fucking quiet leaving this compound, or I will fucking kill you,” he growls.

My eyes widen in shock, but also surprise. When he lets his hand down I push him away.

“Don’t fucking touch me! If you hurt me your wives are as good as dead!” I whisper just loud enough for only them to hear.

The other guard comes up to me and slaps me hard across the face, and I gasp in pain.

“What the hell, man! You can’t touch her!”

“Sorry, but the bitch deserves it,” the second guard spits.

“Go downstairs and distract Antonio. Tell him she will be right down,” he orders, and the other man leaves quickly.

He then pushes his body against mine and I try my best to get him off me, but he’s too strong. His hard length is pressed up against me and I want to puke.

“Now listen to me, bitch. If shit hits the fan and our wives don’t make it back to us, I will personally make it my mission to destroy you and this perfect body of yours. Do you understand me?” I nod frantically, agreeing so he will get off me.

“Go fix your face and cover up that mark. You will have dinner with Antonio and then meet us in the basement when you’re finished.”

I do as he says when he exits the room.



About ten minutes later I arrive downstairs in the dining area.

Plates are set just for Antonio and me.

I sigh when I think of how desperate he has been for a relationship with me. Well, he's not getting anything out of me, because thankfully I will be gone tonight.

My face still throbs, but I ignore the pain.

"Please sit, Erica." He gestures to the chair across from him.

Taking my seat I stare at my plate full of food, but my appetite has vanished.

"Not hungry again?" he asks and I shake my head no, refusing to speak to him.

He huffs out a breath and places his napkin on the table. I must have lost weight staying at this place. I can't stomach anything.

"Are you ever going to talk?"

"What do you want to talk about? How you abandoned me my entire life? Or the fact that you kill people for a living?" I retort, and his expression remains the same. Devoid of any emotion.

"I didn't abandon you. I was unable to care for you personally, but I didn't abandon you per se. I took care of you financially your entire life because your mother wouldn't allow me near you. She threatened to turn me in, and I've worked too fucking hard to just throw it all away."

"So you just threw me away? Like I didn't matter to you at all?" My eyes water, but I refuse to let my tears fall.

He visibly swallows, and contemplates his next words.

"You deserve better than this life, Erica. I know that. But you're older now and I'm established, and you're in danger. Your life was not truly threatened until now, or I would have just let you be. Your mother and the man who raised you fucked up, but that doesn't mean you should go down with them." I actually see sincerity, which surprises me. But why allow Luca all this time to take me against my will?



“How could you allow Luca to do what he did to me?” I croak, and he sighs.

“Sometimes we have to make sacrifices. You were supposed to comply and be groomed for this life. If anything, it has made you stronger.” I think this man is insane.

“Let’s just forget about it and eat,” I suggest, and start to eat my food the best I can. My nerves are shot at this point. I don’t know if it’s the fact I’m leaving and never going to see my father again, or the thought of escaping and getting caught.

No more words are spoken. Antonio gets up after he’s finished, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I stay an extra twenty minutes after he’s gone to make sure the coast is clear for me to leave.



The basement door was left unlocked for me. I tremble as I walk down the rickety stairs. The two men are armed and ready to exit through the back door.

“You don’t need those weapons. He just wants me back,” I insist, and they continue to shove me out the back door and into a truck.

“Shut the fuck up and stay put,” he barks, and I do.

The drive is fairly long. I have no idea where we are because I am now blindfolded again.

The car stops and I hear muffled voices, then doors open and slam.

“Where is she?” Jared demands, and I sigh in relief that he’s here. But I’m scared because they have weapons.

“Give us our wives and we will hand her over.”

More muffled voices and doors open and shut. I’m being pulled out of the truck. I still have a blindfold on and my hands are tied.

“Babe, you okay?” Jared shouts. I nod, holding back my tears.

“She’s fine, now hand them over,” one of the guards says.

“Her first,” Jared grunts out.

My blindfold is torn off my face and my hands untied. It’s like in slow motion as I catch sight of Jared and his men.

When I see his gorgeous face I run to him and he lets the women go, catching me in mid-air as my legs wrap around him.

“Babe, you all right?” He soothes and rubs my back. I’m shaking and crying in relief.

I look over to see Grady, Beefcake, Glock, and four other men with their weapons drawn at the two guards. They wait and watch them leave, speeding off into the night.

He takes one look at my face and I can see the love there. I kiss him like it’s our last kiss, and he returns my kiss willingly. I love this man so much right now it hurts.

I’m crying and still kissing him as he places me in the back seat. He buckles me in and scoots next to me.

“You need to eat something, baby,” Jared says, and I can feel his pain in his voice.

When I lay my head on his lap and cry he just rubs my hair and soothes me the best he can.

Glock now speaks. He’s one of Jared’s men who has always been so nice to me when I visit their bar.

“Erica, are you okay? Do you need us to call the doc?” I can hear his hesitancy, asking me that question. Jared’s hand pauses as he waits for my response.

He thinks I could have been physically assaulted or violated.

“No, I’m okay.” My voice wobbles.

“You say the word, darlin’, and I’ll get you whatever you need,” he tells me and I smile, thinking how blessed I am to have these men in my life.



I must have dozed off, because when I open my eyes I'm being carried in Jared's warm embrace. It's been days since I've actually been able to sleep, so I'm physically and mentally drained.

He brought me back to his house, which I'm grateful for.

All I want is for him to hold me and never let me go. Jared tucks me in his bed and kisses me lightly on my forehead.

"Where are you going?" I croak, reaching for his hand.

"I have some things to take care of." He has his fist clenched at his side.

"Jared, please don't. Just leave it alone; I want nothing more to do with that man." He bends down, giving me a light kiss on my cheek.

"I can't let them get away with this, and I sure as hell won't let you out of my sight."

"He said the Irish are after me. That he was just protecting me from them," I tell him, and his face never changes. He looks at me with caring, thoughtful eyes.

"Babe, you need to understand that all these people are dangerous, and whether or not Antonio is telling the truth he needs to be eliminated. And now so do the Irish if they're involved." He gives me a look that says he means business.

"I don't think you understand how dangerous we are. What those pricks did to you, then to me..." He shakes his head back and forth. "That's just not gonna fly with me, babe. I have thirty more men, and favors that I need to cash in on."

"When somebody double crosses us, they're dead." The way he says that sends a chill through my body. I need him now more than ever. I also need to accept his help that he's offering because I have no one else. I want nothing to do with the mafia. Their goal is to merge families and gain power that they don't deserve. I will not be of service to them.

No longer will I succumb to their ways. I am my own person, and will be damned if I let anyone say different.

Even though Luca is gone it will never stop them from coming after me, so my only way out is to prepare for the capture by learning how to protect myself. Sure, my father taught me how to shoot but it was usually just recreational.

I will learn how to fight, because those motherfuckers are not taking me again.



I grab the back of his neck and pull Jared closer to me. My lips smash onto his in the most passionate yet aggressive way. He groans into my mouth and hovers over me. I lean back and he follows. His firm body is now on top of mine as he grinds into me.

“Babe, you lost weight and need to eat something.” I shake my head ‘no’, just wanting his body on mine.

I feel a million different emotions in this very moment. Love, lust, want, and pure passion that only Jared Knox can give me.

“Take this off,” he orders and I oblige, pulling my pants down and left fully exposed to him. My shirt comes off with my bra and he traces his fingers down my body. Goosebumps cover my arms and he smiles. Light kisses travel around my breasts and down to my stomach. When I tug on his hair he grunts, kissing and licking down to my center. When he swipes his tongue over my most sensitive area, I whimper.

There’s something about my body being on full display while he is still fully clothed and looking sexy as hell. It’s like he’s playing an instrument and I’m fully tuned to him.

He knows what I need and want. He devours me like I’m his favorite meal. My screams echo throughout the room, which only makes him more into it.

White spots fill my vision as I let go to the most beautiful orgasm I’ve ever had.

He crawls back up to my face and kisses me. I can taste myself on him. Our tongues clash. He takes his clothes off in record time, and before I know it he is thrusting into me full force.

Over and over we move together in perfect harmony. Our moans echo in the room and our hands are everywhere, exploring each other's bodies. He thrusts harder like he's claiming me all over again as he sucks on my breasts.

"Jared!" I yell, and he looks me in the eyes like I am all he can see. My entire body is shaking from this man.

"You always feel so fucking good. Tell me it will always be this good," he rasps.

"It will always be this good with you, Jared. I love you so fucking much." He gives me a cheeky grin at my choice of words.

"You know I love you, too, beautiful," he whispers, and pushes in and out of me two more times until we both fall apart in a complete state of euphoria.



## CHAPTER *Thirteen*

### *My Heart*

We made love all night and it was one of those epic times, when you know it's so special that you need to savor it like chocolate cake. You need to bottle up these moments and hold on to them with everything you have because life is precious yet unexpected.

There is something about that moment when you know. You get a feeling that completely takes over your body. There is a rush of happiness and contentment. I knew I loved Jared but I didn't know until last night that he was my soulmate. He is my heart that keeps beating, the blood in my veins that travels through my body to keep me alive.

Yes, I know I sound over the top but it's true. What we have is *real*, and I can't imagine my life without him in it.



The smell of coffee fills his condo. I pull one of his shirts over my body and make my way to the kitchen.

He is shirtless and, oh my, I'm dying to rub my hands all over him.

“Hey, babe, are you hungry?” He gives me a smirk as I saunter up to him and wrap my arms around his middle.

“Famished,” I reply, and take a seat while watching his sexy ass make me food.

I moan at the first bite of my pancake and he laughs. I love that laugh so much.

His phone rings and he sighs, but answers the call anyway.

“Yeah?” The person on the other end is loud, and Jared’s eyes turn cold and unmoving.

I stop eating, looking at him with worried eyes. He hangs up without a word.

When he starts to move I pull his arm down.

“What is it?” I query and he stands up, pacing back and forth. He then takes a glass and shatters it by throwing it hard against the wall.

“Jared, you need to tell me what’s wrong!” I yell.

“Antonio left a message. He took Shannon and sent a lock of her hair. He said if we don’t return you to him he will send one body part back at a time. Fuck!” he shouts, and I start to shake.

“Oh my god! I have to go back! I have to leave!” I stutter, getting up as quick as I can.

“No fucking way! You stay put! We will get her back and I will fucking kill them slowly.”

“Jared, stop! You can’t keep this up. I have to help her; please let me do this,” I beg. “She’s my best friend; she’s a good person and doesn’t deserve this!” I cry.

He comes up gently grabs me to look in his eyes.

“I will not lose you again, do you hear me?” His eyes water and I nod. Tears start to form in mine as I see right through his soul. He wears his heart on his sleeve and I couldn’t be more proud of the man he is today.

“We will do this together,” I affirm, and he sighs.

“You can use me as bait. Gather the guys and whoever you can. I will get in the house and get her. You will make sure she’s safe and I will take him out myself,” I state.

“I can’t ask you to do that. I will kill him, babe. He’s your father and, trust me on this, you will not want his blood on your hands.” He stares at me, waiting for my response.

“If I have the opportunity I’m doing it.” I start to walk upstairs to change and get ready.

He joins me, and when we finish getting dressed he comes up behind me and places his head on my shoulder.

“I can’t be without you, Erica. I need you to make it back to me.” I give him a small smile. There are no more words to be said, because I honestly don’t even know if I’ll make it out alive this time.





## **CHAPTER** *Fourteen*

### *Let's Do This*

We drive to the bar in a hurry. Jared's fists are clenched on his steering wheel. He has been driving this truck more and more. I miss riding his motorcycle with him.

His hand falls from the wheel and grabs my hand to kiss my palm. Warmth rushes through my veins, and I love that just the simplest gesture can make me swoon for this man.

We walk hand and hand into the bar. We see Sean, and he's fuming with rage. You can actually feel the anger pouring off him.

Jared whispers in my ear, "He knows everything. I had to tell him."

"This information could have been helpful in the car, you know." Sean is on the phone, yelling at someone. When he hangs up he glares at me.

"Watch it," Jared grunts.

"I'm so sorry; I promise we will get her back. I swear it." I plead with him, because the last thing I need to be is on Sean's bad side. I care about Shannon, too.

“You better get her back.” He passes by me and my face heats. I’m embarrassed that Antonio is my father and capable of such horrid acts.

“Ignore him, babe,” Jared tells me, but I just shake my head back and forth.

“You were in his shoes not too long ago, Jared. Give him a break.” I walk outside to get some fresh air.

Tears threaten to fall but I push them back. I need to stay strong for them, for Shannon. The door opens and closes and I hear footsteps behind me.

“The plan is simple. We will take you to Antonio and request an exchange. When that exchange is done my men will be hidden, as will his, but we are stronger and smarter. I refuse to lose any more people. Over the years we have established relationships with many others and I have more people than they do. Deadly people, Erica; Antonio will not get away with this, I can assure you.”

“Stop blaming yourself, darlin’; you are family. Jared loves you, and so that makes you our family, too.” Grady’s statement makes my chest fill with pride, knowing they have my back.

I smile at him. He is very handsome and deadly, all mixed into one with his shaved head and tattoos on his neck and arms.

“You care about her, don’t you?” I say, staring straight ahead, waiting for his answer.

“You’re very perceptive, Erica.” That’s all he says, and walks away.

Jared comes out next.

“Babe, I promise you will not be going with him. We are not exactly going to trade you. You just have to be there so he can see you,” Jared explains.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice sounding scratchy because I will do whatever I can to get my friend back. Even if that means going back into that hell.



We pull up to the location. Sean is still fuming and I feel like an asshole right now. Again I put Shannon in danger. My life is not meant to have friends.

“Sean, I promise I will get her back to you safe and sound. He just wants me,” I state, and he nods.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you, either.” Sean is genuine in his admission, but I can’t help but feel responsible for this. I nod at him in acknowledgment.

“You will get out of there the second we give you the signal. The plan is set and we will get her out of there, and you will escape when we give you the signal. Let us handle the rest.” Jared’s tone sends shivers through my body.

I’m afraid for this to backfire and someone get hurt. I will never forgive myself if that’s the case.

We pull up to a secluded location. There are two black trucks parked to the side. My stomach is in knots.

We all get out of our trucks. Jared has men on every perimeter of this location. We are ready to fire if necessary.

Jared is holding my hand as we exit the truck, and he then shuffles me behind him.

Antonio, the two guards, and Shannon come into view.

Antonio has six other men come out from the other trucks, strapped and loaded, ready to fight.

“Drop your weapons,” Grady demands, and Antonio just smiles.

“This is not up for negotiation. You see, as we speak my men are there, there, and there.” He points in all the directions that Jared’s men are.

“You didn’t think I would come unprepared, did you?” Antonio tsks.

“We can make the easy trade, or this can end badly. It’s your choice,” he tells us.

“Just let her go and I’ll come with you.” I try to walk around Jared but he holds me back.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Sean looks at Jared, pissed because he’s not letting me go because that’s the plan.

“I’m sorry, I can’t let her go with him,” Jared says, and I gasp.

“He’s not going along with the plan. They will never release her now.” Sean is red in the face.

“Jared, let go of me.” I’m trying to move around him and he squeezes my arm lightly, but demanding enough for me to realize he is not letting me go.

Shannon is crying; she has her mouth taped and her hands tied. She is looking over at Sean with pleading eyes and then what looks like admiration.

All of a sudden Grady draws his weapon and points it directly at Antonio.

“Let her fucking go,” Grady growls, and Antonio throws his head back and laughs. He then turns his head in my direction.

“Erica, come with me now.” He waves me over and grabs Shannon to push her forward.

“Jared, I have to go.” My voice cracks because now I really am scared.

Nothing is getting accomplished, so I take matters into my own hands.

“Let her go and I will come with you of my own free will. No one needs to get hurt.”

“Looks like my daughter is the only one with a brain.” Seconds later Antonio makes a move with his hand, and one of the guards slaps Shannon so hard in the face she falls to the ground in pain. He then proceeds to kick her.

Sean is screaming. I am screaming. Jared draws his gun, then everyone draws their guns.

I choose to make the stupid decision to run. I know they won't shoot me, so I run as fast as I can to my friend.

Everyone is yelling at me to stop, but I don't stop until I've reached her. The guard who is hurting her won't let up, so I jump on top of her to block the kick and that's when the guard kicks me.

I cry out in pain, a gunshot is fired, and the guard falls to the ground with a bullet to the head.

When I look over, Antonio still has his gun pointed at the guard. He shot him in the head for kicking me by mistake.

Four men lift me up off of Shannon; Antonio grabs her and practically tosses her to the others.

Jared is screaming and begging for them to let me go, but this entire plan is blowing up in our faces. But I couldn't sit by and watch them hurt her anymore.

Sean has her now and is practically throwing her into their truck. Jared has his gun drawn and his snipers ready to fire.

"One signal from my men and you're all dead. Let her go now!" he bellows, and I start crying.

"Jared, just stop! You're making it worse!" I plead.

"You wouldn't risk a gun fight when your girl is in the crossfire, so tell your men to back the fuck off now. Even though she's my daughter I will punish her for escaping, and you will have no say in the matter. It will just be worse on her if you keep this up."

"Fuck you!" Jared barks, and no one utters a word. The guards start to pull me into the truck and I go willingly, mouthing 'I love you' to the only man I've ever loved.

Shots are fired and I have no clue what's happening, because my ears are ringing and I'm being tossed around.

I cover my ears and bend my head down. One of the guards jumps on top of me to shield me from something.

All I hear are the piercing sounds of gunfire and yelling, then everything goes black.



“Help me get her in the car!” a man’s voice echoes, but I can’t make out who it is.

“Holy shit, we killed all of them! We have to get her back now; she could have a concussion.”

I hear more raised voices and my vision is blurry as I try to open my eyes. There’s no use as I drift back into the darkness.



“She will be fine. She hit her head pretty hard. She needs rest.” My eyes crack open to see Shannon staring at me, with worried yet grateful eyes.

“You know you could have gotten yourself killed,” she throws at me, then gives me a soft smile.

“You saved my life, you know.” Her voice is shaking.

“You should have seen how distraught Sean and Grady were.” I smile and then my chest fills with pride, knowing we’re safe because of these men. Then realization hits and I have no idea if they are all okay.

“Everyone is fine.” She gently pushes me back down to rest. I sigh in relief.

“Let me go tell Jared you’re awake.” I hug her tight before she leaves.

Jared then comes storming in like his ass is on fire. I sit up and open my arms for him to come. He does and we embrace. I love this man with everything I am. Just the thought of having an actual relationship with him without anyone to interfere makes me so fucking happy.

“What happened?” I pull back to study his face. He grins at me.

“We won, babe. No more running, no more hiding.” I sigh, falling back into his arms.

“Thank you,” I whisper in his ear.

“What you did was stupid.” He tightens his hold on me.

“Don’t you ever do anything like that again. Do you understand me?” I nod, but know in my heart I would do it all over again if I had to.



A couple of hours later we emerge from the back room. All the guys are drinking at the bar and playing pool. I feel awkward to say the least, knowing last time this place was filled with naked women and people having sex everywhere.

Jared walks over to me.

“You ready to go home?”

“That depends on which home you’re referring to.” I smile.

“The only home you have. Mine. Now it’s ours.” He kisses my lips and ushers me to his truck.

“Then I would be happy to.” I laugh as he lifts me up and into the truck. His lips kiss my cheek, then my neck, finishing with a nibble on my ear.

I moan in response, wishing we were back in his bed. Jared makes his way to the driver’s side and takes my hand, starting the truck up.

“We will move your things in tomorrow. Our time starts tonight.” He gives me a serious look and my eyes water, because this beautiful man makes me happy.

I finally feel like my life is coming together. I just pray that Antonio was lying about the Irish.



## **CHAPTER** *Fifteen*

*One month later...*

Jared and I are the talk of the town. Everyone is noticing the bad boy with the ‘good girl’, as they put it. His reputation has always been based on being a player, but ever since I arrived things have changed.

He saved me from a life of horror. I have no clue what happened to Antonio and, to be honest, I don’t care.

Jared said he took care of him, and I believe what he says. I still worry about the Irish mafia and their intentions.

Jared and his crew keep a very low profile. People know of them, but not one person would dare step to them or question their actions. He is gone most nights, which concerns me. He comes home, needing to make love to me right away. As if he just went through something that made him distraught and needs a warm body for comfort.

That’s what makes me uneasy. What if one of the many women who adore him try something one night and he caves?

I can’t deal with deception, especially from him. He doesn’t share anything with me because it’s private club business. I try to drown myself in my studies to take my mind off my constant worrying.



I'm walking out of my class when I glance to my left. I just caught Stephanie staring at me, but she quickly looks the other way. She has been acting odd as well. I know she's had it out for me since I got here. She knows I'm officially with Jared now, so I can practically see the steam coming out of her ears. From what I've heard, she was there the night I crashed into the bar like a crazy person. I don't know who she was with, but what I do know is it wasn't my man.

Lots of people have been talking about Jared and his crew. They are starting to recognize him as a dangerous man instead of the playboy he was. That doesn't sit well with me, and I think Jared has noticed my standoffish behavior.

I don't know how I feel about being with someone who practically kills for a living.

Nervous butterflies flutter in my stomach at the thought of being known as the girlfriend of a high profile gangster.

That's who he has become at the young age of twenty-five. Does he actually plan on being a criminal for the rest of his life? What about our future?

He texted me a short while ago, saying he'll be late tonight. I huff, exasperated because this has been an nightly occurrence lately. Something is most definitely up with him.



It's starting to get late, so I decide to head home. Matt tails me the entire way to Jared's condo. I might as well get some studying done while I'm alone. Matt follows me up the elevator and does his usual sweep through the house.

"All set, darlin'. I'll be outside the door if you need anything."

"You can stay in here if you want," I offer and he smiles.

"Nah, I'll wait outside. Boss' orders," he replies, then walks out of the condo.

Hours pass and it's almost midnight. My eyes are tired from all the reading so I check my phone. Shit, I missed

several calls from Jared.

I dial his number and he picks up on the first ring.

“Hey, I’m sorry I missed your call,” I start off and then I hear his voice, which only makes me want him here with me.

“Yeah, Matt said you were studying. After I couldn’t get a hold of you I called him.”

“When are you coming home?”

“Hopefully within the hour, babe. I’m sorry. It’s been really busy.”

“Okay, I’ll be waiting like usual,” I groan, and he laughs through the phone.

“I will make it up to you,” he promises.

“Okay, I’ll see you later. I love you, Jared.”

“I love you, too, baby.”



Later that night when he comes home I feel him curl up to my side. His strong arms wrap around my middle. I place my hands on his and sigh.

He nuzzles my hair and just the feel of his rock-hard body against me has heat pool between my thighs.

“You ready for me, baby?” I nod yes, lightly pushing my back to his front. His hands move my panties down and that’s when I feel him. He slides into me easily and we both groan at the feeling we give each other. He moves in and out of me so passionately and it feels like he’s holding on to me for dear life. Like he never wants me to leave, cherishing and grasping every piece of me. He kisses down my neck and starts to lightly tug on my hair. His hands roam over my breasts, lightly pinching my nipples, giving both pain and pleasure at the same time. I am so wet I should be embarrassed, but I’m not. This is Jared and he loves me.

“Jared! Please...” I beg, having no clue what I’m begging for.

“You want this? Take it, baby, take fucking all of me. I love you so fucking much.” All I can do is moan and tell him to move faster. When I’m about ready to explode I clamp down on him hard, and he lets out a groan of pleasure.

He rubs my breasts and follows me in two more thrusts. We lay completely still as we come down from this beautiful emotional high.



*The next night...*

It’s late at night but I decide to go visit my mother’s grave to get some sort of closure. I rarely visit and I’m starting to feel guilty about it. I hold my locket close to my heart and think of her. Would she approve of Jared? She always told me when love hits it hits hard and I will know it. She’s right, because it hit me so hard I can barely see straight. Jared is my other half, he’s my heart and we beat as one together. My mom was right about one thing...when you find someone who loves you for you it makes it all worth it. Never settle and always be true to your heart. Her words will forever be embedded in my soul. I will keep her memory alive by being happy and living my life to its fullest. I have to make Jared see that we can grow old together and have a family, putting all of this shit behind us. I want him to leave the club, but I don’t think he’s ready. The drive is twenty minutes off campus to the gravesite.

When I pull up I get this eerie feeling. Well I am in a cemetery that’s filled with dead people, so it makes sense.

Something about coming here at night makes me feel at ease. No one is here to judge you or talk back. It’s just me and my mom as I sit at her gravesite.

“Hey, Mom, I’m not doing that great today. I miss you terribly and I’m so sorry I haven’t been by.

“Why did you lie to me about Antonio? I know that he was a bad man, but he was my real father and you kept that from me. I’m over being angry about it, though. I just feel so sad without you here.” I hear the rustling of the leaves. My

shoulders shake as I lean against her headstone, letting tears spill down my face. She was all I had and she's gone. Time heals all wounds, right? Not for me and not today it doesn't. My phone vibrates again in my pocket. Of course it's Jared. I wipe my face and compose myself.

"Hello?" My voice is choked.

"Babe, where are you?" he asks, sounding panicked.

"I'm at the cemetery, I just need some alone time," I explain.

"Erica, it's late at night; get the hell out of there now. You can't be by yourself."

"What are you, my father? Shit, Jared, that's enough of you telling me what to do," I retort, and hit the end button. Now I'm even more pissed than I was before.

The fucking nerve of that man.

"He was right," A voice says in front of me, and I scream.

"Who the hell are you?" I scramble off the ground and stare at this gorgeous man who stands before me. He's tall, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a mysterious grin. He is wearing a black hoodie and dark jeans. The man is sexy and deadly all at once. He also looks vaguely familiar.

"Name's Tony. I overheard your conversation. You shouldn't be out here on your own. It's a dangerous world we live in." He gestures to the grave.

"Your mom?" I nod my head 'yes'.

"Sorry for your loss. I lost a dear friend recently, too," he tells me.

"Thanks, and I'm sorry about your friend. Life's a bitch sometimes," I say. He gives me a heart-stopping grin. He looks all too familiar.

"Well, it was very nice to meet you...?" He pauses, waiting for me to tell him my name.

"Erica," I tell him.

“Nice to meet you, Erica.” He then turns to walk down the cemetery, leaving me alone and confused. That was strange yet comforting. There’s something about his eyes I think as I walk out of the cemetery, deep in thought.



The next morning I wake up with a headache. I barely slept last night and it’s all because of that man. I couldn’t stop thinking about him and his familiarity. Jared is already gone; he left me a note. I start waitressing again tonight. I took a little break because he insists on paying for everything. I had to recover from when Antonio took me, but now I’m ready to face the world again.

I rush to my morning class, not paying attention as I knock into someone hard.

“Whoa there, gorgeous.” The man laughs and grabs my arms to keep me from falling.

When I look up the shock on my face is palpable. It’s him...Tony from last night.

“You go here?” I ask, surprised to see his handsome face smiling down at me. His expression is amused.

“I just transferred here, yeah. That okay with you, kitten?” He smirks.

“Did you just call me kitten?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“I did. See you around, kitten.” He smiles and walks away.

“What the fuck?” I mutter to myself and head to class, realizing now I’m late, but my smile is wide.



After my classes I find a nice quiet place to read under a tree. It’s so beautiful out today so I decide to enjoy it for once.

Minutes later someone plops down next to me. I look over and see it’s Tony again. He’s grinning that sexy grin at me.

“You lost?” I query, and he laughs at me.

“If you keep laughing at me like that you’ll give me a complex.” I lightly elbow his side.

“What the fuck are you doing, Tony?” Jared’s voice booms in the air.

Tony slouches, seemingly annoyed.

“You two know each other?” I look back and forth at them.

Jared is fuming, and Tony looks like he couldn’t care less about Jared’s presence.

“Yeah, he’s my brother,” Jared explains, and my mouth gapes.

“For real?” I say. That explains why he felt familiar.

“I guess I’ll be on my way then. Always a pleasure, kitten,” Tony says, and Jared literally growls.

“Stay away from him, Erica. I mean it,” he orders, and I roll my eyes.

“Not this again! Will you stop telling me what to do? He’s harmless; we were just talking.” I start to pack my things up. Jared gently pushes my body against the tree and I instantly shiver at his nearness.

Shit, he smells good.

“Babe, I need you to trust me on this. He’s a snake in the grass. Stay away from him.”

“You’re mine.” He nuzzles my neck and I sigh.

“Are you going to tell me where you go at night?” I counter, and he shuts his eyes tightly.

“That’s what I thought.” I move away from his hold to leave.

“Erica, what I do at night is confidential. I still love you and need you in my life. I’m not cheating on you; I would never do that to us.”

I slowly turn to look in his eyes.

“What I see is a man who’s afraid to tell the truth. Trust comes first, and without that there’s no relationship to save,” I

intone, and walk back to my dorm alone.



## CHAPTER *Sixteen*

### *I Am His*

Shannon is in the room with Sean when I arrive. They are making out heavily, and I cover my eyes to enter.

“Sean, put your damn pants on will ya?” I say, and they both laugh.

“I have to get going anyway.” He kisses her one last time before he leaves.

“Bye, Erica.” He grins as he exits the room. Shannon is on cloud nine by the look she’s giving me. After everything that happened Shannon is still my friend, and stuck by me through everything. She knows my entire life and then some. I feel bad about all the harm I’ve caused her, but she still sticks by my side.

“I love that man.” She hugs her pillow and bites her lip nervously.

“I see that.” I smile while also feeling a tad jealous about their easy-going relationship.

“Why does everything have to be so complicated?” I ask, and she motions for me to sit.



“It’s as complicated as you make it,” she replies, and I shrug.

“Did you know that Jared has a brother? He just transferred here.”

“Shut your face!” she screeches, and I let out a loud laugh.

“Is he hot like him? Oh he has to be.” I hold my hand up for her to chill.

“First off, you’re practically married to that fine specimen who just left your bed, and second, yeah he’s fucking hot and mysterious, dammit.” I put my hands on my face.

“I love Jared, I do, and we really need this space. But now that his brother is here it feels different somehow.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know, Shannon, but I felt this strange connection to him; it was weird. It’s not a physical attraction, though. Even though he is good-looking. He makes me laugh, and it’s nice to have another friend who listens.”

“Oh shit, girl, you have a love triangle thing going on.” She rotates her index finger and I roll my eyes.

“I do not love anyone but Jared. All I’m saying is there is something between them that has Jared enraged. He seems sweet, though. I’m curious to know why he hates him so much.”

“I would hate to be you right now. No offense.”

“Same,” I say, and we sit and talk for a while more before she heads off to her class.



There is a knock at my door an hour or so later. I open it and there he stands in all his handsome glory.

“Hey, Jared, what are you doing here?” I stand at the door, refusing to let him in.

“I’m here to tell you the truth.” I get this nervous feeling, like I’m not going to want to hear this but I asked for it.

“Can I come in?” he asks, and I move aside to let him pass.

He huffs out a breath and sits on my bed. He looks at me and gulps. I’m wearing one of his tee shirts and nothing else.

“Come here.” He holds his hand out and instinctively I take it. His possessive, demanding tone always gives me goose bumps. I’m standing between his legs as he wraps both arms around my middle and rests his head on my stomach.

His hands travel up my thighs and to my most intimate parts. I want to tell him no and to stop, and that I want to hear what he has to say, but I can’t bring myself to do anything but feel right now. I just want to know what he’s doing when I’m not with him. Is that too much to ask?

“Jared.” I shiver. He lifts my tee shirt off my body, leaving my body fully displayed to him. My nipples pucker as his mouth makes its way to kiss and lick my breasts. I’m writhing at his touch.

“You are so fucking beautiful, and you’re mine. Say it. Say that you’re mine.” He stops touching me.

“Don’t stop!” I gasp.

“I’m yours, Jared; you know that.” He seems satisfied with my answer as he kisses a path down my stomach.

“If anything happened to you I would never forgive myself,” He rasps as he continues to torture me with his mouth.

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” I whisper, running my hands through his hair.

He spins me around so my back is on the bed as he kneels on the floor.

When his mouth meets my center, I gasp and he hums in approval.

“You’re so sweet, so fucking perfect.” He continues to devour my body and claim it as his.

“Ahhh...Jared!” I yell, tugging his head closer to me. He adds two fingers and I almost explode.

“I only need you, baby. You are my fucking everything.” He sucks, nips, licks, and then bites my seam. I buck off the bed in pure ecstasy. When I look down to him he grins up at me.

“I need to be inside you.” In seconds he is hovering over me, slamming into me over and over again. He is filling me in the best way.

The passion that ignites the flame within us is so powerful, so strong. Our moans and grunts fill the room, and I’m sure the entire dorm can hear us.

“Fuck yes!” I shout, and he picks up his pace. I am so close and I can feel he is, too.

“Fuck, Erica! Let go for me, baby. I need to feel the pleasure I’m giving you.” He then squeezes my ass, lifting me up higher to meet his aggressive thrusts. I can’t hold out any longer as I explode into pieces around this beautiful man. He soon follows me, and we lay there in a sweaty content mess of intense elation.



We lay there, silently staring at each other. I forgot why he was even here in the first place, and I don’t care. Being with Jared is like being home. He grabs my hand to kiss the back.

“If you need to know everything, then I’ll tell you. But you need to swear to secrecy. You have already had to witness so much and I can’t risk it.”

“What is it that you’re so afraid of?” I ask.

“The night we killed Antonio and his crew was just the beginning. Word got out about you and what my crew did to protect you, and now the Irish are gunning for us. At night we get together and scope out their whereabouts. The only way to

take over is to eliminate the threat. That threat is their head boss, Dean Gambino; he is the highest of the highest in trafficking drugs and people.” I visibly swallow, scared not only for Jared but for myself as well.

“Are they after me?” My eyes start to burn and I’m so tired of all of this.

“That I don’t know, but the only way to make sure you stay safe is to take his entire operation out. Which means we need more people. That’s what I’ve been doing; recruiting more guys.” I nod. “I will do everything I can to protect you, baby.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Absolutely nothing. You need to just do what you’re doing, but I want you back home so I can keep you safe. I have updated my security system and one of my guys is always outside when you’re there.”

“What if someone gets hurt? Just let it be.” I tell him and he shakes his head no.

“You know I can’t do that. There is no way I will take a chance when it comes to you.”

I move closer to him and wrap my arms around his neck. Leaning in, I kiss his lips passionately. We kiss like that for what seems like forever.

When we pull apart he looks into my eyes.

“My brother can be persistent. He’s always trying to one-up me. He has taken more of his fair share of women from me, if you catch my drift.”

“You mean he steals your girlfriends?”

“More like seduces them, fucks them, and leaves. He’s a sick, twisted bastard, and just the thought of him near you makes my skin crawl.”

“Wow,” I breathe.

“I won’t go near him,” I promise, and the rest of the day we make love and it feels perfect.



Now that I know where Jared's head is at I feel better, but I'm also apprehensive. The fact that he and his men are risking so much just to protect me is unnerving.

I've decided to move back in with Jared like he asked. I know he loves me, but the attention he gets from others bothers me sometimes. Women are always pining for him, and it's frustrating to say least. I know I sound insecure, but it's hard not to be when your boyfriend looks the way he does.

I'm in the library, minding my own business, when I hear the fire alarm ring through campus. I quickly gather all my things and make a beeline for the door. I have to do a double take when I see the librarian passed out on the floor. I rush to her side, tossing my belongings on the ground. I start shaking her to wake up. I get no response at all.

"Not so fast," a man says behind me. I go to turn around, but his hand holds my head steady.

"Do you know what we do to women who disobey?" he whispers in my ear. I say nothing while I shake under his hold. He then pulls me by my hair and slams me against the wall. His heavy body crushes mine, and when I feel his hard length beneath me my heart starts to pound harder.

"Please let me go. I don't know what you want!" I plead with the unseen man.

"Oh, sweet Erica, I think you know what I want. You're the one I wanted in the first place." I'm perplexed by his words, and I have no idea what he's talking about. His voice sounds oddly familiar, but I can't see his face.

He then slides his hand around my throat and squeezes. I can't breathe any air as I struggle beneath him. His other hand comes to my backside and yanks my pants down roughly. Oh my god, this man is going to violate me right here in the library against the wall and there's nothing I can do about it.

"Fuck, your ass is beautiful." He slaps me hard and grinds up against me. His grip tightens around my throat, and black

spots dot my vision.

His hands make it to my front, and I almost collapse when his fingers brush my most sensitive area. He growls in my ear like he's loving this as he touches me, and I feel like I'm going to die.

His hardness presses against my backside right as I'm about to pass out.

The man is then thrown off me as I fall to the floor, gasping for air. When I catch my breath I pull my pants up and notice a struggle. The faceless man and my savior are fighting. The unknown man is at a disadvantage, since he was caught off guard with his pants down. I start to cry then let out a horrifying scream as I run toward the man who violated me in such a way. I know it could have been far worse, though. I start punching him in the side of the head, so hard I hear my hand crack. I notice Tony is the one who saved me as I fall off the stranger's back, into a heap of despair.

Tony finishes him off and knocks him out cold. I hear him yelling at someone to get here now as I collapse.



## **CHAPTER** *Seventeen*

### *Desperation*

#### *Jared*

I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket and see it's my brother. I hit ignore and keep walking. The fire alarms are wailing and the entire campus is outside, waiting for the okay to go back in. The roar of motorcycles can be heard, and my brothers all pull up. I told them to meet me here.

Firetrucks are pulling up, then I see an ambulance and a swarm of police. They are surrounding the library and I instantly feel uneasy. My men run towards me and start firing off nonsense about the Irish.

My phone vibrates again and I answer this time.

"What!" I snap, still keeping my eye on the herd of police barricading the library. My brother is yelling through the phone so loud. All I hear is 'Erica', 'attacked', and 'hurt'. That's when my legs are moving so fast towards the library I almost topple over my own feet.

"Sir, you can't pass." The officer pushes me back. He gives my men and me a disgusted look as he takes in our

appearance, judging us by our tattoos and leather jackets. Fucking asshole.

“You need to let him through,” Matt growls at the officer.

“My girlfriend is in there!” I shout, and he gives me a look of pity. That look will forever be ingrained in my brain.

“I’m sorry, but you will have to wait until the officers clear out of the library.”

“Can you tell me if anyone is hurt?” My voice sounds unfamiliar even to myself.

“There is one casualty.” His face stays neutral, as mine must turn a different shade.

“Sir?” he says, and I shake my head out of my stupor.

The next moment my heart falls to the floor as I see someone being rolled out on a stretcher, only this person is covered in a sheet.

“No! Please no,” I beg. Seconds later I see another stretcher being rolled out, only this time my heart rate starts to pick up again. It’s Erica, and she looks hurt. My brother is at her side, holding her hand, and confusion mars my face.

“That’s her!” I yell to the officer then he lets me pass.

When I make my way over to her, she’s passed out cold with an oxygen mask on.

Tony gives me a look that I have never seen on his face before. When they explain which hospital she’s going to we don’t hesitate running to the closest car, which is his.

We get in, and he starts up the engine and screeches out of the parking lot.

“What the fuck happened?” I sound distraught and unrecognizable even to myself.

“I was passing by the library when I heard a scuffle. A man’s voice that didn’t sound right, so I peeked in and saw...” He pauses and his fists clench around the wheel. I try to prepare myself for his next words.



“He had her pinned up against the wall with her pants down, and so were his.” I feel like my world just shattered before my very eyes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it sooner, but when I yanked the son of bitch off her your girl fucking tore him to shreds; almost knocking him out cold. Then she passed out.” He tells me the entire story and I can’t help but see hurt in his features. It looks almost like he cares for her.

“Thanks for helping her. Fuck!” I slam my fist on the dashboard. Tony couldn’t care less that I dented it. He can see my inner turmoil.

When we arrive at the hospital we all but run to the floor the nurse gave us. Both Tony and I wait patiently for the doctor. All I keep thinking about is the fucking Irish and how it had to have been them. They almost got her.

Shannon comes barreling into the waiting area, with Sean by her side. Her face is a mess; she’s been crying.

“Jared! Is she okay?” She throws her arms around me. I hug her back and sigh, feeling defeated.

“I don’t know anything yet,” I admit, and that scares the hell out of me.

“Who attacked her?” Shannon asks, and I know I can’t tell her I think it’s the Irish mafia that traffics women. In fact I know it was them, and this means fucking war. In that moment I lose all rational thought.

“Motherfucker!” I roar, and pick up a chair and toss it across the room. Everyone is trying to calm me down. Hospital security is rushing towards me. They pull me into a room, holding me back. My head feels like it’s spinning and I can’t stop it.

“How the fuck did they get past us?” I shout. The security guards just give me a look like they have no idea what I’m talking about.

It takes a while for me to calm the hell down, but I do eventually. The guards stand there, waiting for me to flip out

again, but I assure them I'm fine. They both follow me back to the waiting room where Shannon, Sean, and my brother wait.

They stand and I hold both hands for them to stop. I just want to wallow by myself until the doctor tells me she's all right. I may be a powerful man, but I sure as shit don't feel very powerful right now. I would trade anything for her to be okay. I would give my fucking life for her in a heartbeat.

An hour later we are told she's awake and doing fine. I rush to the room as fast as I can, with my heart pounding in my ears. When I make my way inside she is sitting upright. Erica stares out the window, her facial expression solemn.

Carefully I walk over to her. I'm worried about her state of mind after everything she's been through.

"Babe?" I say softly, hoping she's okay. Because she sure as shit doesn't look okay. She faces me and I see the dried up tears on her cheeks and the painful look she's giving me. She has marks on her throat and I have to hold everything back for her not to see me flip the hell out again.

"Can you leave?" Her tone is void of emotion as she turns back towards the window. "My heart starts to pound and I feel a loss like I haven't ever felt before. She is shutting down and pushing me away.

"Why do you want me to leave?" I gruff out.

"I just do." She doesn't sound like my Erica right now, and it's freaking me the fuck out.

"Babe, whatever your feeling I can help you with," I plead.

"Help me?" She spins around and looks into my eyes, glaring at me.

"Did you fucking help me when that prick was touching me?" she shouts.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I thought you were safe on the campus grounds. I should have been there to protect you." I admit.

"You say that a lot," she grumbles and the look on her face says it all. Hurt.

She sighs and turns back to the window.

“I don’t know what to say. I’m hurting right now and scared. I just want you to leave.” Her voice sounds broken now, and I can’t help but want to shake some sense into her and tell her to stop being stubborn. I know she has gone through a ton of shit, but that doesn’t mean she should shut me out.

“Please don’t do this, baby. I love you and I’m sorry you’re hurting.” I clench my fists because all I want to do is hold her.

There’s a knock at the door and I see it’s Tony. Nice fucking timing, I think to myself.

“You up for a visitor?” He looks past me and to her. She is facing him and gives him a small smile that invites him to come in further. My face must turn color because Tony looks at me, confused.

“She’s upset with me and doesn’t want me here.” I can’t help the anger lacing my voice.

“Jared, he saved my life so the least I can do is let him in here to thank him.” She eyes me.

“Who are you right now?” I croak, and I can’t help the anguish I’m feeling. This woman is slicing me open to bleed out. She has no clue what she’s doing to me right now. Just when I thought it couldn’t get worse, a painful sob breaks free from her mouth and my first instinct is to grab her and crush her to me. I hold her tight as she clings to me, shaking uncontrollably. Tony must have left, because he comes back with a nurse by his side. I’m lifting her up to place her back on the bed. She’s apologizing for her reaction to me and I’m telling her to forget about it.

“I can’t,” she wails, and I notice she’s having a hard time breathing. The nurse shoos me away and pricks her with medicine that calms her down right away. Moments later her eyes drift closed. My heart slows and I take a breath. That scared the shit out of me.

What if she wakes and still wants to be rid of me? My brother gives me a look of sympathy.

“She’s understandably upset. I know you and I don’t have the best relationship, but for what it’s worth you’re great for her and I know she loves you. She’s in a world of pain right now.” I’m shocked into silence.

“She’s a beautiful woman. Take care of her.”

“I always do,” I reply a little more harshly than I intended.

“Brother, I’m not trying to take this one from you; I’ve changed.” I roll my eyes.

“Thanks for helping her, but I would appreciate it if you stayed away for now.” He nods reluctantly then gives her a long stare. He is pissing me the fuck off with the way he looks at her.

“Tell her I’m sorry.” He then exits the room without another word. I’m starting to feel anxious. The way he looked at her, the way she looked at him. History had better not be repeating itself, because if it does there’s no way I can survive the loss of her.

I hold her hand while she sleeps that night, hoping she wakes up feeling better.



## CHAPTER *Eighteen*

### *I'm Sorry*

#### *Jared*

My nerves are shot. I could hardly sleep last night as I stared at the love of my life. I need to reassure her she is safe.

I didn't get all the details on her attack, but when she said he touched her that's all I needed to hear.

He violated her, although I'm not sure the extent of it because no one will tell me anything. What I do know is that I will make him pay one way or another. As a matter of fact, he's being dealt with as we speak. He will stay alive until I get to where he is. I want to be the one to end his life. I want to be the one to slit his throat before he pleads for his life. Before I do that I will find out who he works for, and they also will wish that they were dead.



When she wakes the next morning I have everything packed and ready for us to leave.

She gives me a smile that doesn't reach her eyes, which makes my heart shudder. This beautiful woman has been

through so much heartache and pain. She can't catch a break.

"Come here." She waves me over and sits up to face me. When she grabs my hand and tears start to leak from her eyes, my heart splits in half. I don't think she realizes just how strong she is.

"I'm so sorry," she murmurs, and then launches herself into my arms.

"I should have never treated you that way, and I'm sorry. I love you so much. I'm just hurting right now," she explains.

"Babe, you don't have to explain yourself to me. I know and understand. You have every right to feel the way you do. I want you in my life forever, Erica. This isn't a quick fling for me, this is me telling you I can't live without you. It physically hurts to think of you not in my life." I feel better getting that off my chest. She smashes her lips to mine and I grab her with greedy hands. We can't get enough of each other as our hands roam each other's bodies and hold on for dear life. This woman is all mine, and I'm never letting her go.



## *Erica*

He feels so good, and I need him right now. I don't care that we are in a hospital room. He lifts me and my legs instantly wrap around his middle. He groans in my mouth and brings me up to the wall. His pants are down and I'm already bare beneath my hospital gown. He then rips the thin rag off of me and I am left completely naked and him half-clothed.

Something about that always gets me worked up even more, like I'm exposed to him in every way and all my vulnerability is visible to his eyes and his eyes only. I'm left for him to take me in any way he pleases. I need to feel Jared's hands all over me and not *his*.

"Please!" I beg, and I feel him smile against my neck as he kisses his way around each exposed breast, giving me pleasure upon pleasure.

“You’re so beautiful.” He moans, and slams his hard shaft inside of me. I yell out in pleasure and he covers my mouth with his hand.

“Quiet, baby; they will hear you, and I’m not stopping if they come through that door.” I’m so worked up right now I could explode.

Jared moves fast and hard inside me as my body is slammed up against the wall. I feel every inch of him take me and I love it. His kisses are more aggressive, as if he’s staking his claim over me.

“So fucking tight. So fucking perfect,” he growls, and I start to feel myself let go. He continues to pick up the pace, moving so perfectly inside me.

“Yes, baby, tightened all around me like you wanted this. I fucking own this gorgeous body.”

“Ahhh, yes! Jared!” I pulsate all around him as he lets go. We are breathing heavily against the wall.

I start to laugh and so does he while he’s still inside me.

“Wow, we are animals.” I continue to laugh then his face grows serious.

“Marry me,” he says, and my eyes widen in shock.

“What?” I stutter.

“I said marry me, please. I love you, Erica, and I don’t want to waste another minute without you by my side as my wife.”

“Jared, are you sure this is what you want? I am a mess right now, and I need you in my life. But marriage?” she questions, and my face stays neutral.

“I have never been so sure about anything in my life, babe. You are my light in this world of darkness. Together we can do anything.” His confession sends my stomach into a fluttering mess.

“I want to marry you, Jared, I do but I need to finish college first. Then we will go from there.” My voice is timid,

and I'm afraid that he may think I don't love him enough. But then he gives me a soft smile and pecks me on the cheek.

"You're worth the wait, beautiful," he murmurs in my ear and I feel his body ease into mine and all is okay again.



## *Erica*

When we arrive at Jared's place I feel a weight being lifted off me. Knowing we can start fresh is a beautiful feeling. I am strong enough to get over what happened with that man. Shannon has called numerous times, but I'm not ready to talk yet. What happened with her was similar, and I know we should talk, but I'm just not ready. It could have been much worse if Tony hadn't shown up.

It was terrifying; you feel useless and like your body is not yours in that moment, even though you chose not to give it up freely. The feeling of complete demoralization takes over and you are left with an endless amount of 'what-ifs'.

After everything I've been through, I can only hope that my life will get better. There is only so much more I can take. I just want to finish school and marry the man of my dreams.

As I unpack my things Jared is in the kitchen, fixing us something to eat.

"You hungry?" He gestures to the sandwiches he made.

"I am, and I could get used to this." I laugh, and he gives me his signature grin.

"If I'm going to stay here the least I can do is start pitching in." He gives me a look that says no fucking way.

"We have already discussed this, baby. You don't pay for shit when you're with me. I make enough money and then some for us to live. You are my woman, and I will take care of what's mine." This isn't the first time he's said this, but I have to at least offer.



“I would feel better if you would let me contribute more. You and your friends are always giving me rides. The least I can do is help out with food.”

“End of discussion, and the reason we take you everywhere is because your car is not safe, baby. I want someone with you at all times. It’s better like this for now.” I roll my eyes. “Erica, I will spank you red if you roll your eyes again.” Just the thought of him spanking me sends my body on overdrive.

“You promise?” I give him a shy smile and he smacks my ass. I yelp and he hovers over me, placing a gentle kiss on my lips.

“This is the way it’s supposed to be, baby. Me and you together always.” He is so demanding, but I love it and I love him.

We eat in comfortable silence. When we’re finished I grab our plates and make my way over to the sink. I’m smiling one second and then the next thing I know a flashback of that man’s hands all over me pops up in my head. I drop the plates in the sink. The loud clattering noise must alert Jared, because he is at my side in an instant.

My hands are shaking and I’m trembling all over as he whispers soothing words into my ear.

Tears cascade down my face as the memory of my mother’s body flashes before my eyes, Shannon underneath Jayden as he tries to take what he never should have taken, and then the feel of his breath as it meets my cheek.

“I just need a minute,” I mumble, and break out of his hold and run into the bathroom. He lets me go without a fuss, knowing me all too well and that I need to be alone.

My head is now resting on my knees as I sit on the cold bathroom floor.

I practice some breathing exercises to get me through this moment and it seems to be working.

“Babe? You okay?” Jared calls from behind the door.

“Yeah, I’m just going to take a shower,” I say to him, and I can tell all he wants is to be with me but I can’t right now. The memory is too vivid and feels so real that I just need some space. I just hope I can eventually forgive myself for bringing these horrible people into our lives.



A week has passed and I am back to school and doing my best to keep my grades up. Shannon confronted me a couple of days after coming home from the hospital and pleaded with me to talk about what happened. Thinking about it makes it worse, so I’m trying to keep myself busy.

She seems happy with Sean, even though she does mention Grady here and there. I can tell she feels a little something for him, too. Grady checks in on her frequently and I can see the feelings brewing. I’m not sure what’s going to happen, but I just want her to be happy.

On another note, rumors have spread like wild fire throughout campus about my attack. I have been receiving glances of uncertainty and looks of pity, kind of like Shannon did. Only I never knew the extent of her situation because she always seemed okay with it. It’s like she’s accepting the fact that it happened and moving on with such grace and composure. I envy her that.

At one point I openly glare at a group of girls whispering and pointing. What the fuck is wrong with these people? Don’t they have better things to do?

Jared is waiting for me outside, leaning against a tree.

“Hey, babe.” He loses his smile when he sees my face.

“Whose ass do I need to kick?” I smile, pressing my lips against his. I sigh at the contact.

“All I need is your hands all over me.” I continue to kiss his lips and he pulls me flush against him and I moan in his mouth. We make out like we’re the only two here on campus, and I love it.

He pulls back and I whimper.

“Come for a ride with me... I have my bike.”

“Okay,” I reply, and walk with him to toss my books in my car but I can’t find it. “Where the hell is my car?” I screech.

I continue to look around the parking lot. That’s when Jared hands me a set of keys.

“What’s this?” I question, and he gives me a smile.

“These are your new keys and this is your new car, baby.” He points to a beautiful white Audi parked beside his bike.

“No fucking way, Jared.” I shake my head back and forth. “You did not just buy me a car!” My face begins to heat with fury because I hate charity. I used to be the girl who had everything, and now I’m barely scraping by. It’s embarrassing. I start to walk away because I’m furious with him right now.

“Where are you going?” He follows me in confusion.

“Anywhere but here. Shit, Jared, you could have talked with me first, you know.”

“Babe, that car was a death trap, and you’re my girl now. I need you in something safe.” When I spin around I glare at him, but he still has that sexy stupid grin on his face like he finds me funny.

“Come on, don’t be upset with me.” Jared pulls me into his hold. I go willingly because I love him and I know he means well.

“Where is my car?”

“It’s sold; now stop your complaining and check it out.”

“It is beautiful, Jared, but it’s too much,” I argue, and he kisses my cheek.

“You have been through so much and I know you have had a taste of luxury before and I want to give it back to you. I want to share my success with you, baby. You are my fucking life and I need you safe.” I sigh and nod because the way he says it makes me feel better as tears well in my eyes. He’s being thoughtful and I’m just being stubborn.

“Now, I want you on the back of my bike. You can drive your car when we get back.”

I hop onto the back of his bike and he takes my hands to wrap around his middle. The feel of his toned stomach through his shirt makes liquid pool between my thighs. I hope I always want him the way that I do. We drive for a while and eventually pull up to a secluded area. There’s a lake and a dock for fishing. We make our way over to the dock, hand in hand. The sun is shining on my face as I take a deep breath and inhale the fresh air. I still can’t believe I am this lucky to have this man in my life.

We sit down at the edge of the dock in silence for a couple of minutes, just enjoying the landscape.

“I promise I will protect you, Erica. Now that Antonio and his crew have been eliminated, you at least don’t have to worry about them.” He’s still gazing at the lake.

“It’s my fault that man attacked you.” His face contorts in pain.

“What do you mean?” The worry on my face is palpable. Jared grabs my hand and I let him.

“When Jayden hurt Shannon we found out he worked for Antonio and his crew. The Irish and the Italians were working together. Then word got out about you still being alive and I just knew the Irish were coming for you. I should have been more careful, and I’m fucking pissed at myself for keeping that from you. I failed you both, and I’m sorry.” His confession makes me blink back the tears forming in my eyes.

“You’re saying you knew this entire time that Jayden was working with Antonio and you didn’t tell me?” My voice cracks.

“Shit, Jared, that’s fucked up. You lied to me! What else have you been lying to me about?” The anger bubbling up inside of me is making me sick.

“We were waiting for the right time to strike. I had no idea the Irish would plant some sick fuck at your school.” I let go of his hand.

“He could have killed me, Jared.”

“I know, and I fucked up, but I was waiting to get more information. I should have told you everything that was happening so you could have been more aware. I will forever regret my decisions. I needed you to know the truth before we got married or took this relationship further.” I have no clue what to feel right now. I am so hurt that he lied to me, yet I don’t want to feel the betrayal that I feel because I love him so much.

“If you ever lie to me again, Jared, I will not forgive you so easily.” My voice sounds harsher than I meant. Jared lets out a breath and grabs my shoulder, pulling me against his side.

“I’m sorry, baby. I was just trying to protect you from any more pain. I saw what your mother’s death did to you. It killed me to see you that way.” I lay my head on his shoulder. For the rest of the afternoon we sit there in each other’s embrace. No more words are needed.



The drive back is fast. We end up pulling up to the bar. Its loud and I’m feeling a bit apprehensive about going inside. I’m not exactly in the mood to be social. I can see Jared wants to let loose a bit and he deserves it. I can also see his constant worry for me and I feel bad.

We walk into the bar, hand in hand. He greets his buddies and they all give me a hug and tell me they’re happy I’m here. His friends are like family, and it feels nice to be a part of that.

“Hey, baby, go take a seat and I’ll bring some drinks over.” Jared kisses me on the mouth and walks over to the bar. He’s wearing a backwards hat tonight and a fitted black shirt, showing off his strong arms and tattoos. My stomach flutters and all I want to do is take him back to our bed.

I sit down with ease and sigh. Looking around I get lost in the moment. Everyone is partying and laughing. Women are

hanging all over the men, per usual, and I get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Was it always like this for Jared? I bet it was. His life was so different before he met me.

Someone plops down beside me and starts to slur his words. I have no idea who this man is, but he thinks it's okay to sit with me and put his arm around my shoulder. Instant panic grips my throat when I feel him against my side. I try to stand, but he urges me to stay.

"Where are you going, beautiful?" He smirks, and all I want to do is run for the hills.

"Can you please leave me alone?" I shudder.

"Relax and have a drink with me." I visibly start to shake.

He is a large man, with dark hair and gray eyes. His beard is long as he twirls his fingers through it.

"Get the fuck up," I hear Jared growl, and I still can't help myself from shaking.

"Sorry, Knox; I didn't know she was yours." The man's eyes widen.

"Apologize to my girl or I will fucking end your life quicker than you can blink." I watch the man stutter his apology and run out of the bar.

"You okay, baby?" His concerned eyes met mine when he slides in to sit next to me.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I may have overreacted a little bit," I explain, and now I'm thinking it was a bad idea to come here.

"That was kinda hot how you threatened his life, though," I acknowledge, and he grabs the back of my neck, slamming his mouth to mine. I gasp as his tongue enters my mouth and massages my own.

A light moaning sound comes out of me as I squeeze my legs together. When we both pull back we are a mess of heated breaths and hooded eyes.

“I fucking love you, Erica. You are mine and I will fight until my last breath for you, baby.” His words slam into my heart and find a place to stay. Jared Knox is everything I’ve ever wanted in a man. He is strong, smart, and knows what he wants. There is nothing sexier than having a man who can take control.

We spend the better part of the night together, talking and drinking. I finally start to relax. All I want is Jared by my side now and forever.



The night goes by in a flash. We are a little tipsy and plan on crashing here at the bar tonight. There are some spare bedrooms in the back, so we make our way towards one. We enter and close the door behind us. Jared instantly covers his mouth with mine.

Our lips collide with one another as his rough hands grip my waist. He lifts me up as if I weigh nothing to carry us to the small bed. This place is tiny but it will serve its purpose.

“I fucking need to be inside you, babe.” I whimper at his touch. He caresses my body while he tears my clothes off, one piece at a time. He lifts his shirt up over his head and I am met with a beautiful six pack and strong arms. My hands touch his chest and he shivers. He then grabs both my hands and holds them above my head.

“Don’t move them,” he gruffs out, and my long dark hair falls in my face.

He then unbuckles his jeans, taking them off. He springs free and I have to hold back my moan.

Jared then covers me with his body, and the feeling of his hard against my soft makes me writhe in pleasure.

He grabs a hold of my wrists, keeping them in place above my head. His soft lips kiss down my neck and to my breasts. Jared takes one bud in his mouth and sucks, licks, and caresses me just enough to leave my body feeling desired and desperate for him.

His thick fingers easily slide into my folds and my body moves to meet his thrusts. I am fucking his fingers and he is enjoying the show.

“You are so fucking perfect for me,” he groans.

“Please,” I beg, and he smiles, knowing exactly what he’s doing to me. I need this release more than anything right now.

“What do you need, baby?” he asks.

“You inside me right now,” I gulp, and in seconds he complies and slams into me with full force. This is not gentle; this is rough, dirty, needy sex. He fucks me so hard that the bed is slamming against the wall, but we don’t care. Our loud moans fill the room as we continue to take from each other to get to that place where we can let go and be one.

“Fuck, you feel good,” he growls in my ear, still moving against me in the most delicious way. He bites my neck gently then licks the sting away. I gasp as sensational overload consumes my every thought.

“Ahh, Jared! Please.” I beg of him to help me get to that place I need so desperately.

“Mine,” he growls.

“Yours,” I reply.

I feel so full when he’s inside me. I never want him to leave.

“Baby, I’m close.” He tenses up, and I do, too.

I shout his name to the heavens as he continues to invade my body and give me pleasure unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. White spots cloud my vision when I pulsate around him, and he soon follows.

“Fuuck!” he groans, and spills his seed inside me. And I can’t help but again feel undeniably exposed to this man. The one who stole my heart and never gave it back because it’s his now, no one else’s. Jared is my life, and without him I’m nothing.

“I love you.” He places a gentle kiss on my lips.



“I love you more,” I say, returning his kiss.

“Not possible, babe.” He grins and slowly gets off of me to make his way to the bathroom.

When he returns he pulls my back to his front and we drift off to sleep, holding each other the rest of the night.



The next morning my head is pounding. When I open my eyes I see orange juice and some aspirin. Wow, I love this man. I greedily drink the orange juice and take the aspirin. Sighing, I move to go shower in the small bathroom we have in the room. After my shower I have no choice but to put my clothes from last night on.

When I make my way out of the room, something doesn't feel right.

“Don't you fucking move,” a man's voice growls next to me, and I freeze in fear. He has a gun aimed at my temple and a shiver runs down my spine.

“Now listen, you are going to come with me out the back door and make no fucking sound, or your boyfriend and all these people are dead.” His accent sounds Irish. I nod in compliance because I know he means what he says. I'm fucked, and the only way to keep everyone safe is to do what he says.

He places a blindfold over my eyes and leads me roughly to the back door, I assume. The brisk fresh air hits me in the face as I'm tossed into a vehicle. The engine roars and then we are moving fast, away from the only man I've ever loved.

## ***Jared***

I'm in the kitchen at the bar, making coffee, when I hear a door slam and then a car sound. My first thought is to run to Erica. I don't know why but I suddenly fear that something's not right.

When I slam our door open she's not there, and my stomach drops. I turn around to check the bathroom and nothing. When I make my way to the hallway, I notice a piece of paper. I grab it and gulp as I read the threat.

*"You will come to 109 Pillion Street at 4:00 pm sharp with 2 million in cash or your girlfriend is dead."*

"Fuck!" I roar, and punch the wall hard. Loud voices are heard, but I can't focus. Someone snatches the note out of my hand and I snap out of it.

"Dude, what happened?" Grady says, reading the note in his damn boxer shorts. His eyes widen.

"Who the fuck wasn't paying attention?" he yells at everyone who has emerged from the spare rooms at the bar. We are all hungover, so it looks like no one was doing their job. I can't believe we let them slip in and just take her. Grady starts barking orders at everyone to do certain tasks, because I can't seem to comprehend that they actually took my girl. We need the two million, and fast.

"It's the Irish; we had to cut ties with them because of their involvement with Erica's father. They were doing business with them as well, and when we killed the Italians they were left without their cut of Antonio's business ventures. I knew there would be retribution eventually, but I didn't think this soon." Grady's guilt is written all over his face, and shoving him against the wall.

"You said you were taking care of it! How could you not tell me about this?" I growl in his face. Matt pulls me away, trying to calm me down. I roughly pull my arm out of his hold and point at Grady.

"You will fix this mess, and you will do it now!" I roar. He nods, understanding I need this moment to vent.

"We will get her back, boss; come on, chill. I have never let you down before. You can trust me." Everyone is silent because, even though I'm their leader, Grady is my right-hand man and best friend. He will never take shit from anyone, even

me, and I respect that. But someone let that motherfucker get inside.

“Let’s move,” I order, and they all scurry to get their jobs done as I silently pray she’s okay.



## **CHAPTER** *Nineteen*

### *Payback*

#### *Erica*

We must have arrived at the location, because they open the doors and pull me out forcefully and I groan. I'm tired, hungover, and starving. I feel like shit and I am taken yet again. But why? Who the hell are these people? I have nothing left to give.

“Put her in the shed and do not harm her until we get our money. Then I don't give a fuck what happens to her,” the angry man says. He sounds Irish, too, and that's when I realize they are getting payback for Jared and his crew killing the Italians. Obviously they were all business partners. I have always been involved in this mafia lifestyle, but it has never affected me this way. Once I left Luca things started to spiral out of control. Their plans changed, and I just so happened to be the reason.

“We got a quiet one over here,” the man whispers in my ear, and I cringe. The blindfold is still on me and it seems they have no intention of taking it off.

I still say nothing in the hopes they keep their hands to themselves.

“You smell fucking good, too,” he growls.

“Okay, bitch. You can stay mute, but I hope when this is all over I get to hear your screams.” I swallow the lump forming in my throat. When the door shuts I know I’m alone. My hands and legs are tied, so I can’t move anywhere. I lean against the wall he placed me at and try to move my hands to my blindfold. I push my shoulder up to my eyes and rub the blindfold clear off my face. The shed is dark and empty. There is nothing for me to grab to free myself. I guess they’re not as stupid as I’d hoped.

I move my hands to my teeth to try and bite the rope off, but it’s so tight. I also try spitting on it to see if my hands will slide through. The more I do this the more my wrists burn. Tears start to sting my eyes.

“What the hell am I going to do?” I say out loud, to no one but myself.

## *Jared*

It’s almost 4 pm and we have the two million in cash when we arrive at the location we were given. The plan is set in motion. We deliver the money only when I see she is safe. Getting her out in one piece and untouched is my main concern.

My team is geared up and ready for battle if needed. I would rather have no bloodshed, but we are prepared just in case. I know the Irish are as deadly as the Italians were, and I would rather not be on their bad side.

I make my way with my men at my side as we walk towards the Irish boss, Dean Gambino. He is not one to be messed with.

“Mr. Knox. I was hoping we could have met under different circumstances. But you have interfered with my business. I usually would have just killed you and your men in the blink of an eye, but then how would I get my money back?” His voice is laced with threats he most certainly would follow through with.

“We just want the girl back and you can have your money.” Grady places the two bags on the ground. Dean’s men come to retrieve the cash and nod at him to confirm that it seems to be all there.

“Very well,” he says.

“Are we good after this?” My voice stays neutral.

“We will be settled, yes. It was a pleasure doing business with you.” He turns to leave and his men draw their weapons, which we prepared for. We are all pointing guns at each other when Dean waves his hand at someone. Another man comes out with Erica, a gun to her head. The fear in her eyes is apparent and I lose my shit.

“Let her go! This was not part of the deal!” I shout, and he laughs.

“Put your weapons down or we will blow her brains out right here for all of you to see.”

“I couldn’t possibly let you get away with fucking me over, now could I?” He laughs again and walks up to Erica, putting his hands around her throat. He starts to squeeze, and she struggles under his hold.

“Stop!” I scream. Four of his men surround me, pointing guns directly at me. They start to kick and punch me to the ground. Others are detaining my men as they watch me get my ass kicked. I take the hits, hoping I get a moment, because when I do I’m going in guns blazing. I am going to kill every last one of them painfully.

I hear Erica’s cries and screams, not sure if she’s crying because they are hurting her or me.

“Enough!” their leader shouts, and his men keep us in one line with all of us on our knees. He walks over to us; our weapons are gone. He has Erica and is still pointing a gun at her, but now it’s by her side. The marks on her neck make me see red.

She looks at me then drops to her knees to meet me. She wraps her arms around my neck and tries to hold on to me for

dear life. I squeeze her back, even though my body hurts from the beating I just took.

“Oh, look at this... it seems you don't understand compliance, my dear.” Dean then signals for one of his men to get her, and I hold tighter.

“Wait! We can work something out!” I beg, which sounds foreign to me. But I can't let him have her.

“No!” she wails as she closes her arms more securely around my neck.

“Baby, it's okay. Shh.” I try and sooth her, but the man rips her out of my hands as she continues to scream and cry.

“Just fucking let her go!” I shout.

“Take her to my vehicle. I think I might keep her for a while. She's a feisty one.” He grins and I lose my shit.

I roar and jump up to crash my body into Dean's, which he wasn't expecting. Shots are fired and we are punching and fighting to the death. I grab his weapon and place the cold metal to his head, pulling the trigger. My eyes are wild and I let out a sound that makes heads spin. I am ready to kill.

An explosion of some sort goes off and all I see is smoke. The ground rumbles and all the gunfire has stopped. I push his dead body off of mine and start to cough as the smoke fills my lungs.

“Erica!” I yell, but get no response. I trip and fall over something. The smoke is starting to clear and I see the bodies that lay before me. All I can think about is seeing Erica dead in a pool of her own blood and I instantly feel nauseated. The thought of finding one of my men as well makes me sick to my stomach.

Coughing and walking through the property, I see no sign of her or anyone for that matter. A couple minutes later I see Grady limping towards me, his face laced with concern.

“Jared! They're all dead, man.” He grunts and then falls to the ground.

“The Irish are dead; Matt and a couple others made it and some didn’t.” He hisses in pain. We are all in need of medical care, but I’m not leaving without her.

“Have you seen her?” I croak, afraid of his response. He shakes his head ‘no’ and looks to the ground. Even though I’m in pain I start running through the grounds, yelling out her name. She never responds. It’s been an hour and still no sign of her. That’s when I drop to my knees and let out a cry. I am not one to show emotions, so when my shoulders start to shake and tears fall down my face I just let it go. The sorrow I feel is immeasurable. I can’t imagine my life without that woman by my side, but it’s looking like I might have to.



## *Erica*

My body hurts when I regain consciousness. Something feels heavy. I gasp when I realize there is a man lying on top of me. His dead body weight is heavy on my heart. I try to push him off, but he’s too heavy. My arm snaps and I let out a sob as the pain radiates up my arm. I must have broken it during the explosion.

I choose to stay quiet under the deceased man just in case the Irish are still roaming the property, searching for me.

My body starts to shake as I feel the effects and realization of the position I’m in. I lie there and wonder if Jared is alive. I don’t know how I’ll survive if he’s dead.

When I hear footsteps my entire body freezes. I keep my eyes closed, staying hidden under the man. I could have sworn I heard a cry. Without a second thought I peek around the side of the man and see that it is in fact Jared walking around frantically, searching for someone.

Instant relief consumes me and I let out half cry/half sob, calling his name. He turns around so fast and his voice echoes in the cold dead air.

“I’m here!” I groan under the man.



“Oh my god! Baby, you’re alive!” He falls to my side, pushing the man off of me. I can’t imagine my horrifying appearance as I feel the blood and smell it everywhere. I hope it’s not mine, but I’m also unsure at the moment because everything hurts like hell.

“Fuck, baby! Is that your blood?” he asks, and that’s when I noticed his bruised, bloody face with tear stains. I reach out to touch him and he relaxes at first. Then he goes into action.

“I am going to carefully pick you up, okay?” I nod and wrap my arms around his neck as he picks me up, gently holding me like a child. My head is starting to hurt and my vision starts to blur.

“Jared, I don’t feel so good.” I complain, and then feel him moving faster to get me out of there.

“Stay with me Erica, please. Don’t close your eyes,” he pleads, but there’s no use because my eyes feel too heavy and my body is too weak. I then sense my body having a mind of its own and I sag into Jared’s embrace, passing out cold.



“Drive! I don’t care how fast. She needs a hospital!” Jared shouts, and I try to say something but nothing comes out.

“Baby, please! I can’t lose you,” he whispers in my ear, and I feel myself drift back into a deep slumber.

The sounds of people talking and rushing around meets my ears. There are a lot of medical terms being flung around and I can’t understand anything.

“Miss, you have been shot and we are bringing you into emergency surgery. We will take good care of you,” a woman soothes. I can’t help but feel panicked, knowing I’ve been shot. Again I find myself drifting off into a peaceful sleep.



There is a beautiful meadow before me. I can smell the fresh grass. Flowers are covering the field in what looks like daisies.

I love daisies. I feel the warm sun on my face and a sudden sense of tranquility covers me like a warm blanket.

There is a figure walking towards me. My heart starts to beat out of my chest. It's my mother, and she is dressed in all white with a beautiful smile on her face. I feel like crying but no tears will come. I smile back at her when she reaches me.

"Mom?" my voice cracks, and she opens her arms for me.

"It's okay, sweetie. I'm at peace. You could come with me, but I think there's someone waiting for you to get back," she whispers.

"Jared," I say, and pull back to meet her eyes.

"Yes, sweetie. That boy sure does love you, honey. I need you to let all this guilt you are holding go. I'm okay now, and I need you to go back and live your life. This is not your time," she explains.

"I miss you so much, Mom." I go to reach for her again, but she starts to fade.

"No, Mom! Please don't leave me yet," I beg, and she gives me a small smile.

"This is all the time the angels will give me, sweetheart. Just know that I will always be with you." Her voice echoes in the meadow and I'm left stunned with my thoughts. This feels so real, and I have no clue what I'm supposed to do next.

## *Jared*

I continue to wait in the waiting room to hear from the doctor. She was rushed into emergency surgery. She had a gunshot wound to her side. I hope that she wasn't damaged internally in any way.

Shannon and Sean have been here waiting with Matt and a few others. I know Matt cares for her deeply. They have become great friends. A couple of my men didn't make it. That shit sits heavy on my shoulders. Even though this is what they signed up for, I will forever remember their bravery.

I pace back and forth, refusing to be looked over even though I'm bruised and bleeding. I can't risk missing the doctor when he comes out.

"Jared, you need to get looked over, man." Sean appears at my side.

"I'm fine," I gruff out, and all I can think of is that my girl in surgery and she may not make it back.

"What if it was Shannon?" I retort, and he holds both hands up.

"All right, man, I get it." He walks away in defeat. I can't help being snappy, but I'm pissed the fuck off I let it get this far. My body is aching and my head is pounding.

"Here, honey," Shannon says, and she hands me a bottle of water and a sandwich.

"Thanks, Shannon." My voice cracks, and I can't seem to get it together. She places her hand gently on my back, giving me a soothing rub.

"She is a survivor; she's the strongest person I know. Erica will come back to you.

Do you want to know how I know this?" I look at her face and it shows that she genuinely believes what she says.

"How?" I stare at her with hopeful eyes.

"Because a love like yours just can't possibly be over when it has barely begun. Jared, I believe that your love is strong enough to conquer all," she whispers, and I see a lone tear slip down her cheek. I give her a nod because that's all I can do. She then gets up and makes her way to Sean. He gives her a hug to comfort her, and that's all I want. I want to hold Erica and feel her warm, healthy body pressed up against mine.



After I drink and eat, I make my way to see Grady. His leg is in a cast. It's broken from the explosion. He was tossed and landed hard on a metal piece that snapped his tibia.

“Hey, just wanted to check on you quick before I go back in the waiting room.” I’m standing at the door and he sits up.

“Any news on her?” he asks.

“Nothing yet; I assume she’s still in surgery.”

“Is Shannon here?” Grady looks up at me. I’ve never heard him ask about a woman before.

“Dude, you feeling that chick?” I almost laugh at the look in his face.

“Nah, man; she’s a cool girl, that’s all,” he says, but I don’t believe him. He likes her, but she’s with someone else.

We talk for a couple of minutes and I make my way back to the waiting room. My heart stalls when I see the doctor talking with Shannon and Sean. Shannon covers her mouth with a sob and I feel dizziness take over. I shake my head and walk over, needing answers. The doctor turns towards me,

“She made it through the surgery okay. Her heart stopped during the procedure, but we were able to revive her. Now it’s just a waiting game until she wakes up... If she wakes up,” he tells me.

“Can I see her?” I query. He nods yes, leading me to her room. When I enter and see her lying there looking so pale, I lose it. My first instinct is to be near her and hold her hand.

She still is the most beautiful girl I have ever laid eyes on.

“Baby,” I whisper, then kiss her hand. Her long dark hair falls over her shoulders. Her long lashes fan on her face. She looks peaceful. There’s no response, no movement whatsoever. So I sit next to her and pray that she wakes up soon, because the thought of losing her sends a stabbing pain through my chest.



*Erica*

I feel something touch my hand, but when I look down there's nothing. I am still in the open meadow. I'm not sure what to do.

I hear my name being called, and it sounds like Jared so I start to look around desperately. My first thought is to run and run fast.

So that's what I do. I run like I'm flying and my feet actually lift in the air. It's a never-ending meadow with no sign of life.

"Jared! I'm here!" I yell, and my voice echoes in the distance.

"Please," I whisper to myself. This is one of the moments when you know you're dreaming but you can't wake up. I have had vivid dreams before, but not like this. There seems to be no way out for me, so I sit on the ground with my head on my knees.

I rock back and forth, saying his name over and over again. All of a sudden I feel a slight pinch of pain on my side. It's tolerable, but I know it's there. I look down and now I'm in a hospital gown. My hands are covered in blood and the meadow that was once before me is no longer. I am in the hospital outside my window. I can see Jared, and he has tears in his eyes while he holds my hand.

Am I dead? What is this?

I start to bang on the window to get his attention for him to realize that I'm here and I don't want to leave him.

He remains glued to my side as I fight my way to him. I'm not going down without a fight. I will make it back to him.

## *Jared*

"Please, baby, wake up. I need you so bad. I love you so much." I sit there waiting for her to wake up. It's been two days and nothing. She hasn't moved or even hinted in the slightest that she was okay. The monitors have been steady and I'm on constant alert. They said her heart stopped during the surgery, so that alone has me staring at the monitors non-stop.

There's a rapid knock on the door. I look over to see Tony walking in, looking just as bad as I do.

"How is she?" he asks with complete sincerity in his tone. His face looks guilty. There is something off about him, but I can't figure out what.

"The same," I reply. Tony has been here with me the past couple of days. I can see that he cares for Erica. I just hope he doesn't feel anything romantic for her, because I can't even fathom that.

How do you not fall in love with her, though? She is pure of heart and the best person I've ever known. She likes to believe there's good in all people. That's what makes her so special. She saw good in my dark soul. She doesn't know this, but she saved me. I never wanted to be better until her.

Tony sits down on the other side of her and holds her hand as well. Here it looks like we are two brothers in love with the same girl. The look in his eyes confirms my suspicions.

"I hope she pulls through, Jared. I really do. She's good for you," he admits, and I just continue to stare at him while his gaze is glued to her face.

"When did you know?" he asks, and I'm not sure what he means.

"When did I know what?" I rasp.

"When did you know you loved her?" he murmurs, and the worry is apparent on my face.

"I know we have had our issues in the past. I would never try anything with her but if you hurt her in any way just know I will be there picking up the pieces.

When she wakes up hold on to this one," he tells me, and then leaves the room.

He can't have her. Over my dead fucking body.



It's been a week and I'm feeling hopeless. She still hasn't woken up and I'm not sure what to do. All of a sudden I feel a light squeeze on my hand. I shoot upright to get a little closer to her. I'm still holding her hand.

"Erica, are you there? Squeeze my hand again, baby." The hope in my voice is obvious.

She does it again and I buzz the nurse right away. Doctors and nurses come barreling in and start to check her over. When the monitors start to beep like crazy, panic seizes my chest.

"Sir, you need to let her go so we can work," the nurse tells me gently, pulling me away from her. I stand there in shock that this is happening. I can't move, as my feet are rooted to the floor. Everyone is yelling codes and terms I don't understand.

Someone grabs me to pull me out of the room. It's Tony, and his face resembles mine now more than ever. We are both afraid we are going to lose her.

"Come on, Erica, fight!" he shouts, and bangs the wall. I just continue to stand there and wait for the news that will forever change my life.

The doctor finally emerges from the room and I stand there, unsure of what's to come.

"She's awake," he says, and he keeps talking but the only thing I registered is 'she's awake'.

I push past him into the room and there she is, looking tired and pale.

"Baby!" I try and calm my voice down, but I'm so happy she's awake.

She gives me a watery smile and I reach over to pull her onto my lap. I hold her in my arms for what seems like forever.

Erica is weeping on my shoulder and I am also crying like a pussy, but I don't care.

Her head comes up to meet mine and we kiss. It's soft and passionate. Her mouth was made to fit mine. A throat is

cleared and we both turn towards the intruder. I huff when I realize it's my brother.

"I'm glad you're okay." He stares at my girl, and I want to knock him out for wanting what's mine.

"Thanks, Tony," she whispers, and he turns to leave. I gently take hold of her face.

"Do you need anything?" I ask.

"Just you, Jared; you are all I will ever need. You brought me back here. Your love saved me," she admits.

"No, you saved me, baby. I love you so fucking much." Then we kiss and cling to each other, and I know in this moment that I am hers and she is mine.

## *Erica*

Days pass and I am officially living with Jared and going back to school. My recovery has been smooth sailing so far, and it looks like I'm in the clear. Jared has been hovering quite a bit, but I don't mind. I can't wait for him to be between my thighs again. I have been so sore that all we have been doing is kissing.

I know Jared and his crew risked everything for me. They still have no clue who died and who survived with the Irish because they rushed me out of the destruction so fast. All that was on their minds was getting me to the hospital. I hope it's over and we can live our lives, but that would be too easy. My father's demise led to a ripple effect of events that keep coming down on my life like a jack hammer.

The Irish mafia wanted what was owed to them, but not without trying to kill us first. The money that they wanted, we took back. When Jared takes his business calls he usually goes in another room, trying to be as quiet as possible. He doesn't like to see me stressed, and the thought of him working makes me anxious. I've asked him numerous times to get out of the club and to start fresh with me, but he just says it's not the right time. Although he has been present more than usual.



My class ends and I'm walking towards my car when I notice his motorcycle pull up. He looks so sexy in his leather jacket, dark jeans, and sunglasses. My lady bits start to do a happy dance just knowing he's mine. I plan on being with Jared forever, but I can't help the constant anxiety I have of the unknown.

Just as I'm about to approach, a shadow emerges in front of me. It's Sam from one of my classes. I sigh, knowing he's probably going to ask me out again.

"Hey, Erica, how are you? I heard what happened and just wanted to check on you." He's another infamous player on campus.

"I'm doing better, thanks." I smile at his kindness even though all I want is to get to my boyfriend. I try to side step him, but he follows.

"Before you leave with him you should know that you can't trust him, Erica. He's not who he says he is." His tone is serious, and now I'm starting to get annoyed.

"What are you talking about?" I raise one eyebrow in question.

Just as he's about to say something, Jared comes storming over.

"You lost?" Jared growls in his face, towering over him by at least three inches.

Sam puts his hands up in defense. "Hey, I was just making conversation. Chill, Knox."

"Get the fuck out of here," Jared grumbles, and Sam just smirks and winks at me.

"I need to claim you as mine before someone else tries to steal you away." He smiles and grabs me by the waist, pulling me flush against his body and plants a not so subtle kiss on my lips.

Every single time his lips meet mine I feel like I'm in another world. There is something about the way your body reacts to the person who you know is meant to be yours. I love

Jared more than anything, and I want this to work, but if he continues down this road with his crew I don't know if we are going to make it. And just the thought of that makes my heart ache. I squeeze my locket and hope to get strength from it.

Jared saved me in more ways than one, but it's over and I want him, all of him. I don't want to share him with anyone, and I don't want him leaving me to do god knows what with his crew. What he's involved in is dangerous, but I'm not exactly sure if he can get out of it.

He knows how I feel, but his response is all the same.

'Babe, you know I can't leave my brothers. I'm locked in for life'.

That's what he tells me, and every time he says that I feel more and more like this isn't going to work.

I want to get married and have a family one day, and I'm not comfortable with his lifestyle anymore. The last thing we need is to bring a child into the mix.

What I'm going to do is finish school and let the years run their course. I will enjoy this beautiful man for as long as I can.



## CHAPTER *Twenty*

*Three Years Later...*

I wake up and groan into my pillow. Jared's strong arms are wrapped around my middle. He pulls my back against his front.

"Where do you think you're going?" he grunts, and I smile.

"You know it's graduation today, right?" I turn around and kiss his cheek.

"I know what day it is, babe, but I want to lie in bed with you instead." His hand travels down my middle and brushes against my center.

My head falls back when he rips my panties off with one tear, and I gasp. I love when he does that.

"I need to be inside you," he growls, and flips me onto my back.

"You always need to be inside me," I whisper, and his gorgeous eyes bore into mine.

"You know how much I love you, right?" I nod yes and try to hold my emotions back. I know how much he cares for me. He still does business with Grady and his crew, and that's all he seems to be doing lately. I let it go while I was finishing up

school, but he knows this is the day where he needs to make his choice, and I'm afraid that his choice is not me.

I think that if he had his way he would have already opted out, but because of his loyalty he stays. I admire how loyal he is, I do, but I need more. I want more.

"Please don't make me choose," he pleads, knowing exactly what I'm thinking.

"Jared, we have been over this. I want to start my career and I want a family someday. Don't you see? I want you more than anything, but I can't live like this. The constant worrying and uncertainty of our future. What if you die? What if we have a family and you leave me? What happens then?" My voice cracks and a few tears fall.

"Shh, baby; please don't do this. I want to give you all of those things, and I will. You just have to trust that I will always come back to you. I would never let anything happen to our family. I want you as my wife and I want to have children with you. Erica, we're soulmates."

"Maybe so, Jared, but I just don't feel right about all of this." I sigh.

"Can you just give me more time?" He starts to trail kisses down my neck and I pull him close. When he is lined up to my center, I know as soon as he enters me I will feel complete again. I always do.

"Are you ready to feel what you do to me? What you mean to me?" he whispers, and then nibbles on my earlobe. I moan in response when he slams into me, with such force I see stars.

"Jared!" I yell, and meet him thrust for thrust.

"Yes! Please don't stop!" I moan in pleasure.

"You're so perfect for me. Every inch of this gorgeous body is mine. Do you understand?"

I respond by kissing him on his lips, hard and aggressive. I love how he dominates me and how he's possessive over me. He makes me feel like I'm the only person who has ever mattered to him. Our tongues collide and our bodies are

moving fast and hard. Every emotion, every move, feels more powerful than ever. We are one and always have been.

He breaks the kiss to lick and massage my breast. I can't help the words that are flying out of my mouth as he worships my body.

He grabs my ass and pulls me up harder and faster, and the feeling of him inside me is deeper and mind-blowing.

I'm so close and I know he is, too.

"Harder!" I shout and he smirks at me, moving faster and claiming my body like he does because the sex is this good every time.

"Fuck, you feel so good, baby. That's right, tighten around me. Come on, beautiful, I know you can." His veins bulge in his neck and arms, and he looks and feels so strong. His words make me come undone, and I pulsate around him in the most beautiful way. He soon follows me in my release.

"Shit! Ah, yes, fuck!" he growls, and lets go. We are both panting and out of breath from what we just experienced. The thought of never having him in my life makes me sick. I just don't know how much longer I can go on like this.



Graduation was bittersweet. The day flew by and I can't believe it's been four years without my mother. I wish she was here today to see me get my degree. I hope she is looking down on me somewhere and is proud of me.

Jared takes me to a nice restaurant after the ceremony and now we are walking hand in hand to his bike. He spins me around, planting his lips on mine as we lean on his bike. The love I feel for this man is indescribable. I want to spend the rest of my life with him. I'm just scared.

His phone rings during our heavy make out session and I groan.

"Baby, I have to take this." He holds up a finger then kisses my cheek. I nod in understanding, but I know he can see

my face and my real feelings shining through.

A couple of minutes later he walks back over to me and grabs my hand. I already know what he's going to say.

"Really, Jared? You can't give it a rest for one fucking night?" My voice sounds more harsh than I meant, but I'm pissed.

"Baby, you don't understand." I rip my hand away.

"You know what? I do understand. I understand that your crew means more to you than me!" I cry.

"Fuck this." I spin around and start walking away from him. He gently grabs my arm and I yank back. "Don't touch me right now. Go and do whatever it is that you do and leave me the fuck out of it."

"Erica, please don't do this, baby. I fucking need to do this."

"You're being selfish, Jared." I point my finger at his chest as the tears stream down my face. His shoulders sag in defeat, and I walk away with my head held high and my heart in pieces.



## **CHAPTER** *Twenty-One*

### *Feeling off*

I walk and I walk for what seems like ages. My legs hurt and my eyes burn from crying. It's dark out now, and Jared has been blowing up my phone non-stop. I'm not feeling like myself. I gave him four years and he promised me he would try and get out.

My emotions have been heightened lately and I just feel off. Shannon texted me as well and I responded, letting her know I'm okay and just want to be alone. There really is nowhere else for me to go, because I have been living with Jared for the past three years.

I decide to sit on the park bench and watch the ducks swim in the lake with not a care in the world. I watch the birds fly above me as the sun is beginning to set, and I wish in that moment that I was a bird and I could fly away.

My stomach starts to growl. I'm hungry again. I have been hungry more lately, too. Now that I'm thinking of it, I haven't had my period in a while.

I shoot up off the bench and start breathing heavily. Panic starts to grip my throat as I start to hyperventilate.

“Miss? Miss, are you okay?” I hear, and then my vision starts to blur. Moments later I feel myself falling fast down into the darkness.



My eyes feel heavy. When I open them a man is staring at me, yelling into his phone. He hangs up and helps me back to the bench. “I called the EMTs; they are on the way.” He then comes into focus and I see it’s Tony, Jared’s brother.

“Erica, what happened? Do you want me to call Jared?” he asks.

“No, please don’t. I’m fine. Really.” He doesn’t seem convinced.

“What are you doing here anyway?” I query, and he gives me one of his signature smirks. He’s sweaty and dressed in workout clothes.

“I was jogging by when I noticed you sitting there, and then I saw you start to panic.”

Tony and Jared have had a better relationship over the past three years. He comes over every now and then, and I can see the looks that he gives me. I know he cares for me, but I love Jared and I can’t get mixed up in all of that. Tony has been a good friend to me, and from the stories that Jared told me he has changed tremendously.

He gives me a look of pity, and I hate that.

“What’s wrong, Erica? You can tell me.” I open my mouth to speak, but that’s when we hear the sirens. I stop what I am about to say as tears spring to my eyes.

“Come here.” He pulls me in for a hug. He’s sweaty and sticky, but I don’t care because I feel comforted in this moment. Tony is usually there when I need him the most. This seems to be an ongoing thing with us.

He grabs my face, searching my eyes for something.

“Did he hurt you?” he growls.



“Not in the physical way,” I whisper, feeling defeated as the EMTs start to look me over. Tony stays by me the entire time. I tell them I’m fine and they plead with me to go and get checked but I refuse.

“I’ll take her home and take care of her,” he tells the EMTs. They end up leaving and it’s just the two of us again.

“Come on; we can walk the rest of the way to my house and I’ll drive you home,” he says, and I follow. We end up at his condo.

“Take a seat and make yourself comfortable. Do you need anything?”

“I’ll take a water.” When he comes back over and hands me the glass he leans down, looks me in the eyes, and says the one thing I needed to hear.

“Erica, you can tell me anything. I’m here for you no matter what. I know how in love you two are, I see it, but if you need anything all you need to do is ask and it’s yours.”

Nervous butterflies swarm in my stomach. I know he cares, but does he have to be so good-looking?

“I do need a favor, but you can’t tell Jared.” My face turns serious.

“What is it?” He grabs my hand in a soothing gesture.

“I need you to buy me a pregnancy test.” The moment those words leave my mouth his face changes.

“Fuck,” he murmurs. He stands up and rubs his neck. I can see inner turmoil clear on his face. He seems unhappy with me. He paces back and forth, and I’m sure I look like a deer in headlights.

“What is it?” I start to get anxious by his reaction, because I need a friend right now and not to be judged.

“I just need a shower and then I’ll go for you.” I watch him walk down the hallway and close the door. He seems a little disappointed, and I don’t blame him. I basically just put him in an awkward situation.

Tony doesn't live the life that Jared does. He chose not to follow in his footsteps, and in some way I admire that in him. Whatever woman comes along will be lucky enough to be with Tony and live a normal life. He's happy working on cars and living his life, drama free. There's no illegal activity that he's involved in, and as much as I love Jared with all my heart I envy Tony and the life he chose.

Thinking back to possibly being pregnant, this could go either way when it comes to how Jared will react. I don't even know how I feel about bringing a child into this life.

This is my fault. I should have been more careful. I'm tired so I lie down on the couch, hoping I will be able to rest my eyes for the time being.



I feel a hand stroke my cheek, and when I open my eyes I see Jared.

“Hey,” he whispers. My first instinct is to sigh in relief, because I do want him here but I don't. I'm so confused and I feel so lost.

My head shoots over to Tony, who has his arms crossed, leaning on the wall.

“You told him?” I rasp, and he shakes his head no.

“He told me what happened and that he found you at the park. What the hell were you thinking? Something could have happened to you.” I roll my eyes.

“I'm fine. I just need to rest. Can you take me home now?” He nods yes, walking us to the door. He shakes his brother's hand and pats him on the back. Tony just stares at me and narrows his eyes, like he's upset with me.

“Wait,” I say, and turn back around.

“Who the fuck do you think you are? You knew how vulnerable I was and yet you couldn't just let me be. I said that to you, thinking you could actually help me,” I whisper that last part.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jared comes between us. Tony is grinding his jaw.

“So much for friendship, huh?” I turn and walk away, leaving Tony to dwell on that. How fucking dare he call Jared, like I’m a problem he needs to take care of. He could have just helped me out by being there as a friend. All I needed was someone other than Jared right now. I know that makes me a selfish person, but I just need time to process everything.

“You need to tell him or I will,” Tony says, and I clench my fists.

“Tell me what?” Jared’s face turns lethal.

“Babe, it’s not what you think,” I plead. He starts to turn towards Tony, ready to kick his ass.

“This has nothing to do with him. Now can we go?” I gently grab his handsome face and he softens.

“Babe, just tell me what’s wrong.”

“I think I may be pregnant.” The smile on his face can only be described as relief.

“Babe,” he whispers then grabs me, pulling my body against his. When his lips crash against mine my entire world shifts. It’s only us as we share a moment I will never forget.

“This is incredible.” He rests his head on mine.

“Jared, we need to talk in private about this.” I can’t even look at Tony, as I feel like he betrayed me in some way.

I know he probably felt like he had to call Jared, and I know I shouldn’t be mad about that but I am.



The ride back to our home is quiet. He picked me up in his truck instead of his motorcycle. Jared went in to buy a pregnancy test while I waited in the car.

He grabs my hand and kisses the back while using the other hand to steer. He is wearing a backwards hat and he knows how much I love him in a hat. I can’t resist him like

ever. I close my legs, feeling excited yet confused. My hormones are all over the place, which is another indication I could be pregnant.

Do we really want to bring a child into this world, when I'm not even certain he or she will be safe?

What I do know is that I will protect this baby with everything I am, even if that means I leave him. I will not subject our baby to this lifestyle.

"I know what you're thinking, and I don't blame you. Erica, you have to know that I will keep you both safe no matter what." I can't help the tears that start to run down my face again.

"Baby, don't cry," he whispers, and I turn towards the window.

When we pull up to our place we make our way inside. I go straight to the bathroom.

I pee on the stick and wait patiently. Jared knocks on the door and I let him inside. We stand side by side, waiting for our future to change.



## **CHAPTER** *Twenty-Two*

### *Don't Let Go*

“You read it, please,” He nods. When I see his face fall I can’t decipher what he’s upset about.

“It’s negative,” he says in frustration.

“It is?” I grab the stick and my hands start shaking. I can’t tell whether I’m relieved or disappointed right now.

“You wanted a baby?” I look him in his gorgeous eyes and he nods yes.

“But I want you more, and now that I know you’re not pregnant it’s only a matter of time before you actually leave me.” He walks out of the bathroom and I follow him.

“Jared, you can’t possibly think that the life you live is normal or safe in any way. I want you to tell Grady and your crew it’s over. I want you to choose me, because one day this will be positive and I will not allow my child to be raised around crime.” I raise my voice to the point it cracks, and he brings his hands to his head. When he starts to walk towards me I back up against the wall. Jared hovers over me, pressing his firm body up against mine.

When he grabs my hand and pulls them above my head he grinds his body up against mine, I whimper.

“You will not leave me. If you do I will find you and drag your ass back here, because you belong to me.” The way he’s dominating my body and talking to me is turning me the fuck on, and I feel in that moment I may be a bit twisted but I don’t care.

Our mouths are a mess of sloppy euphoric kisses that have my legs shaking with need and want.

“Jared, please,” I beg, not exactly sure what I’m begging for.

He then rips my yoga pants and underwear clear off me, unsnapping my bra and exposing my breasts. His hooded eyes trail down my body with a look of primal infatuation.

“You want me to touch this gorgeous body?” I nod ecstatically.

His lips travel all the way down my stomach while he massages my breasts.

“Put your legs on my shoulders now.” I do as he says, feeling completely exposed while he’s fully clothed.

His head meets my center, and the first lick to my seam has me shouting to the heavens.

“Jared! Oh shit, don’t stop!” I whimper, and he does stop looking up at me.

“Are you going to leave me, Erica?” He is not going to pleasure me if I say yes.

“No, I’m not,” I whisper, and he grunts. Devouring me like I’m his dessert. Every lick, suck, pull, is pushing me over the edge. When he enters two fingers, all rational thoughts are out the window when I let go and my head spins into a beautiful euphoric state.

“You taste so fucking good. Come here,” he growls, and tosses me onto our bed.

He flips me over to my stomach and plunges deep inside me. My voice is foreign to me as he takes what’s his.

“Mine,” he grunts over and over again.

“Yes!” I shout, loving how he’s taking me and claiming me as his.

He slams over and over into me, and I feel he’s close. He leans down, grabs each breast and pulls my nipples, and we both let go together. I’m left feeling sated and wanted, like I always do when I’m with this man.



The next morning is like any other morning, only I’m feeling bad about Tony. I should have never put him in that situation, when I know he’s only trying to re-build a relationship with his brother. I will make time today to reach out to him and apologize.

I may not be pregnant, but I sure as hell don’t feel like myself. Maybe it’s the stress of the unknown?

Tonight there is a party at the bar.

These parties that the guys have always leave me feeling anxious. I think all the time how another woman may be able to handle this lifestyle better than I can. I hate to think that Jared will wake up and realize that same thing. There have been many times I’ve had to intervene in relation to a woman trying to steal my man, and it’s tiring.

I’m feeling insecure and confused lately. I need more than this life can give, but I can’t live without Jared. He is the reason I’m still here, in all honesty.



The day flew by and I’m getting ready to meet Jared at the bar. He had some business to attend to, so he asked Sean and Shannon to pick me up. They have been together for years now, and I love having them around.

I’m wearing tight fitted jeans and a tight black tank top with the words ‘Mind your business’ on display. My hair is in soft waves and I have minimal makeup on, just the way my man likes me.

“Hey, chica! How are you, girl?” Shannon hops out of the car to greet me. I hug her and take in her happiness for a moment.

“Hey, Sean, thanks for picking me up.”

“No problem. The party is in full swing already.” He laughs and grabs his girlfriend’s hand, and I smile. I’m genuinely so happy for them. They have been through so much together.

We have a light conversation on the way. When we pull up I rush inside, looking forward to seeing Jared because it’s been all day since I’ve seen him.

“I’ll meet you guys later.” I head to the back of the bar. Girls are grinding on men and each other, and it’s so loud in here. I come to a stop when I hear his voice. He must be talking to Grady.

“I just hate leaving her right now. You don’t understand. She’s tired of this life and wants more, and I need to give that to her,” Jared says, and my stomach drops to my toes. I know I shouldn’t be eavesdropping, but I can’t help it.

“Prez, you can’t just quit. This isn’t something you just walk away from. This is brotherhood, and I shouldn’t even have to tell you that.”

“Fuck, man, you don’t think I know that? I just want both, but she’s very persistent about walking away.” Jared sighs, and my stomach bottoms out.

“She either has to accept you for who you are, or you need to get rid of her and move on. I love her, she’s a great girl, but maybe she’s not meant for this life.” Grady’s voice echoes in my ears, and just hearing what he thinks has my heart pounding and my ears ringing.

What’s worse is there is no response from Jared. I peek inside and choose to make myself known. Jared is contemplating what Grady just said. He didn’t even flinch at his words.

Grady’s eyes widen when he sees me in the doorway and Jared’s head spins fast towards me.



“Erica.” I hold my hand up to stop him and walk towards Grady. I place my palms on his chair and lean in so he can hear me.

“Listen, you have no right to judge me and what I want or need. What you’re doing is illegal and dangerous. So what if I want better for him?” I wave my hand towards Jared.

“I mean no disrespect but we have business to attend to, and you’re distracting,” Grady grunts.

“Baby, please don’t.” Jared comes up behind me.

“Don’t fucking touch me right now!” I shout, and turn back to Grady.

“You want me gone? Fine. I’m gone, then. Have a nice fucking life, you two.” I glare at the two of them.

“Erica, don’t you dare walk out of here,” Jared intones.

“Let her go, Jared; she’s not made for this life.”

“Fuck you, Grady,” I say, and storm out with Jared hot on my heels.

“Erica, stop!” He shouts over the music and follows me outside.

I fall on my knees when a sob catches my throat. Jared wraps his arms around my waist and I push back, landing on my ass. His face is filled with remorse while I sob uncontrollably on the ground.

He kneels before me and I see his eyes glistening. “Baby, please don’t make me choose. I have work to do that you don’t understand. It’s private business I can’t discuss, but you have to trust me that I’ll be okay and always come back to you.”

“Jared, I love you so much; please, I need you in my life. I just want you out. Don’t you see that you could be more than this?” I wave towards the bar and stand. He follows.

I gulp when he doesn’t answer and then stand up, turning around to walk away.

“You can’t be out here alone.” I spin around.

“Why not? What is it that you’re hiding from me now?” I croak.

“Now that the Italians and Irish are out we have been taking up all their business for years, and it’s been stressful to say the least. We were left with a mess of shit to clean up. You need to keep quiet when I tell you things. I’m breaking all the rules as it is.”

“So you are now involved even more than before. When is this going to end? Isn’t there something else you can do?”

“This is all I know, baby. You have to understand that I was made for this life, and I will protect you with everything I am.”

“Am I in danger again? Are we in danger?” I ask him, afraid of his response.

“There was a threat against our club late last night, so that’s why I want you here where it’s safe. I need you to come inside and stay with me at all times.”

“Jared, you have got to be kidding me,” I groan.

“Listen, we have it under control. Grady made some calls, but for now it’s just a waiting game. Everything is a mess and there are deals that have to be sealed, so I need you to trust me.”

“This is not the life I want,” I explain.

“I’m sorry it’s not what you want, but this is who I am so you either deal with it or not.” His tone turns frustrated and angry.

“Fuck this.” I turn around, storming off into the woods.

“Stop!” he shouts, but I caught him off guard when I fled. I just want to be alone and away from them all.

I run as fast as my feet will carry me as I hear him calling my name in the still forest.

I plop down near a tree and quietly sit there, hiding. I just want him to leave me alone so I can think. This is all too much for me. The almost pregnancy, hearing him and Grady talk

about me, and then knowing he's way in over his head with the mafia.

"Erica!" he shouts, and I squeeze my eyes shut, listening to his frantic voice. The last thing I want to do is hurt him, but I have to do what's right for me for once and that's leaving.



## *Jared*

Where the fuck is she? I'm running through the woods, scared out of my mind because I can't find her. She doesn't realize that her life could be in danger. If anyone is seeking revenge against us right now they will ultimately go to our women, knowing that's where it will hurt us the most. I know I should get out of this, and what she doesn't know is that I plan on it after this all blows over. But I would have to disappear because you can't just up and leave the mafia. You are made and that's it. There is no way out but death, and I plan on living. I will take my girl and get the fuck out of here eventually, but I just have to make it look like I'm all in. And if that's making it look like I want to stay, then that's what I'll do. The only real way is to fake my death, and I know that.

Grady and the guys need to think I'll never leave no matter what. I wish Grady would just take over for me, but that's not how this works. My loyalty is to them. I took an oath, but in reality my loyalty lies with her always.

It's been a good hour since she ran as I make my way back to the bar. I called her numerous times. I hope she just needs to cool off. I know now I have to be honest with her. I will tell her my plan to leave when I see her, but I have to straighten some business out first. I just hope I get to explain everything before she leaves.



## **CHAPTER** *Twenty-Three*

### *Stay*

#### *Erica*

I rush back to our house and hope I can get my things before he comes back. I will leave him a note, explaining that I need some time. Maybe a week or even a month. I will tell the diner that I work at part time and take what I have saved with me. This may not be my smartest move, but it's something. I need to figure out who I am and what I want. I have no idea who I am without Jared anymore. I pray that he understands, and that he will wait for me. It's imperative that I go and clear my head.

I'm almost packed, when I hear the door open and close.

"Shit," I whisper.

I quietly make my way to the living area, then something at the corner of my eye has me stopping short.

It's a man, and he's in all black. That's not Jared, and I freeze on the spot. I should have set the alarm like I always do but I was in a rush, leaving the door open.

I walk backwards and knock against the wall. The noise startles me, which makes the man whip his head in my

direction. He can see me through the ski mask he is wearing. His head tilts to the side when he notices me, and I am internally freaking the fuck out.

When he walks closer I make a run for it.

“Shit!” I panic, locking myself back in my bedroom.

My hands start to tremble as I pull my phone out. I call Jared, knowing the police are not an option with these people.

He answers on the first ring.

“Babe! Where are you?” he yells, and I start shaking more.

*Bang, bang, bang!* The man is now banging on the door, so I run into the bathroom and lock it.

“Jared! There is a man in our house and he saw me!” I shout-whisper. “Jared, I’m scared,” I cry, and I hear him shuffling and his bike engine roar.

“Baby, I’m on the way. Stay on the phone with me. Grab anything that’s sharp, anything that you can use if he breaks in.” I start scurrying around in the bathroom. We had moved out of his condo last year, so our house is in a secluded area and there is no one to yell for.

I find tweezers and a razor. “Fuck, Jared! He’s breaking down the door!” I shout. I’m seriously starting to panic as I hear the roar of his engine speed up.

“Open this fucking door, you bitch, or I’ll break it down myself!” the man shouts.

“Baby, if he takes you I need you to shout out everything you see. Every single detail of him. If he has a mask you take it off and yell his features to me. Do you understand?” I nod, even though he can’t see me.

“Erica?”

“Yes, I heard you,” I whisper in defeat, knowing it’s only a matter of time before he makes it in here.

As he bangs and pounds on the door, I see it start to crack. I’m crying so hard right now.

“Baby, you have to be strong! I’m almost there!” I can’t even speak. I drop the phone while I can still hear him shouting my name.

The door splits open and in comes this huge beast of a man.

He comes at me and I rip his hood off. “Black hair! Brown eyes! Skull tattoo on neck!” I’m shouting what I see as he fights me, grabbing me and tossing my body around.. He punches me in my head and I fall to the floor. I feel him lift me over his shoulder and storm out of our house. I’m thrown into the back of a van, when I hear Jared’s motorcycle pulling up.

“I grabbed the girl because he wasn’t home, so move!” the man barks at someone else. My head is so dizzy I can’t see straight.

“Fuck, he’s gaining on us!” another man yells.

Gunshots are fired and I feel my body being tossed around. Finally my head clears, but I pretend I’m out. The man is shooting out the back door and I see Jared’s motorcycle speeding towards us, gun in hand. I then make my move.

Rolling over and up, I knock the gun out of his hand. It goes flying out the back of the van.

“You bitch!” He slaps me in the face and I fall backwards, but not all the way. I lift my foot and kick him right in the dick. He falls down and screams in pain. I then grab his head and slam it into my knee. He groans, falling over. I’ve learned some self-defense moves over the years.

Jared speeds up and his hand comes out to grab me.

“Grab my hand, baby!” he yells through the craziness.

The man who is driving turns the wheel fast, causing us both to lose each other and for Jared to skid off the road. I scream his name, and for some stupid reason I jump out of the van. My ankle snaps as I roll off the cement and down a grassy area off the highway.

I shout out in pain and call Jared’s name, hoping he’s okay. The van screeches to a stop.

“Fuck, I can’t move,” I groan.

So I decide to roll as fast as I can, leaves and branches catching my hair. I make a decision to bury myself in the leaves, trying to stay as still as I can and well hidden.

“I don’t know where the fuck they went!” The two men bicker back and forth while I try to control my breathing.

Two shots are fired and I can’t help it when my body jumps.

“Erica? It’s safe, baby, if you’re out here.” I hear the love of my life and sigh.

“Jared!” I try and yell his name as loud as I can.

I hear him running towards my voice and I sit up. “Over here!” When he sees me I notice a gun in his hand, and the most menacing look I’ve ever seen on his face. This is the man I love. He may be a killer, but I still love him nonetheless.

“You need to come with me back to the bar and stay where we can keep an eye on you. I need you safe, and I promise you when the time comes I’m out. You mean more to me than anything else.” His confession leaves me speechless, and so I just nod as he lifts me up like a child and holds me close.

The ride to the bar is short. Before we go in, he grabs my hand and kisses the back.

“You are my life, baby. Do not run away from me again.” The look in his eyes scare me.

“I don’t want to be here, Jared. I want to go somewhere else. I know Grady doesn’t want me here. What the hell are you guys involved in now?”

“It’s not that; he just wants your loyalty. He needs me to help end this war, and then after I will get the fuck out. You just need to trust me and be patient. If I make Grady the boss I may be able to get the fuck out of this.”

“Don’t you think I’ve been patient enough? Don’t you think I deserve more than this?” I query.

“Of course I fucking do. This is life or death in my world, and I have to make sure we are set up and secure before I get out. The only way out is death, baby.” My lip trembles as he speaks.

“Look, just leave it to me and follow my lead.”

“I was going to leave you,” I whisper, and I see him grind his jaw.

“Are you fucking serious?” His eyes blaze and then he storms away from me. He doesn’t enter the building, he just walks around to the side. He punches the building and that’s when I hobble over to him, because I’m in so much pain. Still I try to grab his hand, but he flinches.

“You were going to just fucking leave?” My body starts to shake with worry. Maybe I went too far and shouldn’t have mentioned that little detail.

“I’m not pregnant, and it’s not like I was going to take your child away from you,” I say.

“I bet you would have, though. You know what? I can’t even look at you right now.” My heart feels like it’s being squeezed to death.

I probably should have just kept my mouth shut.

“Good, because I can’t even look at you either.” I start to move to the bar but have to lean against the wall to steady myself. I feel him move towards me but I push him away. When I make my way in the bar it is in full swing, so I hop as quickly as I can to one of the vacant rooms and slam the door.

I collapse on the floor, leaning my tired body against the door and rubbing my swollen ankle.

A light knock and soft voice echo through the door, and I recognize it as Shannon’s.

“Erica, please open up; I can see that you’re hurt.” My voice cracks when I say ‘hold on a sec’.

I scurry over and reach up to the door handle, opening it up for her as I still sit on the floor.



“Shit, what the hell happened to you?” She rushes in, taking a look at my ankle that is now turning colors.

“You need my help, but first we need to get you on the bed.”

“I can’t.” I break into a full-blown sobbing fit. I’m hurt and in pain in more ways than one.

“I’ll go get Jared to help.”

“No, please; anyone else but him.” She nods in understanding.

“Okay, honey, I’ll be right back.” Moments later Grady comes walking in. He gives me a look of pity and I hate it.

“Come on, darlin’.” He lifts me up and places me gently on the bed.

“Thank you,” I whisper, even though I am still mad at him.

“Look, I’m sorry about what I said.” He sighs and I just nod. Grady is a good guy and I know he cares about Jared’s well-being and mine, but maybe he’s right. Maybe I’m not meant for this life.

“Just give him time, Erica. He will come around.” A lone tear escapes my eye. He leaves, knowing I need to be alone.

“Okay, let’s check out your ankle.” She gets me ice and elevates my foot as I stare out the window. I’m not sure how much time has passed, but she’s no longer in here and that’s when I feel myself drift to sleep.



## **CHAPTER** *Twenty-Four*

### *Not safe*

I wake up to a throbbing pain in my ankle. I hear something, and when I look up Jared is sitting up in a chair across the room. He comes over to me and sits at the corner of my bed.

“What do you need?” he asks, sorrow still on his face.

“My painkillers the doc gave me, please.” He grabs them and some water. I chug them back as he elevates my foot and grabs some more ice.

“Thank you.” He can’t even look me in the eye.

“Are we going to talk about this?” I ask him, and he sighs.

“I guess you were right in a way. I would be a shit father figure for our child.” His admission stuns me so I sit up and stare at him, unbelieving. Many times we have had a discussion about having kids. We both want a family, but I’m not okay with bringing a child into this life.

“Don’t you dare say that, Jared. That is not at all what I meant and you know it.”

“Well, either way I would have ultimately put his or her life in danger at some point, right?”

“I’m only thinking about the baby. If I was indeed pregnant then the baby would come first.”

“As you should,” he mumbles, and starts to make his way to the door.

“Someone will be outside your door at all times. Just shout if you need anything.”

“Jared, wait,” I say, and he stops but doesn’t turn around.

“I just want it all to stop,” I tell him, hoping he understands.

“I know, and I can’t believe it took me this long to realize I really am no good for you.” He walks out before I can respond.



It’s been days and Jared has been MIA. Everyone has been great, catering to my every need, but I’m over it. I asked Sean and Shannon to get some of my things from my place.

I’m not exactly sure where Jared and I stand, and no one seems to know where he is. Either that or they are just refusing to tell me.

My ankle is healing fine and I can semi walk on it. They provided me with one crutch.

I wobble my way out to the front of the bar. It’s early morning. Grady is drinking coffee at a nearby table.

“Can you please take me back to my place? I want to go home.”

“No can do. You are not safe, so therefore you stay here until the situation is handled.”

“This is bullshit. Where the hell is he?” I demand.

“He’s on a mission. He will be back in a couple days. Now get back in your room and rest,” he orders and I huff out an exasperated sigh.

“I’m going outside to get some air.” I move as quick as I can when one of his men follows me out. His name is Pete, and he’s been really helpful, but I’m so done being hovered over.

“Pete, can you please just let me be?” My voice cracks.

“I will be over here if you need anything.” He proceeds to move about twenty feet away. I roll my eyes and just sit there, thinking about my situation. How on earth did I make it this far?

I scroll through my phone and stop at Tony’s number, and then remember him running to his brother the last time I needed his help. I place my phone down and close my eyes. I take deep relaxing breaths while clearing my head.

I have a feeling that Jared and I will never be able to move past this. He probably doesn’t trust me, and I can’t fault him for that. I was going to run. I want to say that I wouldn’t do it if I was pregnant, now that I know he knows, but I would be lying. I already know I would do whatever I have to.



Hours go by and I haven’t moved from this chair outside. I feel like I’m in a dream. I miss Jared, I really do, but I’m not so sure I can trust him anymore. He just left without a word and I’m pissed. I tried calling him numerous times, and yet no answer. No one will tell me anything, and I’m getting frustrated.

“Erica, you’re shivering; let’s get you inside.” Pete kneels in front of me. I shake my head no and he sighs in defeat. He’s been trying to get me to move but I refuse to abide by their rules any longer.

He dials a number, walking away. I know he’s calling Jared.

“Pete, is it him?” I shout over to him and he holds up a finger. When he comes back over he hands me the phone.

I snatch the phone out of his hand.

“You can answer him but not me?” I yell, furious.

“Erica, get the fuck inside and stop it. We are trying to keep you safe, but we can’t do that when you’re being so stubborn.” I hear him inhale.

“Baby, please just do as you’re told for once.” His voice softens.

“You were just going to leave my calls unanswered? You know what, Jared? I’m done playing these games with you,” I cry out and toss the phone over to Pete.

“Don’t follow me,” I say with anger in my voice.

That night I cry myself to sleep again, feeling lonely and uncertain about where my life is heading.



The next morning I wake up to shouting. Matt, Pete, Grady, and a couple others are yelling about god knows what when I make myself known.

“Can you all shut the hell up? You sound like a bunch of bitches,” I grumble, pouring myself a cup of coffee. I hear a couple of laughs as they part ways but Matt is the one who makes his way over to me.

“Rough night?” He smirks.

“Rough month,” I groan.

“You look like you’ve been crying. Let’s talk.” I hold my hand up.

“I’m done with the talking. I just want to go home already.”

“He’ll be back today, so you will have your wish.” He laughs, and I give him a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes

“Hey, it’s all going to be okay. Jared loves you. You guys will get through this,” he tries to reassure me.

“I’m not so sure if there’s any hope for us anymore.”

“Sure there is. You two are the ones who will make it. I know it.” He squeezes my shoulder once before leaving my side.

I decide to text Shannon and see how she’s doing. It’s a regular conversation like always. She and Sean are happy, and that makes me happy. Shannon found peace, and I always tell her things are great because the last thing I want is to worry her. She promises we will get together for dinner soon, so that’s something I can look forward to.

I’m tempted to ask her if I can crash at her place, but decide to wait until I hear from Jared.

I decide to take a nap to help the time go by. I make my way back to the guest room. I’m still sore, so it feels good to lie down. As soon as my head hits the pillow I’m out.



Hard, strong hands caress my back. My body starts to move the rhythm of the hands. I know it’s Jared; I can smell his clean sexy scent that envelops my senses. No matter what, I succumb to his touch every time. The way his body makes my body respond is addicting. Just like the first time we were together, my body reacted to his in such a way I was transformed into a different person.

We were made for each other. I know that.

“Please,” I whisper and he grunts, moving his hard length into my backside. I feel his boxers are already off and he’s ready for me. I’m only wearing my black lace thong so it’s easy for him to slip inside me. In one small thrust he’s there, and we both moan in relief. Finally I can feel all of him. It’s been days since we’ve been intimate, and I missed his touch. I will never tire of the feel of him.

He starts to move in and out, and I can’t help the sounds escaping my mouth. He hisses and my head falls back against his shoulder.

His hands massage my breast as he thrusts faster. All you can hear are the sounds of our bodies slapping together and

our moans of pleasure.

“You feel me, baby? Do you feel how much I fucking love you?” He bites down on my shoulder and then soothes his mark with a kiss.

“Yes!” I shout over and over again as he moves faster, and I pulsate around him so hard I see stars. He soon follows me in my release.

“Fuck!” he grunts, and squeezes me tighter against him. Our hearts are pounding out of our chests. We are one, just like my locket says.



Minutes pass as we lie there, face to face. It's so sexy to see this big, tattooed man go all soft for me. His expression says it all. He loves me with everything he is, and I him.

No words are needed. He brushes my hair over my shoulder and scoots closer, molding our bodies together. He plants a soft kiss on my shoulder and kisses a trail to my ear. I shiver in response as he makes his way down to my breasts.

“You want more, baby?” I nod yes as he explores my needy body with his mouth.

His full lips kiss their way to my belly, then my pelvic bone, and onto my needy center.

I gasp when he kisses me exactly where I need him. “Yes, Jared, right there.” I throw my head back and moan.

He devours me and I'm loving every minute. Jared is eating me like I'm his favorite dessert and I just about combust, when he adds pressure to my center. “Jared!” I yell, and my legs start to shake.

“Baby, you taste so fucking sweet.” In one final lick I'm falling down into a shattered abyss of ecstasy.



## **CHAPTER** *Twenty-Five*

### *Something Better*

We lie in bed all afternoon and evening. My stomach growls loudly and he laughs.

“Hungry, baby?” He smirks and pulls me in for a hug as we lie side to side, still naked from today’s events.

I’m sore, but in a good way. We made love all day long and I feel amazing. I think we are starting a new chapter now that Jared and I are on the same page.

“I promised you I was going to take care of you, Erica, and I will keep that promise until the day I die.” A lone tear falls down my cheek.

“Don’t cry, baby; I swear I will do whatever I have to do to make you happy.” I just nod my head yes because it’s hard for me to answer when emotion clogs my throat.

“I will go get some food and bring it back.”

“Okay.” I smile and watch him dress. He’s so damn sexy.

“On second thought, why don’t you come back to bed.” I throw the sheet off of my body and his eyes bulge at the sight of my naked form.



I laugh when he practically jumps onto the bed and peppers my face with kisses.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispers while he looks into my eyes. I stop laughing and move my lips to his. This kiss is more sensual and passionate. I show him in this one kiss that I am his, now and forever.



The days pass by and I am going stir crazy. He won't tell me the severity of our situation, but I can see he's on edge. Pete has also been acting differently towards me, and when I mentioned it to Jared, he just shrugged it off and said they were stressed about the Irish. Pete was a prospect and has been finally made. Since then I've noticed an odd change in him.

I guess whoever is left in the Irish mafia is out for blood. Jared and his crew made the mistake when they killed off half of the Irish and took the rest of their business.

Jared wants out and for us to start over, and I trust him.

I know what it feels like without him, and I can't live that way again ever.

“Hey, babe.” I walk outside to see Jared cleaning his bike.

“Hey, beautiful.” He smiles and I walk towards him to plant a kiss on his lips. He wraps his strong arms around me as I lean into him.

“Can we go for a ride?” I whine, and he gives me a sexy smirk. “I'm so bored.”

“I don't know, baby, but you're safer here,” he tells me, and I huff.

“I hate being cooped up at this bar. How much longer?” I query, and I can see his features soften.

“Maybe a quick ride,” he obliges and I jump up on him, wrapping my legs around his middle. Jared laughs as I pepper his handsome face with kisses.

“I love you, Jared. I love you more than anything,” I admit.

“Ditto, baby. Now get your sexy ass on my bike,” he commands.

When he revs the engine the vibrations send my heart pumping with adrenaline. Riding on his bike with him is like nothing I have ever experienced before.

“Hold on tight, gorgeous!” I do as he says.

We ride for a while and finally pull up to a gorgeous waterfall that is hidden in the woods off of a long dirt road.

He helps me off the bike and I gasp at the sensational view.

“Jared, this is beautiful.” He takes my hand to walk me close to the cliff.

“I come here sometimes to think,” he acknowledges.

“It’s gorgeous; why haven’t I heard about this place?” I ask, and he just shrugs.

“My brother and I use to come here as kids and fish with my dad. It seems like forever ago when things were simple and life was easy.”

“I know how you feel. I can still remember every bit of my former life in California. I miss it sometimes; miss my mom, too.”

Jared pulls me to his side.

“Baby, you will always have me and we will always have this place. You are my life, Erica, and always will be.” He looks me in the eyes, and all thoughts of anything else fly out the window. Our lips meet and our hands roam each other’s bodies, searching for something. I don’t know what, but I need him closer.

In the heat of the kiss we hear the crunch of leaves. As we break apart and turn towards the distraction, we hear it again.

Jared takes his gun out of his waistband and pulls me behind him. I know to keep quiet when he signals for me to be

silent. Fear is apparent on my face, I'm sure, and my body starts to tremble.

We carefully inch away from the noise and to his bike.

He's trying to get us out of here, but someone has other plans.

Two masked men with rifles appear before us. Jared cocks his gun.

"Who the fuck are you?" Jared stills. The men stay silent as they point their weapons at our heads. They walk closer and we inch further back.

"We have orders to take the girl. Now, we can make this hard or we can make this easy. It's your choice," one man says, and the other man continues to stay silent.

"What the fuck do you want with her? She has nothing to do with any of this." Jared's voice shakes, and I can feel his body tense as I clutch his leather jacket.

"This war is far from over; you made that pretty damn clear. Now you can give us the girl or we can just take her." His menacing voice echoes in the forest.

"Over my dead fucking body."

"Okay, then, big man. You asked for it." The horrible man raises his gun towards Jared and everything happens so fast.

Shots are fired and I'm tossed at least five feet away. I scramble in back of a tree and see Jared covered in dirt and bleeding from his arm. He's groaning at the edge of the cliff, and I just about lose my mind.

"Erica, run!" he groans.

"Oh, hell no!" I reply.

"Please stop! I will go with you willingly. Just don't hurt him, please."

"Sorry darlin orders were to finish this bitch off."

One man walks over to where Jared is and it looks like he's about to kick him off the cliff.

“No!” I scream, and jump onto the man’s back.

“Get the fuck off me!” he hollers, and I continue to squeeze his neck with my arms. Seconds later I am being ripped off of him by the other man, who is still silent.

“Let go of me!” I scream.

Jared is now up, and kicking the other man in the stomach. He grabs the gun and shoots him point blank in the head.

The other man turns abruptly at the sound of the gun going off and aims it right at Jared. I slam my body into him as hard as I can. The gun goes off, but misses Jared.

This guy is quicker than I thought, because now he has me on the ground with a gun pointed at my head.

“She is coming with me, dead or alive. But she is coming.” His voice sounds familiar, and a tingly horrifying feeling climbs up my spine. I start to feel lightheaded when I notice his eyes.

They’re the same as Jared’s.

“Oh my god,” I whisper. “It’s you, isn’t it? Tony?” Tears start to slide down my face.

He sighs and takes his mask off.

“Tony?! What the fuck, man!” Jared yells, and I can see the panic and confusion take over.

“Why?” I croak.

“Listen, I will make sure she’s safe. I just need her to come with me. You don’t understand.”

“What the fuck is there to understand?” Jared spits.

“I promise I’ll bring her back, you just have to trust me. I borrowed some money from the Irish. I know I fucked up! Shit, Erica, I’m so sorry. They’re going to kill me.”

“How the fuck could you do this? It’s Erica! You are willing to risk her life for your own?” Jared barks.

“No! I don’t know, man. They want her, I don’t know why. And I need my debt paid. Fuck!” he roars, and his eyes look

like he's on something.

“Fuck, Tony; are you doing drugs again? Dammit!” Jared grabs him by his shirt and slams him against a tree. I can't believe Tony was going to take me.

“I'm too far gone now,” Tony says solemnly.

“I'm so sorry!” Tony tries to plead with Jared, but it's no use. He betrayed us, and in Jared's eyes this is the worst betrayal. A horrid sound comes from his mouth then everything changes.



## **CHAPTER** *Twenty-Six*

### *Betrayed*

A loud noise has my ears ringing. I realize it was a gunshot, and then I realize again that it was Jared who pulled his gun out.

There are blood splatters on my shirt and arms. Jared turns around, and the look in his eyes sends a cold chill down my spine. I start to wail and sob into Jared's chest. He wraps his arms around me as he continues to shake.

“You killed him!” I cry for Jared and for Tony, who I thought was my friend. But in actuality he had a problem and turned into the enemy. My heart is completely shattered.



He is quiet the entire time. The crunch of the dirt from the shovel is heard throughout the forest. Dirt is tossed to the side in a pile. He makes not a sound while he digs what looks like an endless hole of death. This is one of those times where it's so life changing you can't even form words.

Jared is crushed beyond belief. I can't imagine the heartache I would feel burying a sibling who did me wrong.

Jared's shoulder was thankfully only skimmed by a bullet earlier. You would never know the man was partially shot as he drags his brother's cold, dead body to its resting place.

I try to help, but he tells me to sit back down. I oblige, not wanting to add to his grief.

"Motherfucker!" he yells. Tears are cascading down my cheeks and I know this man, the love of my life, will never be the same.



Right now I am glad we're on a motorcycle to avoid conversation. This day started off great and then ended in tragedy.

I know he just needs time to process what happened. Why on earth would Tony get back in to taking drugs? I feel like a fool, because I really thought Tony cared about me. I guess I was wrong about him in so many ways.

Was it all a lie?

I'm hurting, too; maybe not in the way Jared is, but I am. I trusted Tony with my life, and he even saved it one time. This goes to show you there is no one left to trust.

We pull up to our house, which I'm a little bit shocked about.

"Why are we back here?" I ask while hopping off the bike. Jared is silent as he storms into the house.

He is frantically throwing shit into a backpack and my head is spinning in all directions.

"Jared!" I yell, and he finally looks at me.

"We need to get the fuck out of this town right now. If Tony played me like that, who the fuck knows who else is in on it?"

"You think Grady and the guys are?" I gasp.

"I don't know, baby, but what I do know is there is nothing more I need in life but to keep you safe and hidden away from

all of this. I almost lost you tonight,” he croaks, and I slowly walk towards him.

“Babe, please look at me.” My tone is soft and unwavering. He does, and the broken look he wears cracks my heart in half.

“There was no way for you to know what your brother got himself in to. You said so yourself. He used to have a problem. He was sick, and that should not fall on you. As much as I hate your choice in work, the last thing I want is more people after us for skipping town.” I try and soothe him by raking my hands through his hair and planting a subtle kiss on his lips. He sighs at my attempt to calm him.

“I just can’t take that chance with you, baby. If I lose you...” He pauses. “I might as well be dead and buried just like Tony.” I pull him close to embrace him.

“We have to do this the smart way, Jared. We can do this together, honey. Just you and me. There has got to be a better way to leave on a clean slate.”

“There is no way out of this lifestyle, babe. You make an oath, kill or be killed. Stay loyal or you’re dead.”

As I let his words sink in, I know that we need to make a decision and we need to do it fast.



His indecisiveness is driving me crazy. It’s been two days since he killed his brother, and his mood swings are getting worse.

He spoke with Grady on the phone and told him we needed a couple of days. Grady seemed okay with taking things over at the club, because he hasn’t phoned Jared at all.

I can see the guilt eating him alive. I know he is upset that he even let Tony back into our lives, when he knew deep down there was a chance he would fall back into his old ways.

Jared gets a phone call from Matt while I’m cooking dinner. His face looks stressed, and I’m dying to find out what



they're talking about.

My phone pings. It's Shannon. We have plans to go out for drinks tonight. Jared is not happy about it. He wants to keep me safe, which I understand. But I need to live, too. I can't keep avoiding my best friend.

If he wants to put security detail on me, that's fine. I just need to see my friend. I miss her.

"Babe, I have to go to the bar. Matt said he will keep an eye on you tonight when you go out. Keep your phone on you at all times, and please be careful."

"What did Matt say?" I query.

"He has good news, actually. The Irish are backing down. Grady set a deal, so we should be in the clear. I still have yet to figure out what Tony owes, and if they will use that against us or not." I sigh.

"People can do some crazy shit when they're going through withdrawal. He was a sick man, and I wish I'd seen the signs," I tell him.

"Yeah, he was. And now people are asking questions about his whereabouts and I have to make it look like I have no idea. If we play this right we can hype up that he's on a bender."

"Well, I'm here for you. We can get through this together." I give him a kiss on the lips.

"I need to forget about everything, baby. I need you first; everyone else can wait," he grunts, lifting me up as I laugh.

Jared kisses my lips as I wrap my legs around his middle.

"Get these clothes off," he rasps, and I comply.

I hope we stay like this forever.



## **CHAPTER** *Twenty-Seven*

### *Girl Time*

I'm having drinks with Shannon, and it feels good to be out. Matt keeps his distance, but he is all business.

“What’s with the bodyguard?” She nods towards Matt.

“Jared is a little paranoid after his brother went missing.” Her face falls.

“The word around town is he’s on a bender. I didn’t even know he was in to drugs,” she says, and all I can do is shrug because I hate lying to my friend.

“Better to be safe than sorry. You know how dangerous his line of work is.” She nods in agreement.

“Anyway, how are you and Sean?” I change the subject abruptly, but she doesn’t seem to care.

“He’s amazing. I never ever thought I could be this happy. Especially after...” She pauses.

She is thinking about what Jayden did to her, and just the thought of that creep sends shivers down my spine.

“You overcame something traumatic. Not many people can say they got through that and came out okay.”

“I guess so. I still have nightmares.”

I grab her hand and look her in the eyes.

“You don’t ever have to feel like you’re alone in this. I will always be here for you,” I assure her, and her eyes glisten. I grab a hold of my locket that always stays close to my heart when I need the strength to continue. I know my mother is watching over me, and that alone gives me peace.

We talk some more, but the conversation becomes lighter. We start to reminisce about some college parties we went to and continue laughing.

My phone rings so I hold up a finger, seeing it’s Jared.

“Hello?” I say, but when I hear another woman’s voice on the phone my stomach falls to the ground.

“Is this Erica?” the woman says, out of breath.

“Who the fuck is this?” I counter and Shannon’s eyes bulge when she sees the look on my face.

“Oh honey, that’s not for you to worry about. What I would be concerned with is the fact your man has his hands all over me. He feels so fucking good, too.” She moans, and I just about lose my shit entirely.

“Stay the fuck away from him!” I yell, running over to Matt, signaling we have to leave. I toss a look of apology over to Shannon and she just waves me off like it’s okay.

“Oh honey, you better come quick if you would like to join us. He tells me what a firecracker you are in bed.” She laughs, and all I can hear is the loud music in the background.

Tears well in my eyes when I explain everything to Matt.

“Erica, calm down. One of the club whores has to be playing with you. There is no fucking way he would ever cheat,” Matt assures me, but I’m still having a hard time believing it.

We race to the bar. I fly out of his truck so fast I almost fall.

When I make it into the bar the music is on full blast, but there's no one in sight. It's actually empty. A feeling of dread takes over as my throat closes in on me. I bang every door open. Finally in Jared's office I run in, and the last thing I expect to see is Jared tied to a chair. His shirt is off and his head slumps down.

"Jared!" I yell, rushing over to him. The door slams shut and there is Pete, with a gun in his hand. He punches Matt in the head. He's now out cold.

Jared's head snaps up and his eyes are black and blue. Blood is dripping from his mouth.

"No!" he grunts out in pain.

"You better not lay a hand on her! I will fucking kill you!" Jared struggles to get out of the chair.

Pete just laughs, his gun still pointed at me. He looks manic, and my heart is pounding out of my chest.

"You will die for this when I get my fucking hands on you. Untie me and fight me, you pussy bitch!" Jared threatens.

"Why are you doing this?" I cry, and he laughs again.

"Lydia, come in here please," Pete calls. She is tall, with a perfect body. Long red hair, fake boobs. Dressed to impress in her skintight black dress. Her boobs are practically falling out.

"Lydia, please show Jared what he's missing."

"I would love to." Her sultry voice makes my arm hair stand on end. I try to rush at her, but Pete puts the gun to my head again and punches me in my stomach. I fall to the floor, gasping for air. I can hear Jared's screams of protest. When I look up and catch sight of his face, it's red and fuming with rage. I have never seen him so mad. The bitch is on top of him when his face locks onto mine. It softens, filling with remorse.

"You are going to watch Lydia take what is hers now. He belongs to this club and the club whores. You have made it clear that you no longer wish to lead this club. If I have to take his place, then I might as well have some fun while I do it." He laughs, and now I can see it in his eyes. Pete is pure evil. I

can't believe I once thought this person had my back. Then again, I thought Tony did too.

"Pete, please don't do this," I plead, and he just shakes his head back and forth as the whore continues to straddle my man. Jared tries to wiggle her off him, but it's no use. Her big fake tits are in his face as he moves his head to the side.

"Well, honey, you never used to be this difficult to get into bed before." I lose it. They were together before?

"Go ahead, fucking shoot me, Pete. I will die before I let this bitch touch my man!"

"Wow! I have to say, Erica, you're starting to impress me, girl. I didn't think you had it in you." I hold my head high, poking the bear.

"You are a coward! You piece of shit!" I roar, and he backhands me so hard I fall on my butt.

"Erica!" Jared starts struggling more as he sees me lying on the floor, holding my bloody lip.

"I'm fine. This pussy bastard hits like a girl," I taunt, and that's all I needed to say before Pete was on top of me, choking the life out of me.

"You ruined everything, you bitch! Everything was fine before you came!" I continue to claw at his arms to pry him off, but it's no use. The blackness is starting to take over.

I look out the corner of my eye and see Jared. He head butts the bitch, and she is knocked out cold on the floor. Jared's chair falls over and breaks. He is struggling to get to me, but before I know what happens I start to fade into the dark.



My throat feels tight when I open my eyes. I gasp for air and the panic starts to take over. Why can't I breathe? I look to see Jared's worried, bruised and bloody face begging for me to breathe. So I do my best to catch some air. He calms me down,

and when he can see that I'm okay he holds on to me for dear life. His body is shaking with mine.

"It's over, baby. He's gone." Jared's eyes turn dead. I melt into his hold, relieved that it's over.

"Who the fuck else do we need to kill?" Jared roars. His fists are clenched tightly and looks like he's about to blow.

Grady is standing over to my right. He is also bruised and bloody.

"Grady, gather all the brothers together now! I want to know who the fuck is with me and who's not."

"Grady, you all right?" My voice sounds hoarse.

"Yeah, darlin'; the problem has been taken care of." He leaves us be. The room is cleared out.

"Where is he?" My lip quivers. I am so tired of all this betrayal.

"The guys came in at the right time. Saved my fucking ass," he tells me.

"I'm so sorry, baby, but I promise you I will fix this." Jared's face tells me everything I need to know. We are not yet free of the violence and destruction that has taken over our lives.

"Where does this leave you with the club?"

"That, I will figure out. But I can't leave until I do. I have a responsibility to my brothers. I promise no more illegal bullshit. I'm going to change shit around here. It's you and me, baby. Forever and fucking always," he murmurs in my ear, and I shiver at his touch. My eyes continue to fill with unshed tears. I need to believe things will change for the better, now that Pete is gone. What happens now? Is there anyone else we need to worry about?

I feel somewhat relieved, but also unsure of what's to come. Now that Pete is out of the picture, and so is Tony, I'm hoping things get better. Maybe he can change the ways of the club and find better ways to make money.

“Babe, I’m scared. This is what you do, and I want to be with you, but I need you to promise me things will be different. I can’t live a life of crime anymore. I did it with my parents, and look what happened to them. I can’t bear the thought of losing you, Jared.”

“Babe, no one will fuck with me ever again; I assure you you’re safe. If there is anyone else involved with them I will find out and make them fucking pay.” His voice is deep, lethal, and reassuring. Jared lifts me up to carry me over to the couch in the office. He hisses out in pain at first, and when he sees my worried expression he kisses my cheek.

This is one of those moments when time stands still for us. Our hearts and souls became one a long time ago, but now I know this man was always meant to be mine.

“What’s next for us now?” I query, and he gives me heart-stopping smile.

“We get married and live happily ever after, baby.”

“I love you, Jared.”

“I love you, too, baby.” He leans into me to hold me tight, and all is right with the world.

Our love story may be different, but it’s ours and ours only. I will forever be grateful that I met Jared Knox. I know my mother is looking down on me, happy that I finally found peace because Jared and I were meant for each other.

Jared took my heart and has held it captive since the first time we met at the diner. I have given him everything that I am and will continue to do so, as long as I live.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” I say as we walk out of the bar, hand in hand.

“You ready, baby?” Jared smiles as we both breathe in the fresh clean air outside.

“I am so ready.” I hop onto the back of his bike. My hands wrap around his middle as we drive off to watch the sunrise on the open road. Our hearts are now beating as one, just like my locket says.

The End

To the readers,

I would like to thank you all. You have made my dream a reality. If you enjoyed this book please leave a review! Thank you all so much for your support!



# About the Author

L. Aquila lives in Smithfield, Rhode Island, and enjoys a nice Pino Grigio on occasion. She is a self-published author of romantic suspense and psychological thriller books. She will keep you wanting more with her exciting and riveting stories. Get yourself ready for this author's fast-paced stories.

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