

*USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*  
**ROXY SLOANE**



*BOOK THREE*

**FLAWLESS**  
**PRIZE**

# FLAWLESS PRIZE

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# FLAWLESS: BOOK THREE

ROXY SLOANE


ROXY SLOANE BOOKS

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Flawless : Book Three

Flawless Prize

*All is fair in love and war...*

Discover the sensual, thrilling new saga from USA Today bestselling author Roxy Sloane, perfect for fans of Fifty Shades and Penelope Skye.

I know the lengths I'll go to for desire. The rules I'll break. The lives I'll destroy to get to her.

Now, the only question is:

How far will I go for *love*?

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## CALEB

WHAT IS the greatest prize of all?

I used to think it was power. Wealth. *Control*. Walking into a room and commanding it; showing a woman the kind of pleasure she'd only dreamed of late at night, as she lay there sticky and unsatisfied—by a man who wasn't me.

You know those nights, all too well. When he's collapsed beside you, already snoring, but your body still hums. Aching in all those places he couldn't satisfy you. Desperate to be filled, to be spread open and *fucked*, the way he never would.

So you close your eyes in the dark, as your restless hands creep lower, to pleasure yourself where he failed. Imagining a real man who could hold you down and drive you wild. Command your body and demand your exquisite surrender.

You've told yourself a man like that doesn't exist outside your aching daydreams, but you're wrong.

I was that man.

I took those fantasies and made them flesh. Made women moan. Made them *beg* for more.

And then *she* showed me, I was just as much a captive of desire.

Soon, I was the one aching—to own her. Control her. The way she controlled my every waking thought.

The way she took command of my heart.

I'd never known a desire like that—or felt such desperate ruin in her betrayal.

Now, we're both left in the wreckage of our broken promises.

I know now the lengths I'll go to for desire. The rules I'll break. The lives I'll destroy to get to her.

Now, the only question is:

How far will I go for *love*?



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## JULIET

THE WINDSHIELD IS FOGGING *up with the rain, making it almost impossible to see. I don't know the controls well enough to fix it. I reach up and wipe the windshield with my hand, squinting as the headlights from opposing traffic slash across my line of vision. Then I wipe at my own eyes and realize I'm still crying.*

*Sobbing is more like it.*

*This was a mistake.*

*I swallow. Right now, I want nothing more than to sink into bed. Or the couch at Mara's. That's what I should've done: Gone to sleep and put this whole horrible day behind me.*

*I let out a relieved breath when I spy the arrow for the next exit. Throwing on my blinker, I wrap both hands tightly around the wheel and pray that the sedan will pass me.*

*At first, I think they will. The car draws level, but at the last second, they swerve—directly into me!*

*There's a jolt of impact, and then the Porsche spins out of control.*

*Panic flashes through me, lightning fast, and I grip the wheel in terror, trying to stop the car from the wild fishtail it's been launched into. I swerve to the right, then the left, and then I see headlights closing in on me.*

*I scream.*

*There's another sick crunch of impact, then I go spinning, weightless. Airborne.*

*When the car hits the ground, it's with a terrific, sickening crash, the crunch of metal. Thrown forward like a rag doll, the steering wheel rises up to meet me with such force that I can't do anything to stop it. I hear the squeal of tires, feel the crunch and spray of glass shattering around me, and close my eyes.*

*And then everything goes black.*

WHEN I FORCE my eyelids open, nothing has changed.

Everything's still dark. There is no sound, only echoes from above, as if I'm swimming deep underwater.

Oh, but something is different.

There is pain. It comes to me, not all at once, but in pieces. An ache in my neck. Then in my temples, as I try to move.

Try. But I can't.

I panic. *I need to get out of here.* I will my legs to move. But it's like my brain is no longer connected to those parts of my body. I think I'm trapped. But I can't feel anything. My legs are numb.

Or are they even attached to my body anymore?

I can't tell.

*Oh God.*

Biting back fear, I try to reach down and touch them, and that's when the pain *really* starts to get serious. In my chest. Razor-sharp pain shoots up my spine, enough to make me cry out.

But nobody hears me. Or if they do, they don't care.

I blink, trying to focus on something, anything in the darkness. The first thing I see is a dim headlight, in the periphery of my vision, illuminating a brown patch of earth that seems to be floating in midair.

I notice it at a distance, groggy. How weird. The ground is in the sky.

I can't stop staring at it, wondering why it's there.

With huge effort, I manage to bring my chin down to my chest and feel a seatbelt, cutting into my collarbone.

Then I realize the reason why it was so hard to move that way. Gravity.

I wasn't bringing my chin down. I was lifting it *up*.

I'm upside down, pressed up against the steering wheel of a car. The dashboard is glowing dimly, now, but it's unfamiliar.

Whose car is this?

*You were in an accident, Juliet.*

I blink again, swallow. It's gritty, bitter, painful. Oh, God. Is there glass in my throat? Something wet is leaking from my nose. I lick my lips and taste blood.

It's quiet. So very quiet. No sirens. Shouldn't there be sirens, if I was in an accident? Are my ears working? They feel full, as if stuffed with cotton wool.

Or is it possible no one knows where I am?

*I'm going to die here.*

The thought is enough to spur me to action. I manage to pull one arm up from the darkness, and my fingers move off to the side, feeling for the cool glass of the window. Instead, my finger scrapes against something sharp, and I instantly regret exploring when thick clumps of earth come free.

The window has been shattered.

With my other hand, I try to reach for the seatbelt, but I think it's the only thing holding me in place. If I unfasten it, I know I'll come crashing down to the roof of the car.

Doesn't matter. My arm is pinned. I can't get it free to find the latch.

I turn my head, not far. Just an inch. The pain is exquisite, breathtaking.

Suddenly, whatever clogged my ears comes loose and noise comes rushing in, a deafening cacophony. The sound of



traffic, whizzing by, somewhere close. Car horns blaring. Wheels on pavement.

*Make it stop.*

Something's tugging at my eyelids, willing them to close again. I struggle to keep them open.

Headlights slash across the dashboard, illuminating a figure in the distance.

It's hard to make it out. It's just a silhouette, shrouded in fog.

I think they're watching me.

*Oh, thank god.*

"Help," I try to scream, but the voice that comes out is not my own. It's weak, barely a whisper.

I try again, but I can't get the breath. The pressure on my chest is too much.

The figure in the distance doesn't move. They're just standing there.

What's wrong with them? Why aren't they coming to help me?

That's the last thing I remember before I give in to the darkness.



A SECOND OR A LIFETIME LATER, the scream of a siren wakes me.

I try to open my eyes but the light is too bright. I close them, but not before I see another silhouette above me. Two, actually. Hands moving frantically, trying to shove something down my throat.

I start to choke.

"Don't fight. Let us help you," someone says, her voice as if she's shouting through a wind tunnel.

*I'm fighting?*

There's motion underneath me, and someone says, "Heart rate's steady." They spit out other orders, too, but they're lost on me.

Ambulance. I'm in an ambulance, I realize, before I slip away again.

Another blink, and then I'm awake again, lights bright, images flashing at me.

I'm being wheeled down a hallway, through doors that say *DO NOT ENTER—Authorized Personnel Only*. More silhouettes, looking down on me in concern. Voices discussing things like *SCI* and *contusions* and *lacerations* and *hemorrhaging*, their voices foreign in my ears.

It hurts. Everywhere.

*Please*, I try to say, but no sound comes out. *Please*.

"Just relax, sweetheart," a face looms closer, hidden behind a scrub mask. "Let the doctors work."

But I can't.

I don't understand what happened. What was I doing, driving that late at night? How did I get here?

Caleb.

Where is he? After everything we've been through, I thought I mattered to him. I thought...

With that, it all comes back.

*"I can't trust you!" Caleb roars, his voice hot with fury. "You lied to me, you set me up, and I can't see a way around it. I thought you were the one, that you were everything, that I had finally found someone to share my life with, but you tore all that apart. It doesn't matter what you do, I won't ever trust you again."*

*Everything around me swirls to oblivion. My knees go weak. The only sound is that of my pulse, thudding hard in my ears. I'm vaguely aware that I'm standing in the home of someone who hates me. Who will always hate me.*

“You don’t know what I do to my enemies. But I swear to you, you’re about to find out.”

*And I have. He plays with his enemies, makes us desperate and insane, and then he cuts us so deep that we can’t possibly survive. Like I can’t possibly survive.*

*I step back, to the door, tears blurring my vision. “I love you,” I whisper. “Don’t you see that? But there’s no future for us if you can’t trust me.”*

*He stares at me, unblinking. “Then there’s no future for us left at all.”*

*It’s that cold, cruel image of him in my mind as I turn and race for the door. I pound on the elevator key, and the second the door opens, I throw myself inside. I let the elevator take me all the way down to the garage.*

*I can’t think of taking the subway now, of being with other people. I fist the key for his car in my hand, then click it and open the doors.*

*Jumping inside, I barrel out of the parking garage—*

*“Heart rate’s spiking, push another ten of EPI!”*

The voices break through my tormented memories, but it’s too late. I remember. I remember everything.

Caleb.

I told him I loved him, and he told me, in no uncertain terms, that he can never trust me again.

It’s over. For good.

A fresh wave of pain rolls through me, but this one has nothing to do with the injuries I sustained in the crash—and everything to do with my heart breaking in my chest.

The doctors are still working over me, but I find myself sobbing, hysterical. One of the nurses says, “There, there, now. Don’t cry. You’re going to be all right.”

But I don’t think so.

I’m never going to be all right again. Not unless...

I need to talk to him. To get him to understand...

“I can’t... The pain...” I gasp, but I’m not sure if I’m saying it out loud because there’s a tube shoved down my throat.

“Don’t worry. We’ll take care of that,” the nurse says. “We’ve given you some medication and it should be kicking in right away.”

My eyes feel heavy. I can barely keep them open anymore. Just as I’m about to close them, I see a figure appear in the doorway. He’s wearing a suit; but other than that, everything is a blur.

I blink, trying to focus.

He came?

“Caleb?” I’m not sure I say that, either.

He moves closer. But the nearer he gets, the blurrier my eyesight becomes. I try to force my eyes open, but I’m powerless to stop them as they slip closed.

*Noooo*, I tell myself. *Don’t... You need to talk to him. You have to make him understand...*

But I can’t help it. The world spins off its axis, and then the cool numbness swallows me up.

Silence.



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## JULIET

THE NEXT TIME I wake up, everything is different.

Lights dance beyond my closed eyelids. Machines beep and whir. The acrid smell of disinfectant is strong in my nostrils.

The pain is gone. I feel like I've been asleep for a thousand years. I'm so thirsty, and there's this bitter, metallic taste in my mouth. "Water," I manage to say.

"No problem, honey," a voice beside the bed says.

Somebody presses a button and I feel the head of the bed slowly start to rise. A straw is placed at my lips. I take a long sip. Better.

Then I try to open my eyes. Through the haze, I see the typical things—stark white hospital room, lots of machines, IV drip. The nurse standing next to me is wearing a pink cardigan and a nameplate that says BRENDA.

I scan the bed, wincing at the memory of the pain. Amazingly, I'm not in a full body cast. I don't see any injuries at all. It might be the medicine, but I feel pretty good. "What happened?" I manage to ask, my voice still hoarse from the tube that's been down my throat.

Brenda says, "You've been in a car accident. Don't you remember?"

"A little bit." I nod, and that's when I feel a bit of pain in my neck. Whiplash, probably. "Am I okay?"

She smiles. “You’re lucky. You had a bit of a concussion from that bump on your head. A few bangs and bruises. But that’s all.”

That’s *not* all, though.

Caleb. I look around, but he’s not here. In my delirium, I thought I saw him.

“Has anyone...”

I stop myself. I don’t want to know. It must’ve been a dream. An image from the last time I saw him is cemented in my head. He looked furious, so unmoved by my profession of love. Like he never wanted to see me again.

But Brenda understands the question I didn’t finish. “Has anyone been to see you? Oh, sure.”

For a second, I perk up. “He has?”

She frowns. “He? No... A young woman, actually. She’s out in the waiting room. I can tell her to come in, if you like?”

“Oh.” My spirits plummet, but I force a smile. “Great. Yes. Thanks.”

She leaves, and I pull myself into a seating position, getting my bearings again.

Brenda’s right: I am lucky. I was terrified I’d suffered lasting damage from the crash, but as I gingerly flex my limbs, all I feel is soreness and some cuts. My mind is settling back to normal, too: no more of those fearful flashes, the disjointed sensation. Now, I can track my own steady breathing, and form a coherent thought.

“Juliet!” My coworker Mara sweeps in, carrying bags and balloons. She rushes to me, sitting on the edge of my bed. “Girl! We’ve all be so worried about you. Are you all right? Anything hurt?”

“No, I’m fine,” I reassure her. “They pumped me full of medication. The good stuff. How long have I been out?”

“A day. You missed work, and when we found out, I came right over.” She motions to the balloons. “That’s a gift from

the crew. We all chipped in.”

“Thanks... Has...” I gnaw on my lip. How do I ask about Caleb when I’m not really sure I want to know? “Are they upset that I’m not there?”

Of course, Mara sees right through that. “You mean, is *Caleb* upset that you’re not there?”

I nod.

She shrugs. “Got me. He wasn’t in today, I assumed he was with you...” She pauses. “Wait, he wasn’t? What happened? I thought the two of you were back together.”

I shake my head slowly. I don’t want to go into the confrontation that sent me storming out of Caleb’s penthouse, late last night. I don’t want to relive any of it, especially that horrible accident. I doubt I’ll want to drive a car again, after...

Suddenly, it comes to me. The sound of twisting metal, tires squealing, and... That car. Hitting me. Trying to run me off the road.

And that person, standing by the wreckage of the car, coolly watching me suffer.

That was all a dream, I tell myself. It had to be a dream. Just like Caleb, at my bedside. I have a concussion. I’m thinking things that aren’t real.

Unless... This has something to do with the threatening notes I’ve been getting in the office from Caleb’s mysterious enemy, Nero Barretti...

Which is a very distinct possibility.

My blood runs cold at the thought. Could it have been him, watching me? *He wanted me dead.*

“Hey,” Mara says, reaching over and touching my shoulder. “You all right?”

I nod, trying to shake off the thought. “Just tired.”

“Can I get you anything?”



I'm about to tell her no when two police officers file in the doorway. "Ms. Nichols? Juliet Nichols?" the younger of the two says.

"If you're feeling up to it, we just want to get your statement about the accident," the older says.

"Oh." I gulp. "Yes. Of course."

They come in and the younger one pulls out his notepad. "Can you tell us what happened?"

The memory comes back in a whirl of sights and sounds, all twisting together. The blinding headlights. The rain drumming on the roof of the car. The blaring of horns. I look at Mara, then back at the officers.

I want to tell them the truth about the crash, but something stops me. What if it was Nero Baretto's doing?

What if this is connected to Caleb and the blackmail over Sterling Cross company?

His fraud.

If I say the wrong thing, I could send the police straight to Caleb. And no matter what's happened between us, I can't do that.

"I—I don't remember much. It's all hazy," I finally say. "I remember the rain, and traffic, but the crash is just a blur."

"All right," the older officer says. "But you do remember why you were driving out there, don't you? Where were you headed?"

I shake my head. "I don't remember. Home, I guess."

That's not true. I remember. I wanted to get away. Anywhere, away from him.

"The car was registered to a Caleb Sterling. A friend of yours?"

Friend? No. I wouldn't call Caleb a *friend*. "I... We dated," I reply carefully. "I was at his apartment."

"So he loaned you the car?"

I blink, hard. More like *barreling* from his apartment, like a bat out of hell. I nod.

“And then what?”

Even the memory makes my heart speed up, but I try to stay cool. “I remember a car, behind me,” I reply carefully. “It hit me, I think. And then, I was spinning.”

This interests them. “What did this other car look like?”

“I don’t... I can’t remember. It was dark, and there were headlights in my eyes.”

“And...” The officer squints, waiting for me to fill in the blanks. I don’t. “It’s just a big blur?”

I nod. “Sorry. I’m just really tired. The painkillers.”

The older officer nods. “You get some rest. We’ll talk to you later.”

*Great. Now I have the police to worry about.*

*As they leave*, I feel a wave of exhaustion roll over me. I yawn. “That’s my cue,” Mara says with a smile.

“Sorry.”

“Hey, I’m just glad you’re OK,” she says, squeezing my hand. “It sounds like you had a real scare.”

Scary doesn’t come close. More like, utterly terrifying.

“It’s over now,” I say, as much to myself as her. “I’ll be OK.”

Mara helps me adjust my bed back down flat again, and I snuggle into the covers, already feeling the painkillers take over. She’s still arranging the covers as I let the fatigue pull me under.

It’s late when I wake again. The ward is silent, and someone’s drawn the curtains, casting the room in a dim gloom. I let out a yawn and stretch—then wince as my ribs ache in protest.

Someone moves closer. “Do you need a doctor?”

The voice makes me freeze.

“Caleb?” I whisper, my voice cracking. This has got to be a mirage again, just my morphine-addled mind conjuring up the one man my heart aches to see.

But he’s real.

Caleb clicks on a lamp beside the bed, illuminated by the glow. He’s sitting at my bedside, looking worse for wear in a crumpled shirt and pants, two-day stubble on his face.

“Hey,” he says quietly, eyes dark on me. Inscrutable.

I reach over and touch him, willing him to disappear, like a phantom. But he’s solid. Real.

He came. He really came.

Relief floods through me.

“Are you awake? Anything hurt?” His voice is calm and measured, but it washes over me like a balm.

“I’m okay. Still kind of foggy.”

“The doctors tell me you have a concussion.”

“My head aches. But I’m okay.”

He nods, and gets up, moving away from the bed. I watch him run a hand through his hair, and let out a long breath. Then he seems to collect himself. When he turns back to me, his voice is cold with fury. “Jesus, Juliet. What in the hell did you think you were doing?”

You could’ve gotten yourself killed!”

“*Myself?*” I echo, struggling to process his change in tone. “I didn’t do anything! Someone ran me off the road.”

He whips his head around to stare at me. “What did you say?”

“I said, it wasn’t my fault.” Tears sting in the corner of my eyes. “A car was following me, they tried to run me off the road. That’s all I remember.”

“Who?” Caleb demands, moving closer. “Who would do that?”

“I don’t know,” I exclaim. “I told you someone was threatening me, maybe it’s them. Nero.”

He freezes. For once, I’ve stricken him speechless. “I didn’t think...”

“That I was telling the truth?” I finish for him. “No. You’ve made it perfectly clear that you can’t ever trust me again.”

His face darkens at the reminder of our fight. For a moment, I wonder if he’s here to apologize. Take it back.

Tell me he loves me, after all.

But he doesn’t.

He won’t even look at me. He’s looking at the ground, the wall, the foot of the bed... *Everywhere* but at me. It’s like I’m a stranger to him.

Mara appears in the doorway. “Hey, Juliet! The nurse said you were up!” Her gaze shifts to Caleb. “Oh. Hi. I didn’t know you were here. I’m not interrupting anything?”

He gives her a blank look. “I was just leaving.”

“You don’t have to,” she says, but he’s already striding to the door.

“I have business to take care of,” he says curtly. He gives me another glance. “Be sure to have your medical bills forwarded to my office.”

And with that, he stalks out. But something about the grim look in his eyes makes me feel a shiver of unease.

“Are you cold?” Mara asks, moving to the cabinet. “I can grab another blanket.”

I nod, and let her tuck it around me, but the truth is, my chill has nothing to do with the temperature in the room, and everything to do with Caleb’s expression. Full of purpose.

I told him that Nero might be behind the crash. A mobster who’s made it clear that he’s capable of anything. A man who’ll kill to get what he wants.

And if Caleb's going after him...  
This won't end well.



---

## CALEB

WHAT THE HELL *was I thinking?*

The question haunts me all the way home from the hospital, and as the elevator doors part and I step out into my penthouse, it's Juliet I see.

I can't get her out of my head. She looked so broken, so vulnerable, lying in that hospital bed.

And it's all my fault.

Someone was threatening her—and I didn't take it seriously. Now that same somebody has run her off the road—and I wasn't there to protect her.

I don't need three guesses to figure out who. The same man who's been blackmailing me all this time, making me dance to his twisted tune.

Nero Barretti.

But I'm done trying to find a way out of this mess. A man like that, there's only one language he understands. The same one he's so fluent in.

*Violence.*

I drop my keys on the foyer table, stalk into my office, and twist the dial on the safe. It's not just jewelry and cash I keep in there, and I find what I'm looking for nestled in its case, locked up tight.

My gun.

I grip the handle, cool in my hand. It fits like it was molded to my grip—because it was. It's always just been a precaution, a backup. Last resort.

But I don't see any other way.

Nero's crossed a line, hurting Juliet. He has to pay for what he's done to her.

So I'm putting an end to this, once and for all.

As I take the elevator back down to the garage, I look at the latest message from Logan, which arrived about twenty minutes ago: *No change. Back in Soho.*

Good. Logan's been keeping tabs on Nero, at my request. So far, the man has been all about routine. Lately, he's been meeting with a woman at an upmarket address in Soho, and it looks like he's right on schedule. I don't have a chance of getting past Nero's usual security at his club, but a private apartment for a romantic rendezvous?

He won't see me coming.

The benefit of having an investigator for a buddy: Logan's been thorough in his research. I already know there's no real bodyguards at the apartment building, and I stroll through the lobby without drawing anything more than a respectful head-nod from the doorman.

It's a short elevator ride to 3B, Nero's latest side-piece's place. I take a deep breath, collecting myself. I have the gun tucked in my waistband, and I caress the grip again, reassuring myself.

A part of my brain knows that this is crazy, storming in to confront a man like Nero. A murderer. But that rational side of me is drowned out by the pure fury in my veins, the terror I felt hearing that Juliet had been in a crash.

The sheer powerlessness I felt, knowing that I couldn't save her.

The cocktail of emotion is all-consuming now, the most basic instinct I have driving me on this suicide mission.

*I need to protect her.*



*Whatever the cost.*

The elevator opens, and maybe luck is on my side tonight, because when I tap on Nero's door, I hear casual voices inside.

"That was fast," a woman is saying. "They must have your delivery order ready and waiting—"2

She opens the door, and her eyes widen. "You're not takeout," she says, as I shove past her, into the apartment.

"Nero!" I call, gripping the gun. "Where the fuck are you?"

He appears in the living room, dressed down in a T-shirt and jeans, cool as ever—even when I raise the gun and point it right at him.

"I got your message," I say, heart pounding with anger. "So here's my reply."

I don't know what I was expecting. Contrition, maybe, even fear. But instead, Nero seems entirely unmoved. His lips even curl into a smile. "Nice to see you, Sterling. But message? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't fuck around with me," I demand, anger boiling over into white-hot rage. "You nearly fucking killed her."

Nero looks puzzled. "Who?"

"You know who! Juliet." My voice cracks on her name. I take another step closer, aiming right at his head. "You ran her off the road and left her for dead."

"I'm sorry to hear your girl ran into some... Difficulty," Nero says, with a smirk. "But I can assure you, it wasn't at my hand."

"How am I supposed to believe that?" I exclaimed.

"Because if I wanted her dead, she would be."

Nero's reply chills me to the core, and makes me pause, just for a moment. Is he fucking with me? Or is he telling the truth?

Before I can decide, I hear the telltale CLICK of a gun being cocked behind me.

“Drop the weapon.”

I turn. It’s her, the dark-haired woman I assumed was Nero’s latest squeeze, but she’s holding a handgun in a confident grip, aiming right at me. “Go on, put it on the table. Slowly. Before I blow away *your* precious jewels.”

I can tell from the steel in her eyes, she’s not bluffing.

And I can tell from the steady grip, she wouldn’t miss.

Nero chuckles. “Now, isn’t this fun? Caleb, meet Avery.”

*Fuck.*

I pause, trying to figure a way out of this with my brains—and balls—intact. “Just admit you’ve been harassing her,” I demand.

“Not my style, Sterling.” Nero shrugs. “I don’t need to play games like that. Believe me, when I’m coming for you... You’ll know it.”

“You’re lying!” I yell, anger taking me over again. When I remember Juliet in that hospital bed... When I think of her laying, crumpled in the car wreck... “I swear to God, Barretti, I’m going to destroy you for what you’ve done—” I move forward, past reason now, but before I can take another step, there’s a noise in the open doorway of the apartment.

“And then there were three.”

It’s Logan—with his gun to the back of Avery’s head.

*Thank fuck.* I’ve never been so happy to see my friend in my life.

“Anyone want to do the math on their chances here?” Logan asks, sounding casual, but I can tell from the tension in his jaw, it’s just for show. “Or perhaps we all pack up, and I take my friend here to go blow off some steam.”

There’s a long pause, as Nero looks between us, running mental calculations. Then he nods. “Avery,” he says, an order in his voice.

She gives a reluctant sigh, and then slowly lowers her weapon.

I do the same—but Logan keeps his steady as he gestures me to get out of there.

I give Nero a warning look as I head for the door. “Don’t fuck with Juliet again.”

“As I said, I’m not the guy you’re looking for. But now that I know how much she means to you...” he gives a cruel smirk. “Pay me what I’m owed. Or maybe I will pay your sweet Juliet a visit, after all.”

I growl, about to go choke him out, when Logan grips my arm and yanks me away. “Always a pleasure,” he calls behind us, as he hustles me into the elevator.

The minute the doors close, he shoves me against the wall. “Have you lost your bloody mind?” he roars. “Going up against Nero Barretti single-handed? You deserve to die, because you’re clearly too goddamn stupid to live!”

I slump back, suddenly exhausted. “Don’t start with me.”

“Somebody better fucking start, you were this close to winding up dead in an unmarked grave. Fuck.” Logan shakes his head. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“That someone has to stop that animal!” I reply. “Do you know what he did to Juliet?”

He gives me a look. “Who do you think called me? She was afraid you were about to do something stupid. Which, surprise surprise, you were.”

I scowl, pushing past him into the lobby. “I don’t need a babysitter. Next time she calls you, don’t—” I freeze when I see his sedan, parked behind mine.

Juliet’s standing next to his car, leaning on a cane, her face etched with worry. She’s clutching her sweater closed and looks just as frail as she did in the hospital, when I left her an hour ago.

She should still be in the goddamn hospital. That she’s here, so close to Nero—

It's more than I can take.

I stalk over to her. "What made you think you could leave the hospital?"

"They discharged me. I'm fine."

"You don't look fine!" I yell. "And you shouldn't be out here. Why the fuck would you—"

"I was worried about you!" she cries.

"It's none of your business what I do," I grind out. Nero could be watching us now, or his people. His threat echoes in my ears.

*"Now that I know how much she means to you..."*

Fuck.

I'm putting her in more danger now. The last thing I wanted.

"It's over between us," I tell her harshly, hating the way she flinches at my words. "So stay the hell out of my life. Got it?"

"It's my life too," she replies, stubborn. *"I'm* the one who it happened to, in case you're forgetting."

"How can I forget that? I'm trying to protect you!"

She glances away. People are stopping on the street to watch us, or swerving away from the drama. She nods, and the next time she speaks, her voice is softer. "I know. I get it. But Caleb, I don't want you to fly off the handle and get hurt. That's not going to solve anything."

"I'm fine."

She glances at Logan. "You nearly weren't."

She's right about that. But I don't want her to be the one saving me. Not after the shit I put her through. What we need is to stay apart. So I can fix this.

So she doesn't get hurt again.

But as long as I keep Juliet in my life, Nero will keep coming and coming until my debts are settled.

Fuck.

She reaches for me.

I back away. “No.

Leave me alone,” I tell her, hating how betrayed she looks. All I want to do is hold her and make everything OK, but it’s the only way.

I have to hurt her now in order to protect her.

It goes against every instinct in my body, but I force the words out all the same. “I don’t want to see you, or talk to you. I meant every word I said before the crash,” I lie. “So get the fuck out of my life.”

I walk away before I can take it all back.

Before I see her cry.



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# JULIET

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, things go back to normal.

At least, as normal as they can be, after everything that's happened.

Inside, I think I'm dying. Caleb told me to stay away from him. He doesn't want anything to do with me.

Kind of hard to do that, considering I work right outside his office.

Besides, all I want to do is be near him. To figure out how we can fix this.

And I don't think it's even about my betrayal anymore. Caleb says he doesn't care about me, but you don't show up at the hospital if you couldn't care less about someone. You don't go storming off to confront a dangerous man over a woman that means nothing to you.

I could see it in his eyes. *He cares*. Which means there's still a chance for us. If I can find a way past this new barrier he's building around his heart. I can tell, he's trying to protect me.

He's afraid that he's going to get me hurt.

But he doesn't get how much it's already hurting me, to have this chasm between us. It's excruciating, the worst pain I've ever felt.

But I have to find a way to cross the divide. So, after sitting around Mara's apartment watching way too much TV

all week, I head into work as usual. It's my only option to see him again.

Everyone's looking at me as I hobble into the building. No wonder. I still have a big bruise on my forehead, and I'm limping a little from my twisted ankle.

David is walking past the elevator as I arrive on our floor. He wheels back and hooks an arm through mine. "Let me help you."

"You don't have to. I'm fine."

"Come on. Let me help you." He runs a sympathetic eye over me, the same way one would inspect an injured bird, flopping around in the yard. "I thought they said you'd be out of the office for a while."

"I will be. Just picking up files. Victoria gave me permission to work from home."

"You shouldn't have come in. If you'd let me know, I'd have delivered them to you."

That's David. Such a boy scout. "Even though I look like one, I'm not an invalid. Really."

"I know. I know."

The walk to my desk, which usually takes ten seconds, takes forever with me limping along. After the regular small talk, we fall into awkward silence.

When my desk is in view, he says, "We were really worried about you. That must've been some wreck."

The way he says it, I have to wonder if he buys Mara's cover. As far as anyone else knows, it was just an accident, swerving out of control in the rain. "It was really scary." I nod. "I don't think I ever want to drive again."

We arrive at my desk. Caleb must be in his office, because though the door is closed, I can hear voices.

Maybe I can pack up my stuff quickly and jet out of here before he comes out.

Probably not. Like I can do *anything* quickly, these days.



David holds onto my arm a beat too long, and just gazes at me. I have to shake my arm a little to get him to surrender it.

“Oh. Well, I’m glad you’re okay,” he says, backing off. “Just call if you need me.”

“Thanks,” I call after him as he heads off to the marketing department.

Victoria says, “Nice to have you back,” which might be the nicest thing she’s ever said to me. She’s probably just happy to have someone to lighten her workload.

I notice she’s already packed up most of the files I’m going to need into a banker’s box. As nice as it is to have me back, she clearly wants to get rid of me, as fast as possible. I just need to put together a few more things, and then I’ll be out of here.

But because I’m a glutton for punishment, I find myself lingering. Taking extra care to make sure I have everything. And of course, *constantly* glancing up at Caleb’s door, hoping he’ll emerge.

My gut clenches at that thought.

I don’t want to, shouldn’t, *can’t* confront him now. I know it’ll be torture. And yet, all I want is to see his face again. For him to know I’m fine—and that he doesn’t need to keep pushing me away.

Maybe I’m a glutton for punishment. After all, how many ways can the man say ‘it’s over’ before I get the message?

But my heart is telling me that our story isn’t over yet. And I believe it, more than I believe in anything.

I finish packing up the last of my items before I realize David’s right. It *is* going to be hard to get this all the way back to my apartment.

As if reading my mind, Victoria looks up from her spreadsheets and says, “You can leave it there once you’re done. I’ll have a service deliver it to your place.”

She might be a bit of a witch who hates me, but she is an efficient executive assistant.

“Oh. Thanks.” I look at the exit. “Do you need anything before I—”

“No.”

Okay. Now there really is no reason to stay. I shrug. “I guess I’ll just be—”

At that moment, Caleb’s door opens. I hold my breath in anticipation.

But it’s Olivia.

She gives me a fake look of concern as she flounces out. “Juliet. I heard you had a little accident. I hope you’re okay.”

I decide to ignore her. I look away.

Unfazed, she says, “That’s a shame.”

I have to control my anger. After what she did to Caleb... What she did to *me*, making me into her little tattletale so I could bring him down...

My face heats with the rage I’m feeling inside.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here,” Olivia continues. “I wanted to tell you. I’m still assembling my team for the hostile takeover, and I could use a smart girl like you on my side. Interested in joining me and Sebastian Wolfe?”

My jaw drops. She really thinks I’m that much of a flake, I’d just follow her anywhere? Even if Caleb’s ship was sinking, I’d sooner sink with it than join the rats.

But the company won’t sink, not with Caleb at the helm. I have faith in him. He’s going to show her and the entire board, once and for all, who belongs at the top of Sterling Cross.

She’s still staring at me, expectant. Does she really think I’m considering it? “No thanks,” I bite out.

She shrugs. “Okay. You change your mind, you know where to find me.”

She turns to leave, and I dig my fingernails into my palm. As I do, Caleb’s door opens again, and he sticks his head out.

He barely glances at me. His expression is unaffected. His eyes go to Olivia. “Twelve o’clock on the third. The entire board will meet and vote on the issue.”

“On my calendar!” She wiggles her fingers at him and struts for the exit. “See you then, Caleb, dear!”

She’s so fake. How did I ever buy that act? As I watch her leave, I wonder what Caleb will say to me when we’re finally alone.

But he slams the door shut before she can even step out of sight.

The resulting pain in my heart almost brings me to my knees.

I gather whatever’s left of my shredded dignity, wave goodbye to Victoria, and head out.

I should probably head to Mara’s apartment and take it easy, but I can’t. With everything that’s happened, it’s been too long since I’ve visited my mom, and although she isn’t sharp most of the time, at least I know that she has my back, all of the time.

Right now, I need that kind of clarity in my life.

I head over to the residential home and find her in her room overlooking the garden. She’s sitting in the sun, enjoying the view, as usual.

As I pause in the doorway, Joanie, the nurse says, “She’s a little tired today. I don’t think she slept well last night.” She goes in. “LeAnne. You have a visitor. Your daughter.”

My mother turns around, face blank.

It’s like she’s never seen me before.

Sadly, I’m getting used to that look.

But right now, it’s okay. I don’t need discussion, someone to solve all my problems. All I need is a sympathetic ear.

I pull up a chair beside her and take her hand. “Hi there.”

I wonder if she'll be agitated, the way she sometimes is when she doesn't recognize me, but instead, she smiles pleasantly. "Hello. That's a nasty bruise."

"I had a car accident. But I'm okay, nothing to worry about," I say lightly. "Just a fender bender, really."

"Oh, that's good. Are you one of the nurses?"

"Yes," I lie. "A volunteer."

She nods, looking out the window again.

I sigh. Caleb is the reason my mom is here at Meadow View. He made sure that her bills were not only paid in full, but he somehow secured her the nicest suite in the place.

It's why I know, deep down, he's a good man.

"I don't get it," I murmur, almost to myself. "Sometimes I think our bond is so strong. That I mean something to him. And then he goes and pushes me away. I have no idea what to do. Am I just kidding myself? I always thought I'd be better than this, pining after a man who seems so cold. Whenever my friends would do it, I'd think they were crazy, but here I am, doing the exact same thing... But once I've known a love like his, how am I supposed to settle for anything else? How can I just move on, knowing that we could be happy together, we could have everything, if only he'd just trust me and let me in?"

I'm so busy staring out the window, trying to find the answers somehow in the Zen of the outdoor garden, that at first, I don't notice my hand being squeezed.

When I look back at my mom, her eyes meet mine, lucid.

"Does he know what you want?"

I stare, stunned. She heard all that?

Then I realize that she asked a question.

"Um..." Does he? "I don't know. I mean, I think I made it pretty obvious when I told him I loved him, but I didn't outright say—"

“Men can be fools when it comes to love. But if he’s what you want, then you have to follow your heart. Fight for him, Juliet.”

*Juliet.* She used my name.

She hasn’t used my name in... Well, I can’t remember how long.

But can I do that? Can I make him see we belong together? Would he even let me?

I lean in close to her. “Mom. I don’t know if—”

She smiles and pats my hand. “I know you can. I always thought you could do anything.”

She did. My mom was always my greatest champion.

*You. You. You.* That’s what she always used to say. *You have the power to make things happen.*

I just need the courage to take the first step.

MY MOTHER STAYS herself for most of the day. These times are so precious, I never want to leave her when she’s like that. So I stay, doing jigsaw puzzles with her and reminiscing about memories from when I was a kid, until finally, it’s time for her afternoon nap.

“Maybe she’ll have another good day soon,” I tell Joanie hopefully.

“Maybe.”

As I head to the subway, her words echo in my mind.

*“You have to follow your heart. Fight for him, Juliet.”*

It might be because advice from my mom is a rare and precious thing these days, but her words seem to take on extra meaning. Life is short. Anything can happen. I thought I’d have years with her, but instead, I have to settle for fleeting glimpses of the mother that I used to know.

I don’t want to miss my chance with Caleb. I don’t want to look back, years from now, and wish I’d done more. Fought

harder. Put my heart on the line.

I want to be looking back *with him*. Sharing memories with him.

Watching our love grow, not end before its time.

I feel my heart, beating faster as I realize what I have to do.

The journey to his apartment blurs as my nerves grow, tangling in my stomach. The front desk personnel at his apartment building are used to seeing me. They wave me in, and I head up to his penthouse, pulse racing like crazy.

I still have a key, so I walk right in.

“Juliet?” Caleb stops dead in the middle of the living room. He clearly isn’t expecting company, because he isn’t his usual formal self, like he was earlier that day. Jacket gone. Tie off. Dress shirt open at the collar, rolled up at the sleeves, the way that makes my knees go weak. “What the hell are you—”

“Don’t.” I hold up a hand, and miraculously, it works to silence him. “You’ve had your say. Now it’s my turn to speak.”



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## JULIET

HE CROSSES HIS ARMS. “All right. Speak.”

I take a deep breath. “You need to stop doing this. Coming after me, than pulling away. It’s not fair to me.”

He nods. “You’re right. You need to stay away from me. For good.”

“No.”

My voice is so hard, his eyes immediately flash to mine. “What?”

“You heard me.” I meet his eyes head-on. Standing my ground. “I know, you keep talking about putting me in danger. You want to protect me. But I don’t need your protection, and I sure as hell don’t need you deciding what’s best for me,” I tell him. “*I choose you.* Us. You can’t control how I feel. I love you, and I choose you. I won’t let you shut me out. Not again.”

Caleb runs a hand through his hair, looking ragged. “It’s over, Juliet,” he says, but I swear, his voice wavers. “You can’t keep coming around me like this.”

“Why not?” I challenge him. “If it really was over, if you really felt nothing for me, it wouldn’t matter than I’m here. it wouldn’t matter if I did *this*,” I add, reaching out and laying my palm on his chest.

He recoils like he’s been burned. But the gesture fills me with hope—and determination.

I still affect him. I still *matter*.



“You’re pushing me away, but you don’t get to make that decision for the both of us!” I exclaim, all my emotions bubbling to the surface. It’s scary as hell to put all my feelings on the line like this, but I have no other choice. Not if I want a life with him. Not if I want him to understand.

“We’ve been through so much. I refuse to let it end like this,” I continue. “Because of fear, *your* fear, that something will happen to me? No. I won’t let it happen. It’s stupid. Things happen all the time! Life is dangerous no matter what I do. Even without your secrets,” I exclaim. “I could get hit by a bus tomorrow. If the price of having you is not being hidden away in a bubble, then so be it. It’s worth it. *You’re* worth it. So it’s up to you to decide now, am I worth it too?”

I finally pause, heart pounding in my chest. *What will he say?* I’ve stated my piece, but at the end of the day, love takes two. If he can’t step up and make this work, than all my determination and bravery won’t bridge the gap between us.

I can’t make him love me the way I need.

Caleb stands there a moment, not saying a word. Then he takes a step closer.

My body tightens, just from his nearness.

His form looms, the air of dominance sending a shiver down my spine and stiffening my nipples. I can see everything he feels for me, burning in his eyes, the love and lust and fear.

But which will win?

When he finally speaks, there’s a war raging in his gaze. “Everything I’ve done, I’ve done it to protect you, Juliet... You have to understand.”

His voice is hoarse. Barely controlling the emotions in conflict beneath the surface.

“I do.” I gulp. “And I know things are dangerous, but it’s my decision to make. Being with you... That’s my choice too. And I love you. That’s all that matters to me. And the rest of it? I don’t care. The uncertainty, the potential danger and the risk. It’s all worth it as long as I get to be by your side at the end of this.”

“You don’t mean that.” Caleb searches my face, looking desperate. A dying man in the desert who can’t believe the oasis isn’t a mirage.

“I do.” I move towards him. “It’s you. It’s only ever been you.”

*Will only ever be you.*

Because I know it in my bones, Caleb Sterling is the love of my life, and nobody will ever come close.

“Juliet...” This time, my name is a whisper. A prayer.

“You love me too,” I say, determined. “I know you do.”

“But the risk...”

“We can face it, together.” I reach for him and take his hands in mine. “Caleb, this is what I want. I know you want to keep me safe, but the safest place in the world for me is at your side. Where I belong.”

There’s another long pause, and my nerves begin to fray. What if I’m wrong? What if, in spite of everything, love isn’t enough for us?

What if *I’m* not enough for him?

Oh God.

I pull back, humiliation crashing over me. “I see,” I mutter, tears already stinging in the corner of my eyes. “I get the message. Loud and clear.”

I whirl around and bolt for the exit, but before I can make it to the door, Caleb grabs my arm, pulling me back. He spins me back towards him, and before I even have a chance to process the desperate embrace, his lips are crashing down on mine in a wild, possessive kiss.

*Oh!*

The taste of his scotch hits my tongue, the flavor like coming home after a long trip away, and when his hand fists my hair, yanking me up to steal the air from my lungs, everything melts.

This is where I belong, right here.

Instinct propels me, my hands flying into his hair to grab the strands as if my life depends on it. Throwing myself into the kiss, ignoring the salt from my tears. We're the only things that exist right now and when he pulls away, forcibly holding me against the wall as he takes in a deep breath, dragging my scent in through his nostrils, I know it.

We're not over.

We won't *ever* be over.

Relief washes through me like waves on the shore as he rests our heads together, his pupils blown wide with lust and desperation like I've never seen before.

"Why won't you let me keep you safe?" he murmurs, hands already gripping my waist. "Why won't you just do what you're told?"

"Because you don't want me to." I reply, my heart singing as I cling to him. "Because we're meant to be together."

He laughs at that, shaking his head, a smile playing on his lips.

"You always were a stubborn woman."

I grin back. "I thought you liked me that way."

"I do." His voice drops, and his gaze turns tender. "I love you this way."

*Love.*

The word blooms in my chest, warming my whole body from the inside out.

He cups my chin and lifts it, stroking my cheek. "You're mine."

The floodgates open and pure happiness sweeps away the previous pain and fear as my head drops to rest on his shoulder. "Don't you dare do this to me again," I warn me. "No more pushing me away, trying to protect me. I swear to God I'm kicking you in the balls if you try it again."

Caleb laughs, dropping a heated kiss to my mouth. His tongue slides out, wrapping around mine with practiced ease before sucking slowly. The slick slide and the way he thrusts into my mouth, emulating a different thrusting, makes me shiver with lust.

I press closer.

The fabric of my shirt rubs against my nipples, tightening them into peaks as I let out a breathy moan. Caleb lets out a growl in answer.

“God, I’ve missed you.” He groans into my ear. “Every night that’s passed without me buried in your sweet cunt...”

I clench in anticipation, desire suffusing my body. “I’ve missed you too,” I gasp, as his hands stroke possessively over my body. “I’ve been aching for you.”

It’s the only invitation he needs. One second I’m against the wall, his mouth branding mine in a claiming kiss, the next he’s dragging me to the bedroom and slamming the door behind us.

Silence.

My heart is pounding now, so loudly I swear the whole city can hear, but the only person I care about is undressing me with his eyes—and his hands. Caleb easily strips me of my blouse and pants, and then my underwear too, until I’m standing naked in the middle of the room and his hands are on me, his mouth, everything.

Oh God, it feels incredible.

His touch works me into a frenzy, familiar and exotic all at once, as his mouth devours mine. Stroking my breasts, squeezing my ass, delving between my thighs to rub and pluck at my clit until I’m moaning, legs weak, desperate for more.

“Caleb...”

“I know, baby. You’ve been empty without me.” Caleb growls. “But I’m here now. I’m going to give your cunt everything it needs. Like *this*.”

He sinks a finger inside me, and then another, fucking me with swift, beckoning strokes. *I moan. He's right. This* is what I've missed. The thick intrusion, the aching stretch. The way he seems to know right where I need him, the exquisite pressure and pace. I've barely had time to adjust to the penetration when I climax in a swift, sweet cry.

*Oh my God.*

The orgasm sweeps through me, but I'm still just as ravenous.

I tear away his shirt, fumbling with the fly on his pants to free his glorious cock. He curses as my hand closes around the thick length of him, already moist, slick in my hand. I pump slowly, feeling his body react.

"Goddamn, Juliet..." he groans, pulling away. "Get on the bed and spread your legs. I need to feel that pussy clenched around me."

He strips off his clothes, a fevered passion in his eyes.

But I don't follow his order.

"Juliet?" Caleb looks at me, a question in his eyes. I smile back.

"*You* get on the bed," I tell him, exhilaration fizzing in my veins. I go to the bedside cabinet and retrieve the handcuffs I know are waiting there. I love it when Caleb ties me down and makes me beg, but tonight?

Tonight I want to feel him cry out for me.

I want to show him how much *he* needs *me*.

"Do you trust me?" I ask, dangling the cuffs.

His gaze darkens, and I realize too late just how loaded the question is.

*Trust.*

It's been the crack in our foundation since the very start. The red line we could never cross. Before the accident, Caleb swore he could never trust me again for my betrayal, but now?

Now, I see a new light in his eyes.

He nods.

I inhale in a rush, relief and hope rushing through me—but not as potent as the desire still pounding in my bloodstream. Wanting him. Needing him.

*Now.*

I push him back onto the bed, and grab his wrists, cuffing them to the bedframe. Caleb tests the give, but I'm not messing around. He smirks.

“Are you sure you know what you're doing?”

“Very sure.” I trace a fingertip down his bare chest, stopping just before his groin. His cock stands to attention, straining for my touch. I slowly trace a circle around his thick length, but never come close enough.

Then I lean over and press a featherlight kiss to the tip.

Caleb groans.

I kiss again, closed-mouth, butterfly kisses along the shaft, never landing for long. Then I return to tracing his naked torso, watching him grow even harder.

“Stop teasing.” Caleb demands, yanking at his restraints. “Open your mouth, and suck me. Now.”

I laugh.

“You forget who's calling the shots this time.” I coo, brushing his cock with my palm. “I'm the one in control now. I'll do whatever I want with you.”

Caleb's gaze burns into me, full of lust. Power ricochets through me.

I have him right where I want him.

And it's his turn to beg.

“So what do you want?” I muse, rocking back on my heels. Displaying myself to him.

“You tell me.” Caleb replies, trying to sound cocky.

I smirk. He's putting up a fight. Not used to relinquishing control.

Well, I'll show him...

I run a hand over my naked body, toying with my breasts. "Do you want to be touching me here?"

I tease my nipples, working them into stiff peaks. Caleb's jaw clenches with tension, watching me.

"I think you do," I say, panting a little. "I think you would squeeze them, just enough to hurt in all the right ways. That edge between pleasure and pain."

I reach over and stroke *his* nipples. Pinching. Rolling.

Caleb growls.

"Mmm... Or how about *here*... ?"

My hand trails lower. I part my thighs, baring myself to him. My fingertips play lightly with my clit, and I let out a moan.

"I'm so wet for you," I tell him, amazed at my brashness. But it's just the two of us, and the sense of power is thrilling.

I feel bold. Invincible.

Because of him.

"I love it when you touch me here," I continue, fingers delving deeper into my pussy. "The way you stretch me open, getting me ready for your cock. I never think you're going to fit, but somehow, you make me take you. I love that feeling, that first raw ache."

Caleb curses under his breath, yanking at the cuffs again. His cock is straining, just inches away from me.

"You want to feel it, don't you? Just how ready I am."

I slide my fingers out and bring them to his lips.

Caleb licks them clean.

"Delicious," he growls. "Now come sit on my face so I can gorge on every drop."

I shudder. Dear Lord, but this man is sexy. Even tied down, at my mercy, he still finds a way to make me weak.

“Ask nicely,” I tease him, rising up on my knees.

“Is that how you want to play it?”

I nod. “What’s the magic word?”

“Please,” he finally grinds out. “Now sit on my face so I can fuck you with my tongue.”

With pleasure.

I move so I’m straddling his face, hands braced against the bedframe for balance. Caleb reaches up, and licks against me in a long hot swoop.

I moan.

“That’s right, baby,” he says, licking me again, his voice vibrating against my clit. “Give me that sweet cunt. I’ll feast for hours on you, until you’re screaming my name.”

I nearly come apart right there, as he licks and sucks on my clit. But then I feel the hot intrusion of his tongue against my entrance, and he spears it up inside me.

I scream.

Fuck. Hot and thick, he fucks me with his tongue, nose nudging against my clit with sweet pressure until I’m thrusting against him, demanding more, driven crazy by the sensation until I finally climax in a wail.

I gasp for air, shuddering.

“That was just the warm-up, baby. Now get down there and ride my cock.” Caleb commands me, voice thick with lust.

And dammit, if I don’t obey.

Even handcuffed to the bedframe, his sexual power over me is undeniable. A force not to be reckoned with.

But man, is it fun to try.

I crawl down his body, positioning myself above him.



“You need me,” I tell him, fisting his cock. Teasing him one last time. Sending him to the edge of oblivion even as I long to hurl myself over after him.

“Yes.” He growls.

“Louder.”

“Yes,” Caleb cries out, mad with lust. “Juliet, fuck, I need you. Right now. Fuck me. Use me, I’m yours!”

His words cloak me in power as I sink down on him, taking his cock deep inside.

“Goddammit!”

Caleb yells the curse but I feel it too, the pleasure of his thick girth stretching me open; the delicious friction gliding against my tight inner walls.

I rise up and sink down again, all the way to the hilt. Holding him there.

Owning him. The way he owns me.

*Fuck.*

I find a rhythm, riding him in a slow, grinding pace. Caleb bucks against me, lifting his hips, handcuffs rattling against the frame. “Fuck,” he groans. “Like that, baby. Just like that.”

I keep riding him, pistoning hard, riding up and then sinking deep to take him inside me. The feeling is incredible, nothing in the world but the two of us and the crash of passion where our bodies meet, sending me soaring, cresting towards yet another orgasm.

But it’s not enough.

I need his hands on me. His touch.

His everything.

Panting, I lean forwards, and grab the handcuff key, freeing him from his restraints.

In an instant, Caleb is gripping my hips, rearing up off the bed to bury his face against my chest, sucking at my nipple as his body takes over the frenzied pace of our lovemaking.

“Did you like that, baby?” he demands, roughly pistoning up inside me, making me cry out in pleasure. “Taking control, making me beg?”

“Yes,” I gasp, lost to the feeling, every thick inch of his cock impaling me from below. “I loved it.”

“But not as much as you love *this*.”

He rolls me beneath him, pinning my wrists to the mattress and driving into me in a hard, punishing stroke.

I scream. “Yes!”

“You know who’s boss,” Caleb growls, driving mercilessly, relentlessly, his cock demanding everything I have to give. Over and over, he fucks me wide open, until I’m a writhing, whimpering mass of sensation, strung out and needy, begging him for more.

“You,” I chant, mindless, boneless. “Fuck, it’s always you.”

“That’s right, baby.” Caleb gasps, his body going tense, his eyes wild with animal passion. “Only me. Forever.”

The word echoes through me, but it’s too late to take it in. He’s driving me towards my final climax, the shudders in my spine circling higher, taking me over, as he climaxes with a roar, the feel of him coming enough to send me over the edge into ecstasy. An inferno of pleasure.

In his arms.

*Forever.*



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## JULIET

IN THE MORNING, when I wake in Caleb's sprawling bed, I'm alone.

I sit up on my elbows and look around, *'what ifs'* swarming my mind. What if he's already regretting last night—letting his guard down? Letting me in? What if he's still stuck on protecting me?

What if 'forever' didn't mean a thing?

I suddenly can't stand to wait around and find out. His shirt's draped over the footboard, but I don't put it on. Instead, I fish around for my thong and bra, finding them scattered all over the room. I slip them on, pull my clothes over my head, and grab my shoes, ready to make my walk of shame back to Mara's alone.

But when I open the bedroom door, I hear noises from the kitchen. I smell coffee. At the end of the hallway, I find Caleb, wearing nothing but sweatpants, pouring coffee into two mugs.

"You're up," he says, giving me a sleepy morning smile.

My heart leaps.

*He stayed.*

"What time is it?" I ask, moving closer with a yawn. Damn if this man doesn't look irresistible in the mornings, all tanned skin and mussed hair.

"Just after nine."

He hands me a mug of coffee, eyes raking over my hastily assembled outfit. “Going somewhere?”

I blush.

“I thought you went to work.”

“Funny thing about that... When you own the place, you get to make your own hours.” He smirks as he brings the coffee to his lips. “Besides, I thought I gave you permission to work from home.”

I grin. “You did... But last I checked, sleeping in the boss’s bed doesn’t count as work.”

“Who said anything about sleeping?” Caleb leans in and gives me a sizzling kiss.

I melt happily against him, my fears dissolving in the morning sun.

He draws back. “How are you feeling today?” he asks, gently touching the bruise on my forehead.

“OK. Better,” I say. “No thanks to the workout last night.”

He chuckles. “I forgot. I’ll be gentle next time. Now, sit. Eat. We need to keep up your strength.”

Caleb steers me to the dining table, where he has a whole spread set up—pancakes and scrambled eggs and sausage and fruit.

He pulls out a chair for me, then settles me in, even filling a plate for me. “I told you, I feel better,” I protest, feeling spoiled. “I don’t need you to play nursemaid.”

“How about Doctor?” Caleb asks with a wink, and I laugh, relaxing.

“OK, maybe that...”

He sits down beside me, nursing his coffee. I take a forkful of eggs and when I look up, he’s watching me carefully. “Aren’t you eating?” I ask, self-conscious.

He shakes his head. “Not so early.”

“Well, you probably have a lot to do today. Don’t let me get in the way of it...”

But Caleb doesn’t move. “There’s nothing more important than this.”

“Oh really?” I tease, my voice light. “So, nothing more important than the mob boss blackmailing you and demanding payment, or the hostile takeover Olivia and Sebastian Wolfe are planning for the company, or the fact that your whole family’s reputation is on the line?”

Caleb gives me a sardonic grin. “Trifling issues.”

We both laugh, and damn, it feels good. Because for the first time, it feels like the problems Caleb is facing aren’t a barrier between us, but something drawing us closer together. Like we’re partners in this. Finally.

“But what are you going to do?” I venture. “Olivia has scheduled the shareholder meeting, hasn’t she? To vote on the takeover.”

Caleb lets out a sigh. “She has. And I’m sure she and Sebastian Wolfe are doing their best to woo the rest of the board, turning them against me with the stories about my theft.”

“Only because nobody knows about Nero’s blackmail,” I point out. “If you told them how your father was partners with Roman Barretti—”

“It’s not an option.” Caleb cuts me off. “Revealing that Sterling Cross was built on a partnership with a dangerous criminal? It would be front-page news. Roman’s in jail for financial crimes, but everyone knows that’s not half of what he’s done. My father’s name would be ruined. *My* name.”

“Your father is dead,” I say gently. “And the Sterling name is being dragged through the mud, the longer you try to hide the truth. The public already thinks you’ve been involved in something shady—Olivia made sure of that. They just don’t know what it is. Maybe instead of trying to hide it, you should just come clean.”

He shakes his head. “They wouldn’t understand. And the liability... How do I know the feds won’t seize the company, for being mixed up in Barretti business? I can’t risk it.”

“So why not find out?” I suggest. “Talk to some lawyers, figure out the consequences. The real ones,” I add, “not just the worst-case scenario. Surely Jonathan would know,” I add, naming his buddy, the lawyer who bailed him out when Olivia first started making accusations. “Have you asked him?”

Caleb shakes his head again. “I didn’t want to put him at risk.”

“Well, hopefully you’ve learned by now it’s better to open up rather than shoulder the burden alone,” I tell him. “One conversation. What could it hurt?”



TWO HOURS LATER, we’re sitting in Jonathan’s midtown office, and Caleb is telling him everything.

“So, here we are,” he finishes. “We think Nero was behind the crash, but either way, he expects another payment. I’ve maxed out my personal funds, I can’t pay him without screwing the company, and meanwhile, Olivia and Seb Wolfe are ready to strike. I don’t know what to do.”

Jonathan sits back in his executive chair, looking shell-shocked. “Jesus,” he says, taking off his glasses and polishing the lenses. “And this has been going on for how long? When were you going to tell me about this?”

Caleb doesn’t say a word, but the answer hangs in the silence: Never.

“Can you help?” I speak up.

Jonathan laces his fingers together. “I’m not sure... If Nero can produce original contracts for the deal his father struck with yours, he may be entitled to something from the company...”

“My father settled the debt.” Caleb says in a clipped voice. “He wanted out, and he paid the price. For all we know, the Barretts organized the plane crash that killed my parents.”

“So, contracts aren’t really the issue here,” Jonathan agrees quickly.

“What about the police?” I suggest.

Jonathan opens his mouth, I think to agree with me, but Caleb’s voice is rough. “No police. It’ll be a PR nightmare. And I know you think that isn’t worth the cost,” he adds, turning to me. “But this is my family name. If there’s any chance at all I can protect it—protect the company—I have to try. Anything that weakens me publicly, weakens Sterling Cross, it’s just setting the stage for Seb Wolfe’s hostile takeover. If he gets his way, I’ll be left with nothing. No honor, no reputation, no legacy to pass on... I can’t let that happen.”

“It won’t,” I vow, reaching over and squeezing his hand. “We’ll find a way. Won’t we, Jonathan?”

“We’ll sure as hell try,” he says cheerfully. “Let me look into a few things, and I’ll get back to you.”

“What should we do in the meantime?” I ask, as we get up to leave.

“Just carry on as normal.”

Caleb lets out a laugh. “Normal?”

I know what he means, because none of this feels normal.

Jonathan grins. “Yeah. Do the rich playboy thing you always do, don’t let anyone see you’re rattled. Until we come up with a game plan, it’s all about keeping up appearances. The more public, the better.”

Caleb frowns. “I have tickets to the Met tonight, but—”

“Go,” Jonathan says. “That’s an order from your learned counsel. See, be seen, shake hands. Don’t let the Sterling board know you’re rattled.”

Caleb turns to me. “I guess this means we’re going out tonight. Pick you up at eight?”





I AGONIZE OVER MY OUTFIT, knowing the whole point of the evening is to be standing directly in the public eye. In the end, Mara helps me pick a white gown that's not innocent in the least, with a plunging neckline that exposes my cleavage and hugs my body. She helps me put my hair up in a sexy updo, too, which I pair with smoky eyeliner and a pair of cute flats I can just about manage with my ankle.

Caleb is waiting for me beside the fountain in Lincoln Center. Wearing a tuxedo.

Damn, it's hard to think of a more breathtaking sight than Caleb in a tuxedo.

"You're gorgeous," he says to me as he takes my hand. "But we have to hurry. The opera is about to start."

"Oh? What are we seeing?" I ask, not like I know one opera from another.

*"Die Zauberflöte."*

"Translation?"

He smiles. "No idea. I won't be looking at anything but you," he adds, dipping his lips to whisper in my ear. "Wondering if you're wearing anything under that gown."

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I retort, flirtatious.

"Careful," he murmurs. "I might just find out... Right here."

Caleb steers us inside the grand lobby, which is emptying out as people move to their seats. Still, we draw plenty of looks, and I can sense Caleb at war between whisking me out of there as fast as we can, and maintaining the casual act that Jonathan urged.

"Relax," I tell him, patting his arm. "They're just thinking about how good you look in that tux."

Caleb snorts. “Sure.” But he slows, nodding at a few people in greeting. Everyone’s dressed in glamorous formalwear, and even though the circumstances aren’t ideal, it’s still a thrill to be on his arm at an event like this, moving through the upper-crust crowd as if I belong.

Instead of following the crowd to the main auditorium, Caleb leads me up a flight of stairs, to a lavish, velvet-lined hallway. “This box has been in my family for generations,” he explains, as an usher holds open the door for us. But before we can step inside, a painfully familiar voice echoes down the hallway.

“Well, isn’t this awkward?”

We turn. It’s Olivia, draped in blood-red silk, with Sebastian Wolfe on her arm. The British man looks imposing, dressed all in black, and a part of me would find him handsome if I didn’t know what a massive asshole he is.

Olivia raises her glass in a mock-toast.

“So nice to see you and your... *Assistant* here, Caleb,” she coos.

I tense. But Caleb’s palm is steady on my back.

“I wouldn’t have thought you’d have time for the opera, what with all your scheming,” he replies.

She trills a laugh. “I can multitask. After all, it doesn’t take much work to destroy your reputation when you’re working so hard to do it yourself.”

“We’ll see about that,” is all Caleb mutters, before leading me into the box.

The door shuts behind us and Caleb exhales. “I forgot that the Cross family box is right next to ours. Our parents got them at the same time. Of course Olivia has hers.”

“Sure.” I tease, trying to lighten the mood. “Some families pass down old china. You guys inherit boxes at the Met.”

Caleb cracks a smile. “There are some perks to the soiled Sterling name.”

He's right. We're front and center, with a perfect view of the stage. Instead of cramped chairs, we have luxurious seats to lounge on, and an usher silently enters bearing champagne and *petits fours*.

"Despite the company, this is amazing," I tell him.

He arches an eyebrow.

I laugh. "I mean, the company next door. The one in this box is just fine."

Caleb smirks even wider.

"You know what I mean," I laugh, flushing at the double entendre. But my big mouth seems to have worked, Caleb visibly relaxes beside me as we settle in for the show.

I pick up the opera glasses and peer through them as the lights dim and the orchestra starts to play.

I shiver with anticipation. I am in public, surrounded by NYC society, with Caleb by my side. It feels like the start of something, a glimpse of the life we can share as soon as this current drama is settled.

Except, as the opera gets underway, I notice Caleb's not looking at the stage, but at the box next to ours, where Olivia and Sebastian are visible, their heads bent together as they whisper, ignoring the show.

Damn them.

The music swells, and a singer launches into a plaintive aria. I want to distract him, so I slide my hand into his and squeeze.

He gives a vague squeeze back, eyes not leaving our enemies.

*Hmm*, it's going to take something more to get his mind off their betrayal.

Boldly, I move my hand to his lap, out of sight behind our balcony wall. I let it rest there a moment, over his crotch, and then I stroke slowly through the fabric of his pants.

Caleb inhales sharply.

He turns, giving me a questioning look. I smile back, and slowly trace the outline of his cock, already stiffening beneath my gentle touch.

“You look tense,” I whisper softly. “You should relax.”

The music is playing loudly, so I know nobody can hear us. To anyone watching in the audience, it looks like we’re just casually whispering about the show.

They can’t see my hand beneath the balcony, stroking him again.

But Caleb catches my hand and pulls it away. “Naughty girl. Keep doing that, and I’ll be anything but relaxed,” he murmurs.

“Are you sure about that?” I ask.

He nods, but there’s a new wicked glint in his gaze as he looks at me. Taking in my gown, and how the long folds part mid-thigh in a dramatic slit.

“But you know what would relax me?” he murmurs, dangerously tempting. “Watching you come your brains out in front of all these people.”

I gasp. “Caleb...”

“What’s the matter, sweetheart? Turnaround’s fair play.” Caleb challenges me softly. “Or are you worried you won’t keep from screaming my name with my fingers buried in your cunt?”

I feel a rush of liquid heat between my thighs. My skin prickles. My nipples tighten.

Caleb sees the stiff peaks through my gown and smirks. “I thought so.”

He reaches down and nudges the fabric of my gown out of the way so that it splits at the slit. His hand rests on my bare upper thigh, just sitting there. Heavy.

Promising what’s to come.

I shift in anticipation, pulse already racing.

Then his fingertips trail to my inner thigh, lightly grazing the skin in a hypnotic circle, over and over, until I'm panting.

"I could stop right here," he murmurs, giving me a look of pure dominance. "Leave you panting like this for the rest of the night. Imagining how good it would feel if I only touched you..."

I shift again, damp and sticky just at the promise of his filthy words. "Please..." I find myself whispering.

"You want more?" Caleb grins. "Very well."

His fingers slide deeper under my dress between my thighs, searching until he reaches—

Caleb stops. His breath grows labored.

"Dirty girl," he admonishes me, finding me bare beneath my gown.

No panties.

I'm wet and ready for him.

"Surprise," I whisper, enjoying the thrill of his desire. How I've shocked him.

"Just for that, you're coming twice."

I've barely time to inhale in delight before his fingers are stroking over my clit, sure and steady, a light rhythm that makes me squirm in my seat.

God, but he's too good at this.

"Caleb," I whisper, biting back a moan.

"I know, baby," he replies, still stroking me. "It's not enough, is it? Your greedy little cunt needs to be filled. Stretched. *Used*."

He slips one finger inside me, palm pressing down against my clit as he rubs my inner walls. *Oh God*. I clench around him, panting hard. Luckily, the opera singer is belting out an aria so loudly, it drowns out my whimpers of pleasure.

"Look at them all," he whispers, tilting my head to see the audience below us, just a few feet away. "They have no idea

what a dirty girl you are right now, with my fingers shoved in your pussy, drenched in your slick. You would bend over this balcony and take my cock if I told you, wouldn't you? Let me fuck you in front of all of them, begging for more."

"Yes," I gasp, as he thrusts another finger inside me. "God, yes."

"That's my dirty, perfect girl," Caleb growls in my ear, his fingers moving faster. I swear the music is a crescendo, echoing the rise inside me.

I bite my lip, desperately trying to look cool as below the balcony, I'm thrusting wildly against his fingers, chasing the rush. The music soars, peaking, and Caleb moves in close.

"Now come for me, baby. And don't you dare make a sound."

I push my weight down onto his hand as the orgasm rips through my body. I lose control as his fingers move in a tornado of heat inside me, until I'm wrung out and gasping in my seat.

The audience applauds.

The opera, I realize through my haze. They're applauding the singers, not me and my magnificent orgasm.

I collapse back.

Caleb withdraws and rearranges my dress again. "So, how are you liking the opera?" he asks in a normal voice.

I have to laugh. "It's... An experience, alright."

He grins. "I think that's enough for one night. How about we get out of here?" Caleb leans in. "Your screams of pleasure are better music than anything these singers could create."

I nod, breathless, and let him pull me to my feet.

The town car's waiting for us, so when we get inside, he pulls me onto his lap and kisses me, pulling aside the fabric of my dress so I can straddle him.

As he trails kisses down my neck, he says, "And what did you think of *Die Zauberflöte*?"

I'm in absolute heaven as he feasts on my neck, so out slips the truth. "I didn't understand a lot of it."

He pulls away, his eyes heavy and dark with lust as he gazes at my breasts. His big hands rove up my thighs. "Oh? What part?"

"Actually... All of it," I admit. "I was distracted, if you remember."

He chuckles back and nips at my ear. "All right. Tutorial." He winds a loose strand of hair around his finger. "Prince Tamino is saved from a terrible serpent..." His hands trail up my sides. "By the three ladies who are mistresses of the Queen of the Night..."

"Queen of the Night?" I gasp as his mouth meets the hollow of my throat.

"Mmhmm..."

He gets busy lavishing attention on my collarbone, so the whole explanation goes out the window. Not that I mind. *At all*. What he's doing to my body is *so* much more interesting.

So interesting, in fact, that before I know it, we arrive in front of his apartment building. Reluctantly, I pull away and, when the driver opens the door, step out onto the curb.

"So what was with that bird man?" I ask as we step into the elevator.

"Papageno?" He presses the button for the penthouse and pulls me flush against him, as if he can't get enough of me into his system. "Do you really want to talk about that?"

"No," I whisper, because I won't remember anything he says, anyway. I can't think of anything but him. He feels too good. We tumble out of the elevator, and Caleb fumbles for his keys.

"You better be naked in five seconds," he warns me, throwing open the door.

"And you better be inside me," I tell him, reaching for the ties around my neck.

But he stops, his expression darkening. “Don’t.”

“What?” I pause, confused. He’s looking around, sniffing the air.

“Do you smell that?”

“What are you talking about.”

“Gas,” he says grimly, yanking me back into the hall.  
“We’ve got to get out. Now!”





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## JULIET

CALEB PRACTICALLY THROWS me back in his car, and soon we're speeding north out of the city. Playful Caleb is gone, instead, his knuckles are white on the steering wheel, and the headlights of oncoming cars illuminates a fearsome determination on his face.

Gas. Could it have been someone trying to hurt us?

To *kill* us?

I close my eyes, willing myself not to think of the accident again. "Where are we going?"

"I have a cabin upstate, on Lake George. We'll be safe there."

*Safe*. As in, we were *unsafe* at his place. I can't get that through my head.

"You really think someone turned the gas on—on purpose?"

He doesn't say anything, but I already know. If one of Nero's men could drive me off the road, what's to stop them from turning Caleb's place into a powder keg?

"We just need some time to come up with a plan," he says, trying to reassure me. "I'll figure it out."

But how much time? And short of going to police, which Caleb's firmly against, is there any way out of this?

Caleb's pushing ninety up the interstate. The roads are slick from an earlier rain. A truck coming in the other

direction lays on its air horn. I squeeze my eyes closed even tighter and grip the arm rest.

I hate this.

“Hey,” he says, putting a hand on my knee. I open my eyes again to find him glancing over with a fierce protectiveness in his eyes. “It’s all right. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

The way he says it, his voice never wavering, I almost believe it.

“I mean it, Juliet. Nobody’s hurting you again.”

I exhale. Maybe it’s his force of will, but I let myself be reassured.

As we ride out of the city, the traffic becomes more and more sparse, and eventually, we’re the only ones on the road. He keeps his hand on my knee, steady and comforting, and I must drift off to sleep, because it seems like only a moment later that the car comes to a stop.

I try to force open my eyes, but I’m so tired.

“Shh,” Caleb murmurs. “Go back to sleep.”

I’m dimly aware of the door opening, and a blast of cool air hits me. But then Caleb’s warm body is against mine, lifting me easily into his arms.

I bury my head against his hard chest and melt into him. There’s the creak of steps, the sound of a screen door screeching open and slamming shut. I smell something like pine and earth, mingling with Caleb’s aftershave.

Then he lowers me down into a cloud of pillowy softness, and everything else falls away.



THE NEXT MORNING I wake to sunshine, dappling on a homemade patchwork quilt.

I sit up, yawning as I look around the room.

I'm in a rustic cabin, decorated in a simple, homey style: knotted wooden walls, old furniture, and a clutter of old books and mementos. When I sit up and look out the window, all I see is green, and the blue sparkle of a lake nearby.

I'm alone.

I pull the quilt off my body and realize that I'm naked underneath. My fancy gown is draped over a chair in the corner, my shoes lined up underneath, so I wrap the quilt around myself and go in search of something to wear.

I step out of the bedroom, curious about this place. All Caleb's homes so far have been massive, lavish affairs—the Manhattan penthouse, the country mansion—but this is different. It's a simple, all-wood A-frame house with a small modern kitchen and two-story living area, complete with fieldstone fireplace.

Modest. Charming.

Personal.

In the kitchen, I find a note on the granite breakfast bar.

*Went out to get supplies. Be back soon. –C*

I breathe a sigh of relief. After fleeing the city in such a rush, a part of me wasn't sure what Caleb would do next. But since

I have time to kill, I decide to explore. I start in the kitchen. Supplies are definitely needed. Something tells me this place hasn't been used in a while. There's a fine layer of dust over everything, and nothing inside the cabinets or fridge. Something tells me this place hasn't been used in a while.

So is it a secret hideaway, or a relic of the past?

Meandering down the hallway, I find a collection of black-and-white photographs on the wall. The first is an old photograph of a little boy that can't be more than three or four, standing on the dock's edge, completely naked and grinning.

Is that... Caleb?

I laugh in surprise.

The next is of a teenager with his father, holding fishing gear. The young one's definitely Caleb—he has the same eyes, the same strong jaw. But he's skinnier. Gangly. Maybe even a little awkward.

I find myself smiling as I go to the next photograph.

This one shows Caleb with an unattractive bowl-shaped haircut, in the arms of a woman I recognize as his mom, Annette. They're both in bathing suits, like they just spent time splashing in the lake. And they both look so happy...

I never knew Caleb could smile like that. Of course, no one ever smiles with such unbridled excitement as they did when they were kids... But Caleb doesn't smile much at all, anymore. Too much on his mind, I guess.

I want to make him smile like that again.

Dragging the quilt around like a cape, I go into one of the other bedrooms, and find a chest of men's clothes: sweats, swimming gear, basic T-shirts. I pick out the smallest sizes I can, but they still dwarf me. Still, it's better than nothing, so I dress quickly, and go retrieve my phone from my purse in the living area. I have a couple of messages from Mara, and I'm just scrolling through when it buzzes with a call.

Olivia.

I pause. From the scene at the opera, it's clear she's still going full steam ahead with her plan to undermine Caleb and sell the company to Sebastian Wolfe. I know that she has her reasons, and feels betrayed by the all-consuming role the company played in her parents' lives; but still, all her lying and cheating makes my stomach turn.

I answer, cautious. "Olivia. Did you need something?"

"Just wondering where you disappeared to," she replies breezily, like she hasn't spent the past month plotting Caleb's downfall. "I stopped by Caleb's place with some paperwork, and there were workmen everywhere. Something about a gas leak? I do hope you're all right."

"We're fine," I say through clenched teeth. "Caleb and I just decided to take a little time away from the city."

“I don’t know if that’s wise, considering everything that’s going on here.”

I nearly laugh aloud. That’s rich, considering she’s the source of *what’s going on*. “Thanks for your concern,” I say icily. “We’re just at his place upstate, we’ll be back before you know it.”

“You know what? Take your time,” she coos. “Seb and I will get this takeover buttoned up; you won’t miss a thing. He’s efficient like that. Once he sees something he wants, he doesn’t stop at anything.”

I pause. I’ve been thinking that Olivia was captain of this ship, but maybe Sebastian is really the one in charge? Maybe she doesn’t have any idea what she’s in for. Maybe in her blind need to get revenge on Caleb, she’s forgetting to look out for her own interests.

“Olivia, how well do you know Sebastian?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that his whole business is acquiring companies for the lowest price possible. How do you know he isn’t actively working to devalue Sterling Cross, so that you don’t get what it’s worth?”

There’s a pause. Then she scoffs. “Listen, honey. You just stay in your lane. Stick to giving Caleb the best blow jobs of his life so that when he comes back to the city, he’s in tip-top shape. He’s going to need to be, to withstand what we’re going to do to him.”

And then she hangs up.

I take a deep breath, trying not to let her words rile me up. Caleb will find a way, I tell myself. And until then?

I need to figure out what *my* plan is.

I wander outside, and head to the end of the dock. Sitting, I dip my toes in the cool, warm water, letting the sunshine and sound of the water lapping bring my blood pressure down back to normal again. For a moment, I can almost pretend I’m

on a relaxing vacation, and not fleeing the city to escape all kinds of threats to our lives.

When did my life get so complicated?

When I signed up to be Olivia's pawn, I think ruefully. When I met Caleb, and knew that nothing would be the same again.

Maybe I should be scared of what waits for us back in the city. But instead, I find myself smiling. Because regardless of what's happening, we're in this together now.

A team.

Caleb has let me into his life, but more than that, he's shown up for me in mine. Supporting me with my mom, looking out for me in hospital. Even when he was pushing me away, it was with my safety in mind.

And when it came down to it, when I put everything on the line and told him how I feel, he stepped up. He chose me.

We chose each other.

I hear footsteps behind me, and turn to find Caleb strolling out to meet me, two steaming cups in his hands.

"If that's coffee, I'll love you forever," I joke, and he smiles.

"Then I'm a lucky man."

He settles beside me on the dock. "Settling in OK?"

"Can't you tell from my stylish outfit?" I strike a silly pose. He chuckles.

"I forgot, I don't exactly keep this place stocked."

"It's OK. It's so peaceful here," I say, looking around at the placid lakeshore. "It feels like there's nobody around for miles."

"There isn't. No one will find us here."

There's something to his tone that makes me turn. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing, just...” He drags a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. That you have to hide out. That you have to worry about your safety all over again.”

“I know how it goes. I signed on for this, remember? Besides,” I say, sinking against him, “I know I’ll be safe with you.”

Caleb pulls me tight against him, claiming my mouth in a slow, deep kiss. I melt into his arms. How could being here, with him, be a burden?

“When was the last time you were here?” I ask, when we finally come up for air.

Caleb pauses. “Not in a while,” he admits. “I spent a ton of time here when I was a kid though.”

“I saw,” I say with a smirk. “Those photos are really something.”

He laughs. “No comment.”

“You mean this isn’t your secret nudist retreat?” I tease.

“Why, do you want it to be?” Caleb gets a wicked look in his eyes.

“That depends—”

I barely finish the word before he’s up, hauling me over his shoulder.

“Caleb!” I squeal, but he doesn’t hesitate—heading for the end of the dock and launching me into the cold lake.

Water crashes around me. Breaking the surface, I push my hair back, gasping for air. The cold water is refreshing, and I smile up at him, still standing there on the end of the dock. “Will you be joining me? Or did you just throw me in here for the view?”

“I’ll admit, it’s a good one.” His eyes trail to my wet T-shirt. My nipples pucker under his gaze, and I shiver.

“So you’re staying dry? That’s hardly fair.” I splash in his direction.



Caleb smirks, pulling his T-shirt over his head. “You want company?”

My pulse kicks. “Yes please.”

He strips off the rest of his clothes, and I admire the view before he dives cleanly into the water, barely making a ripple.

He swims over to me. “Now *someone*’s overdressed.”

“And who’s fault is that?”

“You’re right. Let me rectify the situation.” Caleb peels my wet shirt from my body and tosses it onto the dock. My sweatpants follow suit, until I’m naked, treading water beside him.

“Better,” he says, dropping a kiss on my bare neck. “Much, much better.”

I shudder at his touch.

Wrapping an arm around his shoulders, I trail the other downward until my palm finds his cock. Hot, hard and thick. He groans as I close my fist around him and pump. Slowly.

“Juliet...”

I smile. “You know, I woke up naked this morning.”

“HMMMMM...”

“And you weren’t there to *greet* me.”

“My mistake.” Caleb’s voice grows thick. I slow my movements even more, and he bucks his hips against me, straining for more.

“So how are you going to make it up to me?” I whisper.

In an instant, Caleb drags me toward the dock, backing me up against the wooden ladder as we’re both submerged. I reach up, grabbing the wooden frame and bracing myself as he spreads my thighs beneath the water, positioning himself between them.

One of his hands rise to cup my breast, rolling the nipple as he slides his cock against my clit.

“Like this?”

I let out a moan at the delicious friction. Caleb growls against me.

“Yeah, I think you like it like this.”

He rubs himself against me again, and I arch into him, loving the feel of the cool water against my naked body, contrasting the heat within. His cock slides over my clit, wet with my juices and the lake water, pressing lightly, making me gasp. But just as soon as he’s started, Caleb pauses, leaving me panting.

“Please,” I whimper. “More.”

“Use your words, sweetheart.” he murmurs, raw domination on his face as he watches me. “What do you need?”

Through the haze of desire, I find the words. “You. Your cock. Inside me.”

“Good girl.”

Caleb presses the thick head between my folds. I sigh in pleasure as he sinks in, just an inch, teasing me, before pulling away. “Good enough for you?”

His eyes brim with pure male superiority. It’s classic Caleb. *If you want this, You’ll have to beg.*

But I’m happy to. God, I love it when he takes control.

“No, it’s not enough.” I gasp, arching to meet him again. “I need all of you. Every inch. Please.”

“Since you asked so sweetly…”

Caleb thrusts into me again, slow and deep. So deep.

*Fuck. Yes.*

I let out a moan, gripping onto the ladder. “There. Oh God.”

“Not God, baby. Just me.”

Caleb withdraws, then fucks into me again, his cock burying deep, hitting just right. I feel the sweetness tightening

in my spine, and clench around him, drawing a groan from his lips.

Fuck, he feels so good. I'm swept up in the dirty rhythm of his thrusts, and the passion of the moment, cresting higher—

“AGHH!”

I feel something slithering past me, brushing my thigh. “Stop, STOP!”

“What’s wrong?” he pants.

“There’s something in the water!” I scramble out of his embrace, and haul myself out of the water. “Something slimy!”

Caleb lets out a frustrated laugh, then follows me onto the dock, his cock still straining and erect. “Inside, now,” he commands, then doesn’t wait for me to move before throwing me over his shoulder, still naked and dripping wet.

In more ways than one.

Caleb practically sprints back to the cabin, slamming the door behind us and making straight for the bathroom. He turns on the shower, and deposits me on the narrow bench in the back of the stall.

“Now, where were we?” he asks, that dangerous look in his eyes again.

I catch my breath. “You were fucking my brains out?” I say sweetly.

He smirks. “I seem to remember something like that...”

But instead of reaching for me again, he stands there under the spray. “On your knees,” he commands. “You need to earn your pleasure.”

My breath hitches, and I slide to my knees to obey him.

“You wanted every inch. Begged for it, even,” Caleb muses. “So take it. Take it all.”

I slide him easily into my mouth, opening wide to fit his thick girth between my lips.

I can taste myself on his cock.

It's so dirty, I feel a fresh wave of desire, slick between my thighs. Caleb fists my wet hair into a rope, controlling my pace as I swallow him down, almost too much, almost too deep to take.

I gag a little, recoiling, but Caleb holds me in place. "Easy there," he says, stroking my cheek as I drool. "You can take it. Just open wide, like a good girl."

He pulls me back onto him again, his grip tight on my hair. I choke back my gag reflex, and suck him down again, wanting to please him.

Needing to satisfy his commands.

"That's it, just like that." Caleb groans, the sound echoing as the hot spray rains down on the both of us. "My greedy girl, desperate for every inch, isn't that right? You won't be satisfied until my cum's raining down your throat, and you're choking on every last drop."

I moan around him, angling my head to take him deeper.

"Or maybe I should come on those pretty tits," he mutters hoarsely. "Paint you with my cum, watch it trickle over your sweet nipples, have you lick it up for me."

The world blurs. All that matters is the eight thick inches buried down my throat, so deep all I can do is slobber and gasp as he mercilessly fucks my mouth. My body is aching for him, but I wouldn't dream of stopping, of touching myself to ease the ache.

In this moment, I exist for his pleasure only. Used.

*His.*

Caleb thrusts faster, his body going tense. "Fuck, baby, just like that." He bucks wildly against my mouth, and I reach up, cupping his balls, squeezing lightly as I bob on his cock. He answers with a roar. "Fuck. Yes. Yes!"

He wrenches free from my mouth and explodes in a torrent of hot cum, spurting over my face and breasts. I sit back on my knees, taking it obediently, loving the wild look in his eyes as

he's lost to pleasure, clutching the wall for balance until finally, he's spent.

Caleb opens his eyes, looking down at me. I smile back. "Well, fuck," he says with a chuckle. "Look at you. You made a real mess."

"I think that was you," I say, laughing. Caleb helps me to my feet, and I reach for the washcloth to rinse off.

He stops me.

"No. You heard me. Lick it up."

My stomach clenches. *Is he serious?* But Caleb's eyes are boring into me like steel.

*This isn't over yet.*

I delight at the thought.

Slowly, obediently, I lift one breast, bending my head to lick off his cum. Caleb reaches out, swirling the sticky mess over my skin. I can't believe I'm really doing this—or that it's so amazingly hot.

"Remember the taste, sweetheart," he growls possessively. "That's who owns you. That's who'll make you beg. Only me."

"Yes, you," I whimper, squeezing my thighs together at the rush.

I'm his. Completely.

Caleb begins to soap me down, washing my skin, cleaning me with slow, deliberate strokes. I sink into his embrace, hypnotized by the feel of his hands on my skin. Roving over me, teasing at my damp breasts, making me shiver with his sudden gentleness.

He's a man of contradictions. Passion and control. Steel and molten fire. Tenderness and brutal domination. I never know when he'll flip the switch, but I love every moment of the ride.

Now, his touch turns soft, barely brushing me, but making me squirm as his fingertips dip between my thighs. He strokes

my clit, delving into my wetness, inhaling in a sharp breath.

“So wet,” he murmurs, stroking up again, toying with my breasts. “So ready for me.”

“Yes, please,” I breathe, head spinning.

Caleb shuts off the shower and wraps me in a fluffy towel, drying me off, then leads me to the bedroom. I follow, my legs unsteady. I feel like I’ve gone five rounds, but he hasn’t even fucked me properly yet.

I can’t wait for more.

Caleb sits me on the bed, and I scoot back eagerly, spreading my legs wide for him.

But Caleb doesn’t take me hard and fast. He doesn’t even make love to me tenderly. He stands there, looking down at me. Drinking in the sight of me.

“We’re going to play a little game,” he finally says, and the temptation in his voice sends shivers down my spine.

“What kind of game?”

He doesn’t answer me. “Lay back.”

I do it.

“Now, I’m not going to tie you down. I’m not going to restrain you with anything... Except my words: If you move, if you touch yourself... If you lay one finger on my property...”

Caleb presses two fingers lightly, right on my clit.

“Than I stop. And you’ll have to stay like this, wet and needy, aching for my cock.”

He taps me again, then removes his hand. I’m left lying there, naked, shivering in anticipation.

“Do you understand?”

I nod quickly. “Yes. I understand.”

“Good.”

He moves away from the bed, and I lift my head to watch him before remembering his rules.

I'm not allowed to move.

I take a deep breath, and set my head down on the sheets again, listening to the sound of him rummaging in a closet. The anticipation is killing me almost as much as the sexual tension, wound tight in my body. But this is what he wanted: me at his mercy.

Me, willing to obey every command.

And god, I love it.

Music plays softly, then the mattress dips. Caleb sits beside me, back at my side. "See, I'm going to take my time," he murmurs, reaching to stroke my stomach with a featherlight touch. "No interruptions. Nobody to stop me. Just you, and me, and... Some *accessories*."

I clench in anticipation, remembering the nipple clamps in Rome. He chuckles.

"You like that, huh? You want to find out what your body can do for me."

"I want anything you give me," I answer softly. He rewards me with a slow, rolling pinch of my nipple. I moan.

"God, look at you. So perfect. All mine."

Caleb falls silent then, steadily stroking my body, bringing every nerve screaming to life. He covers every inch, so slow, it soon drives me crazy. And when he dips his head, and brushes his lips against my shivering skin...

I arch off the bed.

"What did I tell you?" Caleb pushes me back to the mattress. "Don't move a muscle."

I inhale. Maybe this game is going to be harder than I thought.

Caleb breathes over my stomach, licking a path up the side of my ribs. I shudder, fisting the covers in my hands to keep

from reaching for him. Slowly, he licks higher, swirling his tongue around my nipple, so close, but not close enough.

“Caleb...”

“I know,” he murmurs, breathing on one stiff, aching peak. “You want more.”

“Yes.” I whimper.

“But what do you *need*?”

His mouth moves away again, and I let out a groan of frustration. “I need you!”

Caleb chuckles. “I can tell. Look at you, making a mess.” His tongue suddenly delves between my legs and I yelp in surprised pleasure. Caleb licks me, hard and fast, devouring my clit for a few precious seconds, then he’s gone again, leaving me gasping.

“Bastard,” I mutter under my breath.

He laughs.

“Sweetheart, I’m just getting started.”

And he is. Caleb returns to stroking me softly, working my body into a frenzy of unsatiated desire. I’m whimpering, moaning, cursing his name by the time his fingertips travel lazily between my thighs again.

This time, he slides one finger inside me, tortuously slow.

I cry out.

“Shh, baby girl,” he soothes me, pressing lightly against my clit with his thumb. “You need to relax.”

“Can’t,” I grind out. “Need more.”

“Well, maybe just for a moment. Since you’re being so good for me...” Caleb slides another finger inside me, and I clench around them hard. He works my inner walls, making me tense up, and then—

“No,” I cry as he leaves me, more frustrated than ever. And he does it again, and again: Bringing me to the edge and then taking the pressure away until I’m panting and desperate.



Then I suddenly feel cool metal on my skin.

I strain to see. Caleb has produced a slim, silver wand. He trails the tip over my body, and down between my thighs, resting against my clit.

I tense in anticipation.

He smiles, a dark intention glittering in his eyes. “That’s right, get ready. See, most women don’t know what their body is capable of. But I’m going to teach you. You’re going to come so many times for me you’ll be screaming for mercy.”

*Yes please.*

The wand starts to vibrate with a low, deep buzz as Caleb presses it gently against my clit. The vibrations shiver through me, and I’m already so close to the edge, that it only takes a few seconds before I climax in a swift, sweet wave.

“Good girl,” he says approvingly. “Again.”

Before I can get my breath back, he presses the wand between my legs again. The vibe is stronger, longer this time, and I try to wriggle away from the onslaught of sensation, but Caleb presses a firm hand to my stomach, pinning me in place.

“You can take it.”

The buzzing grows, shuddering through me. *Fuck, that’s good.* I moan out loud, arching up to meet the vibrations, still cresting off my last orgasm.

This one takes me hard. I come with a cry—but Caleb doesn’t move the wand away.

It’s too strong. I fight to get away, but I can’t. He’s holding me down, forcing me to take it.

“Caleb, please,” I beg, ultrasensitive.

“Don’t fight it. We’re only just getting started.”

Caleb flicks the vibe to a higher setting. A deeper, stronger vibration.

I scream.

It's too much, overwhelming. Out of control. Through the haze, I realize that I could say our safe word, the one he explained to me on that very first night. *Red*. One word, and I could stop this. But...

But...

My body explodes in another orgasm. Pleasure crashes through me, and I sink back in the sheets, gasping for air. Wrung out.

When I open my eyes, Caleb is watching me with that dangerous smile. "More?" he asks. I shake my head quickly.

"No. Thank you."

"Silly girl. That wasn't a question."

This time, he slides the wand inside me. I exhale in relief, the cool metal a balm against my inferno. This, I can take. It's slim, too small to work me up, if I just—

Caleb lowers his mouth and licks up against my clit. Swirling, lapping. Devouring me.

I cry out, in pleasure or pain I'm not sure, but he doesn't stop. Swirling his tongue over my tender bud over and over until I'm coming again, sobbing into the sheets.

I can't believe it. Four orgasms, milked from my body under his expert hands.

No other man has ever come close.

"Damn, you taste so sweet," Caleb's voice rumbles against me. He nips at my thigh, then lazily laps my clit again. "Juicy as a peach."

I loll back in the pillows, lost in the afterglow. Endorphins are flooding through me, thick in my veins.

Never mind a day at the spa; one hour with Caleb Sterling is like running a marathon and getting a full-body massage, all in one.

I'm so blissed out, I barely notice he's still licking at me.

Not until the wand vibrates to life again.

My body jolts.

It's still inside me, cool metal buried in my wet heat. The rumbling buzz vibrating against my inner walls now, Caleb angling it deep inside to hit that sweet spot—

“Ahhhh!”

I arch off the bed, but Caleb shoves me back down. Then his mouth is on me again, ravenously lapping at my clit. *Fuck*. I grip the sheets in shock. I can't come again. I can't. There's no way in hell—

“God, yes!” I cry out, as the vibrations and his mouth and God, that wicked tongue bring my body roaring to another crescendo. He closes his lips around my clit and sucks, and *fuck*, the world explodes again.

I crash back onto the bed with a moan, my body aching with pleasure.

Surely that was the last one.

“See?” Caleb's voice is casual, like we've been taking a stroll through the park. “You don't know how much you can take, baby. But we're not done yet.”

He flips my body suddenly, rolling me so I'm facedown on the bed.

“We won't be done until you come screaming on my cock.”

I'm spent and limp as he moves behind me, lifting my hips and positioning himself. I feel the nudge of his cock at my entrance, then he's sinking inside me, all the way to the hilt.

I moan. Despite my exhaustion, it still feels like heaven, him moving inside me. The thick stretch of him. The sweet friction as he buries himself deep.

And he's right.

I thought I didn't have another orgasm in me, but already, my body is responding to his invasion; thrusting back against him of its own accord, taking him deeper, tightening in pleasure.

Caleb pulls me up, so I'm pinned against his chest as he thrusts up inside me.

He takes my hand and presses it against my abdomen. "Feel that?" he growls, driving into me again. I'm shocked to feel the outline of his cock, pressing against our hands. "That's how it feels to be fucked by a real man. So big, your body's fighting to take it. So deep, you've never been fucked like this before."

God, yes.

He moves his hand lower, to pet my still-sensitive clit. "No," I whimper, squirming to get away. "It's too much, I can't—"

"You can, and you fucking will."

I instinctively struggle against his iron grip, but Caleb holds me as he rubs my clit, pleasure mingling with pain in an intoxicating blend as I grow lightheaded, a ragdoll in his arms.

I have no choice. Nowhere to turn.

So I surrender, willingly.

*I trust him completely.*

"That's right, baby. Take it all."

I moan, sinking back against him. It's overwhelming, the sensations crashing through me. His thick cock splitting me open, fingers demanding on my tender clit, his hand like steel, gripping me tightly. A haze of pleasure descends, my body shuddering, cresting, until I'm moaning, louder, crying out his name.

"Caleb! Fuck! Yes!"

"You've never been fucked like this, have you baby? You didn't know it could be this good."

"Never," I gasp, bouncing on his cock. "Only you."

"That's right. Only me. Forever, your only man."

He rears up inside me, hitting that special spot, grinding deep until I can't take the pleasure anymore. I shatter,

convulsing wildly, clenching around him in ecstasy until Caleb comes with a roar.

The pleasure breaks over us both. But as it pulls us under, I hear that word echo in my ears again.

*Forever.*

And I pray it's all for real.



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## JULIET

THE WEEKEND PASSES in a delicious blur—and it's not just the sex that's blowing my mind.

It's amazing being away from it all like this, just the two of us. It's like we're two young lovers, playing house—sleeping in, cooking meals together, going on long walks. We spend the nights in each other's arms, and the days just lazily relaxing in the sun.

I wish we could stay forever. Away from the drama, and danger, back in the city.

“Found your happily-ever-after yet?”

I look up. Is Caleb reading my mind?

He nods to the book in my hand. “Isn't it how they all turn out in the end?”

“Oh, right.” I realize he's talking about the old dime-store paperback romance I found in the cabin. I smile. “I'm not at the end just yet.”

He grins, and goes back to work chopping wood, looking manly and powerful, as he drags logs about, the sweat glistening on his bare chest. And even though it's been barely an hour since the last time he fucked me, I feel the twist of desire, low in my belly again.

I can't ever get enough of this man.

I put the book aside. “I'm going to make a snack. Want one?”

He wipes the sweat from his forehead. “No, but I could use a beer.”

“Coming right up!” I stop to give him a kiss. “Mmmm... Look at you, out of those designer suits. It looks good on you.”

He sets aside the axe and pulls me closer for a thrilling kiss.

“I’m going to get started on dinner,” I tell him. We’ve been eating in bed most nights, grabbing food out of deli containers, but I want tonight to be a proper meal. “See you inside.”

I head up into the house and start setting out food to prep. I find china plates and placemats, but I have to go searching for tableware to complete the spread. I remember seeing some boxes in one of the bedrooms, so I take a look.

When I open the first box, I find water glasses, and some candlesticks too.

Bingo.

I set them aside, but one of the glasses slips from my hands, shattering on the floor.

I curse, grabbing a blanket to sweep up the remains. But a shard of glass catches on the floorboard, and when I go to lift it out, the whole board lifts out of place.

Weird.

I pause, catching sight of something in the dusty chasm. I peer closer, and find a stack of old letters, tied together with a frayed ribbon. They’re crumbling and aged, and who knows how long they’ve been hidden down there.

I look at the one on top. It’s addressed to Annette Sterling.

*Annette Sterling.*

Caleb’s mother?

I reel back, almost cutting myself on the glass. Quickly, I sweep it up and dispose of the pieces—then return to the bedroom and that stack of letters.

I shouldn’t read them.



They're private, I know. None of my business. And they were buried here, under the floor, that means someone wanted to keep them hidden.

It means they were something worth hiding.

Curiosity fights with caution in my brain as I weigh the choice.

Curiosity wins.

I open the first envelope and pull out a small, folded letter. It says:

*Petal,*

My eyes widen in recognition.

Petal. Like the inscription on the Sterling diamond necklace.

I continue to read:

*I think about you every moment we're apart....*

I scan down the rest of the letter. A love letter.

How sweet. Caleb's parents were true romantics. They wrote each other love letters. What a beautiful thing. They must've been so in love.

But my eyes catch on the signature.

*Forever, R*

R? Wait. Maybe I'm mistaken, but I thought Caleb's dad was Jacob. No, I'm sure it is. There's a photograph of him, hanging in the lobby of Sterling Cross, with a gold placard underneath. *Jacob Sterling.*

I pull out another letter. Again, it's to Petal, from this mysterious R. I scan down the page and find something:

*You don't know how happy I am to hear of your decision. Don't lose faith, my love. One day, I swear to you, this will all be over, and you and I can be together.*

Oh, my god.

I glance at the date and do the math in my head. This was a year before Caleb was born. So that means...

Annette Sterling was having a passionate affair.

I'm still gaping at the letter when I hear Caleb's voice calling, "Juliet?"

*Shit.* Quickly, I gather up the letters and shove them back in the alcove, replacing the plank. Then I rush out to meet him, pasting a smile on my face. "Hi!"

"I wondered if the bears got you," he grins.

"There are bears?!"

Caleb chuckles. "Don't worry, I can take them."

I smile. "Sure you can. With a shotgun."

He pulls me in for a kiss, but my mind is still back with the letters, and everything they revealed.

Should I tell him?

It's ancient history, it's not like it could hurt him to know about it. But still... Why rock the boat?

Whatever happened in the past can't make a difference to Caleb now. And the last thing he needs is more drama on his mind.

"Are you OK?" Caleb asks, drawing back with a puzzled expression.

"Fine," I say quickly. "Great! Let's get started on dinner."

"Let's..."

With a wicked look, Caleb pulls me closer... and hikes up my skirt. I laugh, but then he drops to his knees, and the giggles die on my lips—soon to be replaced with a moan.

The past can stay buried, I decide, as he nibbles his way up my thigh.

Why ruin a good thing?



AFTER A MORE-THAN-MINOR DISTRACTION, we wind up in the shower, Caleb cleaning me off with slow, languid strokes. “Take your time,” he tells me, as I rinse shampoo from my hair. “I need a moment to wow you with my pasta.”

“You already wowed me... Three times today,” I tease.

He spans my ass lightly, and goes to dry off. I take my time, luxuriating under the spray, then finally wrap myself in a bathrobe and join him in the kitchen. The scent of homemade pasta sauce wafts through the cabin, and my stomach growls in response as Caleb shoots an amused glance over his shoulder, his bare muscled back catching my attention.

“Hungry?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

I set the table and then hop up on a counter to watch him cook. Music’s playing, a classic rock station; evening sun warms the room, and the simple domesticity of the scene suddenly takes my breath away.

*It’s so normal.*

Caleb fixing dinner, me pouring us some wine... We could be any couple, anywhere. No billion-dollar company hanging in the balance, or Mafia enemy set on revenge.

Just the two of us.

In love.

Caleb sways, humming along to the music as he stirs a pan on the stove.

“You like Springsteen?” I ask, surprised. He always seems too refined for music like this.

“Who doesn’t like Springsteen?” he replies. He takes my hand and tugs me down, sliding his arms around me to dance right there in the kitchen.

I laugh, sinking into his embrace. Treasuring the feel of him against me, and the light, easy energy in his smile.

It's like we have an unspoken agreement: We're on vacation.

The usual rules don't apply.

Caleb whirls me, once, twice, one hand firmly caressing the small of my back.

Resting my head on his shoulder, I whisper, "You're a good dancer."

"I'm better at other things," he tells me, slipping his hand under my robe. It delves under the fabric, grazing my upper thighs, finding my bare ass. He squeezes lightly. "Mmmm."

"All my clothes are in the dryer, still."

"That's where they should stay."

He tugs the cord at my waist, and the robe falls open.

His eyes rove over me. I would have thought by now that he would be used to the sight of my naked body, but still, he drinks in the sight of me like I'm a priceless work of art. Every time.

I shiver under his gaze.

"Come with me," he murmurs, holding out a hand.

"What about dinner?" I ask, even as I follow him to the bedroom.

"Dinner is going to have to wait."

I brace myself for the onslaught of passion, but instead, Caleb leads me to the bed and lays me down slowly, capturing my mouth in a slow, sweet kiss.

I melt in his arms.

"I can never get enough of you," he groans, sliding his hands over my naked body as I eagerly strip off his clothes.

"Me too," I whisper, kissing him deeply.

This time, he's not forceful or commanding. This time, Caleb's touch is exquisitely tender. He caresses me, bringing my body into a state of wild pleasure, as I meet him, touch for touch. I explore every plane of his body, every ridge of muscle with my hands and mouth and tongue, until finally, when he parts my legs and sinks inside me, I could swear I can't tell where he ends and I begin.

We move together. Slowly, perfectly. Pleasure rising in an inferno that takes my breath away.

*Has it ever been like this before?*

I don't think so – and then, I can't think at all. I can only feel him move against me, inside of me, his cock drawing pleasure from me as I sob his name into the night.



WHEN I WAKE, hours later, the scent of smoke is in the air.

Yawning, I decide it's my imagination. I'm curled up next to Caleb, his rhythmic breathing lulling me back to sleep. Everything is perfect.

Except I *am* a little thirsty. No wonder, considering our exertions.

I slip out of bed and start to pad to the bathroom to get a drink, and that's when I see it.

Black smoke, wafting across the moonlight.

Instinctively, I choke. Now, fully awake, I lunge toward Caleb, shaking him awake.

He lets out a moan, but doesn't stir, at first.

"Caleb!" I shout, shaking him harder. "I think the cabin's on fire!"



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## CALEB

JULIET'S SCREAMS WAKE ME. I think I'm still dreaming, a haze of flesh and smoke, but then she shakes me, and it hits me. It's not a nightmare. It's real. And it means only one thing.

We're not as safe as I thought we were.

Scrambling out of bed, I throw on my clothes and grab my phone. Through the smoke, I expect Juliet's doing the same.

But she's gone.

"Juliet?"

I stalk to the edge of the bed, where I last saw her. No sign of her.

"Juliet!"

Nothing.

Did she run for the exit without me? I start for the door. Now, the smoke is pouring in. The fire is somewhere along the front wall of the cabin—but spreading fast. We won't have much time before escape is impossible.

When I reach the doorway, I hear a voice behind me. "Here... I just..."

I follow her voice and find her, of all places, in one of the bedrooms, kneeling in the corner, like she's searching for something on the floor.

"What the hell are you thinking?" I yell, coughing through the smoke. "We've got to get out."

“But—”

I grab hold of her, yanking her away. She struggles, but there’s no fucking way I’m letting her go in all of this.

I toss her over my shoulder, grab my shit, and get us the hell out of there.

Out in the hallway, the fire’s consuming the curtains and most of the furniture in the living room. I know this wasn’t us, though. We were too busy to light a fire last night.

So how the fuck did one start?

“Put me down!”

Juliet struggles against me as I carry her out the door and to the front lawn, choking on the thick smoke.

Outside, the fresh air hits my lungs, and I gulp for more. But when I set her down, she tries to shove me aside and go back in.

“Are you crazy?” I roar. “The place is on fire!”

Juliet pauses, taking in the sight.

The place is burning out of control now, flames licking up the side of the cabin walls. All that wood, it’s blazing like a tinderbox, smoke rising up into the night.

And it hits me just how close we came to death tonight.

How easily Juliet could have been harmed.

She sags, the fight going out of her, and I can see from her expression that she’s thinking the same thing.

“Come on,” I say, hustling her to the car. “Whoever set that fire might still be around here somewhere. We need to get to safety.”

She doesn’t say a word as I bundle her into the car, and hit the road, back to the city. The miles fly by, but I keep an eye on the rear-view mirror, tensing every time I see headlights.

*Nero isn’t going to stop until someone’s dead.*

The thought chills me. It was one thing risking my own safety, trying to find a way out of this mess. But now it’s



Juliet's life on the line too...

I clench the steering wheel with white knuckles.

Nothing can hurt her now. Nobody will touch her.

Not as long as I'm here to draw breath.

"I'm sorry about your place," her voice comes, fragile.

I shake my head and press on the gas.

"But hey, at least you can build somewhere new. One of those modern monstrosities with a spa and jet ski dock."

She's actually joking. I can't fucking believe it.

"Caleb?" she asks, sounding desperate. I can't take it.  
"Caleb, talk to –"

"Fuck it. Fine," I say.

We're a mile from the expressway. I swerve off the road and onto the shoulder, kicking up gravel in the dark.

When the car comes to a stop, I wrench open the door and stalk away from the car. Pacing in the dark. Trying to get my emotions in check. Trying not to wring her pretty neck.

I feel a hand on my hand. I whirl around and find her standing there, pale in the moonlight.

Precious. Fragile.

*Mine.*

"You can't fucking do that!" I roar, fury getting the better of me.

She flinches back like I've struck her, but my heart is pounding in my chest. With fear. With anger. With the knowledge it could have all ended for her tonight.

"You can't run INTO a burning building; I don't care what the fuck you were thinking!" I continue, gripping her arms. "I can't lose you," I yell. "I almost lost you in that car accident and I'm not going to lose you again. Do you understand?"

"I'm fine," she protests. "I survived the crash, and we survived this. I'm not going anywhere."

“But you almost did!” I release her, backing off. “Fuck, Juliet, you don’t know how close you came. And I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to you. I love you!” I yell, desperate. “I fucking love you too much to lose you!”

There’s silence, just the sound of my ragged breathing in the dark.

Juliet nods. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you, too.”

“OK then.” I collect myself, fighting for composure. “So, we’re in agreement. Both of us stay alive.”

Her lips curl in a smile at that. “OK.”

I pull her into a desperate hug, wishing the world could disappear. Wishing I could just keep her safe forever.

“But what happens now?” she asks, drawing back to look at me.

I sigh. I still don’t have a plan yet, but if that fire proved anything, it’s that I can’t run from Nero.

We can’t hide and hope that it’ll all go away.

I need to fight this thing, head on. No backing down.

“What I should’ve done a long time ago,” I tell her, holding her close. “Talk to the authorities.”

Juliet’s eyes widen in surprise. “But I thought... You said you couldn’t risk Sterling Cross’s reputation.”

“Fuck the company’s reputation,” I say, determined.

If it keeps Juliet safe?

There’s no price in the world I wouldn’t pay.



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## JULIET

IT'S MONDAY MORNING. The main conference room is full, and everyone is buzzing.

No one knows what this is about. We usually only have company-wide meetings after the first of the year. So of course, everyone has their theories.

Corporate takeover announcement?

Caleb's stepping down?

Sterling Cross has made a major acquisition?

I'm buzzing, too, and it's not just because I'm one of the few in the know. I've been this way, practically flying, ever since Caleb told me he loved me. I've been smiling, ear-to-ear, even through all the meetings we've had since returning to the city: with Caleb's lawyers, with investigators, and even the police and FBI. We've been through hours of them, but it doesn't matter.

Now that we're together, nothing can bring me down.

Mara leans over. "Any clues? I'm dying to know what's going on. The design staff has a pool going, ten bucks on Caleb throttling Seb Wolfe right here in the middle of the room."

I laugh. "Sorry, my lips are sealed."

Caleb appears at the front of the room, back to his crisp suits and ties. It's a world away from the rugged, upstate Caleb in his jeans and sweaty glory, but he looks just as devastating.

And today, he's wearing casual confidence, looking like nothing in the world could ruffle him.

“Good morning, everyone,” he says, commanding attention as he glances over the crowd. “I'm sure you're all wondering why I called this impromptu meeting, so I won't hold you in suspense.”

His eyes finally find mine among the audience. His lips quirk into a little smile, just for me. “This information will soon be reported by the press, so I wanted you to hear it from me, first. A family secret that it's high time was brought into the light.” He pauses. “Sterling Cross was built by my father, Jacob Sterling, Olivia's father, Charles Cross, and a secret third partner named Roman Barretti, who has known ties to organized crime in the city.”

Gasps of surprise sound around me.

“My father ended the partnership before his death,” Caleb continues, “But for years, the Barretti family has been extorting money from this company. From my family. Well, that ends today.”

There's the buzz of furious whispering around the room, and I don't blame them. The Barretti name is infamous in New York City. Drugs, crime, even murder...

And from today, it will be forever tied to Sterling Cross.

David raises his hand. “Why reveal this now—without consulting your PR team?” he adds, clearly annoyed.

Caleb stands calmly. “I'm done with keeping these family secrets. Now is time to come clean, so we can move on with a clean slate.”

His eyes sweep over the group as he waits for the commotion to die down. They land on me. Another smile that makes my insides go soft.

Again, it disappears quickly. The last thing he wants is his employees thinking he's making light of this situation. But I can't help beaming with pride. It's almost like I can see this weight, slipping from his shoulders.

He's finally facing the truth—and instead of it making him appear weak, or diminished, he seems stronger than ever.

He motions for quiet. “I’ve spoken with the FBI, and as of ten minutes ago, they’ve raided the Barretti headquarters and taken Nero Barretti into custody. Right now, that’s all I can tell you, because everything’s still developing. But I wanted you to be the first to know, to be transparent and avoid speculation. I’ll be briefing PR this afternoon. Again, I thank you all for your loyalty. It means the most to both the Cross and the Sterling families.”

He steps away. Announcement over.

And what a bombshell it was.

People file out, many stopping to shake his hand as they go. It looks like his honesty made an impression, even if everyone is still buzzing with the scandal of it all. I know that the minute they get back to their desks, messages and DMs will be flying—and then it’s only a matter of seconds before the news spreads. Tabloids. Cable news. A story like this will be irresistible.

But it’s not just a scandalous story—it’s Caleb’s family. His life.

I follow him to his office. “How does it feel, now that the secret is out?” I ask, concerned.

He lets out a long breath. “I’m not sure just yet,” he admits, looking conflicted. “A part of me is relieved, but this is my family name. In the end... I can’t protect the past at the price of our future.”

*Our* future. I feel a glow. “So what happens now?”

“Now I have to mount the PR campaign of my life, and hope the board takes my side at the vote later this week.” Caleb says, looking grim.

“What about Nero?” I ask.

“That’s a matter for the feds.” Jonathan speaks up from the doorway. Caleb nods, so he enters the room. “I’ve been talking to my sources over there, and they’ve been wanting to nail him

for a while. They'll have plenty of charges to work with, so there's a good chance at least one of them will stick."

Caleb nods, giving me a reassuring smile. "That means you're safe now. He won't hurt you again."

But still, I pause. I'd love to be sure, but something about this isn't sitting right with me.

"Do we know for sure it was him?"

Caleb and Jonathan look at me like I'm crazy. "What are you talking about?" Caleb asks. "Of course it was Nero. He's dangerous."

"I know. He's all kinds of bad news," I agree quickly, "But this... ? I don't know, something's telling me it's not his style." I try to explain my hesitation. I've only met the guy a couple of times, but each time, he was direct. If a man like Nero wanted me dead, I don't doubt for a second that I would be six feet under already.

"I mean, sending me ripped up roses and cryptic threatening notes? Running me off the road? Leaving the gas on in your apartment? It feels like someone's playing games with me. With us. Does that seem like Nero's style?"

"Who the hell knows what's going on in that guy's brain?" Caleb shrugs. "What matters is that it's over. He's going to answer for what he's done."

"But how does any of this fit into his plan?" I argue. "And how did he find us at the cabin? Nobody knew we were there —"

"It's OK," Caleb cuts me off, pulling me into a hug. "I know you've been through hell, but it's over now. I promise. Nero will get what he deserves, and the two of us can finally move on."

I take a deep breath. Maybe he's right. Maybe I'm overthinking this.

After all, who else would go to such lengths to hurt us?

"You're right," I say, relaxing. "I guess I've just been jumping at shadows for so long, it's hard to believe it's really

done.”

“We should celebrate,” he says, smiling at me. “Dinner at *Le Bernardin*?”

My eyebrows shoot up.

“Are you sure you want to?” I ask. “The rumor mill is churning, and you’re right in the middle of it. They’re going to talk even more, all around us, if we go out to one of the most exclusive restaurants in the city.”

“We have nothing to be ashamed of,” Caleb says, looking stubborn. And I know him well enough by now to know, he’s got something to prove.

He wants to show the world he isn’t hiding.

And there’s no place I’d rather be than at his side.

I smile. “Then I’m right there with you.”



BY THE TIME we arrive at the restaurant that evening, I’m having second thoughts whether this was such a good idea. The moment we step out of the car, I feel eyes on us. And not the usual glances of admiration from every woman in the room checking out Caleb, but more hostile looks. Curious. Skeptical. Wondering how many of the headlines online are true.

I squeeze Caleb’s hand tighter as we take our seats in a romantic corner booth, but he seems perfectly at ease, ordering wine and a number of plates for me to try. They come out, one after another, looking more like works of art than food—caviar, lobster, filet mignon.

“You couldn’t just settle for burgers and beer?” I tease, trying to relax.

He gives me a careful smile. “I have a reputation to uphold. A shot of us in McDonalds would send the press wild.”



That's when I realize, he's not relaxed at all. It's just an act. He knows we're being watched, too. He needs to show them all, nothing is wrong.

"We'll have to cause a major scandal more often," I joke, giving him a private smile. "That way, I'll be eating every day of the week."

Caleb laughs then, for real. "I think we've had enough drama to last a lifetime, don't you? I'm looking forward to things getting back to normal. Just regular, boring life."

I snort on my champagne at the idea. "Seriously?" I laugh, dabbing my lips with my napkin. "Don't play Average Joe with me, I read the gossip blogs. Even before I met you, your idea of 'regular' and 'boring' was international travel and VIP parties. That yacht race in the Caribbean? Those models in St. Tropez?"

Caleb looks smug. "You kept tabs on me?"

I cough. "No. Just... Research, that's all."

"Mhmm," he grins. "Well, how about we find a balance somewhere in the middle? Even lounging on a yacht can seem ordinary after a while."

"Ha!" I exclaim, grinning. "I'd love the chance to find out."

"Then let's do it." Caleb says. "You, me, a tropical vacation... Just as soon as all this is dealt with."

"Deal." I say with a smile.

"But I do have one rule," he adds, mock serious. "No clothes allowed."

"I think I can manage that," I say, sipping my champagne happily.

Out of nowhere, someone materializes at our table. It's an attractive woman, she looks vaguely familiar, and it's only when she speaks that I recognize her as Jacqueline, the journalist he flirted with during our breakup.

Flirted with, and maybe more.

I tense, as she fixes Caleb with a flirty smile. “Mr. Sterling, good to see you again. I’m surprised to see you out, what with everything happening.”

“As you can see, I’m perfectly fine,” Caleb gestures.

“Still, with all the rumors flying, perhaps you’d like to set the record straight?” she produces her phone, set to a voice memo app. “About the Barretti family, and your connections —”

“My father’s connection,” he corrects her with a tight smile. “And I have no further comment. I’ll refer you to my public relations team.”

Jacqueline trills with laughter. “Surely you must have something to say, considering you basically trampled on the Sterling Cross brand.”

I see Caleb flinch imperceptibly. Jacqueline must also, because she moves in for the kill.

“How do your employees feel about your fraudulent betrayal? Many of them were loyal to your parents. And what about the board, surely this little stunt only gives Sebastian Wolfe ammunition for his hostile takeover bid? You really found a way to flush your family’s legacy down the pipes, in just a few years.”

Caleb is just sitting there, trying to ignore her, but I can’t let this slide.

“For your information, Caleb is trying to *save* the company,” I burst out, anger flaring hotly inside my chest. “This is a mess he inherited, not made, so don’t talk to him about legacy or reputation. Everything he’s done has been to protect Sterling Cross!”

Jacqueline reels back, surprised.

“Caleb is as loyal as they come—and every single employee will tell you the same thing. Now, take that stupid phone and shove it wherever you put your dignity and morals,” I finish, glaring.

Caleb smiles. “You heard her,” he says, reaching across and squeezing my hand. “Fuck off and leave us alone.”

Jacqueline makes a strangled noise, but she sees the maître d’ heading for us, and quickly walks away.

I catch my breath as Caleb chuckles. “Look at you, getting riled up.”

“I couldn’t help it!” I protest. “Did you hear what she was saying?”

“It’s what they’re all saying,” Caleb points out.

“For now. But you’ll get through this,” I remind him. “You did the right thing, coming clean.”

“But I couldn’t have done any of this without you,” Caleb says, looking into my eyes. “Thank you.”

His voice is low and thick with emotion. I blink.

“Of course,” I whisper. “You can always count on me.”

He looks at the spread of food on the table—and the whispers around us from everyone who just witnessed my outburst. “How about we take the rest of dinner to go?”

I exhale in relief. All this attention makes it hard to relax and enjoy myself. “Sounds good to me.”

The waiter brings us several bags of food boxed up in crisp packages, and we head back to Caleb’s penthouse.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” I check, as we enter the apartment. “It’s all right if you’re not, you know. Today was a big deal. Anyone would be reeling from everything that’s happened. And you’re only human, you know.”

I look at Caleb, concerned.

The last thing I expect is him to pull me into a massive hug.

When he releases me, I see to my surprise that he’s smiling. A genuine, easy smile. “I’ve carried that secret around for years,” he says. “It was a burden I always thought I’d have to bear alone. But being free of it now... I don’t have

the words to describe how light that makes me feel. And it's all because of you," he adds, leaning in to give me a slow, sizzling kiss.

"I didn't do anything," I protest, blushing.

He shakes his head. "You did. You've been there for me the way nobody else has. Even when I pushed you away..." He shakes his head, like he doesn't want to remember that dark chapter in our relationship. "If it wasn't for your support and advice, I never would have been able to admit the truth to everyone. You changed everything."

My heart glows.

"Which is why I want to show you just how grateful I am..." Caleb's voice turns smoldering. He gives me a wicked look. "I have a gift for you."

My pulse kicks. "What kind of gift?" I ask, flirty.

"You'll see. Go to the bedroom," he says. "Be ready for me."

Now my heart is racing with excitement.

I quickly hurry down the hallway, and into his bedroom. There, waiting on the bed, is a garment box with a fancy Italian designer name on it.

With a squeal, I open the lid and tear back the tissue paper to find...

A gorgeous silk lingerie set.

I lift it out. The silk is deep purple, shifting like ink, and edged with intricate lace. It's classy and sexy all at once.

Stripping quickly, I put on the bra. It fits perfectly, because of course it does. Caleb seems to know my body better than I do. Then I reach for the panties.

I stop. There's an opening framed in the silk... *In the back.*

Excitement shoots through my veins like lightning. Just where is he going with this? I can't wait to find out.

I slide them on, and take in my reflection in the mirror. I look seductive, elegant, a world away from the inexperienced woman I was before I met Caleb.

He's introduced me to a whole new side of myself. He's shown me a pleasure I never dreamed of.

And something tells me that my education is about to continue. Tonight.

"Look at you."

I turn. He's in the doorway, sipping a glass of scotch. I slowly turn a pirouette, displaying myself for his admiring gaze.

He looks at me, ravenous. "You're missing something. Check the box."

I do so, and find something I hadn't seen.

A diamond choker—with a glittering chain.

My heart stops.

"It's beautiful," I breathe, admiring the sparkle of the jewels.

"I had it made especially for you." He moves closer, taking it from me, and fastening the cool metal around my neck. "How does it feel?" he asks, voice low in my ear.

"Nice," I say and hear him chuckle.

"Oh, we can do a whole lot better than just 'nice'."

He tugs gently on the chain, pulling my head closer as he kisses me hard. I shiver. Caleb pulls me back, and I have no choice but to follow the force of the necklace.

He controls my movements, completely.

"Now, are you going to be a good girl for me?" Caleb asks, danger glinting in his eyes.

I nod swiftly, my blood already running hotter at the thrill.

I don't know what he's got in store for me tonight, but I know I'm going to love it.

Every last inch.

“Good. Now open that pretty mouth for me and get on your knees.”

I inhale in a rush, his dirty words turning me on.

“You heard me.” Caleb tugs on the collar, guiding me down. “Get on your knees and swallow my cock.”

My heart races with excitement. I eagerly scramble to the floor below him, and quickly reach to undo his pants. Caleb tugs the collar again.

“Put your hands behind your back. I want to see you work for it.”

I gulp, but I do as he says. It’s fumbling work, tugging his zip fly down with my teeth, but I manage to pull his pants and briefs down, freeing his cock.

It springs up, already hard. straining for attention. I let out an appreciative sigh.

“You’re a greedy little thing, panting to suck my cock.” Caleb smirks. He picks up his glass of scotch again, and takes a casual sip, looking at me down here on my knees. “You’re already wet, aren’t you?”

I nod, thrilled, my mouth already watering for him.

“Show me.”

I shiver, but I do as he says, reaching between my thighs to scoop my wetness with two fingers. I hold them up to him, glistening with my juices.

Caleb takes my fingers in his mouth and sucks. “Mmmm,” he rumbles with a satisfied sigh. “Sweet as sugar. Now it’s your turn: Taste.”

I gasp, hesitating at the dirty command.

“You heard me.” Caleb’s face turns determined. “That wasn’t a suggestion. Taste yourself.”

Blushing, I do as he says, tentatively licking my fingers. The taste is tangy.

*Filthy.*

“Now, let’s put that pretty mouth of yours to good use,” Caleb says with a sexy smile. “Open wide.”

He tugs gently on the collar, forcing my face into his crotch. I tentatively reach out and lick his shaft. Caleb pulls me closer.

“Don’t tease me, sweetheart. Swallow every fucking inch.”

His words wash over me in a haze of dirty desire.

I open my mouth wider and suck him down.

“Fuck, yes.” Caleb groans above me, bringing one hand to grip in my hair, setting a punishing rhythm. He pulls me down, over and over, fucking my mouth like I’m made for him to use.

And I love every minute of it.

“Are you going to swallow me, baby?” he asks, voice growing hoarse. “Do you want my cum streaming down your throat.”

I murmur around him, gasping for air. *Yes.*

“That’s right, you want it all. But you haven’t earned it yet.”

He suddenly pulls the chain, bringing my head up from his cock. “After all, my cum is a gift,” he adds, tilting my head up to see him. “A reward for very good girls. But only if they beg.”

I catch my breath, panting with anticipation and raw desire. My body is already aching for him, I’m so turned on. I slip one hand between my thighs, instinctively rubbing my clit, chasing the pressure I so desperately need.

Caleb tugs the collar so swiftly I nearly choke.

“Did I tell you that you could touch yourself?” he asks, rising to his feet.

With his steady grip on the collar, I have no choice but to follow.

“No,” I blurt, gasping for air. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry’s not good enough.”

Caleb suddenly throws me facedown over the edge of the bed.

CRACK.

There’s a sudden stinging slap on my ass. I cry out in pain and shock, trying to wriggle away.

Caleb pins me in place. “Don’t fucking move,” he growls. “This ass belongs to me now. A forfeit for your disobedience.”

He spansks me again, another stinging blow.

I yelp, jolting forwards on the mattress. “Please! I’m sorry!”

Caleb tugs my collar, pulling me back in place.

“The more you struggle, the longer this will take,” he tells me softly, and when I twist to look up at him, he’s standing there above me, icy determination on his face.

Then he unsnaps his belt and pulls it from the loops of his pants.

My stomach twists in a heady mix of anticipation and fear. *Holy shit*. The look in his eyes is more intense than anything I’ve seen before.

This is a new Caleb. Darker. More dominant.

Sexy as hell.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter again. “I won’t disobey you.”

“It’s too late for apologies. Get on your hands and knees and take your punishment.”

I shiver, following the silken command. I remember the last time he spanked me – and how incredibly sexy it was – so I quickly take position on the bed, my ass presented in the lacy underwear. He tugs the silk roughly down over my thighs, trapping my legs.

“Now count to ten.”



I relax a little. Like last time, I'll have to work for my pleasure. But when the belt snaps against me, I yelp in surprise. The sensation is nothing like his hand on my ass. It's sharper. Quicker.

"O—one," I manage, bracing myself.

He snaps it again, my flesh tender now.

"Two!"

"Three!"

The next blow is angled on the backs of my thighs, a sharp crack of pain.

"Four..." Tears sting in the corner of my eyes. *This is way more intense than last time.* How am I supposed to make it to ten?

But just as I'm wondering if I should use my safe word and make it all stop, Caleb's hand smooths over the tender skin, soothing it.

"Good girl," he murmurs softly. "You're being so good for me."

I take a deep breath. It's crazy, but the praise warms me from the inside out.

*I want to be good for him.*

His fingers delve lower, skimming between my legs, to where my damp wetness is pooled. He presses gently against my clit. "See? I can be good to you too."

I moan in pleasure, pressing back against his hand. Needing more pressure.

"Not yet, baby. I'm not done with your punishment yet."

The next cracks of the belt come swiftly on the backs of my thighs. I cry out, and immediately, Caleb is rubbing my clit again, harder this time. I moan. The pleasure radiates, mingling with the pain, drowning everything with an intoxicating intensity.

*What the hell is happening to me?*

I find myself breathless in anticipation, eager for the next blows—because then he'll make it all better. "More," I swallow, blood pounding. "I'm ready."

"That's my girl."

*Another.* I moan out loud, pressing back against his hand. *Again.* It's overwhelming, the feelings ricocheting through my body. Pleasure and pain, pushed to the limit. *More.*

"Ten!"

I fall forwards on the bed, gasping for air. Tears are running down my cheeks, and my ass is on fire from the belt.

Until Caleb's tongue licks over one cheek, soothing.

I gasp, automatically pulling away, but he grips my hips, forcing me to stay in place.

"Don't fucking move. I told you, this ass is *mine.*"

He licks again, tongue trailing over the bare globes. I tense, my heart racing as he licks closer to my crease. *He's not going to... He wouldn't...*

But he does.

Caleb licks around my asshole, his tongue nudging at the tight petal.

I shriek in surprise, but he doesn't stop.

He licks again, slower. Deeper.

*Oh fuck.*

I can't believe it, the sensation rippling out from his illicit touch. It's so dirty. *Forbidden.* I've never dreamed that anyone could invade me like this.

But Caleb won't be denied.

His tongue nudges into me, and my whole body goes rigid in shock.

And *pleasure.*

*Oh my god!*

Caleb chuckles against me. “You like that, don’t you? You think you’re so sweet and innocent, but here you are with my tongue in your ass, loving every minute of it.”

He licks again, reaching further between my legs with one hand to pet my clit at that same time. I can’t help it, I moan out loud, shuddering from the pleasure. His fingertips circle my clit swiftly, as his tongue laps, and nudges, and drives me crazy in ways I didn’t think were possible.

“Caleb,” I whimper, thrusting back shamelessly. “Oh my god, Caleb!”

“That’s right,” he says, growling in satisfaction. “I’m a fucking God. And my word is your command. So come for me, my filthy girl. Come for me right this fucking second.”

He adds two fingers, thrusting deep inside my pussy. Stretching me. filling me up. And all the while, he’s licking my asshole, holding me down, forcing me to take his tongue in a place no one has ever licked me before.

It’s incredible. *Wrong*. I know I shouldn’t like it, but, God, I do.

And he knows it.

He knows everything.

How to turn me on. How to make me beg. How to bring me to my knees and show my body a pleasure I never dreamed of.

“You heard me.” Caleb lifts his face and gives my ass a sharp slap. “Come!”

He thrusts his fingers deep, palm pressing on my clit as he spans me again. Again. *Again*.

And I have no choice. I come screaming in one of the most intense orgasms of my life.

The climax rips through me, a wave of pleasure.

“Caleb!” I cry, gasping. Moaning. Writhing there on the bed.

“I’m right here, sweetheart,” he says, stroking my body possessively. “And I’m not done yet.”

He pulls my collar, forcing me to roll onto my back. Caleb is standing there, looming above me, hunger wild in his eyes. He strips off his shirt and the rest of his clothes, and pushes me back, up the bed.

“Is your cunt good and ready for me now?” he demands, leaning down to bite one of my stiff nipples.

“Yes,” I gasp eagerly. “So ready.”

“What about that ass?” Caleb’s gaze turns smug. “Is it ready to take me?”

I gasp in shock, my head spinning. He’s huge. An animal. He could never fit...

Caleb chuckles. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’m just getting you warmed up for now. But mark my words,” he leans in close to growl in my ear. “I will claim that tight ass of yours. You’ll be begging for my cock back there, and you’ll take it. Every fucking inch.”

I swear I almost climax again, just from the filthy promise of it all.

“But for now... Now, it’s that pussy of yours that needs me the most, doesn’t it?” He rubs between my legs again, making me moan. I part my thighs wider, and reach for his cock, wanting him. “You’re empty without me. You need to be filled. To be *owned*.”

“Yes, Caleb. Please!” I cry.

“Shh, it’s OK. You’ve been such a good girl for me.” Caleb croons, positioning himself at my entrance. “And good girls get fucked the way they deserve.”

He thrusts inside, so deep, so fast, it’s like he’s tearing me apart.

*Fuck.*

I slam back with the impact, loving the wicked stretch. Already clinging to him, arching up eagerly.

Needing more.

“Fuck, your cunt’s a miracle.” Caleb swears, pinning my wrists down, driving into me again. “Clench for me, sweetheart. Show me how much you want me inside.”

I do it, whimpering there beneath him, overwhelmed with the force of it all. Consuming me. It’s like Caleb is filling me to the brim, so there’s nowhere to hide. No way to deny his total domination.

I’m his to use, his to fuck.

His to *own*.

He pounds into me again, then pulls out. Before I can protest, he’s flipping me onto my hands and knees again. “There’s that ass of mine,” he says admiringly. “You like it dirty now, don’t you? You need filling all the way up.”

“Yes,” I gasp, thrusting my ass back towards him. Shameless. Brazen.

*Free.*

He chuckles. “Then you should get what you ask for.”

He reaches over and pulls something from the bedside table. I catch a glimpse of a slim wand, before he’s moving into position behind me again.

He swipes through my folds, gathering my wetness. Through my daze, I wonder what he’s doing—until I feel the cool nudge of the wand against me.

Back *there*.

I inhale in a rush. “Relax,” he orders me, notching his cock at my pussy entrance. “I promise, you’ve never felt this good before.”

He sinks inside me, his cock feeling so amazing that I almost come, just from the thick, sweet, friction deep inside. “Fuck, you were made for me,” he groans, thrusting deep. “This cunt was made to fit my cock. I’m going to mold you to me, baby. Make it so no other man will ever fill you up.”

I thrust back to meet him, gasping and eager. “Yes,” I sob, “So good.”

“Can you take any more?” he asks. He’s already buried to the hilt, I don’t know what he means...

Until I feel the wand nudge against me again, slick with my own juices against my asshole.

I gasp.

Caleb thrust his cock into me again, as he slowly eases the slim probe into my ass.

*Oh my god.*

I clutch the sheets and moan, reeling from the sensation. His cock, stretching my cunt wider as the probe glides deeper, doing the same thing to my ass.

I feel impossibly full. Stretched open. Filled to the limit.

And *fuck*, it’s incredible.

Caleb holds the chain to my collar in one hand, controlling my position. Riding me like a wild animal as he drives into me again, nudging the probe deeper, fucking me twice over, making me clench and moan around him.

It’s too much. Too good. Fuck. *Fuck.*

I feel the waves of pleasure rising, a tsunami ready to unleash.

“Please,” I gasp on the edge, remembering his order. “Please let me come!”

“Louder,” Caleb commands, plunging into me again, riding me mercilessly. “I want the whole fucking city to hear you beg.”

“Please!” I beg, screaming, almost incoherent with pleasure. “Please Caleb! Please let me come on your cock!”

“Do it,” he growls. “Come for me, baby!”

With a shudder, I let go, and hurtle over the edge. His cock strokes me from the inside, and the probe stretches me open, and then I feel him come inside me, spurting with a deep, dirty

pleasure that explodes through my body. I scream, over and over, coming so hard and fast, I swear I black out for a moment.

When I surface, I'm gasping, limp in his arms. Pleasure is still rushing through me, a comforting blanket of calm. Caleb eases himself from my body, and then wraps me in blankets, tenderly cradling me to his chest. "OK?" he murmurs, gently unfastening the choker from my neck.

I twist to look at him.

"More than OK," I smile, sleepy and utterly satisfied. "That was... Well, there are no words."

Just moans, and gasps, and screaming.

He relaxes, discarding the million-dollar necklace and cradling me like I'm the precious jewel.

"There are," he whispers. "I love you."





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## JULIET

“SO, you have to give it to me straight. What’s the situation with you and Caleb?”

Mara puts her sandwich aside and fixes me with an expectant look. We’re down in the design department, grabbing lunch in her studio and catching up after all the madness of the past week.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I want details! You guys have been running hot and cold for months now, but things finally seem to have settled. Right?”

“Right.” I beam. Although ‘settled’ isn’t exactly how I’d describe the mind-blowing sex we had the other night... And this morning... And then again in Caleb’s office with the door ajar and him covering my mouth with his hand to keep me from screaming. “It’s been... Nice.”

“Are you kidding me? Caleb has been walking around with a smile on his face for the first time in, well, forever. *Nice* wouldn’t get you that. It’s really working out this time?”

I nod. “So you’ve noticed it, too?” I ask.

“Either you’re blowing him ten times a day, or that is a man in love.” Mara smirks. “Or both.”

I laugh. “No comment. He just did some soul searching. That’s all.”

“You’re back on, for real this time?”

I bite my lip, wondering if it's okay to say. Then I nod. "He said he loves me," I admit.

She claps her hands excitedly. "I can't believe it! Why are you not, like, hanging from the chandeliers with excitement?"

I smile. "I am, really. I love him so much. But there's a lot of drama, still."

"Tell me about it. How is he doing with it?"

I sigh. "He's handling it. You know, he's not one to be honest with his feelings. But he's been really open with me. And I won't accept anything less, not this time. I'm not letting him push me around again," I say, determined. "We're equal partners in the relationship now. As long as that continues, I think we'll be okay."

Mara licks mayo off her fingers and shakes her head. "I can't believe it. Caleb Sterling. Settling down. That's insane. You *do* think you're settling down, right?"

Of course, I've had a goofy fantasy of Caleb kneeling in front of me, slipping a diamond ring on my finger. Of walking down an aisle and having him gaze in my eyes and say, *I do*. But usually when I think of those, I remember that up until very recently, Caleb Sterling was the city's number one bachelor.

"I don't know for sure." I admit. "Maybe in the future. I'm hopeful. I guess we'll see," I say, popping a cherry tomato in my mouth. "First we have to weather today's drama."

She nods. "Of course. The whole Sterling Cross takeover attempt rumor is taking over the internet."

There's also the person who has been trying to hurt us. But Mara doesn't know anything about that. And I'm determined to keep it under wraps, so I just smile.

"Enough about me, I want to see your new designs!"

I GET CARRIED away poring over Mara's amazing new prototypes, and it's mid-afternoon by the time I head back

upstairs to the office.

I see Caleb's door is open, and a bunch of suits are just leaving, so

I wait until they're gone and poke my head in. He looks tired, sitting back behind his desk. "How's it going?" I ask, entering.

He does that little thing where he rubs the back of his neck, which he only does when he's stressed. "Good."

"Liar." I give him a kiss on the cheek. "How's it really going?"

"Like shit," he says with a low chuckle as I put my hands on his shoulders, massaging them a little. They're so tense. "I think this takeover is looking more and more likely."

My heart drops. "Really?"

He scans the papers in front of him and nods, his jaw tight. "I'm trying to reassure the board, but I don't know what else to do. Olivia holds enough shares that if she convinces even half the major stakeholders to sell... I can't stop it."

Caleb Sterling isn't a man to ever admit defeat, so I can't imagine what he's facing to be talking like this.

"Still, at least Nero Barretti is dealt with," I offer, trying to look on the bright side. "That's one problem down. And if you can handle him, you can handle anything."

"I wish it were that simple."

We both turn to see Logan arriving, with a grave look on his face.

"What do you mean?" I ask, getting a very bad feeling.

"I just got word. Nero's out."

I gasp.

"Out?" Caleb asks, rising to his feet. "How the hell is that possible? The feds said they had a list of crimes a mile long."

"How does any mobster get off?" Logan looks grim. "Money, connections, the best lawyers his dirty cash can buy."

He grabs a remote and turns on the TV mounted to the wall. The very first news station he finds is carrying the development live: Nero Barretti, leaving the courthouse, surrounded by his cadre of lawyers.

“Fuck.” Caleb slams the table, making me jump.

The camera pans to one of the attorneys, surrounded by press microphones, as he says, “Nero Barretti adamantly denies these charges and will be filing charges of his own against Mr. Sterling, for slander.” He waves legal paperwork around. “We have all the documents to prove that the Barretti family entered into a legitimate investment with Sterling Cross and has been paid according to contract.”

I turn to Caleb. “What is he saying?”

Caleb shakes his head. “Those contracts have to be forged. There’s no way that blackmail is standing up in court.”

But it’s not the paperwork I’m worried about. I catch a glimpse of Nero’s expression as he fights his way through photographers and slides into a black car. He looks purposeful and sharp.

Like a man who won’t be bested.

“What does this mean?” I ask, shivering. “Do you think he’ll come after us again?”

“No.” In an instant, Caleb is at my side. He wraps his arms around me, protective. “You’ll be safe. There’s no way I’m letting that animal get to you again.” He looks to Logan. “We’re going to need private security. Twenty-four seven.”

“That’s not necessary,” I try to protest, but Caleb talks over me.

“You take the first shift, while I make the calls. Take her to my place, it should be safe for now, I’ll tell the building to post extra protection until the team arrives.”

“Caleb!” I pull away. “Really, you don’t have to—”

“No arguments,” he cuts me off, face set like steel. “I’m not changing my mind, so don’t waste both our time. You’re

going to be locked down tighter than the fucking Sterling vault.”

I see it in his eyes, this is serious.

“Fine,” I sigh, as if I have a choice. “But I have work to do —”

“No. Home. Now.”

Caleb’s eyes drill into me. “Please,” he adds, lowering his voice. “I can’t focus on any of this bullshit until I know you’re safe,” he says, gesturing to the desk.

I want to stay with him and help, but I know, it’s a fight I’ll lose.

I gather my things together, wish Caleb good luck with his paperwork, and head out with Logan.

“Hey,” Logan says as we descend in the elevator. “It’ll be okay.”

I probably shouldn’t be as worried as I am. Logan can more than take care of the both of us, and from the bulge under his jacket, he’s packing heat. If anyone comes near me, he’ll probably rip the guy’s head off. He certainly doesn’t seem scared at all.

Still, I’ve seen what Nero can do. So when we step outside, even though it’s a warm afternoon, I shiver.

As we step toward the sidewalk, a black sportscar pulls to the curb, splattered with mud. The door opens, and Olivia steps out, handing the keys to the valet. “Have it out for me by eight,” she barks at the poor guy, who nods obsequiously.

Then her glare shifts to me, her lips curled into a snarl. I return it.

I watch her strut through the revolving doors, new worries spiking in my chest. Is she going to see Caleb? For what? Whatever it is, I’m sure it’ll put him in an even worse mood.

Perfect.

“We should get a car,” Logan says, pulling out his phone.

“Do you mind if we walk?” I ask. “I could use the fresh air. Clear my head.”

“Sure,” he nods, and we

stroll in silence. “It is safer this way,” he adds. “I know it seems weird, having a bodyguard, but Caleb’s right. We don’t know what Nero is planning next.”

“As long as you don’t mind playing babysitter,” I joke.

He grins. “You’re not a baby. Hell, with everything you’ve been through, my money’s on you in a fight.”

“That’s sweet,” I say with a snort. “A total lie, but sweet.”

We walk a ways further, until I see a line snaking out of my favorite Thai place. “Are you hungry?” I ask.

Logan pauses.

“Let me guess, you’re under strict orders to take me straight home,” I sigh.

He looks around, then cracks a grin. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

We grab a table and settle in with spring rolls, Pad Thai, and delicious hot and sour soup. I make a fool of myself diving into the food, but Logan takes his time, and I realize that’s because he’s keeping his eye on the exit, scoping everyone who walks through the door.

“You were a cop, right?” I ask, curious about Caleb’s closest friend.

Logan nods. “For a while. Now I’m freelance. Investigations.”

“Babysitting.”

“That too.” He smiles.

“So how long have you known Caleb?” I ask curiously.

“Fifteen years, now. We were roommates in college.”

My eyes widen. Logan is the first person I’ve run across, besides Olivia, who knew Caleb before he became CEO. There is some potentially juicy information here.

I push aside the carton of Pad Thai. “So what was he like? You must have some stories.”

But Logan shakes his head. “Sorry, kid. Bro code. Stronger than any NDA.”

“Come on,” I urge. “There must be something you can share. He’s so... Mysterious. I sometimes look at him and wonder what he was like, before his parents died, and he had to deal with all this Sterling Cross stuff.”

“A lot more fun, for starters,” Logan says. “But I guess we all were, when we were younger. He used to be the king of pranksters, believe it or not. He was always fucking with someone on our floor.”

“Really?”

He nods. “He actually almost got kicked out because he filled the RA’s room with popcorn. Like, to the top.”

My jaw drops. “You’re not serious.”

“I am. I should know, because he enlisted my help to clean it up.” Logan grins. “Took the better part of a week. By then he was failing economics and he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to graduate. I have no idea how he pulled it out, but he did.”

“Probably the Sterling name had something to do with it.”

He shakes his head. “Not really. He just... He doesn’t want for much, but when he *does* decide he wants something, he goes after it. He doesn’t stop. So Sterling Cross’s success since he took the reins, even though he did it unexpectedly, didn’t surprise me in the least.”

*If he wants something, he goes after it.* Kind of like how he pursued me, with all those flowers and gifts. “And once he gets what he wants?”

His eyes narrow slightly as he takes me in. I can tell he’s wise as to why I’m asking, because he says, “Caleb’s a good guy.”

I’m not sure what that means. That he’ll put a ring on my finger? Or that when he breaks it off, he’ll let me down easy?

“I know he is.”

Logan leans in. “Look, Juliet. Caleb isn’t one to go around wearing his heart on his sleeve. He’s never been that guy. But what I do know is that he’s different with you.”

“How so?”

“He just is. Seeing the way he looks at you, talks to you... You mean something to him. I can’t remember the last time I saw him like this with any woman.”

I can’t help smiling. “It’s never been like this for me, either,” I admit.

“C’mon,” he says, finishing his food. “We better get you home before Caleb sends a search party. Or a SWAT team,” he adds.

I pull on my jacket and follow him outside. We’re only a few blocks from the apartment now, but Logan doesn’t let down his guard, even for a second. He moves me to the inside of the sidewalk, carefully alert even as we walk.

“Do you really think Nero will come after me again?” I ask, unsettled by how wary he is.

Logan shrugs. “He’s tried it before. And he’s a man who gets what he wants.”

There it is again: That prickling feeling, like I’m missing something important. I mull for a moment, before finally speaking.

“Look, I know we’re all assuming it was Nero—or one of his guys—behind my crash, and the gas leak, and the fire... But what if it wasn’t?”

Logan looks at me, puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

I try to explain what’s been bugging me in the back of my mind, for weeks now. “Nero is a Barretti. Organized crime. As deadly as they get. Guys like him, they don’t mess around. They finish the job, no matter what.”

“Which is why you need security, before he follows through this time.”



I shake my head. “But don’t you think that’s weird? He’s failed. Not just once, but a bunch of times. Nero’s not the kind of guy to go behind your back. He’ll just shoot you in the face, so you know perfectly well who’s coming for you. What he’s been doing, all this sneaking around stuff...”

“Isn’t like him?” Logan finishes.

I nod.

“I agree. It’s not.” Logan looks thoughtful. “But maybe he likes playing with you because he’s finally found someone that Caleb actually cares about.”

“Maybe.” I pause, thinking. “But still, the things he did just don’t add up. Sending me roses that he’s cut to ribbons? Threatening notes?”

Logan frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t Caleb tell you?”

I quickly explain about the weird gifts, and that night the power went out in the office. “What if Nero isn’t the only person Caleb needs to worry about?”

He shakes his head slowly. “It doesn’t sound like they’re after Caleb,” he says. “Shit like that, it’s personal. Someone has some kind of vendetta against you.”

“Me?” I blink. “But I’m nobody.”

My mind races as we enter Caleb’s building. We’ve been assuming everything that’s happened to me is about him: Someone tormenting me to get to him. Hurting me to make *him* pay.

But what if we’ve been looking at this all wrong?

What if they were coming after me—and me alone? What if this has nothing to do with Nero Barretti or Caleb at all?

But who would hate me that much?

Suddenly, it hits me.

I know who’s behind all this.

Hands shaking, I grab my phone and dial Caleb's office. Logan watches, confused. "What are you—"

I hold up a finger to him as Victoria answers. "Victoria? Is Caleb still there?"

"Yes. But he's in a meeting. Juliet?"

"I need you to go in there and interrupt the meeting. Tell him it's urgent."

A pause. "Juliet. I can't do that. He's meeting with some very important—"

"Please," I beg. "It's a matter of life or death. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't."

"Fine," she grouses. "One moment."

In the elevator, Logan's looking at me, eyebrows raised. He mouths, *Life or death?*

I nod, just as the phone clicks up. "Juliet?"

It's Caleb. Thank god. "Caleb. Listen to me. I need you to quit whatever you're doing and meet us right now at your apartment." I take a deep breath. "I know who's been trying to kill me."



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## JULIET

BY THE TIME Caleb arrives at his apartment, I've worn out the rug in front of the fireplace with my pacing.

The second I hear the elevator ping in the hallway, I rush to the door and meet him there, Logan on my heels.

I hug him a little desperately. With everything going on, I wasn't sure I'd see him again. He holds my hands and looks into my eyes.

"What's this all about?"

"I figured it out, Caleb. I figured out who's been trying to kill me," I blurt.

Now his eyes go from me to Logan, then back again. "Nero's—"

"No. It's not Nero." I gulp. "It's Olivia."

His eyes narrow. "What?"

"You see, it all makes sense," I tell him, my heart racing. Now I've figured it out, I can't believe I didn't see it before. "The shredded flowers. The notes. The power outage in the office... She could easily have been behind it all."

"Hold on," he says, stalking into the living area. "Sit down, and tell me everything. Don't leave anything out."

I do as he says, collecting myself.

"It all makes sense," I add, after laying out the evidence again. "She was in the office during the blackout. I ran into her on the stairs. I was so relieved to see anyone, I didn't think she

might have been the one chasing me through the office. Plus, she could've left the opera to turn the gas on at your place. And she called me, when we were at the cabin," I add.

Caleb frowns. "You didn't mention that."

"I didn't think twice about it!" I shake my head. "It was just her being her usual snarky self, but I mentioned we were upstate. I didn't say where, but if she knew about the cabin—"

"She knows," Caleb nodded grimly. "It's been in my family forever."

"Then she would have known exactly where we were. She's the only one."

"So you think she's the one who ran you off the road." Caleb looks furious.

I nod. "Maybe. Or she paid someone to do it for her. I assumed it was a guy watching me, while I was fighting for my life. But... It could have been her."

Caleb paces angrily.

"This doesn't make sense. Why would she come after you? I knew she wanted to screw over the company, but what have you ever done to her?"

I stare at him in disbelief. "Because she's still in love with you."

"What?"

He gazes at me, the confusion all over his face. "That's impossible."

It would be sweet, how naïve he's being, if the woman wasn't literally out for my blood.

"You dated, didn't you?" I explain gently. "And you broke it off with her."

Frowning, he says, "Yes. But she agreed. We were young, it didn't mean anything. She acted like it was no big deal."

"Well, clearly it was.

She agreed to save face,” I break it to him. “And I bet you all this time, she thought you two would eventually wind up together. That you’d dump the company and head off into the sunset.”

Logan nods, agreeing. “And when Juliet arrived, and she realized how you two felt about each other, she couldn’t take it.”

Caleb’s shaking his head in disbelief. “But... Olivia? I’ve known her forever. We played as kids, for Christ’s sake. I know we’ve had our differences, but she’s not capable of something like this. She can’t be.”

“She’s capable of more than you can imagine,” I tell him. “Staging the takeover, hiring me as a mole to get close to you?”

I look at Logan for support. He nods. “I’ve seen jealousy make people do some fucked up shit. All the pieces fit together, though. We thought it was Nero, coming for you, but this is all about Juliet.”

Caleb paces, still clearly trying to wrap his head around it. I don’t blame him. Olivia can play sweet and innocent when she needs to, and besides, people break up all the time. It doesn’t mean they’re going to turn into a psycho bitch and try to kill someone.

“Fuck.” He finally curses, looking resigned. “You’re right. It could be her. Which means... she tried to kill you.”

His expression changes. He stalks for the door.

“Wait. Where are you going?” I leap to stop him.

“Where do you think? I’m going to confront her. And if it’s true...” Anger flashes in his eyes. “She’d better pray it’s not.”

“You can’t!” I protest.

“Juliet’s right.” Logan moves to join me, blocking his path. “We don’t have any proof. She’s untouchable. And with the takeover hanging in the balance, you can’t fuck this up even more.”

“Promise me,” I demand. “Promise me you won’t confront her.”

There’s a long pause.

“Dammit!” Caleb slams his fist into the wall, shattering the plaster with his frustration. “She can’t get away with this!”

“She won’t,” I say, getting an idea. “We can set a trap, catch her in the act.”

The men’s eyes snap to mine. “Trap? What kind of trap?” Caleb asks.

I know I have to tread carefully with this. “We can coax Olivia into trying something again, and take her down when she does.”

“And by trying something, you mean hurting you.” Caleb shakes his head. “No fucking way.”

“It won’t get that far,” I reassure him. “You, Logan, hell half the NYPD can be keeping watch. The important thing is for her to believe she has a chance to get rid of me. She’s so blind with jealousy, she’s not thinking straight. If we dangle that opportunity... She won’t be able to resist.”

“Use you as bait? Fuck no.” he swears. “No way in hell. I’m not putting you in danger again.”

“Caleb—”

“No.” He bites out the word with such finality, if I didn’t know him better, I’d have cowered in the corner.

Instead, I go to him and put my hand on his forearm. “Look at me, Caleb.”

He does, but reluctantly.

“I want this over as much as you do. Until we catch her, I’ll always be looking over my shoulder. You and I won’t be able to move on. Listen to me, we can end this.”

He starts to shake his head, but Logan adds, “She’s right. It might be the only way.”

Caleb pulls me to him so he can wrap his arms around me, almost as if he doesn't ever want to let go. His eyes bore into mine, searching. "Are you sure about this?"

I nod. "Absolutely. Let's finish this."



I WALK into the office with Caleb the next day, my pulse skittering with nerves. It feels like I'm undercover all over again, sneaking in with a hidden agenda, but this time, I'm working against Olivia, not for her.

I'm trying to pretend like everything is normal as I drop my things at my workstation. Caleb stops in front of Victoria's desk to retrieve his messages, then turns to me.

"You'll be all right?" he asks.

I manage a casual nod. This was my idea, and from the look in his eye, he's still against it. The last thing I need to do is make him think I'm having second thoughts. He might tell me to call off the whole thing.

And I can't. This is the only way.

*We* need to do this.

He murmurs something that sounds like, *Good luck*, then retreats to his office, glancing at me before closing the door for his nine o'clock meeting.

I'm about to go to my desk and start my daily work—not that I'll ever be able to concentrate on it—when my phone buzzes with a text. It's from Logan, hanging out on watch downstairs

*'Olivia is in. She's heading to Design.'*

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Showtime.

I square my shoulders and head down to the design floor. As usual, the creative group is working up a storm in their



studios. Mara is sitting on a stool at the light table, showing the latest designs to Olivia.

“Hi, there!” I call brightly, waving at everyone.

Olivia looks up.

“Oh, hi, Olivia. I didn’t know you were here,” I say with a smile.

“Hello, Juliet.” Her voice is stiff. “I do come in every so often to check out the new designs, you know. Because after all, it is *my* company.”

Somehow, I keep smiling at her. “Mara’s latest earring designs are killer.”

Mara beams proudly and says, “You’re early, Jules. What brings you here?”

“I just wanted to give you these back.” I hand her the set of keys she loaned me for her apartment.

Thank goodness Mara never handles surprise quietly. She gasps loudly as I hold the keys up. “You’re moving in with Caleb?”

I watch Olivia edge closer to listen. “Kind of,” I say.

“Caleb’s set me up in a company apartment on Fifth Avenue, right across from the Cathedral! It’s really nice. Sixty-fourth-one Fifth. Sixth floor. It’s amazing! It’s so luxurious! You have to come see it.”

I make sure my voice carries. In fact, I do everything but draw Olivia a map.

“Midtown? Nice.” Mara says. “Of course I’ll have to come over and check it out. I’m sure it beats my sofa. But why aren’t you moving into Caleb’s penthouse?”

I let out a little sigh. “Oh, you know Caleb. He needs his space. And I kind of need mine, too.”

“You do?” She seems confused, with good reason, since Caleb and I have been attached at the hip for weeks.

“In fact, I can’t wait to get off work today. Caleb’s meeting with his lawyers, so I’m going to go straight to the new place, have a bath, open a bottle of wine, and watch some awesome chick flicks on the big television. *Alone.*” I add, for emphasis.

Mara lets out a little sigh. “That sounds lovely.”

“I know, right?” I say, “Can’t wait. Sometimes you just need some me-time.”

There. I’m not sure what else I can do to drive the point home, short of renting a billboard in Times Square: ‘Attention Olivia: Juliet will be alone tonight, at the aforementioned address!’

I turn and find the bitch herself watching us. “Yes?” I ask.

“I want to see the rose gold in this one,” Olivia demands, glaring.

Mara jumps to attention.

“Sure.”

I back away. “I’ll leave you to it.”

I head back up to my desk and text the guys. ‘*Bait, taken.*’

*I can only hope it works.*

I SPEND the rest of the day trying to finish up my regular work duties, my pulse steadily rising to a fever pitch. By the time I’m ready to leave, I can’t sit still. My heart rate is spiking.

Can my plan really work?

I can only hope it does.

I take the subway to the apartment we’re using. As I walk past the shoppers and tourists, I try to scan for Logan, who is supposed to be staked out across the street, with a cop buddy. But the street is so choked with cars and people, it’s impossible to tell.

Caleb trusts Logan, though. So I do, too.

The building is a swanky apartment complex with a doorman, just like his place in the Upper East Side. The company owns it, to put up visiting business partners, or designers. We needed somewhere Olivia would feel safe entering, where she could easily get details of the security code—or even a key.

The doorman waves me in, and I go up to the apartment.

When I twist the key and go inside, I turn on the lights and look around. Spacious and roomy with high ceilings, it's just as luxurious as his penthouse uptown, but a little impersonal. Like a hotel room, but with all sleek, modern furniture in various shades of gray.

I shiver. Now there's nothing to do but wait.

I put on the TV and try not to go crazy wondering what Olivia's planning now.

I've got snacks, but I should have brought a bottle of wine. I could use something to calm my nerves.

Too nervous to get comfortable, I go to one of the stiff gray sofas and sit on the very edge of the cushion. I take out my phone and check for messages.

Nothing.

I put the phone on the glass coffee table and rub my hands together, wondering if Olivia will come.

She has to come.

And when she does... Who knows what will happen, then? She's tried to kill me before, so anything's possible.

I shiver even more at the thought.

Am I in over my head? Was this whole plan a mistake?

Peeling off my jacket, I go to the window and stare out at the city. The lights of adjacent buildings are blinking on. The spires and façade of St. Patrick's Cathedral are aglow. Shoppers scramble below. I try to spot Logan among them. Every time I see a blonde head, my heartrate quickens.

Then my phone buzzes, loud and echoing in the empty space, making me jump almost to the ten-foot-high ceiling.

I hurry over to the coffee table to pick up my phone and see a text from Logan. *Just checking in. We're in place. Let me know if you need anything.*

I let out a sigh of relief. *Ok so far*, I type in.

Suddenly, someone knocks on the door. Two quick raps.

I startle, clutching my phone to my heart.

I freeze, not knowing what to do.

I stare at the door. In the crack beneath it, I can see the shadow of someone hovering there, on the carpet, just outside.

I take a step closer, until I'm close enough to touch it. The knocking comes again. Then: "Jules? Are you there?"

That voice sounds familiar.

I take a deep breath, and prepare to face the person on the other side. But when I open the door...

It's Mara.



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## JULIET

“MARA?” I stare at her in disbelief, my mind racing. “What are you doing here?”

It couldn't be her... Could it?

Mara smiles, holding up a bag of takeout. “You told me to stop by, so I couldn't resist. Girls' night!”

Her eyes trail behind me, looking around the apartment. “Whoa. You weren't kidding. This place is amazing. And the location... Wow!”

Relief floods me. Of course she's not my enemy. I suddenly realize I'm being rude and step aside. “Come on in.”

When she passes, I glance up and down the hallway. It's empty.

Closing the door, I let out the breath I'd been holding. “Sorry. I didn't think you'd come by tonight.”

She goes to the kitchen island and starts pulling tacos out of a bag. “You looked kind of strange, earlier. I thought you and Caleb might have had a fight?” She winces. “I mean, why else would he give you a separate place?”

“No. It's nothing like that.”

I slowly relax as she goes fishing around kitchen cabinets for wine glasses. “I wish I had my own swanky crash pad, I mean, don't get me wrong, I love my guy, but when he leaves those little shaving specks all over the sink...”

I shake my head, still in a daze, as she passes me a glass of wine. “His and hers sinks,” I manage. “The secret of a happy relationship.”

“Isn’t that right?”

There’s another knock at the door. I tense, but then I get a text from Logan. *‘It’s me’*.

I go over and open it to find him at the ready, hand on the butt of the gun under his blazer. “I saw someone come up.”

“It’s all right. Just Mara.”

He heaves a sigh and comes in. Mara studies him. “Hel-lo? Don’t tell me you’re juggling *two* hot guys at once?”

I quickly make the introductions.

“A private investigator?” She eyes him curiously, the food forgotten. “What do you need that for?”

“Well...” I pause. “That whole thing I told you, about me moving here? It was staged.”

“Staged?”

“I wanted Olivia to hear about it, because I thought she might try something.”

“Why?”

“This is going to sound crazy. But I think Olivia is trying to kill me.”

She stares at me, as if waiting for the punchline.

“It’s true,” Logan adds.

I sit down at the kitchen counter and explain everything.

“Oh, my god,” she says after hearing the whole story. “So you set this up? I knew it! I knew something was wrong with you, from the way you were acting.”

A bolt of fear hits me. If Mara knew something was off, then maybe Olivia did, too.

“You thought she was going to come here and try something. So where is she?” Mara asks.

There's a pause.

Good question.

"I don't know," I murmur, looking at Logan.

"She left the office a couple of hours ago," Mara offers.

"She should have come straight here," I say. "That was the whole point of the plan."

Logan heads for the door. "I'm going to check up on her. See what she's up to. You stay here."

I nod.

When he leaves, Mara passes me the bottle. I take another long swig, my nerves zinging. "Something isn't right." I slide off the stool and go to my phone. I call Caleb, but it goes to voicemail, so I send a text instead.

*'Everything OK?'*

As I'm hitting send, I realize something.

"*Logan* checked in with me via text. Caleb hasn't." I tell Mara, my anxiety rising. "He was supposed to be in meetings, but that was hours ago. He should be home by now. He knew what I was doing."

So why hasn't he called me to check in?

I call again. Voicemail. *Fuck*.

"I'm sure he's fine," Mara says. "Have a taco."

I have no appetite. I start to pace the floor, heels clicking on the hardwood.

"Caleb's probably just in a meeting." She gives me a reassuring smile.

"You can't be sure." I gulp, fear rising. "Olivia, she's capable of anything. Caleb broke things off with her. And then I came in and... She's so jealous of me. Mad with jealousy. Why else would she risk everything to go after me? That's some serious hate. And not just towards me. She has to know there's no chance of being with Caleb now. So what might she do next? "



Grisly scenarios swarm my thoughts, all involving Caleb becoming the victim of some freak “accident” that will never be traced to her.

And it’s my fault. I told Olivia that he’d be home, alone.

*Oh God.*

I grab my purse and phone. “I have to go. I have to go make sure he’s OK.”

“Wait!” Mara argues. “If you think she’s going to do something, you have to call the cops.”

But I’m already racing for the door. I hurry downstairs and desperately hail a cab uptown, cursing the evening traffic as I send Caleb another text. Even if he was in a meeting, he’d send me a reply by now.

*‘Are you OK??’*

No response.

The cab driver lays on the horn. All the brake lights swarm around me, suffocating me.

The lights of an ambulance and police cars whirl blue and red, ahead.

Probably just a regular, everyday accident. But in my mind, it’s something worse. In my mind, Caleb is in trouble.

We’re a block from Caleb’s place and traffic is showing no signs of letting up.

I throw some money at the front seat. “I’ll get out here.”

I don’t give him the time to find a space at the curb. I throw the door open, then rush down the block, lungs bursting when I reach his apartment building.

Inside, I shout breathlessly at the doorman, “Is Caleb here?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the man says, looking confused as I barrel for the elevators.

“Call the police!” I order, jabbing the elevator button. “Have them come here. now!”

The doors open and I rocket inside. I watch the numbers above the door climb, visions of Caleb, in trouble, rushing through my head.

He could be hurt. He could be needing me.

What is Olivia capable of?

I curse myself for this stupid plan. We were all so worried about me... We didn't think about *him*. And while I know Caleb can usually handle himself, this isn't usual. His defenses will be down.

He wouldn't see her coming.

When the elevator doors part, I race for his door.

It's locked.

I'm about to hammer on it when I manage to stop. I don't know what's inside, but I do know that I have the element of surprise right now, so instead, I fumble in my purse for the spare key. I twist it in the lock, pushing open the door.

There's darkness. All the lights are off, and there's no sign of life inside.

My heart stops. I want to call his name, but I force myself to take a silent step across the threshold.

*Please be OK, Caleb. Please come strolling out of the bedroom and tell me everything's fine and hand me a glass of wine so we can laugh about how paranoid I am.*

But he doesn't.

I slowly let my eyes adjust to the dim. Moonlight filters through the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the white granite surface of the kitchen counters.

And then I see them, sitting on the island:

His keys and phone.

Caleb's here.

But why are all the lights off? Why would he be silent, in the dark alone.

*Something's happened.*

I take another step, and hear the smallest of noises somewhere in the apartment. Nothing more than the swish of fabric in the night.

I whirl to face the dark hallway. At the end of the hall, Caleb's bedroom door is ajar.

I blink, trying to make out any motion there. But then I hear another scraping sound.

I creep to the end of the hallway, my heart beating a wild rhythm in my chest. If he's here... And he's not responding... Something is very wrong.

But I can't turn back, now. If he's in danger, I have to help him.

Palms slick with sweat, I reach out to push the bedroom door the rest of the way. The creaking is so loud, it makes me wince.

At first, all I see is his bed, made. His housekeeper has definitely been here. There's a jacket thrown on the end, the way he always does when he comes home.

But other than that, the room is empty.

Then the sound comes again. Behind me.

From his office.

Stiffening, I backtrack and push open that door. There's no window in here, so it's too dark to see. I fumble on the wall for a light. I find it, and suddenly, the room floods with a bright glow.

Illuminating Caleb, slumped in the chair.

His eyes are closed.

And there's blood trickling down from his temple.



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## JULIET

“CALEB!” I cry, rushing to him. “Oh my god, say something. Caleb?”

He lifts his head, looking dazed—but alive.

*Thank God.*

“Juliet,” he mumbles. “Go.”

“What? No!” I realize he’s bound to the chair, his hands tied. I struggle to free him. “What happened?” I demand. “Was it Olivia?”

His eyes move past me and widen in fear. He struggles frantically at his restraints.

I hear a clicking noise.

When I turn, I find myself staring at Olivia. She has a gun in her hand.

And it’s pointed directly at me.

“Well, isn’t it sweet? Caleb’s little whore, here to save the day.”

My heart stops. The look in her eyes isn’t sane. It’s clear that she’s way over the edge. Gone is the picture of the perfect debutante. Her blonde bob is a mess. Her mascara is running. Her blouse is wrinkled. She looks like she’d forgotten everything about who she is.

“Olivia...” I say slowly, straightening up. “Take it easy. Everything’s OK.”

“Shut the fuck up.” She waves the gun at me. “I don’t take instructions from a whore. Because that’s what you are, aren’t you? Working for the highest bidder. First it was me, until you got your hooks into a bigger payday. I have to applaud you. Well, I would applaud, if I wasn’t holding this gun.”

“Put the gun down,” I say quietly, trying to stay calm. “You don’t want to do this.”

She laughs bitterly. “Oh, trust me, I do. I’ve had enough of the games. Now, finally, I can get what I want.”

“I don’t know what you mean...”

“Don’t you?” she glares, eyes wild in the light. “Well, that makes you fucking stupid, as well as a waste of my time. And I had such high hopes for you, with all your scheming...”

I shake my head, confused. “Olivia. I promise, I wasn’t scheming.” I don’t know what to say to her, I just know, I have to stall for time. Until the cops arrive. Until Logan figures out where we are.

Until someone can do something to stop this madwoman.

“I’m sorry if I got in your way,” I tell her, wracking my brain for the right strategy. What she wants to hear. “I can see it now. I’m not meant to be with Caleb. I should never have come between you—he’s all yours. You belong together, and I won’t stand between you anymore.”

Olivia stares at me blankly, then bursts out laughing, high and unhinged. “You think this is about *Caleb*?” she asks, “Jesus Christ, you’re both fools.”

I pause, confused. “But... Isn’t that why you’re trying to hurt me?” I venture, uncertain now. “Because you’re in love with him. You think you’re supposed to be together, so if I’m out of the way...”

Olivia is still laughing. “I should feel sorry for you,” she says, waving the gun at me. “The man has skills in bed, to be sure, but no man’s dick is worth hundreds of millions of dollars. My word, you really thought I was some jealous psycho bitch, trying to steal him back?”

I bite my lip. *Yes.*

“This was about the *money*,” she explains, like she’s talking to a child. “Do you even realize how much I stand to make if Sebastian Wolfe pulls off this takeover? Sterling Cross is valued at *eight billion dollars*, and I own twenty-five percent.”

Shit. I do the math. That’s not just fuck-you money, that’s fuck-you-and-everyone-you’ve-ever-known kinds of cash.

The kind of money some people would kill for.

“Now she gets it,” Olivia smirks, seeing the realization dawn. “This sale goes through, and I could have anything. *Everything*. But this selfish asshole won’t even entertain the offer,” she adds, glaring at where Caleb is still slumped in the chair, barely conscious. “He just whines about family, and legacy, and *loyalty*. Well fuck that, I’m getting what I’m owed.”

“But I don’t understand,” I venture. “Why come after me? I have nothing to do with the takeover. How does that help you?”

She looks at me pityingly. “You were a distraction, sweetheart. First with your silly little affair, and then as his obsession. As long as Caleb ran around cunt-struck, worrying about you and your mysterious attacker, he wasn’t paying attention to what was happening with the company, right underneath his nose.”

“Bitch,” Caleb mutters, but she only laughs.

“You should have thanked me for putting together the deal. That company is cursed,” she glares at him. “It takes everything from you, if you let it. It took our parents. I’m *saving* you.”

And there it is, the flicker in her eyes. As much as Olivia wants to pretend this is just about money, I can see, there’s more than that behind it. The passion, the rage. Her feelings for Caleb may have been twisted into revenge, but they came from somewhere.

“Bullshit.” Caleb manages to grind out a reply. “You sabotaged the company. You plotted against me.”

“Only because you wouldn’t see sense!” she explodes. “You put the company first, ahead of me, just like everyone else does!”

“You’re crazy!”

“Shh,” I try to stop him, but it’s too late. Olivia’s eyes flash with anger.

“You’d like to think so, wouldn’t you? But I’m the only smart one here. Once you’re gone, there’ll be nothing to stop me closing this deal. In fact, the board will have no choice. What a tragedy. A double funeral...” she muses. “I always did look good in black.”

She raises the gun.

“Olivia, no.” Caleb speaks up. “You need to get a grip. This is crazy! I know you. You don’t want to hurt anyone. Just calm down.”

“Oh, I’m calm,” she says, aiming right at me. “I’ve had years to think this over, and it’s clear what I need to do. To be free of Sterling Cross once and for all.”

I look around, frantic, my eyes landing on a silver letter opener on his desk. I’m within reaching distance of it, but if I lunged for it now, she could pull the trigger before I’ve even wrapped my hand around it.

Caleb catches my eye, like he can see what I’m thinking.

“You’re right,” he says, suddenly soothing. “The company is cursed. I thought I could turn it around, but maybe we’re better off selling once and for all. Call your lawyers, have them bring the paperwork. I’ll sign it, right here, right now.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Olivia scowls, but I see her waver.

“Of course, Liv. This is us, remember?” Caleb turns on the charm, even with blood trickling down his jaw. “Nothing is worth dying for. Not Juliet, she was just a distraction. I’ll give you whatever you want. So what do you say you untie me, and



we put all this behind us? You're not a killer," he adds. "Why worry about investigations and jail when you could be off spending your money instead. How about Europe?" he adds, and I see that he's loosening the restraints behind his back, out of Olivia's sight. "You always loved Spain. You could get a place outside San Sebastian. Spend your days drinking wine, relaxing on the beach. Doesn't that sound nice?"

Olivia gets a faraway look in her eyes. "Or London."

"I'll sign the papers, and you could catch a plane tonight." Caleb promises. "Just put the gun down and untie me."

For a moment, it looks like Olivia might take the bait. But then she catches a glance between us and reels back, fury in her eyes again. "No! This is all a trick. You would never choose anything over that company."

But I know she's wrong. He already did. He chose *me*.

"What are you going to do, kill us both?" Caleb exclaims, "You won't get away with this."

"Won't I?" Olivia looks smug. "It's actually fortunate that you had that little secret with Nero. Because now, I can kill you both, and everyone will think he's responsible. And then the business will be all mine to burn to the ground."

Oh my God. She really has lost her grip on reality.

"Like hell," Caleb spits back, his face tight with rage.

Suddenly freeing himself from the cords, he lunges at her, tackling her to the ground.

It all happens so fast, the two of them struggling there on the floor. Olivia fires wildly, and a picture frame shatters by my head.

"Go!" Caleb is yelling at me, trying to wrestle the gun away. But he's already injured, and Olivia is like a woman possessed, clawing at him, desperate. "Run!"

I know I should get the hell out of there, but there's something primal and animalistic in Olivia's screams of anger. It scares me to death.

Because she's not going to stop fighting until one of them is dead.

Olivia manages to get out from Caleb, slamming his head against the desk. He reels back, dazed. "This is all your fault!" she's screaming, hitting him again, straddling him there on the floor. "We could have had everything! You're just like them!"

Then she lifts the gun with both hands, pointing it directly at him.

I panic.

I lunge for the desk, grabbing the letter opener and plunging it down into her back with everything I have. Olivia lets out a blood-curdling scream, dropping the gun as she reels back in pain. Caleb lunges for it, and then he has it trained on her.

"It's over, Olivia," he swears, waving it determinedly. "Don't you fucking move."

Olivia sinks back on her heels, like all the fight's suddenly gone out of her.

"Caleb?" I cry.

"I'm OK, baby," he gives me a smile, even through the bloodstains. "Everything's OK."

My knees go weak, and I sink to the ground beside him. "Thank God," I sob. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Never." Caleb gives me a fierce look. "I'm too goddamn stubborn to leave you alone."

We help each other to our feet, bloody and bruised. I can't believe what just happened—or that he's OK.

And as for Olivia...

"You stabbed me." Olivia rolls over, clutching her shoulder. She looks at me in disbelief, blood blooming from her blouse.

"You'll live." I say.

“Not that you deserve it.” Caleb adds as he pulls me into a crushing hug.

I hear voices down the hall, and the thunder of footsteps.

It’s the cops.

Caleb hugs me close as they flood into the room, cuffing Olivia and securing the gun. “Everything’s all right,” he murmurs, holding me. “It’s over now. It’s all OK.”



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## JULIET

AFTER WE EXPLAIN EVERYTHING, the police take Olivia into custody. As the paramedics escort her away in handcuffs, she keeps her chin up high, like she's heading off to a debutante ball.

“Do you think she'll be OK?” I ask, watching them go.

“I don't give a fuck.” Caleb replies. I look over at him. “She nearly killed us both,” Caleb adds, with a scowl. “Whatever happens now, she deserves it.”

“I hope she gets the help she needs,” I say, surprised to feel a pang of sympathy, even after everything. “She clearly lost touch with reality.”

“You're too nice.” Caleb pulls me into a kiss.

“I stabbed her.” I point out.

He smiles. “Remind me not to get on your bad side ever again.”

“It's not funny!” I protest, but I can't help smiling too—overwhelmed with relief that we survived the ordeal.

But it's still not over just yet. We have to give our statements to the police and get checked out by the paramedics. It feels like hours later when the last of them finally pack up and leave, and we're left alone again.

I exhale. “I'm exhausted. I could sleep forever,” I say.

Caleb nods. “How about I run you a hot bath?”

“That sounds like bliss.”

He goes to start the water, while I grab champagne from the wine fridge. Now that the panic and adrenaline is fading, I feel like we have everything to celebrate.

We survived.

In the bathroom, Caleb has the tub full of steaming water, bubbles piled high in a foamy mass. I strip off my clothes and gratefully slide into the water.

“Oooh, that feels amazing.”

“Room for one more?” Caleb asks, smiling at me.

“Always.”

He strips off his clothes, and climbs in behind me, pulling me back to rest my head against his chest. I sink against him, loving the feel of his arms around me, so solid and right.

“I can’t believe I nearly lost you.”

Caleb’s voice is low behind me. I turn, water sloshing around us. His expression is tense. “I’m so sorry,” he says, cradling my face in his hands. “I had no idea. I never thought she could be capable of—”

“It’s over.” I cut him off with a kiss. “Olivia’s in the past now. Nothing can keep us apart.”

“I love you.” Caleb growls it, fierce possession in his eyes. “Those things I said to her, I didn’t mean them for a second.”

“I know.”

“But still, I need to say it. You’re not a distraction,” he tells me. “Olivia was wrong when she said nothing was more important to me than the company. *You are*. I would have done anything to save you. You’re everything to me.”

I melt into his arms, kissing him passionately. Our bodies slide together, slick in the water, a delicious friction that brings my body raring to life again.

“I’m going to show you,” he vows. “Show you how special you are.”

Caleb stands, lifting me with him, kissing me all the while as he carries me out of the bathroom and into his bedroom. He towels me dry, hands reverent on my body, so soft, it makes me pull his mouth to mine again, demanding *more*.

He takes the hint, yanking me up against the wall. His hands roam my body, hungrily running down my sides, and it's a whirlwind, how fast it's all happening. In a flash he has me on the bed and is tonguing my nipples, making me moan in pleasure.

"You're so beautiful," he tells me, nuzzling at my neck. "I could look at you all night."

"Look later," I tell him breathlessly. "Fuck me now."

His eyes flash dark at my boldness, and he pins me down. "Be careful what you wish for, sweetheart. That dirty mouth of yours will get you in trouble."

"Yes please." I grin. I love the kind of trouble Caleb has in mind.

My eyes trail down his strong torso, to the V of his waist, to the trimmed pubic hair, and lastly, his cock. God, he's so beautiful.

I draw in a shaky breath as it hits home. *He's mine now.*

Nothing can keep us apart.

"I don't know where to feast on you first," he says with a growl, his mouth finding purchase on my breast. "I could taste you for days." And all at once he's licking and sucking my nipple, leaving me spasming and arching my back in pure delight.

"Caleb, yes!" I scratch at his ass with my fingernails, pushing myself off the bed, meeting his open mouth. He stays like that for what seems like hours, just licking and kissing my breasts, cupping one and then the other, and the small fire in my belly starts to gather into a fiery inferno.

Then his mouth slowly trails downward, licking and nibbling to my navel. He slides off the bed, and suddenly

grabs my leg, lifting it up, positioning himself so that I can feel his breath on my clit. I let out an animal groan.

“So sweet and juicy,” he murmurs,” he says, his breathy, hot whispers sending jolts of pleasure through me. “You’re wet just for me, aren’t you baby? Dripping for my cock.”

He nudges my thighs wider on the edge of the bed, spreading me open. I’m wet for him, so ready, but he takes his time, slowly licking at my clit, barely dipping to my pussy before returning to lap me into a state of ecstasy.

“Look at me.”

I glance down. His eyes are locked on mine as he licks and sucks and teases and nibbles me, and I don’t even want to blink because I’m afraid I’ll miss a moment of this filthy, perfect sight. Him. And me. Right where we should be.

Forever.

I buck against him. “More,” I gasp.

“That’s right, baby,” he says, curling a finger inside me. “This cunt needs more, and you’ll get it, don’t worry.”

My orgasm starts to overpower me, and my belly quivers, and I can’t control myself. I writhe on the bed, arching and bucking in time to his tongue’s lapping. I coil my fingers in his thick hair and push his face into my cunt. And just when I think it can’t get better, he pulls away, climbing the mattress to cover me with his body.

He sinks into me slowly, inch by perfect, thick, inch.

“You feel that?” he murmurs, voice strained and husky. His hands are gripping my hips. “That’s my cock claiming what it owns. Your sweet pussy is *mine*.”

I moan. There aren’t words to describe how good he feels, so I show him instead, meeting him stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust until he’s embedded to the hilt, rubbing my inner walls so perfectly I’m sobbing for more.

“Take it,” he groans, thrusting into me again. “Take every fucking inch.”



“Yes!” I can feel him inside me, throbbing with his heartbeat.

He thrusts into me, hard this time. The pressure is building, blooming deep in my core like a volcano, ready to erupt. His muscles are tense as he pulls out and thrusts again, harder. Faster.

Deeper than ever before.

“Yes. Yes,” I cry out, lost in pleasure. “Fuck me, Caleb. Don’t stop!”

“That’s my girl. You like it hard,” he growls out, voice strained. We’re both covered in sweet sweat, and the friction is threatening to make us burst into flames.

“Yes. Harder.” I whimper, as the feeling that started low in my belly but now is radiating out, threatening to take over every inch of me. Now, I feel shameless. I want his mouth on me, everywhere. I want him to fuck me forever. “I’m close, Caleb. I’m close!” The pressure in my belly is now thundering through me, and I know an explosion is coming.

But as if sensing my need, Caleb slows. “Wait for it,” he growls. “You’ll come when I say you can.”

He slows his thrusts, sliding in and out, testing the rhythm, getting even deeper. His chest slides against my hard nipples, and suddenly, I let out a cry.

“That’s it, baby. Clench that cunt for me.”

He’s found the right place, because the pleasure is almost too much to take, I’m getting even hotter and closer to that edge than I dreamed possible. I hook my legs around his hips and he buries himself impossibly deep inside me. I’m frantic as I find myself building to the edge of that peak.

“Please,” I beg. “I’m close. I need to come!”

Caleb looks down at me, passion burning in his eyes. “Then come for me, sweetheart. Come all over my cock.”

My entire body ripples with such intensity I let out an animal scream. I come. So hard. So hard that I keep screaming

and sobbing his name, over and over again, even as I start to come down. He rips me apart.

He must've been holding out on me because the second I find myself coming down, he plunges deep into me, holding me there, and I feel him pulsating inside me. He lets out a long, muffled groan into my hair, then whispers my name over and over again.

"I'm never letting you go," he murmurs, gazing intently into my eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere," I whisper to him, softly stroking his hair as I kiss his temple. "We're here. Where we belong, and that's never going to change."



LATER THAT NIGHT, I wake in Caleb's bed, still feeling like I'm right where I belong, watching the moonlight dance across the ceiling as my body hums with a sweet ache from his touch.

This is perfect.

We didn't just make love. Caleb practically worshipped me, showing me the intensity of his passion with every kiss, every touch.

Every hard, deep thrust.

And I already want him again.

I roll over to cuddle close to his warm body, but find nothing but pillows.

His side of the bed is empty.

He's gone.

I sit up in bed and listen for the sound of the shower running. Or something sizzling on the stove. A sexy midnight snack, maybe. Or he's off fetching some new, exciting toys.

But the penthouse is so quiet that all I hear is the nighttime sounds of the city, far below.

*Where is he?*

I crawl out of bed, and slip into one of his luxurious robes. “Caleb?” I call, wandering through the empty apartment. “Are you here?”

There’s no reply. I shiver. And that’s when I see a note resting on the kitchen counter.

I pad over to it and read: *One more thing to take care of. Be back soon – C*

I stare at it, my mind racing. One more thing? What could he mean?

Olivia is finally in custody. And yes, the takeover is still hanging over him, but surely when word gets out about what happened, the board will come over to his side. There’s nothing threatening us anymore. Everything’s perfect now.

Except—

*Nero.*

My heart pounds at the thought. It’s not over with *him*. The blackmail, the demands for money... And now that he’s been arrested? Nero will be looking for revenge.

Which means Caleb is in danger.

And he’s running straight into the fire.



---

## JULIET

I RUSH TO MY PHONE, and quickly call him. “Pick up, pick up,” I chant, anxious.

*But the phone clicks to voicemail.*

*“This is Caleb Sterling—”*

*Fuck.*

I write him a text. ‘Where are you?’

But even as I click to send, I already know the answer.

I make another call, this time to Logan. It’s rings and rings, but just when I think it’ll go to voicemail, he answers, voice groggy. “Juliet? What’s wrong?”

He must’ve been asleep. Glancing at the clock, I realize it’s after two. No wonder. “Sorry... I just... I woke up, and Caleb’s gone. I think he might’ve gone to see Nero.”

There’s a pause, and I wonder how much he already knows. “Listen to me, Juliet. You need to stay out of it.”

“What are you talking about?” I demand. “This is serious. Caleb can’t go face the guy alone!”

“It’s none of your business.”

“How can you say that?” I cry. “Everything about Caleb is my business now!”

“This is between the two of them. It’s about pride and honor,” Logan warns me. “Don’t get in the middle of things.”

“You know as well as I do that Nero’s *honor* usually comes with a body count.” I retort. “You can sit around and let Caleb get himself killed, but I won’t.”

I hang up, furious. I don’t understand it, why Caleb would go rushing off in the middle of the night to confront the guy. But his judgment has always been clouded when it comes to Nero—to the debt his father owed, and everything the company was built on.

I have to stop him. But how?

I pace, thinking back desperately over all my research. Back before I knew what the fraud and blackmail was really about. Something was going on there.

The answer is right in front of me, if only I could see it.

I look around the room, but there’s nothing here to help me, just sleek furniture and high-tech stereo equipment; a few books on the shelves, framed photos on the wall.

No hints of the dark history Sterling Cross has been hiding.

I move to the office, and rifle through the drawers. It’s still a mess from the struggle with Olivia, but I ignore the bloodstain on the rug, and focus on Caleb’s things instead. Papers, business contracts—

Wait.

Buried under the mess is a framed photo of his parents and the Crosses, taken years ago. It’s like the print Caleb had in his office, but this one must have been a different shot, because in addition to Jacob and Annette Sterling, there’s another man in the frame.

Roman Barretti.

I shiver. I can see the resemblance to Nero, even though his father is smiling in the frame, arms around Caleb’s parents. Celebrating their deal, I guess. No wonder Caleb kept this print out of sight from the world.

But it’s the necklace that Annette is wearing that stands out to me.

It's the beautiful daisy necklace that I wore before. I'd know it anywhere. Caleb had said it was a family heirloom.

And it had been inscribed with the word, *Petal*... The same name that those love letters were addressed to. Her pet name from her secret lover, the affair she hid until the end.

I loosen the back of the frame, and check the writing on the back.

*Annie, Jake, and RB.*

I stop.

RB. The initials from the love letters. Annette's secret lover.

Barretti.

Of course! The truth comes crashing in. How did I not put it together before now?

Roman Barretti and Caleb's mother were having an affair. Annette Sterling was torn between the two men. But according to that last letter, she was planning to leave Jacob Sterling so that she could be with him. And then something must've happened to end it.

So did that mean... ?

Oh, my God.

Now, it all makes sense.

I reel back, shocked. I need to tell someone, but there's no time. Who knows what trouble Caleb is in right at this moment? I can't wait.

I pull on my clothes, and race for the door.

I know where Nero's club is. It's that place in that seedy section of town, where I saw Caleb hanging about, months ago. He'd tried to play it off, but I know the truth.

If he's gone anywhere tonight, it's there.

Outside, I hail a cab, and speed across town, my nerves growing. Nero isn't a man to be messed with at the best of

times, but after being locked up, and having Caleb accuse him so publicly of blackmail?

He'll kill Caleb on sight.

They don't know what I do. What could change everything.

I tap the glass. "Can we go any faster?" I plead, painfully aware of the clock running out.

The driver nods, and hits the gas, and soon, we're pulling up outside the club. I barrel out of the car, and race to the doors.

A meaty bouncer moves to block my path. "We're closed," he growls.

"But I need to get in," I protest. "I have to see Nero."

"Never heard of him."

I let out a noise of frustration, and look around, thinking fast. "Look, you need to take me to Nero Barretti right this minute," I say, drawing myself to my fullest height, and staring the guy down like he doesn't have two hundred pounds on me. "He called and told me to come here."

"I don't think so. You're not his type." The guy smirks.

"Do you really want to test that theory?" I demand, hiding my fear. "Do you really want Nero wondering why I'm not in there? And who, exactly, disobeyed his orders to get me in? He won't be happy," I add. "And you know what happens when Nero Barretti isn't happy."

There's a pause as the guy thinks about that. "Fuck it," he swears, and stands aside. "It's your funeral."

I hope not, as I make my way into the club. The place is pretty empty, just some shady looking people at the bar, so I try to look like I know where the hell I'm going, striding deeper into the dark, cavernous hallways.

Then I hear voices. Yelling. From up ahead.

I break into a run.



“Caleb?” I call, my shoes pounding on the floors as I race down the hallway. “Caleb, is that you?”

I throw open the doors—and stop dead.

Caleb’s there, all right. He’s got a gun pointing straight at Nero Barretti.

And Nero’s pointing one right back at him.

It’s a stand-off.

“Caleb,” I start, taking a step closer.

“Juliet?” Caleb’s eyes flash over to me. “What the fuck are you doing here? Go!”

“No, you have to listen.”

“I’d agree with your boyfriend,” Nero answers in a low, deadly voice. He cocks his weapon, the sound harsh in the silence. “Get out. Before my guys are digging two graves.”

“I’m not going anywhere!” I exclaim. And then, before I even know what I’m doing, I step between them.

Directly into the line of fire.

“You can’t kill him,” I tell Nero, my heart beating out of my chest. “He’s your brother!”



---

## JULIET

“WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?” Nero asks. I’m not sure if he’s more confused by my presence in the line of fire or because of what I just said.

“Caleb’s your brother. Your half-brother,” I explain. “You have the same father!”

There’s a pause, as both Caleb and Nero process the bombshell revelation.

“That’s a lie,” Caleb growls, looking furious.

“No,” I plead with them. “It’s true. Annette was having an affair with Roman. I found their love letters up at the cabin. They were going to run away together. But then she must have found out she was pregnant, and she had second thoughts. She stayed.”

“No.” Nero looks grim, in agreement with Caleb.

“I swear.” I tell them. “Don’t you see? It all makes sense. The bad blood between Roman and Jacob. The reason Roman kept coming after him for the money, even after they were supposed to settle their debt. Jacob kept the one thing he wanted more than anything, and Roman was determined to make him pay.”

Caleb shakes his head, taking it all in. “We’re... Related?”

“Yes.” I say. I can’t imagine what this news means to him —to both of them—but there’s no time to go into it now. Not with lives hanging in the balance. The slightest spasm on their trigger fingers... Everything could be over.

“This is bigger than an old feud.” I tell them both, trying to hide my fear. “You’re family. Connected. You have to stop and put your guns down right now!”

Caleb looks like he’s considering it. His hand wavers, and I will him to see reason now.

But then Nero’s voice comes, harsh. “It doesn’t matter if we’re blood. A debt’s a debt. And everyone knows what a Barretti does if you don’t settle what’s owed.”

He raises his gun again, and I snap.

“Will you quit it with this family honor bullshit?” I explode, frustrated enough to challenge him head-on. “This is what got your parents into this mess in the first place! You’re all wasting time on petty vendettas that should be ancient history. Roman was determined to get revenge on the Sterlings, and Jacob was too proud to pay the man what he was owed!”

“So you admit it.” Nero scowls. “The Sterlings owe me.”

“What I’ll admit is that I don’t understand why you’re risking everything like this,” I turn on him, gathering all my courage. The mob boss. The criminal.

The man who is standing between me and my forever with Caleb.

Because if I can’t get these two to see reason right now... It’ll never end. We’ll never be able to stop looking over our shoulders. Nero will always find a way to make Caleb pay.

That’s not the life I want.

It’s not the future I *deserve*.

I remember what my mom told me. That I have to be brave and go after what I want. And if Nero’s standing in the way of my life with Caleb, then I have to find a way to make him see what makes sense.

Our lives depend on it.

“You’re a smart man,” I begin, my mind racing to find the words he can’t deny. “You wouldn’t be running this empire if

you weren't. So what are you playing at, coming after Caleb when he's proven he's never going to give in to your demands? All you're doing is opening yourself up to attack, giving the Feds an opening to take you down. Because I'm sure this blackmail is the least of your crimes. Do you really want them sniffing around the rest of your business?"

"She's right." Caleb adds, but I'm not done yet.

"And you," I add, turning to Caleb. "You think this obsession is helping you keep control over your company? Sebastian Wolfe will keep on coming for you whether you get Nero to back down or not. You're so damn stubborn, you could lose everything just out of the principle of the matter! You're more alike than you even know!"

My voice echoes in the empty room. Both men stay deathly silent for a moment, and I catch my breath, wondering if I've just put my foot in my mouth—and signed my death warrant.

What was I thinking, marching in here and bossing the most fearsome men in New York around?

Then Nero speaks, cool and controlled. "Since you've got all the answers, what do you propose? He owes me."

"I'm not paying."

"Stop it, both of you!" I take a deep breath. "You both know this can't continue," I say. "So, we're going to find a compromise. I suggest you name your price, Barretti. For this to be done with, once and for all."

He raises an eyebrow. "My price?"

"Yes. Caleb will pay you out of your claim to the business. But then I want you to be out of Sterling Cross's affairs. Forever."

Caleb shakes his head. "Juliet—"

"No. Caleb. This is the only way," I tell him. "Swallow a one-time cost and put this behind you. You have enough to worry about with Wolfe's takeover attempt."

Caleb scowls. "I don't like it."

“And neither do I.” Nero says.

“Good. That’s what makes it a compromise.” I say, sounding braver than I feel. “So make the deal and walk away.”

Nero looks thoughtful.

“All right. Fifty million.”

“Twenty.” Caleb immediately responds.

“Thirty-five.”

“Done.”

I can’t believe it. I look back and forth between them, waiting for the catch. But they’re both glaring fiercely at the other, not happy.

But not shooting each other dead, either.

My heart races.

“Shake on it,” I order. “No going back.”

Another pause, then they both reluctantly grip each other’s hands.

“You’ll hear from my attorney to iron out the paperwork.” Caleb says.

“Bet on it.” Nero scowls back, before his gaze drifts to me. I’m shocked to find something that looks like admiration in his eyes. “You’ve got some balls, I’ll give you that. Nobody’s ever walked into my club and given me an order. Not without leaving on a stretcher.”

“I do what it takes to protect the ones I love,” I tell him. He nods.

“I can understand that.”

I don’t stick around to push my luck. I grab Caleb and we get the hell out of there. With every footstep, I’m expecting someone to stop us. For Nero to change his mind about the deal, and decide it’s easier to be done with us. It feels like the longest walk of my life, but eventually, we make it out of the club and into a cab back to Caleb’s.

It's not until we're halfway across town that I realize: he hasn't said a word to me.

I look over, but he's ignoring me. Staring out the window like there's something more than darkness and neon speeding past.

"Caleb?" I ask, but he doesn't reply.

I frown. I thought he would be happy. Well, relieved, at least. I thought this would be a load off his mind.

But damned if he doesn't look more tortured than ever before.

But this is probably a lot to take in, I tell myself: the news about Roman, and his mom's affair. Everything he thought he knew about his family is a lie, and now he's forever connected by blood to one of the most fearsome mafia families around.

That's a lot to process.

I decide to leave him in silence, but by the time we pull up at his place, I'm a little hurt that he's freezing me out. After everything, I would have hoped he'd let me in. And since I risked everything for him tonight...

We get upstairs. Caleb closes the door behind us, and heads straight for his office without even looking at me.

"What's going on?" I ask, stopping him.

He pauses, looking reluctant. "Juliet..."

"I mean it. After everything that's happened tonight, you don't have anything to say to me?" I step forwards. "Look, I know you're angry about making that deal with Nero, but surely you can see, it's the only way out—"

"Quiet!"

I hush, surprised.

"I'm not mad at you," Caleb says, dragging a hand through his hair. "In fact... I'm wondering what the fuck I would do without you."

*Oh.*

I stare at him, open-mouthed. Whatever I was expecting, I wasn't this.

“What you did for me tonight... I don't know what I did to deserve someone like you, but I owe you my life. My everything.” Caleb moves closer, and then, before I can even register what's happening, he drops to one knee in front of me.

“Will you marry me?”





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## JULIET

MARRY HIM? I stare at Caleb in disbelief, on his knee before me on the floor. My heart pounds in my chest as my mind races. He can't possibly mean it.

Can he?

Finally, I trip over my words as I say, "Y-you want to marry me?"

I can't believe it. Commitment-phobe from hell Caleb, the city's hottest bachelor, is down on one knee. Asking *me*. Wanting me.

He takes my hand. "Marry me," he says it again, with that irresistible confidence in his smile. "Juliet, I know I don't deserve you, not yet, but fuck it, I'll do anything to prove I'm the man for you. Because you...? You've changed everything for me. Your passion, your determination, the way you just walked into that room and told Nero fucking Barretti how to handle his business..." Caleb chuckles. "I can't live without you, Juliet. And I don't want to. Marry me."

"This is crazy." I'm shaking, light-headed. "You can't be serious?"

"I've never been this serious in my life." Caleb swears.

"This is just the adrenaline talking," I argue. "You're still processing everything that happened with Nero. Near-death experiences make people do crazy things. You don't really want this. You don't even have a ring!"

Caleb gives me a look, and continues into his office. I follow, and see him open the safe in the corner, and pull out a small velvet box.

My heart stops.

He walks back out, leading me away from the visible signs of Olivia's mayhem, and out into the living room again. "I was planning for this to be different," he says, looking almost nervous for the first time. "I thought, we could take a trip, or have a whole dinner planned... But if the past few months have taught me anything, it's that life is short, and precious."

Caleb opens the box, revealing the most gorgeous diamond ring I've ever seen before.

Princess cut. Six carats at least. Simple, elegant.

Perfect.

My hands fly to my mouth. "Oh my God," I whisper—at the sight of the ring, but also everything it means.

He planned for this.

He wants this.

*Me.*

Caleb takes my hand, gazing into my eyes. "I can't imagine spending my life with anyone but you. Every day. Every night..." His eyes take on that wickedly seductive gleam. "Don't you want it too?"

*I do.*

The words are on my lips, but still, I hesitate. Not because I don't love him. But because I love him so much. This man has my heart in the palm of his hand, and the thought of bonding myself to him forever is thrilling—and scary as hell.

"What if you get bored of me?" I whisper.

"Impossible." Caleb smiles. "I haven't even begun loving you yet. Besides, you'd come at me with a letter opener if I dared step out of line."

"Caleb!" I cry, half-laughing. "You can't say that."

“Tell me yes.” Caleb kisses me hotly. “Unless you need me to *order you to accept*,” he adds, his voice dropping with promise.

I shiver. “That won’t be necessary,” I tell him, my heart in my throat as I realize the weight of the moment. “I love you. I want to be with you always.”

“So you’ll do it?” Caleb grips my hands.

Slowly, I nod. “Yes,” I say, breathless. “I’ll marry you.”

Caleb slides the ring onto my finger, and then sweeps me into a passionate embrace. His kiss is all-consuming, an inferno that swallows me whole. His tongue slides deep into my mouth, his body hard against me.

*Mine.*

I feel a rush of possession. This magnificent, infuriating, wickedly capable man is mine now. My fiancé.

*My future husband.*

I draw back, gasping for air. “We’re really doing this?” I say, gazing at the ring in a daze.

“We’re doing this,” Caleb vows. We gaze at each other for a split-second, then all the passion suddenly explodes. Our hands are on each other, our mouths tangle in a furious dance. Caleb shoves me back against the wall, yanking my shirt open, and feasting on my breasts.

I moan, his tongue rasping roughly over the silk of my bra. He nips at my nipple lightly through the fabric, making me gasp, and then sucks it into his mouth until I’m whimpering for more.

“Caleb... !”

“That’s right, say my name,” he growls, yanking my bra down, and suckling on my stiff, aching peaks. “Scream it so loud, they call the cops. Because it’s the only fucking name you’ll ever need again.”

“Yes, Caleb!” I reach for him, just as hungry to claim his body. I pull his shirt off, running my hands over his bare chest,

and then down, down to rub his cock through his jeans. He's stiff and hard, straining to be freed, and fuck if I don't feel a rush of damp heat, already needing him inside me.

Where he belongs.

"Bedroom. Now." Caleb pulls me after him, practically carrying me down the hall. He strips off the rest of his clothes as we go, so by the time we reach the bed, he's naked. Like a Greek statue, chiseled and perfect.

"Spread your legs, sweetheart. I'm going to gorge on that sweet cunt."

Caleb shoves me back on the bed, gripping my thighs and spreading them wide before he dives for my pussy. His tongue is hot and demanding, and with the first long swoop of my clit, I cry out in pleasure.

*Fuck, yes!*

I grab the bedframe and hang on tight, arching up as he devours me, licking and sucking at my clit, spearing me with his tongue, a frenzy of sensation that sends me spiraling higher, higher—

"Oh my god!"

I come with a cry, legs clamping tightly around his head as the climax rips through me. And Caleb keeps on licking right through it, wringing another swift climax out of me before he pulls away.

"Easy baby, that was just the warm-up," he says with a wicked smile, as I fight to collect myself again.

Warm? I'm downright blazing now, my core aching with the sharp need to be filled.

I sit up, heart racing. "I want to touch you," I say, taking in the sight of him.

Caleb holds his arms wide. "Take whatever you want, sweetheart. I'm all yours."

*Mine.*

There it is again, that hot burst of possession. Caleb climbs beside me on the bed, and I waste no time before exploring his body, leaning in to kiss his neck, hands sliding over his lean muscles, tongue teasing at his nipples and torso.

Caleb groans, his cock jerking as my hair brushes past him. “You’re torturing me,” he growls.

“Patience,” I coo, loving the power as I slowly close my hand around his cock. He’s leaking from the tip, and I lean over to lick it up, savoring the salty tang.

“Fuck,” he gasps, falling back on to his elbows. “Juliet...”

But I don’t hurry. Increasing the pressure, I fist him in my hand, and slowly start to pump. Up and down, working the shaft, teasing my thumb over his thick head as Caleb’s body tenses and flinches beneath me.

“Where do you think you should come?” I muse, tormenting him. “My mouth? On my breasts? Or buried deep in my wet cunt?”

“None of the above.”

Caleb suddenly sits up, and pulls my hand away, that dominant look in his eyes again.

I pause, confused. “Then where... ?”

He kisses me deeply. “You know where. I want it all.”

A shudder of lust rolls through me as I realize what he’s saying.

*There.*

“I don’t know...” I gulp, uncertain. “I’ve never...”

“Trust me,” Caleb says.

And I do.

He kisses me again, hand delving between my legs to rub and toy with my clit until I’m wriggling against him, panting for more. “Don’t worry, baby. First, we’ll get you nice and warmed up for me. I could never neglect this sweet cunt,” he

adds with a wicked gleam in his eye, as he lays me back. “Not when you’re so wet for me.”

He positions his cock at the entrance to my pussy, and slowly, thrusts inside.

*Yes.*

I clench around him in bliss. “That’s right,” Caleb groans. “God, you’re so tight.”

He withdraws, and then sinks into me again, holding my gaze the whole time. It’s amazing. I could fuck him like this forever, just the thick, steely drive of him, angling up just right inside me, friction driving me wild. He finds a slow, relentless pace, driving me higher, making me cry out as I near the edge.

“Shh, not yet, sweetheart.” Caleb suddenly pulls out, leaving me whimpering. Empty.

“Please,” I whine, aching for him, “I need you.”

But he just smiles.

“Oh, you’ll get me, baby. Every last inch.”

Caleb rolls me over, so I’m face down on the bed. He lifts my hips, pulling my ass up. “Remember how good this felt?” he asks, spreading my cheeks and tracing the crevice.

He circles the tender bud of my asshole, nudging and probing.

Blood rushes to my face at the dirty touch, but I can’t help moaning.

“Yeah, you remember.” He chuckles against me. “Now, let’s see you take my fingers like a good girl.”

He nudges at my ass, then slowly sinks one finger in, up to the knuckle.

I gasp. It’s stretching me wide, a new kind of fullness. I wriggle, adjusting to the intrusion.

Caleb notches his cock against my pussy, and sinks into me again.

*Fuck.*

I cry out at the stretch. The fullness of both his cock and finger inside me. like nothing I've felt before.

"Shh," Caleb places a hand on my back, keeping me in place. "You can take it, baby. In fact, you can take one more."

He eases another finger into my ass, and *fuck*, I shudder from the sensory overload.

"Caleb," I stammer. "It's... It's..."

"I know. Fuck, you feel so good like this," he groans, slowly flexing his fingers. "So tight, like a goddamn vice around my cock."

Another thrust of his cock, and I feel a kind of sweetness start to rise, curling my toes, shuddering up through my spine. "Yes," I moan, moving back to meet him. "Oh God, yes...."

But he stops. Pulls away. Withdraws from me until I'm left so empty, I could sob. "Caleb?" I manage, glancing back in confusion. I see him reach across to the bedside cabinet and retrieve a tube of lube.

"That was just the preview, baby. Now, you get the real deal."

I catch my breath, my heart pounding in anticipation.

I've never gone this far with anyone. Never wanted to. But with Caleb, there are no limits. No boundaries to our pleasure.

I want to give him everything.

"See how wet you are?" Caleb croons, reaching between my thighs to pet and probe at my clit. "You're dripping for me. You can't wait for me to own this ass."

"Yes," I gasp, thrusting back against his hand. "I want you."

"My sweet, filthy girl," Caleb growls in approval.

He moves behind me again, gripping my hips, spreading me wider. I feel his slick cock nudge against me, and then there's pressure. Demanding entry. Caleb rubs my clit again in swift, deep circles, as slowly, he begins to thrust inside.



I see stars.

His fingers were incredible, but nothing could have prepared me for the feeling of his thick cock invading my ass. It's fullness like no other. The incredible stretch, dancing to the very edge of pain.

I gasp for air, overwhelmed, but somehow, Caleb's lightening fingers playing with my clit work me through the ache, sending pleasure mingling with the pain until he's sheathed deep inside. Deeper than I could have ever imagined.

"Fuck, Juliet," he groans, sounding ecstatic. "You're taking it all."

He starts to move, dipping into me with shallow thrusts, pulling out, and driving deeper, his fingers still working me into a frenzy. The friction is incredible, and soon I'm lost in the haze of taboo pleasure, the forbidden thrill. It sends me soaring higher, lost to Caleb's demanding thrusts, his animal grunts mingling with my moans, echoing in a chorus of pleasure.

"I can't hold back," he growls.

"So don't," I gasp, rocking back to impale myself on his cock. "Give it to me. Give me everything!"

Caleb sounds a roar, and slams into me, harder this time. I jolt forward with the impact, crying out for more. "Yes! Yes!"

I've lost track of thought, or reason now, like I'm consumed with a raw, primal passion. All that matters is the two of us, the thick demanding thrust of his cock, and how my body feels, strung out, split open, surrendered to this filthy, fantastic moment.

"Fuck me!" I cry, shameless. "Don't hold back. Caleb, god, don't stop!"

And he doesn't. Caleb doesn't pause a moment, doesn't stop the barrage of strokes, taking me higher, pushing me to the limits of pleasure and pain until my whole body is wound tight, shaking, sobbing with need. Chanting his name like a prayer. "I'm close. Fuck, I'm close!"

And then he notches himself deep inside me, presses down hard on my clit, and takes me over the edge.

I come apart with a scream. *Fuck*. My body shatters, pleasure crashing everywhere, an epic torrent of sensation that takes me over, drowns me, until there's nothing in the world but Caleb's steady hands and his unrelenting cock and the magic of our connection. Beyond words.

Beyond reason.

“Juliet!”

I hear him groan my name, and then he's pulling free, spurting over my body in thick, hot jets as I lay there, spent. Used.

*His.*

Slowly, the shockwaves recede. Dear Lord. If this is what a lifetime with Caleb will be like, I can't marry the man fast enough. I can't help but giggle at the thought.

Caleb slumps beside me, breathing hard. He gives me a questioning look.

“I was just thinking, I can't exactly wear white, after tonight.” I grin.

“You'll wear whatever the hell you want,” he says, his voice thick with satisfaction. He cups my cheek tenderly. “Mrs. Sterling.”

And damn if I don't love the way that sounds.



---

JULIET

ONE MONTH LATER

“HOLD YOUR BREATH.” Mara says as she pulls up the zipper on my wedding gown.

It’s a Cinderella dress, a huge confection of lace and tulle, the kind that will probably get me stuck in doorways.

“Is it too much?” I wonder, fretting over my reflection.

Mara laughs. “There’s no such thing as too much on your wedding day.”

“Yes, but the last thing I want is to be a Bridezilla.” I grin.

“You’re not. Trust me. You put together this whole event in what—three weeks?” Mara beams. “You haven’t had time to go crazy. Except for your groom,” she adds with a wink.

I give a smug grin. “Well, that’s just part of the deal, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely,” my mom agrees.

I turn to her with my heart in my throat. She’s here at the church with one of the nurses, Joanie, and to my utter delight, she’s having a good day. Lucid. *Remembering*.

She looks at me proudly. “You look beautiful. Just perfect.”

“You look amazing, too, Mom,” I say, so happy to have her here—however long it lasts. A part of me wonders if knowing I’m happy and in love is helping her somehow, giving her something to hold onto.

“Not bad for short notice,” she says with a smug grin.

Short is an understatement. The past weeks have flown by, filled with a whirlwind of wedding plans; officially moving into Caleb's apartment, and—of course—christening every room in the place. It's been a non-stop blur of passion and future plans, but underpinning everything is the bone-deep certainty that I'm making the right choice.

Caleb is my forever, and the sooner that forever starts, the better.

"Now, I have a gift for you." Mara beams mysteriously. She produces a jewelry box from her bag, and hands it over. "I demanded an unlimited budget from your husband-to-be," she adds with a smirk. "My genius shouldn't be restrained by mere numbers."

I open it excitedly, and gasp. "Mara!"

It's a jeweled headpiece, adorned with scrolls of diamonds and pearls. "It's gorgeous," I breathe, lifting it out.

"Naturally." Mara helps me fasten it in place.

"I look like a princess."

"You look like a Sterling." She winks, and I feel a jolt of anticipation.

There's a tap at the door. One of the event planners peeks in. "We're ready for you," she says, and everyone squeals in anticipation.

"This is is." I take a deep breath.

"Nervous?" my mom asks me, fussing with my hair.

I shake my head. "Excited," I admit. "I can't wait for us to start our life together."

She cups my cheek. "I'm so proud of you. I know it hasn't been easy, these past few years. And if I could be there for you, you know I would be."

"I know," I tell her, tearing up.

"You have no idea how happy it makes me, knowing you have someone to take care of you, too." She says, eyes also glazing over with tears. "I know, you don't need it. You take

care of everyone. But the way Caleb looks at you... I know he'll protect you, when I..." she trails off. "When I can't."

Now I'm really trying not to cry. We hug each other tightly, until Mara claps her hands.

"Don't leave the groom waiting!" she says, picking up her maid-of-honor bouquet. "I'll see you out there."

She heads into the church, and Joanie escorts my mom, just behind.

I adjust my skirts, and take my place, just behind the double doors at the end of the aisle. My heart is racing, and I feel like sprinting down the aisle to Caleb. But I also want to treasure every moment of this day, to remember it for the rest of my life.

"Well, aren't you a sight to see."

I turn, shocked to find Nero standing there beside me. "What are you doing here?" I start to ask. After the scene at his club, neither Caleb or I have seen him again. The lawyers handled their compromise deal, and as far as Caleb is concerned, that means Nero is out of his life forever—brother or not.

Nero gives me a cool smirk. "Did my invitation get lost in the mail? Don't worry," he adds, before I can panic. "I'm not here to crash the party. In fact, I have something for you."

He hands me a sheaf of papers, filled with dense legal language.

"Sebastian Wolfe is dropping his takeover bid," he translates for me.

My eyes widen. "What? How? We thought for sure he was going to win!"

"He was." Nero replies. "Until I... Talked him out of it."

I shiver. Even though Nero is being perfectly civil, there's still a dangerous animal beneath that well-cut suit.

And I'm pretty sure, Sebastian Wolfe wouldn't have given up Sterling Cross easily.

Not unless he had no other option.

I swallow. “But why?” I ask. “Why do this favor?”

Nero gives me a curious smile. “Consider it a wedding gift. After all, we’re family now.”

I can’t tell if that sounds more like a promise—or a threat. But either way, I’m not going to ask questions about this eleventh-hour save.

“You could stay,” I offer, nodding to the crowd inside. “I know Caleb will want to thank you in person.”

“Not my scene,” Nero says shortly. “You better not keep him waiting.”

And then he’s gone, just as quickly as he arrived.

The orchestra strikes up the music, pulling my attention back to the church. The doors open, and I take a deep breath, stepping down the aisle.

And then I see him standing there, and everything fades away. Caleb. The only man for me.

My forever.

I walk towards him eagerly, and the look on his face as he greets me is something I know I’ll remember for the rest of my life. When I reach him, he’s smiling.

“You look so beautiful,” he says, moving in close to take my hands. “Ready?” he asks, leaning in close to whisper to me.

I nod. I’ve never been more ready.

“Just wait until I get you alone on our honeymoon.” Caleb adds with a wicked grin. “I have big plans for you...”

THE END

(Almost)

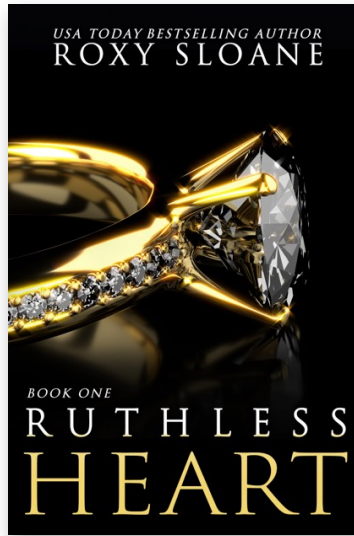
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## LILY

IT'S two a.m. on a Wednesday morning when a man walks through the door and ruins my life.

You might think there isn't much in my life left to ruin, since I'm serving drunk assholes watered-down whiskey in a strip club on the outskirts of Las Vegas, and maybe you're right. I'm not curing cancer, or fighting for world peace, and the only masterpiece I'm painting is the lipsticked smile on my face, inviting guys to shove grubby singles in the waistband of my leather miniskirt. The nuns at my old fancy Catholic school would probably faint if they could see me now—and then pray for my poor soul.

No, this life isn't anything like the one I dreamed about, but it's just that: A life. And it's a hell of a lot better than the alternative, which is laying six feet under in an unmarked grave somewhere like I never even existed at all.

The Barretti Family doesn't give you the honor of a headstone, not when you've crossed them like I have.

Which is why I take one look at the guy who just sauntered in, and my blood runs cold.

*You knew this day would come.*

I look again, praying I've got it wrong, that I'm just seeing things in the dim light, but I would know that man blindfolded at a hundred paces.

Nero Barretti.

I panic.

He hasn't seen me, he's too busy frowning at his cellphone, surrounded by a group of enforcers. I even recognize a few of them, checking out the dancers on stage, shaking their asses to Rihanna. The group flags down a waitress, joking about something; the fat wad of bills in their hands that say they're here to play.

But there's only one man who matters to me. Nero. He's still looking at his phone, distracted. And then, I realize: they haven't come here looking for me.

*I still have a chance.*

I duck through the crowd, which is drunk and rowdy like usual. I keep my head down, away from the threat, cursing my bad luck. Of all the shitty strip clubs in Vegas, he had to walk into mine.

"Amber!" One of the other girls catches me by the bar. "Where are you going? You're supposed to close at four."

Fuck.

"Cover me?" I ask, pleading. I shoot an anxious look back across the room, but I don't see him. "I'm... Not feeling great."

She sighs. "I don't know..."

"You can take my tips for the night," I say, pulling loose bills from the stash in my bra. "I'll close the rest of the week. Whatever you want."

"Fine," she agrees, then studies me. "You should get home. You don't look so hot."

I don't feel it either. "I owe you!" I tell her grateful, and hurry towards the back exit, already knowing I won't be back. Amber will fade away as easily as I invented her. Just another fake name to add to the list of women I used to be.

I head down a dark hallway, and out the back door into the alley. I can see the neon lights flickering from the Strip and take a deep breath of relief. *Freedom*. But I've only made it a few steps, when someone grabs me from behind.

I freeze in fear, turning—but it’s one of the customers from inside.

“Baby, where you goin’?” he slurs, eyes unfocussed. But his hand is focused all right—right on my ass.

“Sorry!” I blurt, trying to slip under his grabby hands, but the guy holds on tight. He backs me up against the wall, beside the trash cans.

“How much for a dance?” he leers down at me, breath rancid.

I try not to retch. “I’m not a dancer, I just serve the drinks,” I say, putting my hands on his chest and trying to shove him away. But the guy’s built like a linebacker. I may as well be shoving a brick wall.

“So maybe we don’t dance...” Bad Breath leans in to nuzzle at my hair, pressing closer. His hand gropes my breast, and I shudder in revulsion, looking over his shoulder to see if Security is around to toss this guy like usual.

But it’s not a friendly face that steps out the back door.

*It’s him.*

Nero’s making a call, his voice steady and lethal. The light catches his face properly for the first time, and I stifle a gasp. In the back of my mind, I’ve been half-imagining the boy he used to be at twenty. Lanky, still filling out; a mop of dark curls, and a boyish smile that could tempt you into breaking all the rules.

But the man staring in the doorway is cut from raw steel. Hard and unflinching. He looms there, muscles taut against the fabric of his black T-shirt and jeans; mottled tattoos peeking through. He’s unshaven, his hair tousled, and his eyes full of contempt as he barks an order on the phone.

I feel an ache, memories rushing back like a tidal wave. But I force them back. I can’t go down that road, not right now, shoved up against the wall with this drunk asshole about to give the game away.

About to end my shitty life forever.

“Yeah, baby...” The drunk guy’s hand moves between us, and I hear the sound of his zipper. I fight the rising bile in my throat. Nero is still standing there oblivious, barely twenty feet away from us.

He hasn’t noticed us here in the shadow of the dumpster, but if I struggle... If I scream...

He’ll hear me.

And then it’ll all be over.

In a split-second, I weigh the impossible choice. Either I let this drunk guy rape me here in the alleyway...

Or Nero Barretti will find out exactly where I disappeared to. And not just me, either.

He’ll find my little brother, too.

*God help me.*

I close my eyes, tears hot on my cheeks as I sink back against the wall.

*Make it fast, I pray. Just get it over with.*

The drunk guy is pawing at me, breathing faster now in anticipation. “Baby, yeah...” he groans, yanking my skirt higher. “I know you want it.”

What I want is the past ten years of my life back. To be somewhere far away from this grimy alley, and these grubby hands, making impossible choices just to stay alive.

“Fuck,” he groans, fumbling with his limp whiskey dick. “Just gimme a sec, I’m getting harder, I’m getting—”

Just like that, he’s gone.

My eyes fly open in time to see Nero hurl the guy to the ground and bring his heel down on the man’s head with a sickening crunch.

“Hands off the merchandise.” Nero tells him coldly. “This one’s taken.”

He gives me an assessing look, like there’s not a decade of history between us. “Lily Fordham,” he says coolly, eyes



lingering on my ripped blouse and hiked up skirt. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

I’m reeling from the icy scorn in his gaze, but Drunk Guy isn’t out yet. He lurches to his feet, roaring angrily, and lunges at Nero. Caught off guard, he stumbles back, and the guys go careening into the dumpsters.

I don’t wait around for another second. I take off, my heels clattering on the asphalt as I bomb it across the parking lot to my ancient Jetta. I pull my keys from the pouch around my waist and jam them into the ignition, hands shaking so hard it takes me three tries just to get them in.

The engine sputters.

*Please start, please start.*

I chant it, sobbing, until finally it bursts to life. I pull away, tires screeching, damn near breaking the speed limit across town until I pull up outside my run-down apartment complex and race inside. I hurry up the stairs to my floor, and slam the door behind me, shoving the deadbolt into place.

I sink to the floor, my heart pounding.

*What do I do now?*

I look around. The place is sparsely furnished, but I’ve done my best to make it feel like home. Thrifted furniture, books and blankets. I painted the kitchen sunbeam yellow and did a mural on the bedroom walls: Jungle vines twisting up to a blue ceiling, tropical and bright.

But a part of me always knew it would be temporary.

A part of me always knew, the day would come when I would have to leave it all behind.

Once it would have been for him. *With him.*

Now, Nero is the one burning it all to the ground.

Slowly, my pulse comes back to normal. I wipe away my tears, and straighten up my clothing, turning over every possibility in my mind. I could run. Pack a bag, hit the road. Find another city to get lost in, another shitty job to keep my

brother's tuition paid. Spend every waking minute looking over my shoulder, searching the crowd for a familiar face.

But I already know, it's not an option. Not anymore.

Now that Nero Barretti knows I'm out here, he'll stop at nothing to find me again. He'll hunt me down, no matter what, and he won't care who he has to hurt to get to me.

*Teddy.*

My brother is safe in college in Indiana, attending lectures and meeting other freshman at Friday night pizza parties. Oblivious. Happy. I've spent the past ten years raising him, making his life as normal as possible in the wreckage of everything that went down.

He's my reason for everything, and there's nothing I won't do to protect him.

A knock echoes through the apartment.

I flinch.

It comes again, determined. *He's found me.*

I get to my feet and take a deep breath. Slide the deadbolt open and throw the door wide.

But it's not Nero on the other side. It's his enforcer, Chase standing there—with three of his guys, menacing in the dim light. I try not to notice the bloodstains on his shirt, probably the last trace of that drunk guy anyone will ever see.

"Chase," I greet him, pretending it's not a shot of disappointment I feel. "Come in."

He looks surprised, like he was expecting to have to break the door down to get to me.

"Where is he?" I ask. "Where's Nero?"

"He flew back to New York. Business." Chase replies. "He left me to deal with you."

Terror strikes hard, but I hide the shiver. I know how Chase *deals* with people.

Instead, I draw myself up to my full height and give him my most imperious stare. The one I used in my former life, when I was pampered, and privileged, and the whole world leapt to give me whatever my heart desired.

When Nero Barretti was the boy I loved, and not the man who wanted me dead.

“Take me to him.” I say, offering up a final prayer. Because there’s only one person who can save me now, and there’s no way to run from him. Not anymore. “Take me to the boss.”



---

## LILY

I DIDN'T EXPECT a first-class ticket, but the drive back to New York is long and humiliating—and gives me plenty of time to wonder if I just made the biggest mistake of my life. Two days tied up in the back of a van, listening to Chase and the other guys speculate over just what Nero will do when we reach the city.

“He’s gotta make an example, after what her father did.”

“For sure. Everyone’s going to know, the Barretti family never forgets. You hear that?” Chase turns and gives me a chilling smile. “Nero’s going to have some fun with you.”

I don’t have to listen in to their conversation. I’ve spent the past ten years going over every scenario for myself. When your father rats out a Mob boss and gets him locked up in prison, you learn pretty fast that overnight, everything can change.

And just like now, I never saw it coming.

One minute, I was Lily Fordham, pampered daughter, society princess. My life revolved around private school gossip and exclusive parties: art classes and piano lessons and horseriding at a stable upstate.

The next? My dad was telling me to pack a bag. He’d cut a deal to testify against his boss, Roman Barretti, and we were disappearing into Witness Protection. No more luxurious mansion and credit cards, no more flitting around New York City, no more passionate trysts with the boy I secretly loved. In a heartbeat, I was a thousand miles away, stuck in a modest

tract home outside of St. Louis, one of a thousand at my local public school, working weekends at the local Applebees just to afford community college one day.

New name. New life.

I came back down to earth with a bump, that's for sure.

My little brother was young enough to take it in stride, but my mom didn't make the switch so easily. She'd married a wealthy finance whiz, with country club memberships and an account at Neiman Marcus. This new, modest, anonymous life wasn't part of the deal. It turned out, *'for richer, for poorer'* only went one way. She took off after a couple of years, and we never heard from her again.

Dad's cancer diagnosis came a few years after that, and soon—too soon—it was just me and Teddy left.

Now he's all I've got in the world, and I'd do anything to protect him.

Even deliver myself directly into the hands of the new Barretti boss. I figured that with Roman still locked up, Nero would be the man in charge, and it looks like I'm right.

And every mile takes me closer to him.

Every mile brings me nearer to my fate.

I bite back the fear, bitter like metal in my mouth. All I have to go on is that split-second glimpse of him in the alleyway, a moment after a decade of nightmares. I thought I'd figure out a plan on the journey, some way to reason with Nero and get myself out of this mess, but I'm still drawing a blank.

*What have you done?*

It's too late to turn back now, and I refuse to give Chase the satisfaction of seeing my fear. "I need a bathroom break," I tell him instead.

"You just had one."

"Hours ago. It's that time of the month," I add, lying, just to see him wince.

“Women,” he grumbles, but after a few minutes, the van pulls over all the same. The door swings open, and harsh sunlight floods the back of the dark, cramped van.

“Five minutes,” Chase warns me, yanking me out. He uncuffs me, hauling me over to the grimy rest-stop at the back of the gas-station. There are a few cars parked around, and I glimpse the freeway signs nearby. *New York City: 50 miles.*

“Don’t try any clever business,” he adds, his voice dropping. He glances at the harried-looking mom trying to hustle her kids out of the bathroom ahead of me. “I said I’d take you to Nero, but I didn’t promise what kind of state you’d be in when you arrive.”

I stifle a shiver of fear, remembering the bloodstains on his shirt.

“I’m not stupid,” I reply, keeping my voice icy. “Now, can you pick me up a water, or do I have to drink out of the faucet like a dog?”

Chase smirks. “You always were a bitch.”

I push open the bathroom door, resisting the urge to slam it in his face. I may be acting high-and-mighty, but under the surface, I’m scared half to death.

Scared, and running out of time to come up with a plan.

I look around the bathroom. Two stalls, a sink, a window high on the back wall... I could try and squeeze through make a run for it, but I wouldn’t get far. Chase isn’t dumb—and he’s just itching to make a point with me.

Nero’s the only one who can save me now.

Save me—or deliver the death sentence for me and my brother.

Moving to the sink, I try my best to clean myself up in the cracked mirror. Two days of gas station junk food and dirty motels haven’t been kind, but I smooth down my hair and use paper towels to scrub the dirt off my face. I’m still wearing my hostess outfit from the club, short and tight, with my bra showing through the sheer shirt, but maybe that’s for the best.

One chance with Nero, that's all I've got.

And he always did love me in black.

Chase thumps on the bathroom door. "Time to move!"

I take a final breath, and head back outside. This time, he slams the cuffs back on me hard enough to make me yelp, tossing me in the back of the van. I lay there, trying not to cry as we rattle back onto the highway.

*You can reason with him, I tell myself. He loved you, once.*

But what kind of man is he now?



I CAN TELL when we finally reach the city, the sound is unmistakable. Traffic and sirens and that buzz of life. Despite everything, my heart leaps.

God, I missed this place.

I thought about moving back a hundred times, but they were just desperate daydreams. I couldn't risk being spotted; one stray look is all it would take.

But in the end, it turns out nowhere was safe.

We come to a stop, and the van door opens again. We're in some kind of alleyway, a delivery entrance maybe. I barely have a chance to look around before Chase hauls me to my feet again and roughly wraps some kind of blindfold around my face.

"Seriously?" I ask, as he hustles me straight ahead. I nearly stumble, off-balance, but force myself to keep moving. "Is the cloak-and-dagger routine really necessary?"

"Quiet."

"I mean it," I continue, following him blindly. "You think I can't smell the bagels in the air? I bet you a hundred bucks we're within a block of Eddie's. Didn't you guys have a dive bar on fourteenth street?"



“I said, shut the hell up!”

The blow lands hard to my stomach, knocking the wind out of me and making me yelp in pain. I stumble back, hitting some solid wall, before I’m yanked forwards again. Inside, the street noise muffled, down a hallway of some kind. Then a door opens, and I’m shoved inside, onto a hard metal chair. “Don’t move.”

I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. It’s not just the cuffs biting into my wrists or the blindfold over my eyes. Now that we’re finally here, I’m suddenly paralyzed with fear.

Nobody knows that I’m here. Nobody would even know where to look if they noticed I’m gone.

I’m completely at their mercy.

The door slams, and then there’s silence. I wait, my heart skittering an anxious rhythm in my chest.

And I wait.

The minutes tick past, or is it hours? I have no idea. I shift, uncomfortable on my chair.

“Hello?” I call. “Anyone there?”

Silence.

I gulp. Maybe they’ve forgotten about me, or maybe they’re all standing around somewhere, laughing at what’s become of me. But I refuse to let them see how scared I really am. I yell louder.

“Whatever games you think you’re playing, I’ve had enough. I get it: You’re the powerful one. The big mob boss. So cut the bullshit, and show yourself.”

Nothing.

“I want to talk to Nero, right now!”

More silence. Then a voice comes, so close it makes me gasp. Inches away, a low, throaty growl that sends shivers down my spine.

Shivers of fear —and desire.

Because I would know that voice anywhere. And he's standing close enough to touch.

“Be careful what you wish for.”



---

## NERO

LILY FORDHAM.

*Fuck.*

Of all the ways I imagined us in the same room again, I didn't picture this. Don't get me wrong, the handcuffs and blindfold have made a few appearances in my fantasies, but those were always just that:

Fantasy.

After she left, she damn near drove me crazy, remembering. I couldn't get her out of my mind, burying my cock in some other girl but thinking of Lily the whole time: The way she broke, sobbing with pleasure in my arms. The taste of her mouth, eager and willing.

The breathtaking grip of her slick cunt.

But Lily, here in the flesh after all this time?

*Fuck.*

I stand in the doorway, just taking in the sight of the woman who's haunted me for the past two days since Vegas – and the past ten years. The blonde hair, tousled around her face. Those lush breasts, spilling over the neckline of her sheer blouse. Legs for days, stretching out from a tight miniskirt all the way down to a pair of kinky black leather sandals I want wrapped around my neck.

When I knew her last, Lily was barely sixteen. Still a girl.

Now, she's all woman.

“Nero?”

She swallows, her breath hitching. Her breasts lift with the motion, tongue wetting her lips, and just like that, I’m hard. Imagining those nipples naked and stiff for me. Feeding every inch of my cock between those sweet lips.

“Nero, I came here to talk.”

“Really, princess?” I reply, strolling closer. “I thought you were here because I ordered it so.”

She stops, and shivers again. “Can you take this thing off?” she asks, her voice sweet and persuasive. “Come on, Nero. It’s not like I haven’t seen you before.”

Seen me. Betrayed me. *Consumed me.*

I feel the wave of old emotion rise up. I need to get a fucking grip. “You’ll do what I say, when I say it,” I grind out—and then I walk out, slamming the door behind me with a crash.

Goddammit.

I catch my breath, furious—at myself as much as her. How long has it been since she made a goddamn fool of me? Ten long years. I’m not a lovesick kid anymore, I’m a man now.

*The man.*

And Lily is going to have to realize, she can’t sweet-talk me this time around.

I head back to my office and pour myself a drink, trying to think straight now. I’ve gone over it for days, ever since I stumbled over her in that alley in Vegas. I know what’s expected of me in this situation. No mercy. No exceptions. But I’ve got more in play than just an old vendetta, and I need to make sure nothing screws up my plans.

“What do you think?” Chase saunters in, looking smug. “Like Christmas, all wrapped up with a pretty bow.”

I pour him a glass of whiskey too. He’s earned it.

“Not such a princess now, is she?” Chase snorts. “Man, I remember how she’d walk around, acting untouchable. Well,

she's not so untouchable anymore."

There's something to his sneer than makes me stop. "What did you do?" I demand, lunging for him before I can even think.

"Woah, nothing!" Chase puts up his hands, surprised. "Well, maybe just a little roughing up on the ride. But come on, that club we found her at? Guess Miss Innocent turned out to be nothing but a whore."

I ignore the flare of jealousy. I already over-reacted once on her behalf, disposing of that guy in the alleyway. Now I remind myself again, what Lily did, or who she's been doing it with, is none of my concern.

No, the only thing I care about is what she's willing to do right now.

"And her father?"

Chase shakes his head. "She wouldn't give him up. The brother, neither. I didn't go too hard, figured you'd enjoy getting the info out of her."

I nod. "I will."

Chase grins. "People need to know. Doesn't matter if it's been ten years, or a hundred. You cross a fucking Barretti, and we'll find you in the end."

I nod again. I know the code. It runs as deep as blood in our organization. There's no virtue greater than loyalty. And Lily's father sinned worst of all.

"Roman will be pleased," Chase adds, gulping his drink. "Fuck, that family stole his life from him. Ten years locked up—and another ten to go. Death is too kind for a betrayal like that."

*Roman.* I can just imagine my father when he gets the news—if his jailhouse whisper network hasn't already told him. Even behind bars, he's feared and respected. And he raised me to be just the same. Brutal. Uncompromising.

*Ruthless.*

“I’ll get the information out of her,” I say, finishing my drink. “Her father, her brother, everyone. But nobody touches her aside from me. I mean it,” I add, narrowing my eyes. “Spread the word. She’s under my protection until the moment I decide it ends.”

“Yes, *boss*.” Chase drawls, teasing. We’ve been friends for as long as I can remember, and I know there’s nobody who has my back like him. He winks at me. “Have fun with that.”

I scowl. There’s nothing fun about dredging up old memories with Lily Fordham, which is why I need to keep my eyes on the prize.

“Is Milo back?” I change the subject, asking about one of my lieutenants, a guy I’ve tasked with my most *tricky* legal problems.

“Not yet.” Chase takes another drink. “I don’t know why you’re running in circles for this politician. Just stick some cash in a briefcase and be done with it.”

I shake my head. “This guy’s different. He’s not some chump on the liquor board, it’s going to take finesse.”

“It’s a distraction, that’s what it is,” Chase says, a note of complaint creeping into his voice. “C’mon, Nero. You’ve been chasing this deal for way too long. We’ve got more pressing business on the table. We need to lock down the new import routes out of South America, my guys are working on a connect at the port—”

“And we will.” I cut him off. “Or are you saying I can’t multitask?”

Chase backs down in a hurry.

“Course not,” he says, with a grin. “But all work and no play...”

“I’ll play plenty when this deal is all sewn up.”

The deal of a lifetime. The one that will take the Barretti organization off the streets—from low-life protection rackets and dealing to a legit, multi-million dollar business enterprise. If I can get this politician to play ball.

“Why not get started early?” Chase grins, nodding to the store-room where Lily is waiting. “I’m sure she learned plenty of tricks out there in Vegas.”

My cock twitches with anticipation at the thought. Whatever she learned, I’m sure as hell going to find out.

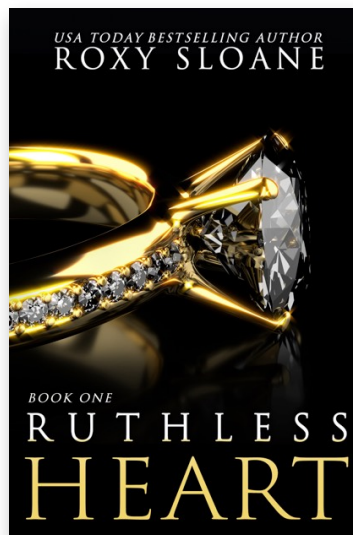
Lily Fordham owes me.

And now it’s time to collect.

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Roxy Sloane is a USA Today bestselling author, with over 2 million books sold world-wide. Roxy loves indulging her naughty side by writing sinful erotica that pushes the limits. She lives in Los Angeles, and enjoys shocking whoever looks at her laptop screen when she writes in local coffee shops.



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