

S. LEXI



# GUARDED HEARTS

A DARK ORGANIZED CRIME ROMANCE

# Guarded Hearts

S. Lexi

# Contents

Copyrights

Trigger Warnings

1. Wedding
2. Another Message
3. An Opportunity
4. It's A Date
5. Coffee
6. Leave
7. Who Hurt Her?
8. Pizza
9. A New Plan
10. Don't Message Him
11. Our First Official Date
12. A Bad Feeling
13. Where Is She?

14. Running For My Life
  15. I Got You
  16. Bad Reaction
  17. Puzzle Pieces
  18. Broken
  19. Include Her
  20. Revenge Part Two
  21. Waiting Game
  22. A Surprise
  23. Pool Day
  24. Conflicted
  25. No Going Back
  26. Feeling Feral
  27. Mine
  28. A Fighter
  29. The Full Experience
  30. Memories
  31. Checking In
  32. Where Is He?
  33. A Fight
  34. Little Bird
  35. A Shocking Discovery
- Epilogue

## About the Author

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**Trigger warnings**

- Domestic Violence
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- Thoughts of self-harm
  - Violence
  - Torture
- Anxiety Disorder
- Foul Language
- Mention of drug abuse
- Mention of rape (not detailed)
- Human trafficking (mentioned)
  - Pregnancy
- Explicit sexual scenes

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# Chapter 1



# Wedding

## Cruz

I took a swig from the flask before handing it to the groom, my best friend Blaise. Today was his wedding, and he was marrying Fred, or I should say, Erika, his perfect match. Fred was a nickname I gave her when we first met since she refused to provide us with her real name. It stuck with me ever since.

I wasn't one to believe in soulmates, but from the moment I saw those two together, it was hard to deny their instant connection. Even in the beginning, when every interaction they had ended in violence, I could see the magnetic pull between them and knew without a doubt they would end up together.

I was thrilled for my buddy because he was spiraling down a black hole before he met Erika and was obsessed with vengeance. Luckily though, she pulled him out of it. The man loved that woman more than anything, and they definitely brought out the best in each other.

Sometimes I was envious of what they shared, but at the same time, a wife and family just weren't in the cards for me. I liked keeping things light and easy and definitely wasn't ready to give up casual sex to settle down with one woman. That thought was ridiculous, and I had no clue how any man would intentionally do it. Marriage wasn't for everyone, and I had accepted that years ago.

We were currently at the church in one of the back rooms waiting for the ceremony to begin.

Erika didn't want a big wedding, whereas Blaise did. Well, I should clarify, he hated big events like these but wanted to invite the entire city so he could figuratively rub his balls all over Erika in front of everyone to mark his territory. I swore if it wasn't frowned upon, he would probably pee on her too, just for added effect. The guy was possessive, and it cracked me up to watch him in action. He was lucky Erika put up with his shit because not all women would.

Erika talked Blaise out of a big wedding, and they settled on a smaller ceremony with just enough important guests to ensure the word got out that she was taken.

"I can't believe I'm getting married today," Blaise stated, shaking his head, before lifting the flask to his lips and taking a generous swig.

"What do you mean you can't believe you're getting married? You didn't exactly give the girl a choice," I teased, which earned me a glare from Blaise.

“I gave her a choice, and she happened to pick the only answer I was willing to accept,” he retorted.

“You’re lucky that woman loves you because you’re insane,” I chuckled.

“Whatever, she still said yes, and once she says I do, there’s no turning back.” He shrugged.

“I’m surprised you haven’t knocked her up yet,” Jared added with his own chuckle, before taking the flask out of Blaise’s hand and bringing it to his lips.

“He’s known her for less than a year, nine months to be exact. What the hell’s the rush?” Dex grumbled, as he grabbed the flask from Jared and took a swig.

Blaise, Jared, Dexter, and I were all in the military together and quickly became like brothers. I would lay down my life for any of them and I knew they would do the same for me. When Blaise’s entire family was murdered almost six years ago, we all moved to New York City to help him avenge the death of his young sister and mother. Once we took out the person responsible for their murders, we took back the city and have been running it together ever since.

I never in a million years thought I would become a gangster, but here I was, living my best life with my brothers by my side. At first glance, you would never guess I was involved in organized crime. I was far too clean-cut for that and definitely more laid back than the average criminal. I could be serious when needed, but I would much rather joke around and keep things light.

“Nine months too long if you ask me. I would have put a baby in her the first time we had sex if she had let me. Erika’s a stubborn woman, but once she takes my last name, there won’t be anything standing in my way. Hell, maybe I’ll knock her up tonight on our wedding night,” Blaise replied with a smirk.

“Let me guess, your crazy ass canceled her doctor’s appointment again.” I chuckled, shaking my head in disbelief.

Blaise had tried twice in the past to cancel her appointments so she wouldn’t get her next round of birth control and each time, got his ass kicked by his soon-to-be wife for being controlling.

Blaise didn’t answer but the grin on his face told me he had fucked around with her doctor’s appointment again.

*Dumbass.*

“Oh, Blaise, my friend, you have a death wish,” Jared chuckled, shaking his head.

I laughed, too, since Jared was right; Blaise was definitely asking for trouble.

“Whatever, if your crazy ass does succeed in knocking her up and you guys do have a little tyke, I already know I’m going to be that kid’s favorite uncle,” I added with a shit-eating grin. If I wasn’t going to have my own kids, I could at least spoil the shit out of his.

“It’s because you’re still a fucking kid yourself,” Dex shot back.

“Fun, Uncle Cruz. I can already picture it. I’m going to teach him, or her, all sorts of fun ways to piss off Dad,” I added, ignoring Dex’s jab. The guy was a grump on the best of days.

Dex wasn’t wrong, though; I was a total man-child and damn proud of it. Without my easygoing personality, these three nutsacks would be all work and no play.

“You’re not allowed around my kids unsupervised,” Blaise grumbled, which made me and Jared chuckle.

Our conversation was interrupted when there was a knock at the door.

The wedding planner, some hot little brunette with giant tits, poked her head inside the room and asked, “Is the groom ready? The priest is ready to begin the ceremony whenever you are.”

“Hell, yeah, I’m ready,” Blaise replied enthusiastically before standing from where he sat on the couch.

We all left the room and headed into the church, which was already full of seated guests. The priest motioned for us to join him at the front. Blaise stood closest to him while Jared, Dex, and I lined up beside Blaise.

The wedding music started after we arrived, and all the guests stood, waiting for the bride and her bridesmaids to walk down the aisle.

The first one to appear was Olivia, Erika’s older sister, dressed in a charcoal grey, floor-length silk gown, carrying a bouquet of purple, blue, and white flowers. She was the

spitting image of Erika and looked beautiful dressed up, even though I knew not to be fooled by her looks. Underneath all that makeup and silk, there was one hell of a violent woman. One who would eat me alive if I pissed her off, so I made sure not to cross that boundary. I liked feisty females, but Olivia was next-level, and unless I wanted to go to sleep every night wearing a hockey cup to protect my junk, I was better off steering clear of that one. Plus, she and Tyson had some weird tension between them. They acted as if they hated each other, but I was pretty confident there was something there. Like Erika and Blaise, I could practically taste the chemistry when they were near each other, and it was nauseating.

Next was Carla, Erika's younger sister, wearing a matching grey dress. She looked nothing like Erika and Olivia with her light brown hair and pale skin. Her personality was completely opposite to theirs too. She was sweet, soft-spoken, and shy, whereas Erika and Olivia were outspoken, violent, and far from shy.

After Carla, Georgia, Dex's sister walked out. Gia was another sweet girl who had been sheltered most of her life by her brother. I couldn't blame him, though. We lived a dangerous lifestyle and he wanted to keep her safe from the crazy world we lived in. Gia was petite, standing around five feet two inches and she had long dirty blond hair with a light dusting of freckles across her button nose.

Once Gia reached the front, a fourth woman walked down the aisle, whom I had never seen before. My mouth went dry at the sight of her; she was fucking stunning. She must be

Presley, Erika's fourth bridesmaid and good friend. I had never met her before, but heard Erika talk about her plenty.

Erika said Presley didn't like being around people and stayed home most of the time because of her anxiety. For some reason, because of that, I was expecting someone else to walk down that aisle, not this gorgeous creature with legs for days.

My heartbeat picked up speed the closer she got. She stood around five-foot-nine and was slim but with mouth-watering curves. She looked no older than twenty-six and had long, wavy, light brown hair that almost looked golden in certain lights. Her big hazel eyes appeared blue against her dress and holy fuck, don't even get me started on those big, pouty pink lips. God, what I wouldn't give to have them wrapped around my... fuck, down boy. I have to stop thinking like that before I get a boner in church.

It was too late though, my dick was already stiffening from simply watching her sway her hips down the aisle like a sex goddess, and she wasn't even trying. The girl was a natural beauty with barely any makeup on. Why the fuck would a woman like that be hiding away inside her home all the time? It should be a crime to deprive the world of seeing her beauty.

One thing was certain; I had officially laid eyes on my target for the night. If there was one thing I was good at, it was smooth-talking women into a night of mind-blowing sex. Presley didn't know it yet, but that was exactly where she would end up, naked in my bed, screaming my name, as I made her come repeatedly.

A low groan left my lips from the images rushing through my mind, which made Presley's eyes snap to mine. She frowned before glancing down and noticing the growing bulge in my pants and quickly averted her eyes, looking disgusted.

*Great start, Cruz.*

Who the fuck gets a boner in church?

*I fucking do, that's who.*

Presley reached the front of the church and took her position beside Georgia. Zeus, Blaise's dog, was next. The crazy bastard was the most terrifying ring bearer I had ever seen. Zeus was Blaise's service dog in the military, and he didn't let anyone near him except for Blaise and Erika. As he walked down the aisle toward Blaise, he let out a low and steady growl while flashing his canines at the terrified guests. It was almost laughable how everyone moved away from him as he passed. Like the well-trained dog he was, the minute he reached the front he went straight to Blaise and sat next to him.

The music changed, and Erika started walking down the aisle. I glanced at Blaise, whose gaze locked on his soon-to-be bride. He wasn't blinking as he watched her with love and adoration swirling in his eyes. That woman was his whole world, and the look on his face was proof of it.

Once Erika reached the front, Blaise took her hands in his, as they stood across from each other.



Blaise had this love-sick puppy dog look on his face that made me snort out loud. Fuck, he was so whipped.

I glanced over to see Presley giving me another disapproving look.

Fuck. I really needed to turn things around, before I sealed my fate with that one. She didn't look very impressed with me, and I couldn't blame her because so far, I was failing at first impressions. I had gotten a semi-boner in church and had laughed at the soon-to-be-married couple who were about to say their vows.

*Great fucking job, Cruz.*

The ceremony was quick and fairly painless.

Once it was over, the wedding party was dragged off to take pictures, while the rest of the guests made their way to the reception.

As the photographer snapped a few shots of Erika and Blaise alone, I took the opportunity to start working my magic on the hot little bridesmaid I had set my sights on for the night, Presley.

I casually strolled over to where she stood watching the photographer snapping shots of the newlyweds.

“There's something wrong with this picture,” I hummed, stopping beside her. Her eyes snapped in my direction, and her eyebrows pulled together in a confused frown.

“A beauty like you shouldn't be alone at a wedding. Where's your date?” I asked with a sly grin, knowing she didn't have

one. If she did, I would have likely seen some dickhead hanging off her by now.

“He couldn’t make it,” she replied dryly, and I immediately knew she was lying, but I decided to let it go.

“Presley, right? I’m Cruz,” I said with the most charming smile I could muster, extending my hand for her to shake.

She shook my hand, and I felt sparks zap through my body at the contact. Feeling her skin against mine awoke every nerve ending inside of me and I found myself not wanting to let go.

On the other hand, Presley looked utterly unaffected except for her pupils, which had dilated from the contact.

*What the fuck?*

“That’s right. It’s nice to meet you,” Presley replied with a forced smile.

I was about to say something else; my mouth was already open when she turned around and started talking to Olivia, completely dismissing me.

Well fuck, if that wasn’t a clear shot to my ego, I wasn’t sure what was. Good thing I was no quitter. Women couldn’t resist my charm, so I was still confident I could turn things around by the night’s end.

“Smooth,” Jared taunted.

I glanced over my shoulder to see him walking toward me. By the smug smirk on his face, it was clear that he had

witnessed my failed attempt at flirting with the long-legged beauty.

“She’s playing hard to get. Good thing for her, I like a challenge,” I replied with a cocky smirk, my eyes locked on Presley, who was smiling at something Olivia said.

“We’ll see. From what Erika said, she’s not that kind of girl, man. I wouldn’t waste your time,” Jared stated before walking off.

Well, that only made the challenge that much more fun. Who wouldn’t want a piece of forbidden fruit?

Once done taking pictures, a few limos took us to the reception.

We took our seats at the head table while we listened to speeches. I wasn’t allowed to make one, since Blaise didn’t trust me not to say something offside. I was slightly disappointed that he knew me so well because I had every intention of poking fun at him if I had gotten my hands on that microphone.

Dinner was a bore, I spent most of the time trying to get Presley’s attention by staring at her, but she didn’t once look my way. I knew she could feel my eyes on her, though, since she squirmed every time my gaze landed on her. I smiled at that; at least she wasn’t completely unaffected by me.

Fuck, it had been a long time since a woman made me work this hard for her attention, and I wouldn’t say I was

disappointed about it. It made my body buzz with a weird energy as I waited for my next opportunity to speak with her.

Finally, dinner was over, and people started getting up from their tables to mingle. A small dance floor was in the middle of the room, and the DJ started playing classic shitty wedding music. Usually, at events like these, I would already have a woman lined up for the evening to make it more bearable, but not tonight. Blaise had pointed out a few of the single ladies in the room earlier, and I noticed a few of them giving me *come fuck me eyes*, but oddly enough, I wasn't interested. Instead, my attention stayed focused on the one person in the room who probably wouldn't bat an eyelash if I suddenly dropped dead.

I walked to the bar and ordered a scotch and a glass of champagne. Once I had the drinks, I returned to the table where the bridesmaids were standing, chatting in a small circle.

Presley didn't smile much throughout the day, but this was the first time I noticed she looked uncomfortable, almost anxious. Maybe she had before, but I was too busy lusting over her to notice how her eyes continuously scanned the crowd as if she were looking for someone. I was guessing it was related to her anxiety.

I walked up behind her and lowered my mouth to her ear before whispering, "If you were looking for me, gorgeous, I'm right here."

God, she smelt so fucking delicious, I was tempted to run my tongue along her smooth, pale skin in the crook of her delicate neck. Jesus, what was wrong with me? I already wasn't winning any first impression medals when it came to Presley, licking her probably wouldn't help my case.

Her body shivered before she spun around, looking ready to punch me. I held the drinks up in surrender and stepped back, giving her space.

“Woah... It's just me,” I said with a smile.

“Why would I be looking for you?” she asked dryly, her small fist clenched at her sides.

“Because, didn't you feel that spark between us earlier? I sure did,” I replied with a lopsided grin.

“I'm sorry if you got the wrong impression, Cruz, but I'm not interested,” she replied, clipped.

Well, shit. The sexy little vixen was really making me work for it.

“Here, I got you this.” I outstretched my hand that held the glass of champagne toward her.

“Thanks, but I don't drink,” she replied, looking like she would rather be anywhere else than here with me.

*Ouch.*

“I saw you sipping champagne at dinner,” I pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

“I have a one-glass limit,” she shot back, quickly adding, “It was nice talking to you, but I need to find Erika.”

Before I could get another word out, she spun around and walked off, dismissing me for the second time tonight.

Fuck, that girl was as cold as ice. Her behavior would probably turn off most guys, but I wasn't most guys, and all it did was make my fucking cock throb.

“I must say, Cruz, that was fucking amazing. He shoots... and...misses!” Jared mocked as he appeared from somewhere behind me. That fucking asshole was always showing up at the worst times tonight. I didn't bother looking at him, since my gaze was still on my gorgeous target walking away from me.

Presley glanced nervously over her shoulder before picking up her pace.

“Fuck off. The night's still young, my friend. Mark my words, by the night's end, I'll be balls-deep inside that one,” I shot back cockily.

It was time to up my game. Maybe I should play hard to get and see if a little reverse psychology wouldn't work on my ice queen. I could always try to make her jealous by dancing with some of the other single ladies. Hell, if I danced with Erika and rested my hands on her ass, maybe I could make Presley jealous and piss off Blaise simultaneously. Fuck, that sounded like a win-win to me.

“You sure about that? That looks a lot like a goodbye hug she just gave Erika and Olivia. I would say your shot at

scoring is narrowing by the second,” Jared pointed out with a dark chuckle.

He was fucking right; by the looks of things, Presley was saying goodnight to the girls. What the fuck? It wasn't even eight o'clock yet.

I shoved the two drinks at Jared and left his side, quickly making my way through the crowd to eavesdrop on the end of their conversation. Okay, maybe I was coming across a bit like a stalker, but I couldn't fucking help it; the woman was a complete mystery, and I happened to like puzzles. So, I blamed her for my behavior.

“I'm sorry I can't stay, but I have somewhere to be early in the morning,” Presley told Erika.

“No worries, girl. I'm just glad you made it to the ceremony,” Erika replied with a genuine smile before adding, “Plus, I know these crowded events aren't your thing.”

I didn't get it. What single woman in her mid-twenties didn't love an open bar and a crowd of single guys chasing after them?

“Here,” Presley said, handing Erika an envelope.

“Awww... you shouldn't have,” Erika replied.

“Don't get too excited. It's a gift certificate for a month of free pole dancing lessons. Tell Blaise he can join too,” Presley joked, making Erika and Olivia chuckle.

I almost forgot Presley was the one who owned that pole dancing studio Erika told me about. So fucking hot. Great, my

erection returned with a vengeance now that I had the mental image of her working that pole like a sexy goddess.

“Anyways, it was a beautiful ceremony, and I hope you guys have an awesome night. I’ll see you both next week in class,” Presley added, glancing between Erika and Olivia.

“You know it, girl, we’ll be there,” Olivia replied.

They said goodbye, and Presley left the room faster than I had ever seen anyone move. She glanced my way but quickly averted her eyes.

Shit, did I smell funky or something? I had never seen a woman so anxious to get away from me before.

That woman might have given me a bit of a complex tonight.

I lifted my arm to sniff my pit, but all I smelt was my cologne and body wash. If anything, I’d say I smelt pretty damn good.

“Ummm...What are you doing?” Erika asked, drawing me from my thoughts.

I looked over to see her and Olivia watching me with amused expressions. They each had an eyebrow raised.

“Just checking to make sure I don’t stink. Your friend was pretty quick to leave after I tried talking to her,” I replied with a shrug. I was hoping Erika would shed some light on her friend’s behavior. Did Presley have a boyfriend or something?

Erika and Olivia chuckled before Erika replied, “Oh, Cruz, you need to learn how to pick your girls better. If you’re trying



to get into Presley's pants, it won't happen. So, I suggest you give up on that thought."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked curiously.

"She's not interested in dating and definitely isn't into one-night stands," Erika clarified.

"That makes no sense," I mumbled as Erika patted my shoulder and walked off with Olivia.

I guess the only sex I would be having tonight was with my right hand. Was I losing my touch with the ladies?

Nah, that thought was absurd. Presley just wanted to be chased, and luckily for her, I was a natural-born predator.

Until next time, my long-legged beauty.

## Chapter 2

# Another Message

## Presley

I was so relieved when I finally left Erika's wedding reception. I knew it was still early, but I needed to get out of there before I had another panic attack. I hated crowds, especially when I didn't know most of the people there.

I forced myself to go since Erika was a good friend of mine, but I would have rather stayed home. When she asked me to be one of her bridesmaids, she ensured I knew I didn't have to say *yes* since she was aware of my anxieties, but I also knew she really wanted me there, so I sucked it up and agreed to be part of her big day.

Erika had been there for me from the first day I arrived in New York City just over two years ago. Even though she was going through her own shit, she really helped me when I had no one else to go to.

I wasn't confident I would have made it if it hadn't been for her. Back then, I was in rough shape and a shell of a woman; she helped build me back up without asking questions, which I

was grateful for. We had been great friends since then, the kind of friends that could go weeks without talking and it never affected our friendship.

The wedding was nice, even though I didn't want to be there. Erika looked gorgeous as always, and I could tell she was thrilled to marry Blaise. I had only met him once before the wedding, and it was under odd circumstances since he showed up at my apartment unannounced, introduced himself as Erika's boyfriend, even though she looked just as shocked by his words as I was, and then proceeded to throw her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and drag her out of my place like a barbarian. I almost shot him back then, thinking he was trying to hurt her. As soon as she stopped me, I knew he wasn't a threat. Erika was a tough woman, and she didn't put up with anyone's shit, so if he had been a threat, she would have ripped the gun out of my hands and shot him herself.

I could see how perfect they were for each other, and I was happy she had found her person.

Cruz, one of her husband's best friends, kept trying to start a conversation with me at the wedding. I was pretty confident he was hitting on me, but I wasn't interested, so I shut him down immediately, ensuring he didn't get the wrong idea. I wasn't always a cold-hearted bitch, and it actually killed me inside to act that way, but it needed to be done so he wouldn't get the wrong idea.

I couldn't deny that the guy was handsome, standing over six feet two inches, with a muscular build, a sharp jawline, and a

face that belonged on a magazine cover. His black hair looked soft and shiny, and I wondered if it would feel as good as it looked if I ran my fingers through it. Fuck, where did that thought come from? Not even his charming smile or the absurd amount of sex appeal radiating off him would make me change my mind about getting involved with someone.

I was a little surprised at my body's reaction to Cruz, though. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach when he smiled at me, and my panties definitely dampened when I heard his deep husky voice. He had this easygoing demeanor that I didn't doubt helped with the ladies, but I could also tell he was an alpha male behind that charming smile. None of that mattered, though. Maybe five years ago, I would have swooned over the guy, but not now... I was no longer that naive girl, the one who fell for the first handsome man who showed her the slightest bit of attention. I didn't trust men, nor did I want one in my life.

Given Erika was friends with Cruz, he was probably an okay guy, but it wasn't a risk I was willing to take. I had lost all interest in a romantic relationship years ago, along with my libido, so I had accepted the fact that I would be single for the rest of my life. More than accepted, I wanted to keep my independence and remain alone since it was easier and a whole lot safer, not just for me but for everyone.

I left the wedding as soon as all the important stuff was over, and the only thing that remained was the reception. I didn't need to be there and watch everyone getting drunk and loud. The more liquor everyone consumed, the more attention I

would get, and I really couldn't handle it. Especially, not when guys got touchy-feely after a few drinks. Just thinking about someone putting their unwelcome hands on me spiked my anxiety.

Thank Christ, Erika knew me well, and she didn't seem bothered when I said my goodbyes and scurried out of there as fast as humanly possible.

All I wanted in life was to slide under the radar and be invisible. I finally got my freedom back a few years ago, and although I wouldn't call my life a happy one, it was a thousand times better than before I escaped my past.

I currently lived in a run-down apartment that wasn't the safest or cleanest, but it was still better than my old home. At least here, no one knew me, and for the most part, I avoided unwanted attention. I paid my rent in cash which helped keep me untraceable. I basically didn't exist, and that was how I liked it.

I also had my own pole dancing studio. Well, it wasn't an official business since, again, I didn't want to register anything in my name, but I still called it my own business. I was proud of myself for building it from scratch since I had nothing but the clothes on my back when I first got here.

It didn't happen overnight, but slowly, with the help of Erika, I built a life for myself.

I rented an old run-down mechanic's garage and transformed it into a studio that wasn't anything fancy but worked. Most of my clientele were either strippers or women who enjoy a full-

body workout. I picked that business, knowing I would mainly be dealing with women, and that took away some of my anxieties. It helped that I used to instruct ballet, so I had some experience with teaching dance.

As soon as I got into my apartment, I locked the door and set the alarm in case anyone managed to open it while I was asleep. Call me paranoid, but I didn't live in the best part of town, and if my past ever caught up with me, I would prefer to have a little heads-up. I also had a lock and an alarm on my bedroom door as a secondary security system in case someone bypassed the first one.

Not that I had many options for apartments that accepted cash, but I picked this one because it had a rickety metal emergency ladder out the bedroom window. If I ever needed to make a quick escape it would come in handy. I was on the second floor, so the ladder was lifted from the ground and when I needed to use it, I lowered it.

I also had emergency bags packed and ready to go at my apartment and studio in case I needed to leave in a hurry. I really hoped I never had to start over again, but the sad reality was I knew the day would come when my past caught up to me, and I would be forced to run again.

I stripped out of my bridesmaid dress and put on an oversized off-the-shoulder sleep shirt before making my way to the kitchen. Opening the fridge and looking over the contents, I sighed. There was a half-empty bottle of ketchup, a leftover container of Chinese food probably a few days past its

safe-to-consume date, and a half-empty bottle of cheap white wine. I should have eaten the food at the reception so I wouldn't be starving right now, but who was I kidding? I couldn't eat earlier because of my anxiety. If I had, I would have definitely made myself sick.

With a defeated sigh, I grabbed the bottle of wine and shut the fridge before opening the freezer. I knew I had a few bites left of the cookie dough ice cream I bought last week when I was on my period, so I grabbed that container.

I put the ice cream and wine down on the counter before pulling out a plastic cup to pour the remaining wine into it. Grabbing a spoon and shoving it into the open container of ice cream, I brought it along with the glass of wine into the living room. I sat down on the old torn-up loveseat and put my wine glass on the floor beside me. Grabbing my laptop, that was on the cushion next to me, I opened it before turning it on, and while I waited for it to fire up, I ate a heaping spoonful of ice cream.

*God, that was good.*

It was my go-to when I was having a rough day and today was definitely one of those days.

Once my computer was up and running, I opened my email. It had been a habit of mine to check my messages even after I left my old life behind. Erika had hooked me up with an untraceable computer. As always, she never asked me why I needed the computer to be untraceable; she just acquired it and showed me how it worked.



That was one of the things I loved the most about her, she knew if I wanted her to know something, I would tell her, so she never pried. It wasn't that I didn't trust her, because I did, it was just that the fewer people who knew my story, the better. The last thing I wanted was to endanger her in any way.

The minute I spotted the new message in my inbox, my breath hitched, and my heart started beating frantically. It wasn't the message that caused my anxiety to spike, but rather who it was from.

I wasn't sure why I still did this to myself; I should have stopped checking my old email account a long time ago, but for some reason, every day, I checked to see if he had sent me another message. Maybe I was a glutton for punishment, or maybe I needed the constant reminder that he was still out there, searching for me, so I wouldn't let my guard down. Either way, like brushing my teeth, checking my old email account had become part of my daily routine. I never replied, though, just read his taunting words.

The asshole sent me messages almost weekly, and you would think I would have gotten used to them by now, but I hadn't. They still fucked with my head and spiked my anxiety, just the same as the first one I received over two years ago. I knew he didn't know where I was or he would have come for me by now, but still, the messages always shook me to the core.

I put the ice cream down next to me and picked up the wine glass before swallowing a big gulp. I needed the liquid-

courage to open the email.

As the wine slowly burned down my throat and into my empty stomach, I clicked on the new message that was titled *‘Where are you hiding little bird?’*

Reading the nickname he always used to call me caused a cold chill to rush through my body. Memories from my past flooded my mind, and I could practically hear his voice as he called me that. Little bird was never used as an endearment, but rather to taunt me when I hid from him in the house. It was a way for him to make me feel weak, to remind me that he could crush me if he wanted to, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. Hell, he had done everything in his power to ensure my wings were clipped before I left, trying to make sure I couldn't fly away. I did though. I spread my fucking wings when he thought I never would, and I flew away from that sadistic bastard.

The email opened, and the message was shorter than usual but still caused fear to course through my veins as I slowly read each word.

*The longer you hide from me, the more excited I get. It's given me so much time to think of everything I'm going to do when I finally get my hands on you. And yes, my scared little bird, I WILL find you. Very soon.*

*Your big bad wolf*

I shuddered once I finished reading the message. Why couldn't he just let me go?

Slamming the computer shut, I jumped in fright when my phone started ringing, having to flatten my hand over my chest as I took deep breaths to calm my racing heart.

*It was just the phone and a complete coincidence that it rang after I finished reading that message.* I told myself.

Placing the computer on the loveseat next to me, I got up to retrieve my cell phone from the counter.

Looking at the display of the old flip phone, I let out a relieved breath when I saw Erika's name flash across the screen.

I pressed the answer button before bringing the phone to my ear and saying, "You miss me already?"

I tried keeping my voice playful, even though I was still frazzled by the email I had received because I didn't want Erika worrying about me on her wedding night.

"Damn right, I miss you. The party's a bore now that you left," Erika joked before adding, "I just wanted to make sure you made it home okay."

"Yeah, I made it home. I just poured myself a glass of wine and am about to have a movie date with a tub of Ben and Jerry's," I replied.

"Well, fuck. That sounds way better than this party," she stated before musing to herself, "I wonder if anyone would notice if I disappeared?"

"You're the bride. I have a feeling at least Blaise would notice you were missing." I chuckled.

“Don’t even get me started with that man. He’s driving me nuts. The guy won’t leave my bloody side. I practically had to pull a Houdini act just to make this phone call without him hovering over me,” Erika huffed, causing my laughter to grow since she sounded more amused than annoyed.

“And you love every minute of his possessive, overbearing ways,” I replied with a smile, even though she couldn’t see it.

I hadn’t spent much time with Blaise, but Erika always talked about him. She could pretend she didn’t like how possessive he was, but I could tell she did. She loved everything about that man.

“Anyways, I just wanted to check in and make sure you made it home,” she said.

“I did, so don’t worry about me, and enjoy the rest of your wedding night,” I replied.

“Is that her?” I heard a male voice ask in the background. It was too noisy for me to make out who it was.

“Yes, she made it home. Now go away,” Erika whispered to whoever was talking to her.

“Let me talk to her,” the same male voice demanded, and this time it was closer to the phone, and I recognized it to be Cruz.

“Cruz, if you don’t fuck off right this second, I’ll send Olivia after you and we both know she’ll kick your ass,” Erika warned before returning to our conversation. “Sorry about

that. I don't know what you said to that guy tonight, but you certainly made an impression on him." She chuckled.

I let out a frustrated sigh before saying, "Tell him I have a boyfriend or something. I'm sure he's a decent guy, but I'm not interested."

"Oh, I have, but it's like talking to a wall with him. He only hears what he wants to hear," she huffed.

"Well, he's wasting his time," I said bitterly. Why couldn't men just accept *no* for an answer?

"I'll talk to him again." Erika sighed defeatedly.

"Thanks, girl. Now stop worrying about me and enjoy the rest of your wedding night," I stated playfully.

"I will. Talk to you soon, Pres," Erika replied before hanging up the phone.

I tossed the cell phone back on the counter and walked to the loveseat before sitting down.

I hoped Cruz didn't become a problem, because I really didn't need any more stress in my life.

Picking up the ice cream, I took another big spoonful before putting it back down. I then lifted the glass of wine to my lips and took a sip. Fuck, the combo of the dry wine mixed with the sweetness of the ice cream was a match made in heaven. I was really regretting not making a wine float with the two.

I leaned back on the couch and let out a long sigh. Today marked seven-hundred and eight days since I escaped. That

thought reminded me that no matter how shitty things were, they could be a thousand times worse, and I needed to be grateful for my safety and freedom.

## Chapter 3

# An Opportunity

Cruz

I was in my office getting some work done when Jared popped his head inside the open door.

“Blaise needs to see us in his office.”

“About what?” I asked casually, leaning back in my chair.

“Not sure, but he sounded pissed and said it’s important,” Jared replied with a shrug.

“Fine. I guess my work can wait.” I sighed dramatically.

If I was being completely honest, I had barely accomplished any work today. In fact, for the past several days I had been underproductive. My thoughts kept going back to Blaise and Erika’s wedding, distracting me from getting anything done. A certain mysterious brunette was the cause of my distracted state, and it was starting to get on my nerves because this was so unlike me. Women were a relief, and I never thought about them after the fact. Maybe it was because I never got a taste that I couldn’t get her off my mind.



We left my office and made our way to Blaise's. As we got closer, I could hear Blaise and Dex talking in raised voices.

"We need to find out who's behind that shit and fucking end it. NOW," Blaise growled.

"No shit. I say we go hunting," Dex replied.

Jared and I walked into the room, and I headed straight for the couch where I lazily threw myself down. I didn't get worked up over shit like the other guys did unless it was a threat against those I cared about. When that happened, though, all bets were off and I became a whole other person.

"What's got your guys' panties in a knot," I asked casually, earning me glares from Dex and Blaise.

They hated how laid-back I was when shit went down.

"Someone's been poaching in our city. There were three times the usual overdoses on the south side of town last week alone," Blaise replied as he slammed his fist down onto his desk in frustration.

"Why assume someone poached? Maybe it was just a bad week." I shrugged.

"Our contact at the NYPD confirmed that most of those deaths were associated with fentanyl overdoses." Blaise sighed before running his fingers through his hair, looking stressed.

We owned this city, including what criminal activities we allowed to happen in it. As much as we would have loved to ban all drugs from the area, we knew that would never happen,

so instead, we set strict rules for street-level dealers and heavy consequences for those who broke them.

One of the rules was that we only allowed drug deals with adults, not kids, if they fucked with that rule they would pay with their lives, so dealers were cautious. The second rule was that we didn't sell Fentanyl or use it to cut our product. Our drugs were pure which still resulted in overdose deaths, but far fewer than when it was laced with lethal shit like Fentanyl.

"Well, shit. That's a problem," I replied casually, earning me more glares from the guys in the room.

"No shit. That's a fucking big problem. This is our city. I don't want that shit here. We need to find out who's behind it and fucking send them a message, making sure they know we won't tolerate that bullshit," Blaise stated angrily.

"Let's go hunting. If you said it's happening more on the south side of town, then I'd say that's the perfect place to start," Jared suggested.

"Yeah, we can do that, but it will have to wait till later. I'm picking up Erika from her pole dancing class in an hour. We were supposed to go to dinner, but I can cancel that," Blaise replied, letting out a frustrated sigh.

I perked up at hearing his words. Presley would be there if Erika was at her pole dancing classes. It might be the perfect opportunity for me to try my luck again with the long-legged beauty. Maybe ask her out on a date this time.

“Hey, I have a few things I need to take care of downtown. Why don’t I pick up Erika from her class? That way, you and the guys can deal with the problem in the south,” I suggested casually, trying to sound as indifferent as possible.

The minute my eyes locked with Jared’s; I knew my casual approach didn’t fool him by the giant smirk on his face.

*Asshole.*

“I don’t think so. Erika told me about how you harassed Presley at our wedding,” Blaise replied as he shook his head.

“Your wife’s a cock block,” I mumbled, causing Blaise and Jared to chuckle.

Our conversation was interrupted when Blaise’s cell phone started ringing.

He picked up the phone and glanced at the display before announcing, “It’s Harris.”

Harris was one of our street-level distributors. We trusted him and he was always in the know of what was happening on the street. He usually didn’t call unless it was important which was why we all listened with interest when Blaise pressed the answer button and brought the phone to his ear before saying, “Blaise speaking.”

I could hear Harris talking on the other end of the line but couldn’t determine what was said. By the way, Blaise’s jaw clenched, I was guessing it had something to do with our little poaching problem.

“Keep him locked up until we get there,” Blaise ordered.

“Yeah, that’s right. We’ll be there in less than thirty minutes,” he added before hanging up.

“Harris and his crew came across one of the fentanyl dealers. They’re holding him at our southern warehouse,” Blaise informed us.

“My offer to pick up Erika still stands,” I said casually, intertwining my fingers at the back of my neck.

I would have liked to deal with this asshole selling Fentanyl myself, but I knew the guys could handle him on their own. Plus, I still had unfinished business to settle with Presley, so I would let the guys play without me this time.

“Fuck,” Blaise cursed and paused to assess me for a minute before his shoulders slumped in defeat. “Cruz, I swear to fucking god, if you do anything to piss off Erika, I’ll kill you myself if she doesn’t do it first.”

“Hey, settle down. It’s not like I’m going to kidnap the girl.” I smirked while putting my hands up in mock surrender.

My comment was a jab since Blaise had held Erika captive when they first met.

“You’re an asshole,” he said, pointing an accusatory finger at my chest.

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” I replied with a shrug.

“I mean it, Cruz. Leave Presley the fuck alone,” he ordered with a pointed look.

“Yes, Sir,” I said with a mock salute as I got up and headed for the door.

I paused before leaving his office and added over my shoulder, “Text me the studio address.”

“I’m going to fucking regret this, aren’t I?” Blaise huffed as I walked down the hall toward the garage, chuckling.

“One hundred percent,” Jared replied with his own chuckle.

Fuckers had no faith in me. But they were probably right to be worried since I was a bit of a wild card.

Blaise said he wasn’t supposed to pick Erika up for another hour, but since I lied about having other things to do downtown, I figured I could show up early and watch the last bit of their class. Parents always do that when they pick up their kids from sports practice, right? So why couldn’t I do it with a stripper class? I would just casually sit in the corner and try not to stare at all the tits and asses.

While driving, my cell phone dinged, indicating I had gotten a text message. I glanced at the screen and saw it was from Blaise. He sent me the address where I needed to pick up Erika, followed by another death threat if I happened to piss off his better half. I chuckled at that—the guy had no faith in me.

I arrived at the dance studio with fifteen minutes to spare. I did do a triple-take at the address since the place was sketchy as fuck. It looked more like an abandoned mechanic’s shop from the outside, and if it weren’t for the cars in the parking

lot, I would have assumed Blaise had sent me the wrong address.

The minute I stepped out of my truck, the loud music that was echoing through the parking lot reaffirmed that I was in the right spot.

My heart started thumping faster as I walked toward the front door. Was I anxious? That was odd; I didn't get nervous, especially not because of a woman. I brushed it off, maybe it was the sketchy neighborhood that was putting me on edge.

I reached the door and yanked it open before walking inside.

There were a dozen women each standing by their own pole. No one immediately noticed my presence since the class was in the middle of a routine. It only took a second for me to spot Presley at the front of the class.

My breath hitched as I took in her outfit. She wore a full-piece black and gold bodysuit that dipped low between her breasts and did little to cover her ass. My cock twitched at the sight of her moving up and down that pole looking like sex on a stick. *Literally.*

Her outfit was nowhere near as revealing as the rest of the women. Most of them wore skimpy and flashy bikinis except for Erika and Olivia, who wore spandex shorts and sports bras. Even they were dressed more revealing than Presley, which was another thing that piqued my curiosity. Was she insecure with her body? She certainly had no reason to be, the woman was in fantastic shape, and every inch of her lean frame was tight and curvy. Based on her thigh muscles, I imagined she

likely had a slight six-pack under that one-piece suit or at least a few defined lines dipping down to her... Fuck. I needed to get my head out of the gutter before I got another hard-on in front of her. The woman would start thinking I popped Viagra like candy if I wasn't careful.

The inside of the studio actually looked pretty decent compared to the outside. Obviously, she did a lot of work to make the space usable. The floor was laminate but clean and polished; there were two walls of floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and the lighting was bright. It used to be an oversized garage based on the four garage doors that lifted to the outside, but other than that, you couldn't tell this wasn't supposed to be a dance studio. A dozen poles were set up in front of the mirrors with one at the front.

I barely even glanced at the other girls because my focus was on Presley. The way she danced was hypnotizing; she was sexy but also elegant, and skilled. Her movements were almost too delicate for pole dancing, making me wonder if she had done a different style of dance before. She almost danced like a ballerina and certainly had the body for it.

Suddenly, her moves faltered when our eyes locked in the mirror, and she glared, making me smirk.

*There would be no running from me this time, beautiful.* I thought to myself.

The entire class noticed the change in Presley's demeanor and followed her line of sight until all eyes were on me.

I heard Erika groan when she saw me, and Olivia rolled her eyes before cursing under her breath.

I ignored their hostility and moved to the back of the room, where a few chairs lined the walls, and I casually took a seat.

“Don’t stop on my account.” I motioned with my hand for them to continue while winking at a few of the ladies batting their eyelashes at me. I wasn’t one bit interested in them, but maybe winning a few over might come in handy down the road. Plus, if I could make Presley jealous, I was all for it.

“Cruz, what the hell are you doing here?” Erika asked, sounding annoyed.

“Blaise had some business to take care of, so he asked if I could pick you up instead. I dropped everything I was doing just so I could come get you,” I replied dramatically with a cheeky grin.

“I’m gonna kill Blaise,” Erika mumbled as she gave Presley an apologetic look.

“Pretend I’m not even here,” I said, waving my hand dismissively.

Presley narrowed her eyes and hesitated momentarily before eventually giving up and returning her attention to the class, looking flustered. The session had only ten minutes left, so she led the ladies through another routine before doing a wind-down and some light stretching.

I still couldn’t pull my eyes away from her. She was fucking breathtaking. Meanwhile, she tried to ignore my existence, but



given how flushed her cheeks were and how flustered she looked, I would say she felt my presence straight down to her core. Exactly where I wanted her to feel me.

Once the class finished, some ladies quickly said goodbye, grabbed their bags, and headed out, while others hung around and mingled. A few women gave me curious looks as I stood from my seat and headed to the front of the class where they all chatted.

I ignored the other women and focused on Presley, who tensed when she felt my approach.

Erika shot me a warning look, but I ignored her. I swore none of my friends had any faith in me.

“I must admit, this wasn’t at all what I was expecting,” I said honestly, drawing everyone’s attention to me.

“And what were you expecting?” Presley asked, crossing her arms over her chest, which pushed her tits up and naturally drew my eyes to them.

*Shit.*

Staring at her tits certainly wouldn’t win me any points either, so I forced my gaze back up to her face. The fire burning in her eyes was hot. I liked it when a woman was a little feisty. She was nervous, though. I could see it mixed in with the irritation as she waited for my answer.

“Honestly, I guess I expected less skill and more seduction,” I admitted truthfully with a shrug.

“It’s not all about tits and ass, Cruz. It’s actually a really good workout,” Erika scoffed.

I ignored Erika and kept my attention on Presley.

“I like what you did with the place. Have you been renting this studio for a while?” I asked while letting my eyes look around the room.

“Long enough.” She sighed before turning her attention to the other girls in the room.

*Ouch.* Once again, I was dismissed.

“I don’t mean to rush you guys, but I have somewhere I need to be,” she told the group.

“No worries, Pres. We’ll see you on Thursday,” One of the girls replied with a smile before picking up her bag and heading for the door with two other girls.

I had a feeling Presley didn’t have anywhere to be but wanted me gone, so she asked everyone to leave so she didn’t have to ask me directly.

Once most of the girls had left except for Olivia, Erika, and me, Presley started cleaning up the room.

“Want some help cleaning up?” Erika asked.

“Nah, I got this,” Presley replied with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“Let’s go.” Erika motioned to the door with her head.

Without answering, I lifted my index finger to tell her to wait before turning to Presley.

“So... What do you say I take you out for dinner sometime?”  
I asked casually.

“No,” she replied, clipped, without even looking in my direction.

“Cruz...” Erika warned, but I once again ignored her.

I couldn't for the life of me figure out why Presley was being so cold when she seemed friendly and sweet with the other women. It didn't happen often, but I could feel a little frustration gnawing at my chest.

“Alright then, I guess I'll see you Thursday,” I said with a shrug, which seemed to get her attention.

She dropped the towel in her hand and spun around to face me.

“Thursday?” she asked with a confused frown.

“Yeah, the same time, right?” I asked while taking a few slow steps toward her.

“I don't allow people to watch my classes. Today was a one-off because you were picking up Erika,” she said as I closed the last bit of distance between us, forcing her to tilt her head back to look up at me.

We were so close I could feel the heat from her sweaty body radiating off her. Her face glistened with perspiration, and a few strands of hair that had escaped from her messy bun clung to her face, making her look even more fuckable. She was still panting lightly from her workout, drawing my attention to her slightly parted lips.

“Nah, I’ve been looking for a new workout. I figured, why not try this?” I smirked as my eyes stayed locked on her perfect mouth. Fuck, I wanted nothing more than to lean down and taste those plump lips.

“You want to join my class?” she scoffed with an eyebrow raised.

“Oh, so women are all for equality, except for when it comes to a man wanting to try something that’s mainly dominated by women. Then there’s a problem,” I argued.

My lips curved into a victorious smirk when her mouth opened and closed several times without any word coming out. I had rendered her speechless.

*Good.*

“Cruz, let’s go,” Erika groaned, sounding irritated.

“See you Thursday,” I said with a wink before bringing my hand to Presley’s face and sweeping a sweaty strand of hair behind her ear. The action made her tense and close her eyes, but not in a good way. It was almost skittish. What the fuck was up with this woman?

I watched her curiously as she took several steps back and put some distance between us. Her cheeks were flushed but she still had that anxious look in her eyes.

Erika grabbed my arm and started pulling me toward the door. I didn’t want to leave yet, but at the same time, it was obvious I had overstayed my welcome, so begrudgingly, I followed.

“What the fuck is wrong with you,” Erika hissed once we were outside.

“Nothing. I don’t know what you mean.” I played dumb.

“You’re joining our classes now?” she huffed and glared at me.

“Yeah, seems like a great workout. Why wouldn’t I?” I shrugged.

“We both know that’s not why you’re joining,” she whisper-yelled.

“Sure it is,” I argued.

“Well, whatever you’re up to, I can’t wait to see the nut-huggers you show up in on Thursday,” Olivia chuckled as she walked to her vehicle that was parked a few spots down from mine.

“Can I borrow those? They would probably do my nuts justice,” I joked as I motioned to the purple spandex shorts she wore.

“Not a chance.” she laughed as she got into the driver’s seat.

“See you guys on Thursday,” Olivia added before shutting her door and driving away.

“Get in the damn truck, Cruz,” Erika snapped as she stomped around to the passenger side.

“So angry. What did I ever do to you?” I teased as I got in and started the ignition.

“Why can’t you just leave her alone.” She sighed defeatedly.

“Why should I? I like her. I’m asking her for a date, not proposing,” I argued.

“She’s not interested, Cruz,” Erika growled while shaking her head.

“Why not? Give me a legitimate reason to back off, and I will,” I shot back.

“Listen, I’m sure she has her reasons why she’s not interested and it’s really none of our business so why can’t you just accept that?” Erika asked as she let out a long-frustrated sigh.

“Maybe I’m exactly what she needs in her life. She looks far too serious for a girl her age, and we both know I’m the king of fun,” I retorted with a grin and a wink.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how right I was. Presley seemed miserable at the wedding and again today. Maybe, that was exactly what she needed, someone to show her how to have fun and enjoy what life had to offer. There was no better person for that job than me.

“Whatever, Cruz, just know I’ll kick your goddamn ass if you hurt her or make her feel uncomfortable,” Erika said sternly.

“Well shit, should I pull over now so we can get this ass-whooping out of the way? I’ll probably make her and every other woman in the room uncomfortable on Thursday when I show up in a hot pink banana hammock,” I teased.

Erika groaned but when I glanced over, I spotted the corners of her lips twitching upward into the slightest smile.

“Just please, don’t make her life any harder than it already is, Cruz. I don’t know much about her past, but I’m sure she’s not the way she is because she had it easy,” Erika stated in a softer tone.

“I have no intention of making her life hard, if anything, I want to make it better,” I replied truthfully.

I wasn’t interested in anything serious, but Presley looked like a cool chick, and I bet she could be a ton of fun if she loosened up and lived a little.

Erika didn’t say anything else as she turned to look out the passenger window.

While we drove in silence, my thoughts went back to the conversation I had with Presley. Did I really just sign up for pole dancing classes? What the fuck was I thinking? I had zero coordination and couldn’t dance worth a shit. Not to mention, I would never live this down when the guys found out. I groaned at that thought.

What the fuck did a guy even wear to a class like that? Where would I hide my gun? God, I was really starting to regret my life choices.

## Chapter 4



# It's A Date

## Presley

**C**ruz was kidding when he said he would attend today's class, right?

I groaned as I anxiously walked from my apartment to the dance studio, wondering if he would show up. God, I hoped he didn't. Not only did he make me nervous, but I also didn't appreciate how my body reacted to him. There was no denying the man was attractive, but I had seen plenty of good-looking men over the years, and not once had my body reacted the way it had with Cruz. Hell, I couldn't even get a reaction out of my vagina with the best toys on the market, and trust me, I had tried. So why did she decide to wake the fuck up now? Sleeping Beauty could go back to sleep for all I cared because I didn't need the added drama associated with hormones. I should have put my foot down and told him he couldn't take my class.

Cruz seemed like the jokester type, so maybe I was getting myself all worked up for nothing, and he simply wouldn't

show up. I really hoped that was the case.

Even though I didn't want him there, the thought of him making a fool of himself dancing on a pole made me chuckle to myself. He certainly didn't have a dancer's body with all that bulky muscle.

I walked through the parking lot of my studio and toward the front doors. The lot was still empty since the class didn't start for a half hour. I always came in early to set up before everyone else arrived.

As I approached the front of the studio, I spotted something dark on the ground in front of the door. It was the size of a fist, and as I got closer, I realized it was a bird. *A dead bird.*

My pulse quickened as my breathing became labored. The first thing that came to mind was *him*, the devil from my past. Was this a message? Had he found me?

I stood over the bird, looking down at it as my anxiety spiked and the looming panic attack threatened to take over. My breathing became labored, and my heartbeat accelerated.

*Please, not now, not here.* I thought.

I took several deep breaths and held them in for a few seconds trying to stop the panic attack from hitting me full force.

*The bird likely flew into the window and died. It had nothing to do with him.* I tried telling myself.

I lifted my fearful gaze from the dead bird and looked at the glass door, where I noticed a smudged print the size of my fist

at eye level, confirming my theory was correct. It was just a coincidence and had nothing to do with him or the nickname.

With shaky hands, I pulled some tissue out of my bag and bent down to scoop it up, before walking over to the bushes and tossing it out of sight.

My gaze scanned the area for anything out of place, but there was nothing. I saw no one except a young woman who looked unaware of my presence, walking with her toddler. I let out a relieved breath even though my entire body trembled.

Stuff like this happened all the time, but it never got easier. I wasn't sure I would ever stop having those sudden panic attacks when situations triggered memories from my past.

I quickly walked to the front door and withdrew my keys from my bag before unlocking the studio and stepping inside. I shut the door behind me and scanned the parking lot one last time, before, finally, feeling satisfied that no one was watching me.

I moved further into the studio, turned on all the lights, and started preparing for the class. My mind tormented me with dark thoughts as I moved around the studio on autopilot, preparing for everyone's arrival.

I heard the front door open, and my eyes shot over to see who it was. I let out a relieved breath when I realized it was just one of my usual girls, Cassandra.

She had been taking my class for over a year now, and we got along quite well. We weren't friends outside the studio or

anything like that, but I liked the girl. She was around my age and a single mother to a young son.

Cassandra worked two jobs to ensure her child had everything he could ever need, and I respected her for that. Undoubtedly, she was a good mother and had her struggles, like me.

“Hey girl, you Okay? You look stressed,” Cassandra asked, her eyebrows pulling together as she walked toward me.

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine,” I replied with a fake smile, waving a hand dismissively.

“Okay,” she drawled, not sounding convinced but didn’t push it.

Cassandra put her bag on the bench before unzipping her hoody and revealing a sequined blue bikini top. She then lowered her sweatpants, leaving her in a pair of tight blue spandex shorts.

The girl was stunning, with long platinum blond hair and ridiculous curves. When I was younger, I would have been envious of her looks, but now, I was thankful that I looked more like the girl next door that no one noticed. It helped me stay in the shadows and not be seen.

“You hear about that murder two nights ago?” she asked casually while stretching.

“No, what happened?” I frowned curiously.

“It happened in the alley right behind this place. Some homeless guy was decapitated,” she replied, shuddering at the

thought.

I felt my heart rate spike at hearing her words. There were lots of murders in this part of town, but for some reason, today, everything felt related to me. I knew I was being paranoid and that the murder had nothing to do with me, but still, a cold chill rushed through my body.

“Anyway, just make sure you’re not walking home alone after dark. Lots of crazies out there these days,” Cassandra warned as she continued to stretch.

If only she knew I had already met the worst psychopath out there, all those other crazies didn’t hold a candle to him.

“I won’t,” I replied awkwardly.

The sound of the front door opening drew our attention toward it. A few more girls strolled into the studio and greeted us before starting their warm-up.

Olivia arrived shortly after, and I resisted the urge to ask her where Erika was. The class was about to start, and she hadn’t arrived yet, nor had Cruz. Maybe she stayed home so he wouldn’t come.

Of course, that hopeful thought didn’t last long when the front door opened, and Cruz strutted into the studio with a giant grin on his handsome face, followed by an annoyed-looking Erika.

Cruz wore black basketball shorts and a white t-shirt that hugged his large biceps and showed off the definition of his chest and arms. Why did he have to be so attractive? The way

his eyes scanned my body, appreciatively, made my stomach flip. His gaze never wandered to the other women, who were all wearing far more revealing outfits than I was.

If I were a normal woman, I would be swooning over how he was looking at me, but instead, I wished the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

“Ladies,” he greeted and winked at me before going to the bench where the other women gathered.

“Sorry, Presley, I tried to get him to stay home, but he wouldn’t listen,” Erika said, giving me an apologetic look.

“It’s fine,” I replied, keeping my irritated gaze locked on Cruz.

I wanted to slap that smug look off his face, as he walked around my studio like he owned the place.

I turned away from him and took a deep breath to try and calm myself down. The only positive about him showing up was that it completely distracted me from how anxious I felt after finding the dead bird and hearing about the murder. I didn’t feel nearly as uncomfortable with his presence as I thought I would, and if anything, I felt almost safe having him here. Don’t get me wrong, I was still irritated that he showed up, though.

I could hear him laughing and chatting with the other girls, which only spiked my frustration. Why were they flirting with him? This was supposed to be a dance class, not a social gathering.

I spun around, getting ready to snap at them, but the minute my eyes landed on Cruz, my mouth went dry.

He had taken his shirt off, revealing his perfectly chiseled chest and abdomen, but that wasn't the only thing he took off. He had also removed his basketball shorts and was now wearing tight black spandex shorts that hid nothing. I could literally see the length and girth of his cock since the material hugged him like a second skin. His dick was massive, and it wasn't even hard, just casually hanging there looking like a third leg barely contained within his stupidly tiny shorts.

Once again, my pussy picked this moment to wake the fuck up and started pulsing with need at the sight of him. I normally didn't find tight shorts attractive on a man, but Cruz somehow pulled them off even though they looked far from his usual style. Maybe it was his confidence as he stood there unashamed, looking sexy as sin. Whatever it was, I had to clamp my mouth shut before drool escaped.

My gaze lifted and I slowly took in his perfectly sculpted six-pack and hard pecs before finally settling on his eyes. The cocky smirk on his face was a clear indicator that he had caught me staring.

*Fucking great.*

A quick glance around confirmed that I wasn't the only one checking him out. Every girl in the room, except for Erika and Olivia, were getting an eye full, and that caused a weird pang of something unfamiliar to hit my chest, which I knew was

ridiculous. It must have been because he was distracting my class that I was getting annoyed, not because I was jealous.

“See anything you like, beautiful?” Cruz whispered next to my ear.

I hadn’t even noticed him approaching, but he now stood directly in front of me, and his face was hovering next to my ear. The electricity buzzing between us made my body shudder.

“I...it’s twenty-five dollars to take my class,” I blurted out. Really? That was the best thing I could come up with.

He was so close I could feel the heat radiating off his body, and all it did was ignite a fire low in my abdomen.

*Jesus Christ, get it together, Presley.*

I shook my head and quickly took several steps away, putting some distance between us, which made him chuckle. The rumble deep in his chest was low and sexy, which only added to my torment. Why, oh, why, did my libido choose now to come back to life?

“Here,” he said, handing me two twenties before adding with a smirk, “Keep the change.”

I ripped the money from his hands and quickly spun around, so he didn’t see how frazzled I was. You better believe I was keeping the change if he was going to torment me like this.

“Cassandra, do you mind showing Cruz the basics while we dive into where we left off last class?” I asked.



She looked at me with a curious frown before saying, “Of course.”

I usually handled the newbies personally, so I wasn’t surprised by her reaction. I was just glad she didn’t say anything in front of Cruz.

Cruz looked ready to protest but the minute he saw my irritated glare, he shut his mouth. He must have realized he was already pushing his luck by showing up, arguing with me on how I ran my class would only make it worse.

Cassandra walked over to Cruz’s station and demonstrated some basic moves. Fuck, that same stupid pang of something returned to my chest as I watched her flirting with him. Why wouldn’t she be? She was single and he was good-looking. She had every right to flirt, and I should be happy about that since it took his attention away from me.

Someone cleared their throat, which snapped me out of whatever trance I was in. I realized I had been standing there for far too long watching Cassandra dance and flirt with Cruz.

“Sorry, I was just making sure they were good before we started,” I lied.

Olivia was smirking with a knowing look, while Erika frowned. All the other girls seemed clueless about the tension in the room. I couldn’t wait for this class to be over.

I moved to my old-school CD player and pressed play. *River by Bishop Briggs* started playing before I walked to the pole at the front of the class.

Everyone watched as I started dancing the routine, adding to what I had already taught them during the last class.

Without even looking, I could feel Cruz's burning gaze on me while I lost myself to the music, and for the first time in a long time, I didn't shy away from the attention. I moved with ease along the pole and probably put more effort into the routine than I normally did.

I hadn't realized how carried away I had gotten until the song ended and a new one began. Damn it, I had danced the whole routine when I was only supposed to show them a few extra moves to add to what they already learned.

"I don't think I can remember all that," One of the girls mumbled.

"Me neither," Another added.

"I just wanted to show you guys the entire routine. I'll break it down this time," I said, trying to cover up my mistake.

I glanced over to see Cruz's dark, hungry eyes still locked on me.

*Shit.*

What the fuck was I thinking by getting carried away like that? I was trying to get him to leave me alone, not pursue me harder. I was such an idiot.

I walked over to the CD player before starting the song over. I went back to my pole and started dancing, but this time only added a few extra moves for the girls to practice. Cruz had gone back to his own lesson with Cassandra.

I moved through the class and assessed the girls as they practiced what I had taught them.

My eyes moved without permission over to where Cruz was practicing basic moves with Cassandra. I had to work hard not to smile when I saw how ridiculous he looked. I was right, the guy couldn't dance worth a shit, and if anything, he looked constipated as he tried arching his very stiff back. Even though he looked ridiculous, he owned it like the confident man he was, and somehow still managed to look hot doing it. Maybe, it was the fact he wasn't afraid to laugh at himself, that was so attractive. Whatever it was, I once again found myself unable to look away, even though I tried my very best to do just that.

He glanced my way, and I quickly averted my eyes, pretending to be watching the girls while secretly, in my peripheral, I was still watching him. I couldn't stop and it was infuriating.

"You alright? You seem distracted today," Olivia asked as she came over to stand beside me.

I glanced over to see her smirking with that same knowing look as earlier. Erika had come over with her, while the other ladies took a well-deserved water break.

Cruz and Cassandra were still practicing, and I hated how she kept giggling like a teenage girl at every bloody thing Cruz said. Seriously, what grown-ass woman giggled?

"You're the one who asked her to show him the moves, so you should really stop trying to blow her head up with your vicious glares," Olivia joked.

Fuck, she was right, I hadn't even realized I was doing it, but I was totally glaring at Cassandra, who absolutely didn't deserve that.

"I wasn't glaring, just thinking about something she had told me earlier. I guess there was a murder in the alleyway behind the building two nights ago," I said, intentionally changing the subject. Olivia knew what I was doing, but luckily, didn't call me on it.

"I heard about that one from some of my old colleagues. I guess it was quite the gruesome scene," Olivia replied.

"Do you know any of the details? Did the police catch whoever was responsible? I hate how close to my studio it was," I asked.

"Nah, they didn't catch the person yet, but they do think it was random. Whoever did it, though, seemed to know what they were doing by how the body was butchered," she replied with a concerned frown.

"I know you're too stubborn to take me up on my offer but if you change your mind and want to move away from this shitty neighborhood, it still stands," Erika stated.

She offered to help me financially when I first moved here, but I refused her help. I wanted to make it on my own, which I had never done before, and I needed to prove to myself that I could. Many people wouldn't understand, but luckily, Erika did, and she never pushed. Plus, she had already helped me enough mentally and physically, so I couldn't take her money too.

“Thanks, girl, but you know me, I love this neighborhood,” I joked, causing them both to chuckle.

It was our inside joke since Erika had enough money to move a long time ago but never did and always claimed she loved the neighborhood too much to leave. It wasn't until she met Blaise that she finally moved to a nicer part of town. I hadn't seen her new place yet, but I heard it was massive and really nice.

A loud thud interrupted our conversation, followed by a pained groan. We turned to find Cruz upside down on the pole with his head smashed against the floor while still clutching the bar between his muscular thighs. His body folded over himself, looking awkward and uncomfortable.

Erika and Olivia buckled over with laughter, as did a couple of the other ladies, while I tried to hide the amusement on my face.

Cruz looked as confident as ever when he easily picked himself up off the floor with a giant grin. He even winked at me before gripping his pole and returning to work as if nothing happened.

I shook my head in disbelief but couldn't help but chuckle. The guy was insane.

The rest of the class flew by, and by the end, Cruz sucked just as badly as when he first arrived, but that didn't deter him.

After watching him today, he seemed like the kind of guy who would make the best out of any situation, or maybe he

was just an outstanding actor. I had met one of those types before and made a mistake by falling for his act. That certainly wouldn't happen again.

Once class was over, most of the women left, but Cruz was stalling, making Erika wait impatiently by the front door. I was a little surprised that Erika wasn't trying to haul Cruz out of here like last time. She seemed to almost accept his stall tactics.

I felt Cruz's presence behind me without looking over my shoulder. I tried to ignore him, but it was clear he wouldn't leave until he got my attention, so I dropped the towels in my hand and turned to face him.

Thankfully, he had his basketball shorts and T-shirt back on, so I wasn't completely distracted.

Once again, he moved into my personal space, and I resisted the urge to back away.

"Have coffee with me tomorrow," he ordered confidently.

"No," I replied sharply.

"Fine, then I guess I'll be back again next Thursday. I'll be due for another concussion by then." He shrugged while smirking.

*Asshole.*

"Cruz, You can come every Thursday if you must, but I still won't go out with you, so if that's the only reason you're doing this, then you're wasting your time," I huffed and the frustration was evident in my tone.

“Have coffee with me once, and I’ll stop coming to your classes,” he countered.

I glanced over his shoulder to where Erika stood by the door, hoping she would help me out a little, but to my surprise, she averted her eyes and pretended like she wasn’t even listening.

*What the hell?*

I really didn’t want to go to coffee with him. I knew if I did, it would only give him false hope. At the same time, I didn’t want him attending my classes every week since he was obviously a distraction to the ladies. That was what I told myself at least.

I didn’t realize I had been biting my bottom lip until I noticed Cruz’s hungry gaze zoned in on my mouth.

Shit. I needed him to stop looking at me like that, so I blurted out, “One coffee, and you’ll stop showing up at my studio?”

“You have my word. If you have coffee with me, I won’t show up to your classes unless you want me to,” he replied, already looking victorious.

Fuck, this guy was far too confident for his own good.

“Fine.” I sighed defeatedly.

“Great, how about I pick you up at two,” he suggested with a sexy smile.

“Not a chance.” I chuckled dryly and shook my head before adding, “I’ll meet you at the coffee shop around the corner at

two. It's called *Bean Around The World.*"

He probably already knew where I lived since Blaise had been there before, but still, I wasn't getting in a car alone with him. Having coffee in public was one thing, but being alone in a vehicle where he could easily overpower me was completely different.

"Fine, it's a date." he nodded, looking smug.

"It's not a date," I corrected firmly.

"Two strangers who are attracted to each other, having coffee, and getting to know one another. I think that's practically the definition of a date," he argued with a shrug.

"Oh my god, you're practically blackmailing me to go. It's not a date." I shook my head in disbelief.

"You didn't even deny that you were attracted to me. I take that as a win. How about we save some of this tension for tomorrow on our date." Cruz winked with that same charming grin he always wore.

I groaned in frustration. Arguing with this man was useless, so instead, I said between clenched teeth, "I'll see you tomorrow at two."

"Cruz, can we go now," Erika huffed.

"I'll see you tomorrow, beautiful," he smiled down at me before turning around and striding away, looking confident as always.



“I got a date tomorrow,” he bragged to Erika as they left my studio.

“I heard you coerce her, Cruz,” she scoffed.

“Whatever, she still agreed to the date.” He shrugged.

I wanted to shout that it wasn’t a date, but I knew it was pointless, and the door had already slammed shut behind them, so I saved my breath.

Oh god, why did I agree to have coffee with him? I could already tell this was a bad idea.

Maybe I should just stand him up. I groaned at that thought, knowing he would keep returning to my classes if I did, and I definitely didn’t want him doing that.

Maybe if I licked the door handle to the bathroom at the corner store, I could get sick and have a legitimate reason to stand him up. The idea was ridiculous, but I must admit, I debated it for far longer than I should have. That was how much I was dreading this date.

Shit, he even had me calling it a date now.

## Chapter 5

# Coffee

## Cruz

“So, have you heard anything from the Lincoln brothers yet?” I asked Blaise as I walked into his office unannounced and sat across from him at his desk.

When I went to pick up Erika a few days ago, Blaise, Jared, and Dex dealt with the shithead that Harris had picked up for selling fentanyl on our streets.

He was just a low-end street dealer, but the guys found out he worked for the Lincoln brothers, who ran the underworld of several cities south of us, including Philadelphia. It was odd that he would have ventured so far from his turf, and supposedly, he didn't say much, even when Blaise used highly persuasive interrogation techniques. I guess the asshole was more worried about what the Lincoln brothers would do if he spoke than what we would do to him. I didn't feel bad for the guy, though. He was a piece of shit selling drugs laced with fentanyl, and several buyers had overdosed because they

weren't aware they were buying drugs laced with that lethal shit.

Blaise, Dex, and Jared ended up beating the crap out of him and sending him back home with a message for his bosses to contact us. That was five days ago, and we still hadn't heard anything.

The Lincoln brothers were fucking crazy. They weren't just ruthless; they were psychopaths. They tortured and killed without reason, which was how they instilled fear in people. We hadn't had many dealings with them before, but we were well aware of their reputation.

To the general public, the older of the two, Conrad Lincoln, appeared to be a well-respected businessman heavily involved in politics. He owned several legitimate businesses and was a big donor to several non-profit organizations and charities within Philadelphia, which gained him several powerful alliances within the city. Conrad claimed not to be involved with his brother's criminal activities, but we knew better. He was the brains of their operation, and his brother, Owen, was the enforcer. I was sure some of his political friends knew of his criminal activities but chose to look the other way because of the financial support Conrad provided them.

Blaise sighed and leaned back in his chair before answering, "Not yet. I'm giving them till the end of the weekend before I send another message."

"Good. We need to be heavy-handed with guys like that. If not, they'll walk all over us," I stated casually.

“You’re right, but I was hoping we could have a conversation with them and put an end to all this before it escalates.” Blaise replied, rubbing his hands down his tired-looking face.

I didn’t blame Blaise for wanting to de-escalate the situation. Guys like the Lincoln brothers had a lot of allies, and a full-on war against them would be deadly. Luckily, we had the military experience to back us even though they likely outnumbered us with all their alliances.

“You’d think if they wanted to clear the air, they would have called by now,” I noted.

“I know, you’re right.” Blaise let out a long breath before adding, “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“If it’s a war they want, then I’ll ensure our guys are ready,” I stated firmly.

I was the tactical guy in our group and handled most of the training for our men. We had a lot of ex-military guys who worked for us, but the ones who didn’t have military experience needed a bit more training to bring them up to our standards, and I handled that.

“It doesn’t make sense, though. The Lincoln brothers have as much to lose as we do, so why would they risk it? Unless they’re getting greedy and trying to expand their territory, I guess.” Blaise huffed, looking frustrated.

“Look at your father. He got greedy and tried to pull moves that got him killed. There’s a strong possibility that’s exactly

what's happening," I stated with a shrug.

"We won't know for sure what they're up to until they contact us," Blaise replied and paused before adding, "I have Dex working on gathering intel on them, just in case we don't hear back and need to send a clearer message."

"Good," I replied with a curt nod.

"I also had to send Jared and a couple of the guys to have a little chat with Antonio Castillo today. He thought he could rip us off half a mil on our last arms deal. The fucker's about to learn the hard way not to mess with us," Blaise growled.

"This fucking lifestyle, man. There's always gonna be someone who thinks they're smarter than us." I shook my head in disbelief.

"Tell me about it. The Kelly brothers have also been bugging me to strike a deal with them. They want to use our city to move some of their products," he added.

The Kelly family was associated with the Irish mob and they controlled everything to the north of New York.

"And what would we get out of it?" I asked.

"A cut. But we don't need it, and I honestly don't see the benefit in bringing more problems into our city," he replied.

"Then tell them to fuck off." I shrugged.

"I did already, but the assholes are relentless," he huffed before adding, "If they ask again, we'll probably have to make our answer clearer," Blaise stated, and I knew exactly what he

meant. Sometimes guys like that didn't understand the word *no* unless violence was used.

“Well, let me know what I can do. I'm more than happy to make it clear to them where we stand on their offer,” I said, standing and getting ready to go.

There were always people to deal with in our business. The minute we got rid of one problem, a new one would appear. It was the name of the game, unfortunately.

“Where you going?” Blaise asked with a curious frown.

“I, my friend, have a date,” I replied with a grin.

“Oh right, Erika told me about your little stunt at Presley's dance studio,” Blaise stated, his lips twitching at the corners into a smirk.

“What can I say? When I set my sights on something, I don't stop until I get what I want,” I replied with a grin, completely unashamed.

“Erika snapped a good shot of you. It's my new display when you call,” he added, and my grin dropped when he turned his phone around to show me the picture on the screen.

Of course, she didn't snap a shot when I looked like a sex god. Instead, she snapped one when I landed upside down on my head and looked like an idiot. Well, honestly, I probably looked like an idiot most of the time, but still, that moment was my weakest.

I would get her back for that one, mark my words.

“Where’d you even hide your gun? Because those shorts are...petite,” he asked with a mocking smirk.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I said dismissively.

I actually had to hide my gun in my bag since my outfit was far too ridiculously small for me to hide anything in my shorts, but I didn’t need to give Blaise any more ammunition.

“Actually, never mind. I really don’t want to know.” Blaise shook his head with a chuckle.

“You know what, make fun of me all you want but I did manage to get Presley to agree to go out with me, so there,” I stated.

“Agreed? That wasn’t exactly how Erika described it,” he snorted.

“You’re one to talk,” I retorted.

“Hey, I didn’t coerce Erika to go out with me. She agreed all on her own,” he argued.

“That’s right, you didn’t force her into making a bet that she was almost guaranteed to lose,” I shot back, earning me a glare from Blaise.

“Have I told you I dislike you sometimes?” he asked bitterly.

“Several times a day,” I replied with a smirk before adding, “This was fun, but I wouldn’t want to keep my date waiting. I’ll see you later.”

“I don’t understand why Erika thinks you might be good for Presley. I sure as fuck don’t see how you could be good for



anyone. You're more like a bad case of herpes that a person can't get rid of," Blaise grumbled to himself as I headed for the door.

His words made my steps falter for a second. I did notice that Erika had backed off a little at the last dance class and seemed less determined to keep me away from Presley. When I asked Presley out, Erika looked annoyed but didn't interrupt. Maybe she was realizing I might actually be good for her friend. It certainly wouldn't hurt to have Erika on my side. Perhaps she could put in a good word for me.

I left Blaise's office and headed for the garage.

It took me almost forty minutes before I arrived downtown and parked outside the sketchy coffee shop near Presley's studio.

I wondered why she lived in this neighborhood. Her business seemed to be doing well, but Blaise told me her apartment was horrendous, and he couldn't believe anyone lived there.

I was a bit early, so I headed inside and found a table where I could watch the door and see out the front windows.

Now that our criminal organization was a pretty big deal, I should bring guards with me when I was out, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Even though we had a lot of enemies, I still desired a semblance of a normal life, like having coffee without guards watching the doors for me. Plus, if I had brought guards, it would probably freak Presley out, which I didn't want to do.

The coffee shop was small. It had a dozen tables inside, but only two were occupied. A young girl around eighteen worked behind the counter. I didn't order anything since I wanted to wait for Presley.

Ten minutes later, Presley walked through the front door looking as stunning as always in an oversized burgundy knitted sweater and dark denim jeans. Her hair was still wet, likely from a shower, and pulled up in a messy bun. Her eyes nervously scanned the room, looking for all the exit doors before she carefully assessed the other customers.

I frowned as I watched her. I noticed she had done the same thing when we arrived at Blaise and Erika's wedding reception, but I didn't think much of it then. Now I realized she was doing the same thing I always did when I entered a new building. I looked for all possible exits, assessed the room for threats, and then looked for a place that granted me easy access to a door in case I needed to leave in a hurry.

The difference was that I learned that behavior from the military. It had been part of our training. Why would Presley do that? Most people were utterly oblivious to their surroundings, but it was clear she wasn't most people. Fuck, did that ever pique my curiosity. What was this woman's deal? Maybe I could run some checks, if I got her last name from Erika.

When her eyes finally met mine, she looked even more nervous. I had selected a table in the far corner of the coffee shop, close to the back door. And since I took the seat against

the wall that allowed me to see the entire coffee shop, the only other chair available for her was across from mine, and it meant her back would be to the room. I never turned my back to a room and could see it on her face that she didn't either.

I would have given her my chair even if that meant going against my instincts, but I had a better solution. I moved the other chair to the side of the table so it was next to mine. Now I would get her closer to me while giving her a side view of everything. It was a win-win for us both, but more for me.

She looked annoyed as she walked toward the table, but at the same time, I could see the relief on her face that she wouldn't have her back to the room.

"You made it," I stated as she reached the table.

"I did," she replied with a forced smile.

"What do you want to drink?" I asked as I stood from my chair.

"Ummm... A black coffee, please," she replied awkwardly.

"Sure, anything else? A muffin? A raspberry turnover?"

"No, I'm fine." She shook her head, but her stomach growled at the mention of food, telling me she was lying.

"I'll be right back."

I walked to the front counter and ordered our drinks before ordering one of every treat in the display window. If Presley didn't tell me what she wanted, I would bring her everything and let her have her pick.

Once the drinks were ready, the barista put them on a tray with the dozen treats and handed them to me. I thanked her before returning to the table where Presley was fidgeting nervously.

“Here, since you wouldn’t tell me what you liked, I got you everything they had,” I said, as I put the tray down in front of Presley, took my drink, and sat beside her.

“You really didn’t have to do that. I won’t be able to eat all this.”

“You can bring what you don’t eat home for later.” I shrugged.

She broke off a piece of a chocolate chip muffin before putting it in her mouth and slowly chewing it.

“So, do you live near here?” I asked casually. I already knew where she lived, but figured I could pretend I didn’t since it was a good icebreaker.

“Close enough,” she said, before taking a small sip of her black coffee and scrunching her nose in disgust.

“Do you not like coffee?” I asked with a chuckle.

“Not really, but I drink it for the caffeine boost.” She shrugged.

“Try this, you’ll probably like it a lot better, and you still get your caffeine fix,” I said, putting my drink in front of her.

“That’s ok. I’m fine with this,” Presley stated while shaking her head.

“One sip. We both know I won’t let it go until you do it. I think I’ve proven that already.” I chuckled.

She rolled her eyes but took the mug in her hands and brought it to her nose so she could smell it.

*Good girl.* She was learning.

It was best to pick your battles with me since I was a stubborn fucker.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A caramel macchiato,” I replied with a satisfied smirk when she took a sip, and a small moan left her lips.

Fuck me. That sound was glorious, and it made my cock twitch.

“A caramel macchiato?” she asked with an eyebrow raised.

“What? Some of us have good taste. Who drinks black bitter coffee anyway?” I replied defensively.

“I usually don’t have milk or cream in my fridge, so I’ve gotten used to drinking it black,” she explained.

“Used to it? The disgusted look on your face made it look like you might throw up if you took another sip,” I teased.

“As I said, I don’t love it, but the caffeine keeps me going during the day, so I tolerate it. Here,” she stated, trying to hand me back my mug.

“Nah, you drink it. I prefer my coffee black.” I said before reaching for her mug with the black coffee and taking a small sip. Holy fuck, it was like drinking thick, bitter tar.

*Disgusting.*

She laughed a genuine laugh when I physically gagged.

“That’s fucking gross. Who in their right mind would torture themselves by drinking this shit,” I choked out.

When she went to hand me back my drink, I quickly added, “I mean, damn, this is delicious.”

She could read through my lie and let out another full-blown belly laugh, which made me smile.

Hearing that sweet sound was like music to my ears. She looked like an entirely different woman, smiling and laughing, seeming carefree and almost happy. Fuck, if I didn’t want to hear that sweet sound again. I would make it my mission to hear her laugh like that regularly.

“Do you want this back?” she asked, outstretching her hand with the mug.

“Why would I want that when I can have this,” I scoffed as I took another sip. Gross, I could already feel the heartburn starting in my chest.

“Ok,” she replied, sounding unconvinced.

“So, where you from?” I asked casually.

“Here, born and raised,” she replied nervously. I could tell she was either lying or hiding something by the slight flutter of her eyelashes when she answered. I decided to let it slide since I didn’t want to scare her off when she had just gotten here.

“I’m originally from Washington but moved here after my last deployment in the military almost six years ago,” I told her, even though she hadn’t asked. I had a feeling I would be responsible for keeping this conversation going since she still didn’t look thrilled to be here.

“You were in the military?” she asked, looking surprised.

“Sure was. Believe it or not, I can be serious when I need to be,” I joked.

“What made you move to New York then?” she blurted out before quickly adding, “Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

“Don’t worry about it. You can ask me anything, beautiful, and I’ll answer,” I said with a smile before adding, “Blaise was part of my troop in the military, and so were Dex and Jared. Blaise was from New York, and when he ran into some family problems, we all came back to help him deal with it.”

I wasn’t sure how much information Erika had given Presley about our organization, so I kept my answer simple and left out the criminal stuff.

“I see,” she said as she took another small sip of her drink.

“So, what do you do for fun when you’re not at the studio?” I asked.

“The studio takes up most of my time. If I’m not teaching a class, I’m choreographing new routines for the girls.”

“Seriously? You don’t do anything else? You need to mix in a little fun with all that work,” I chastised playfully.

“Listen, I’m quite happy with how I live my life. I’m not telling you how to live yours, so please don’t tell me how to live mine,” she barked.

I raised my hands in surrender and let out a soft chuckle before saying, “Whoa. I didn’t mean to get you all fired up. I was just going to suggest I take you out again and show you some things I like to do for fun around here.”

Presley sighed heavily, looking frustrated, before replying, “Listen, Cruz. You seem like a really nice guy, but I’m not interested in getting involved with anyone.”

“That’s good because you’re totally not my type,” I shot back with a shrug, making her frown.

It was a total lie, but she didn’t need to know that. She was one hundred percent my type, even though I wasn’t exactly sure what I wanted out of all this. At first, I wanted to fuck her, but the more time I spent around her, the more I wanted to actually get to know her and break down those cold, icy walls that guarded her heart.

“So, why’d you ask me out then?” she asked suspiciously.

“Because I felt sorry for you,” I replied with a smirk, which earned me a gasp of disbelief from Presley.

“Are you serious? Why would you feel sorry for me? You don’t even know me. I’ve met you twice, and we barely talked. I can assure you that my life is loaded with fun, and I certainly don’t need you feeling sorry for me,” she rambled.



“Settle down, firecracker. I’m kidding,” I chuckled at the angry look on her face. God, she was fun to rile up.

“Something about you intrigues me, and I want to know more. That’s why I asked you on a date,” I added.

“I thought I wasn’t your type?” she asked with another suspicious frown.

“Okay, so I lied. You’re totally my type. Can you stop calling me out on my bullshit,” I smiled playfully.

“You’re impossible,” she groaned in frustration, but a hint of a smile on her face let me know she was mildly entertained.

“So, what do you say? How about I take you out sometime and show you all the fun you’re missing out on?” I asked.

“Cruz... I can’t,” she replied, her voice sounding softer.

“You can’t or won’t?” I asked, my head tilting to the side as I waited for her reply.

“Both. As I said, Cruz, I’m not interested,” she replied, her tone clipped as she pressed her lips into a thin line.

“I guess I didn’t make myself very clear.” I said casually before adding, “You’ve got two options; you can either agree to go out with me again, or I can bring the fun to you. Be warned, though, if I have to bring the fun to you, you won’t have a say in what we do, and I just so happen to be a fan of naked Twister.” I half-joked. Who didn’t love Twister?

“Oh my god, has anyone ever told you how annoying you are?” she groaned, but a soft chuckle left her perfect lips.

“Actually, my buddy reminded me of that just before I came here today. I think he compared me to a bad case of herpes or something.” I shrugged.

“I’m not going out with you again, Cruz. And I need to get going because I have a private class starting shortly,” she said before standing up.

“Naked Twister it is.” I grinned.

“You said you didn’t know where I lived?” she frowned.

“Another white lie.” I shrugged before asking, “How about tomorrow night after your class?”

“Nope, not tomorrow, not ever,” she threw over her shoulder as she walked away from the table, added, “Thanks for the coffee and muffin.”

She was already out the door before I could reply.

I looked down and noticed she barely ate any of the muffin she had been nibbling on and hadn’t touched any of the other pastries. I was sure she seemed hungry, so why didn’t she eat?

I grabbed a paper bag from the barista and shoved all the food into it before running out of the coffee shop after Presley.

She was already half a block away, but it didn’t take me long to catch up to her.

“Hey! You forgot these,” I shouted.

She looked over her shoulder and when she saw me running toward her with the bag in hand, she sighed.

“You keep it since you paid,” she said firmly.

“Nah, these would mess with my figure if I ate them,” I replied while motioning down my body with my hand.

“Do you even know how many calories are in a caramel macchiato?” she asked with an eyebrow raised.

“Stop it right there. Don’t you dare ruin my morning coffee routine by saying it’s loaded with sugar,” I blurted out while lifting my hand to stop Presley from continuing that train of thought.

“It’s probably just as much sugar as two chocolate chip muffins,” she continued anyway.

“You’re evil,” I groaned, earning me another real chuckle from Presley.

She ripped the paper bag out of my hand before saying, “Thanks again for the coffee and the treats.”

She turned around and walked off.

“You’re welcome. See you tomorrow,” I shouted after her.

“Not happening,” she shot back.

“We’ll see,” I said, but she ignored me.

I stood in place and watched her leave, debating following her until she made it to her studio safely, but not wanting to push my luck.

As she approached the end of the block, A scraggly-looking older man with greasy long brown hair and an unkempt beard popped out of the alley next to her.

He immediately zoned in on Presley and started spewing crude words, “Hey, sexy. How about you join me in the alley, and I’ll show you a good time. What do you say?”

Presley glanced at him over her shoulder, before picking up the pace and clutching her purse tightly to her side.

“Fucking stuck-up bitch,” he muttered after her.

*What a prick.*

A pang of anger hit me in the chest when I saw how uncomfortable he made her.

Presley reached the next street and glanced back at me over her shoulder. I waved and smiled at her before she turned the corner and disappeared down the street.

Once she was out of sight, I started walking down the road.

In no time, I reached the dirty piece of shit who made her uncomfortable, and before he even noticed my approach, I grabbed him by the throat and slammed him up against a brick wall.

“If I ever catch you talking to a lady like that again, I’ll cut your balls off and make you eat them,” I threatened calmly.

The bastard sputtered and clawed at my hand that was wrapped around his throat as he tried to breathe. His face turned a dark shade of purple, and his eyes started bulging out of his head from the lack of oxygen. I waited until he was about to pass out, before finally releasing him and letting his skinny body fall to the ground with a thud.

“Did I make myself clear?” I asked, and he quickly nodded as he tried sucking in as much air as possible.

“Also, if I ever see you within five miles of this corner, I’ll fucking kill you. Clear?” I asked calmly.

“Y-yes...” he coughed while still gasping for air.

“Good. You have a wonderful day,” I said calmly before spinning on my heels and walking away, whistling.

I felt a lot better after teaching that dirty fuck, a little lesson. I had a feeling he would be much more cautious in the future and think twice before spouting off like that.

## Chapter 6

# Leave

## Presley

I found myself smiling randomly throughout the day. Cruz had this magical ability to break down barriers, even when I tried my best to resist him. My mind kept replaying our coffee date. I chuckled again at some of the ridiculous things he had said.

I couldn't remember the last time someone made me laugh like that, and it was over the stupidest things. Seriously, what grown man suggests playing naked Twister for a second date? He didn't even say it in a sleazy way; he was just being playful, which was why it was so funny.

I was finding it harder and harder to keep up my cold front around him. If he continued inserting himself into my life like he had been doing, I knew it wouldn't be long before he managed to break through my guard altogether.

No matter how sweet and funny he seemed, I had to remind myself why I couldn't let that happen. I had too many secrets

and couldn't afford to let anyone close enough to potentially discover them.

One thing that really surprised me, though, was that I wasn't as anxious as I thought I would be on our date. I mean, I was at first, but the minute Cruz started saying the most ridiculous things, my nerves settled, and I felt the most comfortable I had with a man in a long time. Not only that, but I didn't watch the doors to the coffee shop or the other customers as I usually did. It was almost as if I subconsciously knew Cruz was doing it for the both of us. And that wasn't exactly a good thing. I barely knew the guy, so trusting that he had my back was absurd and foolish.

*I should know better than that.*

I groaned in frustration as I walked home from my studio. I hated how Cruz had already fucked with my head and confused my thoughts. On the one hand, I secretly wanted him to show up again tonight as he promised, but then on the other hand, I knew it would be trouble if he did—trouble I didn't need in my fucked-up life.

I reached my run-down apartment building and pushed the front door open. The building was in such poor shape that the door didn't lock anymore, you just needed to shove it hard enough, and it opened.

As I climbed the stairs to the second level, I scrunched my nose at the awful smells that invaded my senses. No matter how long I lived there, I never got used to the horrible smells.



I reached the second floor and started walking down the hall toward my apartment. As I got closer, my steps slowed when I noticed my door slightly ajar.

*Fuck.*

My heart hammered in my chest as I reached for the gun in my backpack with shaky hands. I hated guns, but given my situation, I knew it was best to always have one on me. Erika had taught me how to shoot and some self-defense when I first arrived in New York City a few years ago. It was times like these when I was extra grateful to have her in my life.

My mind immediately went to the one person I feared the most. Was he inside my apartment, waiting? A chill rushed down my spine at the thought. Not a day went by that I didn't think of him, and I hated that. I craved to one day live without fear of being found.

The worst part was I couldn't call the cops because they would ask for my identification, and the last thing I needed was my name getting run in the system. I had a fake ID, but I wasn't sure it was good enough to fool the cops, so I wouldn't dare try my luck.

I was on my own, as always.

I took a deep calming breath as I slowly approached the door. Based on the busted frame, it looked like someone had kicked it in. It was eerily quiet, and I didn't even hear the usual chatter through the thin walls of the neighboring units.

I held the gun before me as I slowly pushed the door open and peeked inside my unit. The place looked ransacked. Items were all over the floor, but I couldn't see anyone inside.

I moved my shaky legs forward and into the apartment. I lived in a small one-bedroom unit, so from the doorway, I could see the entire main living area, the only places I couldn't see were inside my bedroom and the bathroom.

I slowly moved toward the bedroom and shoved the door open before scanning the room with my gun lifted.

It was also a disaster, but no one was in it.

I then left my room and crept toward the bathroom. The door was partly ajar and, from what I could see, looked empty. I wouldn't be satisfied until I looked in every corner, including behind the shower curtain.

I took another calming breath before using my foot to open the door and kept my trembling hands on the gun, ready to shoot. The small room was empty, and a quick peek behind the shower curtain confirmed there was no one there either.

I let out a relieved breath before lowering my gun. I walked back into the main living area and took a minute to assess the damage. Suddenly, panic kicked in for a new reason when I realized this was likely a break-and-enter. I had hidden all my money inside my apartment since I couldn't use a bank account. Some cash was at my dance studio, but the majority was here.

I ran back into my room and reached under the mattress for the hole I knew was there. Once I found the hole, I slipped my hand inside searching for the wad of cash I had hidden there. A curse left my lips when I found nothing. Shit, they found one of my stashes.

I ran out of my room and another string of curses left my lips when I noticed the freezer door was partly open. I walked over to it and moved the ice trays around looking for the wad of cash I had hidden in there, but I already knew it was gone before I even looked.

I had one last stash to check. I went to the bathroom and opened the cabinet below the sink and pulled out the box of tampons. I shoved my hand inside and let out a relieved sigh when my fingers wrapped around the money I had hidden inside.

*Thank god.*

At least I would have enough money to pay my rent next month, but still, my entire contingency fund was gone. It took me two years to save up over five thousand dollars and just like that, I was back at square one.

*Fuck.*

I shoved the box back in its hiding spot before going back into the living room.

Not only that, but I would have to pay out of my pocket if I wanted the lock changed on my door since the landlord was a useless twit.

All the fear was quickly replaced by rage as I stormed around the room, picking shit up off the ground and muttering angrily. I was so sick of the shitty hand I was dealt in life. Why couldn't I catch a goddamn break?

I heard the front door creek open and quickly picked up the gun I had put down on the counter and spun around to point it at whoever was at the door. A fresh wave of fear washed over me, but the anger was still overpowering. I was so done with being a victim. If whoever did this was back for more, they would learn that I wasn't the woman to mess with.

I let out a heavy sigh when I found Cruz standing in the doorway.

"What happened?" he asked, looking more serious than usual.

"It's nothing, but as you can see, I'm extremely busy, so please leave," I gritted out as I put the gun back down and continued to pick stuff off the ground.

Of course, he didn't listen. When did he ever listen? I heard the door close but could still hear him moving around inside my apartment.

"Jesus Christ, what is your problem? I don't have time for your games tonight, Cruz. Please, for once, listen to me, and leave," I growled.

"I just want to help, Presley. Did you check all the closets? You sure there's no one still here?" he asked, and I just now

noticed the gun in his hand as he moved around my apartment, checking everywhere I had already checked.

I wasn't sure why he had a gun on him, and I probably should have been more concerned, but I was far too blinded by rage to focus on that. Did he deserve my wrath? No, but he was also here against my wishes and that was on him.

"There's no one here. Now. Get. Out." I growled, pointing to the door just as Cruz came out of my bedroom and tucked his gun into the back of his pants.

"Did you call the police?" he asked, ignoring my demand.

"What the fuck are they going to do?" I gritted out. He better not push the police thing on me because that was going to end poorly for him.

"Fair point." He shrugged before asking, "Anything taken?"

"No," I lied between clenched teeth. My emotional state was hanging by a thread, and I could feel my anger rising to a dangerous level.

"Where's your broom? I'll clean up the glass."

When I didn't answer, he started opening closets, looking for it on his own.

"For fuck's sake, Cruz. What is it you want?" I shouted, stomping toward him, and waiting for him to face me before continuing, "What do I need to do for you to leave me alone? Hmmm? If I let you fuck me, will that get whatever this is out of your system? Would you leave me the fuck alone then?"

I knew I was being irrational, but I couldn't stop the words from leaving my lips. I was so fucking fed up with everything, and Cruz, unfortunately, took the brunt of my anger.

I hadn't realized how close I had gotten to him until now. Our chests were practically touching as he watched me with a frown.

I had no idea how much time passed as we stood there staring at each other. Me, with my nostrils flaring and my fist clenched, and Cruz, with an unreadable expression on his face. Maybe pity? That just set me off even more. I didn't need or ask for his pity and certainly didn't want it.

I couldn't take the silence anymore, so I did the first irrational thing that came to mind and started to undress.

I lifted my shirt over my head and threw it to the floor before unbuttoning my pants. Hell, maybe if he thought I had lost my mind, he would leave me alone.

"Stop," he commanded as he reached for both my hands and stopped me from shoving my pants down.

"I'm not fucking you like this, Presley. And no, one fuck wouldn't be enough to get rid of me. I get it. You don't like letting people help you, but you know what? Sometimes you need people you can count on, and right now, that's all I want to be. Someone you can count on. So please, just let me help you clean this mess up," he stated as he gave me a pleading look.

“Why Cruz? I’ve been nothing but a bitch to you. I’ve given you the cold shoulder at every opportunity. I barely acknowledge your existence and have rejected you more times than I can count. Why are you still here?” I bit out angrily, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. The meltdown was ready to consume me, and I just wanted him gone so he wouldn’t witness it.

Cruz pulled his T-shirt over his head before saying, “Lift.”

I just then realized I was standing in front of him in only a black lace bra, and even worse, my scars were on full display. So, I didn’t argue and lifted my arms for him to slide the shirt over my head.

Now that I was losing steam, my anger was quickly replaced with embarrassment and the reality of the situation settled in. I had just made a complete ass of myself by having a full-blown meltdown in front of him.

Cruz wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into him. Maybe it was because I really fucking needed a hug, but I let him and buried my face against his chest.

He rested his chin on the top of my head before saying, “Maybe it’s because I know you need me here, even if you won’t admit it. That’s why I won’t leave.”

Tears started running down my cheeks after hearing his words. Was he right? Did I need him? My mind was a jumbled mess as I sobbed against his bare chest.

After a few minutes of silence, Cruz added with a shrug, “It’s either that or I’m really into degradation and think you might be cold enough to call me a dirty little whore before you sit on my face.”

I pulled back from his embrace to look up at him with a confused frown, only to see his playful grin had returned. I couldn’t stop the soft chuckle from leaving my lips as I wiped my tear-stained cheeks. God, he was insane, but somehow managed to make me feel a little bit better.

“Why don’t you come stay at my house for the night, and I can have someone clean this mess up for you? Erika will be there, and you can have your own room,” he suggested.

“No,” I quickly replied while shaking my head. “I’m good now, I promise. It was a long day, and finding my place broken into was icing on the cake. But I’ve had my little meltdown, and I’m better.”

“What about the lock? You can’t possibly stay here with a broken lock on your door,” he argued.

“I’ll have it replaced first thing in the morning,” I stated before turning around and bending over to pick up a lamp that had been knocked over.

“Alright, I guess I’m staying here tonight then if you won’t come with me.” He shrugged.

“Is there any point in telling you that you don’t have to do that?” I sighed, suddenly feeling exhausted.



“Nope.” He smirked before continuing to search for the broom.

“It’s in there,” I stated, pointing to one of the closets next to the bathroom.

We managed to clean my apartment in under an hour. I hated to say it, but I was really thankful for his help. I was so emotionally exhausted that I couldn’t wait to climb into bed and be done with this day.

Once we were done, I headed into the bathroom and brushed my teeth before washing my face. I looked at myself in the mirror and sighed. My eyes were still bloodshot, and my cheeks flushed from crying. What a mess I was. I really didn’t understand how I didn’t send Cruz running for the hills after that meltdown. Any normal man would have left the second I gave them an out, but not Cruz. He was still here getting ready to sleep on my small, disgusting loveseat.

I left the bathroom and found Cruz standing in nothing but his black boxer briefs, bent over the loveseat as he laid out a blanket.

I inwardly groaned. Why did he have to be so good-looking? He had such a nice ass, and I couldn’t stop staring at his back, watching the muscles flex as he worked the blanket into place. Suddenly, my skin felt hot, and my core throbbed with need. It had been a long time since a man touched me. I started thinking about what it would feel like to have his big hands all over my body, touching, squeezing, and grabbing at my soft flesh...

“I’m done setting up the blanket, but if you need another minute, I can bend back over and pretend to still be working on it if you’d like,” Cruz offered, drawing me from my thoughts.

My eyes snapped to his, only to see a cocky smirk plastered on his handsome face.

“I wasn’t...” I started but trailed off and shook my head before adding, “Are you sure you’ll be comfortable there? I don’t mind sleeping on the couch, and you can have the bed.”

“No way. What kind of man would I be if I made you sleep on the couch? Plus, this thing looks cozy. I can’t wait to settle in,” he replied, laying down on the old ratty loveseat and trying to get comfortable. He was so big that his body hung over both ends of the couch.

“Goodnight,” I said before making my way into my bedroom and closing the door, leaving it open just a crack.

I slipped my jeans off but left Cruz’s T-shirt on as I climbed into bed. The smell of his cologne invading my senses was oddly comforting and it helped soothe my nerves.

I felt pretty guilty, though, as I listened to the nonstop sounds of the couch squeaking and Cruz moaning and groaning uncomfortably.

An hour later, he was still trying to get comfortable on a loveseat that was far too small for his giant frame.

I wasn’t exactly sure what caused me to say the following words, but they left my lips before I could really think it

through.

“Why don’t you sleep in here? The bed’s big enough for the both of us,” I suggested.

I cringed when it suddenly went very quiet. Was I too forward? Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut.

Before I could put too much thought into it, the door flew open, and a grinning Cruz stormed into the room.

“Only if you promise to keep your hands to yourself,” he stated with a playful grin and his hands on his hips.

“Oh god, I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?” I groaned as he climbed into bed beside me and got comfy under the blankets.

Shit. I really didn’t think this through. He was only wearing boxers, and I only had a thong on underneath the T-shirt. There wasn’t anything else separating us. What the fuck was I thinking?

“Hypothetically speaking, if I were to move while I slept. What do you prefer to be? The big spoon or little spoon?” he asked.

“Go to sleep, Cruz,” I chuckled, unable to stop myself.

“Little spoon it is,” he added as he rolled onto his side.

I was already facing away so I couldn’t see him, but I felt his warm breath fanning the back of my neck and knew he had turned toward me. A shiver ran down my spine when I felt the warmth from his body radiate against mine. Suddenly, my core throbbed to be touched, and butterflies invaded my stomach.

My nipples pebbled and heat consumed my body as I fought the urge to back my ass up against him. I swallowed the groan when that thought led me to his cock. Was it hard? How would it feel pressed up against my ass?

*Fuck, Presley, get it together.*

How did I end up in this situation? Only hours ago, I was dead set on pushing him away, and now he was in my bed lying next to me wearing nothing but boxers.

I lay awake for a solid hour, unable to sleep. I would have liked to think it was because I was uncomfortable sharing a bed with a stranger, but I knew better than that. It was the sudden surge of arousal keeping me wide awake.

Just when I was about to get out of bed and get a glass of water, a thick arm wrapped around my waist, and pulled me against a hard chest. I tensed waiting to see if Cruz would wake up, but he didn't. I could tell by his shallow breaths.

I had two options. I could either wake Cruz up and ask him to move or, for just this once, let the warmth of his body soothe me to sleep.

I chose the latter.

## Chapter 7

# Who Hurt Her?

Cruz

I woke up to something heavier than a blanket draped over my chest. What the fuck? Whatever it was, it smelled nice, like cherry blossoms and vanilla. I inhaled a lung full of that sweet scent as I slowly opened my eyes.

Memories from the night before hit me all at once, and I realized it was Presley wrapped around me like a koala bear. Her head rested on my chest, one of her arms was flung over my abdomen, and her leg was draped over my thigh. I could feel the heat from her warm cunt against my bare leg, and it really wasn't helping tame my morning wood.

She was still fast asleep, and when I looked down, I had to hold back a chuckle as I noticed the drool hanging from her parted lips and pooling on my chest. Fuck, she was even cute when she slept. She looked so peaceful and innocent, nothing like the anxious, guarded woman I had gotten used to. I wished I could bring some of that peace to her life when she

was awake too. It did something to me when I saw her so tormented with anxiety and fear all the time.

I decided then and there that I didn't care if she wanted me around or not because it was obvious she needed me more than she was willing to admit. She was stuck with me no matter how hard she tried to push me away.

I had never spent the night with a woman before, so this was definitely new territory. We didn't hook up, but sharing a bed seemed like a big deal, almost more intimate than having sex with someone. The weird part was that I slept better than I had in a long time, and what was even stranger, I couldn't wait to do it again.

What was this woman doing to me?

Presley was still a complete mystery, but it was apparent someone had hurt her in the past to make her the way she was. I also noticed the scars on her lower abdomen when she had a meltdown and ripped her shirt off. I didn't spend too much time staring at them since I didn't want to make her uncomfortable, but those scars were definitely not from an accident. It almost looked like someone had carved something into her skin. I tried not to let it show how angry the sight of them made me, but deep down, I had been vibrating with rage and fantasizing about killing whoever hurt her. I would find out who did it, and if they weren't already dead, and I hoped they weren't, I would fucking kill them slowly and painfully.

I planned on grilling Erika for information later and hoped to get some answers about Presley. I wanted to know if there was

someone from her past I should be worried about. That would explain a lot, especially her anxiety around crowds.

But before I did that, I needed to get some of my guys over here to guard this fucking shithole while I figure out a more permanent solution to keep her safe. I had a few ideas on what to do about this place. Presley wouldn't like them, but tough. No young woman should live in a place like this alone. It was in the worst part of town, and anything could happen. Last night was proof of that. What if she had been home when her apartment was broken into?

Presley started to stir awake drawing me from my thoughts. I tightened my hold around her waist so she couldn't pull away from me the second she opened her eyes. I knew she would, but fuck that; I liked the position we were in.

I watched her face as her eyelashes fluttered open. Her brows pulled together in confusion as she tried piecing together where she was. I knew the second it clicked because her eyes flew wide with shock, making me smile.

“Good morning, beautiful,” I said in my raspy morning voice.

She blushed, and as expected, tried to pull away.

“Nope, you used me as your own personal pillow, so you owe me a morning snuggle,” I teased and pulled her further onto me, forcing her to straddle my waist.

“Cruz, please, I have to pee,” she pleaded as she wiggled in my hold, causing me to groan from the friction her cunt



created against my dick.

“Do you really have to pee? Or are you grasping for any excuse to escape me?” I asked with a soft chuckle.

She suddenly stilled, just now noticing my erection pressed against her core. Fuck, I loved that shade of pink that covered her cheeks.

“Really, I do,” she blurted out, looking anywhere but at me.

“Kiss me, and I’ll let you go,” I bargained. I probably shouldn’t be pushing her, but fuck it, I wanted a damn kiss so I could finally taste those lips.

“I’m not kissing you,” she gasped.

“Then I guess we’re jumping straight to the golden shower in this relationship. Kinky.” I shrugged.

“Oh my god, what is wrong with you? First, this isn’t a relationship, and second, eww,” she said, scrunching her nose in disgust.

I let out a deep chuckle after hearing her words. Fuck, she was adorable.

“We slept together. This is most definitely a relationship,” I corrected.

“I took pity on you and shared my large bed so you didn’t have to spend the night on the small couch in the living room. This is not a relationship,” she said, her tone getting higher pitched by the second.

“You have your opinion, and I have mine. Let’s agree to disagree even though we both know my opinion is the correct one.” I smirked.

Presley opened her mouth to argue, and I took advantage of her distracted state by bringing my mouth to hers, silencing her with a kiss.

She immediately tensed and tried to pull away, but I brought my hand to the back of her head, tangled my fingers in her hair, and held her in place. I wasn’t letting her go until she kissed me back, even if we both suffocated from lack of oxygen.

Luckily for both of us, it didn’t take long before she relaxed in my hold and parted her lips, allowing me to deepen the kiss. Which I didn’t waste time doing. My tongue invaded her sweet little mouth as my hands hungrily roamed up and down her body. The best part, she kissed me back with equal passion as she started gently rubbing her pussy against my dick.

*Holy fucking shit.*

I gripped her hips tightly to stop myself from ripping her panties off and savagely fucking her here and now. She wasn’t ready for that, and I didn’t want to take more than she was willing to give.

*Baby steps, Cruz.* I had to remind myself.

Presley started grinding harder against me as the kiss grew desperate and rough. Fuck me, if she kept this up, I was going

to explode in my boxers. Her warm cunt felt so good against my cock.

It was as if lust had temporarily blinded her, and she was finally living in the moment. I wouldn't fuck her today, but that didn't mean she couldn't use me for pleasure.

She was getting close. I could feel it. So, I used my hands to help guide her hips, pushing her down against my cock harder.

I swallowed her moans as she came violently, her entire body shuddering from the climax that ripped through her.

Fuck, that was hot and intense. It was clear Presley hadn't been with anyone in a long time from how eager she was, and I liked that thought.

I didn't come, but that didn't matter since this wasn't about me. I didn't want to push my luck, so when Presley slowed her movements, I loosened my grip on her hips and let her break the kiss.

"I'm sorry, I...I don't know what got into me," she stated, looking embarrassed.

"Don't be. You can use me for your pleasure whenever you want," I replied with a toothy grin, staring at her swollen red lips. Fuck, having those wrapped around my cock would be glorious. My cock twitched at the thought as if it was agreeing with me.

"I can't believe I did that. This doesn't change anything between us," Presley blurted out, sounding panicked as she pushed herself off me, and I reluctantly let her go.

I didn't regret pushing her past her comfort zone a little, but I needed to ensure what happened didn't ruin our progress.

"Hey, you didn't do anything wrong. Calm down," I said as I stood up and grabbed Presley's upper arms, stopping her from aimlessly pacing the room.

"Don't tell me to calm down," she snapped before adding in a more vulnerable voice, "This was a mistake. I need you to leave."

Fuck, this woman was going to be the death of me.

"It wasn't a mistake. We kissed, that's it. Don't let it get in your head," I reassured her.

"No, it never should have happened. Please leave." Presley shook her head vigorously, tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

"Fine, I'll leave, but don't think you won't see me again, Presley. I'll give you space today because I can see you need time to process everything, but after that, we'll sit down and talk. I know you feel the connection between us as much as I do, but you're fighting it for whatever reason, and I want to know why," I said firmly, feeling frustrated that we had just taken one step forward and then three steps back.

"I don't feel anything, Cruz. Why can't you just accept that?" she shouted.

"Lie to yourself all you want, but you're not fooling me," I said and paused before adding, "Someone will be by in an hour or so to change the lock on your door."

“You don’t have to do that. I can handle it myself.” She shook her head.

“I know, but I’ve already made the arrangements, so don’t argue with me,” I shot back. It was a lie, I hadn’t contacted anyone yet, but she didn’t need to know that. I planned on making the call as soon as I left.

“Thank you,” she practically whispered as I left her room and retrieved my pants hanging over the armrest of the couch.

“I’ll get dressed so you can have your shirt back,” she offered and turned to go back into her room.

“Keep it. Just make sure you think of me when you wear it,” I said with a wink as I headed for the door.

I spotted her cell phone on the counter and picked it up. It was an old piece of shit flip phone. I wasn’t surprised to find that there wasn’t a passcode to get in when I flipped it open.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she protested.

“Putting my number in so you can call me if you need something,” I replied as I entered my phone number. I then hit dial and waited till my phone vibrated in my pocket, before shutting hers and putting it back on the counter. “And sending myself yours since you would probably never give it to me voluntarily.” I grinned and shot her another wink.

She rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of a smile on her face.

“I’ll text you when the locksmith is on his way,” I added before heading for the door.

“Okay,” she said softly.

I opened the door and stepped outside before saying over my shoulder, “And don’t even think of ignoring my messages unless you’re eager to see me again.”

“Bye, Cruz,” she huffed before shutting the door behind me.

Even though I was a little frustrated that she pulled back after our kiss, I still felt like we made progress. At least she didn’t seem anxious around me anymore.

*Baby steps.* I reminded myself. Presley was worth the effort. Whatever happened to her in the past clearly had something to do with her behavior, and I needed to be patient. The problem was, I wasn’t a patient man.

I headed down the stairs to the main level of her apartment building and pulled out my phone before dialing Vlad’s number. He was one of our guards at the house.

After the second ring, the line connected.

“Vlad,” he greeted.

“Hey, it’s Cruz. I have a job for you.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll text you an address and unit number, and I need you to grab one of the other guys and come down here to guard it,” I explained.

“Sure. Anything I should know about the place?”

“Yeah, just be discrete since I don’t want you freaking out the tenant. There will be a locksmith coming by in a bit to

change the lock on the door, but other than that, I want you guys to make sure the pretty little brunette that lives there is safe.”

“You got it.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll text you the info,” I added before hanging up the phone.

I immediately texted Vlad the address before texting the guy we used when we needed a locksmith, Johnny. We used him regularly and paid cash, so he was always eager to do business with us. I wasn’t surprised when he replied immediately and said he could be at Presley’s place within an hour.

I reached my truck and hopped inside, even though I wasn’t planning on leaving Presley’s apartment building until Vlad arrived, and knew she would be safe.

I shook my head in disbelief as I watched some crackhead shooting up next to her building in plain view, and another walking down the road trying car doors along the way. Seeing that reaffirmed how unsafe this place was.

While I waited for Vlad, I dialed Erika’s cell phone.

She picked up on the third ring and said, “Hey Cruz, what’s up?”

“Oh, nothing much, just leaving Presley’s place,” I replied in a sing-song tone.

Erika gasped before asking, “Did you sleep there?”

“Sure did,” I said smugly, leaving out the part where her apartment was broken into, and that I didn’t give Presley much of a choice.

“And she was there?” she asked.

“Of course, she was there. Why else would I spend the night in that shithole?” I scoffed, feeling slightly offended by her question.

“I don’t know; it’s just hard to believe, that’s all. Presley’s guarded around men, and you two haven’t really known each other for long.”

“About that. What’s Presley’s story anyway?” I asked bluntly.

“I’m not sure. She never told me,” Erika replied, but I could hear the hint of concern in her tone.

“You didn’t ask?”

“No, I don’t pry into her business, and she doesn’t pry into mine. It’s been that way from the first day I found her outside my apartment building over two years ago, having a pretty intense panic attack,” she explained.

“Panic attack from what?” I asked curiously.

“She wouldn’t tell me, but I got the impression she was running from someone. She was a mess back then. A shell of a woman.”

“What’s her last name?” I asked, knowing Erika wouldn’t be happy about me digging into Presley’s past, but I felt it was



necessary. I wanted to know the details so I could protect her.

“She never told me,” she replied before asking, “Did something happen, Cruz?”

“No, I’m just worried about her, that’s all.” I sighed before asking, “How do you not know her last name but claim to be her best friend?”

“As I said, we have a relationship where we don’t ask questions. It was the only way I could get her to trust me initially, and it’s been that way ever since. I taught her how to handle a gun and also how to fight, so if whatever nightmare from her past came back to haunt her, she’d be ready.”

I didn’t like any of this, but at least Erika taught her how to fight back.

I knew asking Presley about her past was pointless since she didn’t trust me yet, so I wasn’t going to try, knowing it would only push her further away. I would need to get answers some other way.

“Don’t spook her, Cruz. I know you want all the answers, but she’ll run if you push too hard,” Erika warned.

“Do you actually think she would run?” I asked.

“She ran from something once, and I wouldn’t put it past her to do it again if she thinks you’re digging around to uncover her secrets.”

“Her place was broken into last night, and she was pretty freaked out. What if it’s someone from her past? I’m just looking out for her, Fred. That’s all” I argued.

“I knew there was something you weren’t telling me. No wonder she let you spend the night,” Erika exclaimed.

“I wanted to make sure she was safe since her door was kicked in,” I said truthfully, not feeling very playful anymore.

“Well, I’m glad you were there then. It’s a pretty shitty neighborhood and it could have been anyone who broke in.” She sighed and paused before adding, “I offered to pay for a better apartment long ago, but Presley wouldn’t accept my money.

“I want her out of there.” I huffed.

“I know Cruz. I do too. Honestly, though, your best bet is to go slow and earn her trust. Who knows, maybe she’ll eventually open up to you,” Erika suggested.

“Yeah, well, in the meantime, I’m going to fix that place up and put a goddamn twelve-foot fence around it.”

“Cruz, how the hell are you going to do that,” Erika laughed.

“I’ll buy the damn building if I have to,” I shot back.

“What part of ‘*go slow*’ did you not understand?”

“I don’t give a fuck if she doesn’t like it. I won’t be able to sleep at night knowing she’s living in that criminal-infested apartment building,” I grumbled.

“That’s gonna be hard to explain to her without coming across as a crazy stalker,” Erika pointed out.

“As I said, don’t care.” I said pointedly before asking, “How much does she know about what we do? Did she know Blaise

held you captive when you first met?”

“She doesn’t know any of that. Blaise holding me against my will isn’t exactly one of the highlights of our relationship that I like talking about.” She chuckled dryly before adding, ” As for the criminal part of your guy’s world, she knows nothing. There was never any reason for me to tell her, and she didn’t ask.”

“Jesus Christ, Fred. You guys are practically strangers who talk regularly,” I scoffed.

“Hey, it might not be a conventional friendship, but it works for us,” she said defensively.

“This is fucking great, another hurdle for me to get past with her. How do you think she’ll take it when she finds out what I do?” I asked worriedly.

“Honestly, I have no idea, Cruz.”

“Alright, well, thanks for the little info you had. I gotta go. Vlad just pulled up to Presley’s building,” I said with a heavy sigh, feeling frustrated that Erika didn’t have very much information for me.

“No worries. Are you putting a few guards on her place?” Erika asked curiously but didn’t sound opposed.

“Sure am. At least until I can figure out something more permanent,” I replied.

I was doing this for her protection, not because I was a creep trying to keep an eye on her, so I didn’t feel guilty for my actions.

“Okay, good. Call me if you need me for anything. I can talk to her if you want,” Erika offered.

“Thanks, I’ll let you know,” I replied before hanging up the phone.

I pulled up Jared’s number on my phone before sending him a text.

**Me:** Hey, can you find the owner of Presley’s apartment building and buy the place?

Within seconds three laughing emojis popped up on the screen, followed by a text.

**Jared:** What the fuck? Are you serious?

**Me:** Deadly.

**Jared:** You’re insane, but sure.

**Me:** Thanks, man.

I pocketed my phone and exited the truck to meet Vlad and Ryan, crossing the road toward me. I ignored their curious looks when they saw me without a shirt and started explaining what I wanted them to do.

Maybe I was overreacting, but I didn't care. I had a bad feeling in my gut now that I knew more about Presley, especially after seeing a glimpse of her scars. Who was she running from? I was going to find out, one way or another, and ensure they were dealt with accordingly.

# Chapter 8

# Pizza

## Presley

It had been two days since I woke up in Cruz's arms. I hadn't heard from him other than a *'You're welcome'* text when I sent him a *'thank you'* message for the locksmith installing new locks on my door. I told myself it was a good thing. I wanted him to leave me alone.

So then, why did I feel disappointed every time I checked my phone and had no missed calls or messages?

God, I was the definition of fucked up. I wanted him to leave me alone so badly, but at the same time, I didn't.

He probably figured out I was bat-shit crazy, which was why he hadn't messaged me. I guess that was for the best. At least if he lost interest, it made it easier for me and my convoluted thoughts.

I cringed when my mind went back to the awkward kiss we shared. I fucking dry-humped Cruz like a horny teenager until I came so hard, he probably thought it was my first time. How embarrassing was that?

I didn't know what had gotten into me. It just felt so good being in his arms, with his warm lips on mine and our barely clothed bodies rubbing together. My arousal had taken over and I chased my release like some sex-starved animal. Hell, I was getting turned on just thinking about it.

I groaned from the memory and the sudden dampness in my panties.

I couldn't believe I let myself get carried away like that. The last thing I wanted to do was lead Cruz on and that was exactly what I did. I blamed it on the fact that I hadn't had an orgasm in years. I couldn't even remember the last time I had one.

With a heavy sigh, I grabbed my phone off the counter and slipped it into my backpack before leaving my apartment. I locked my door and walked toward the stairs.

I frowned when I reached the end of the hallway and noticed a man standing by the stairwell. He had been there yesterday, too, when I went to the corner store to get a sandwich.

It wasn't unusual for people to loiter in the hallway of my apartment building, but this guy stood out because he didn't belong in this neighborhood. He was too well-dressed in his black trousers and navy-blue button-up shirt to be in this shithole.

His height and size were intimidating, which caused a shiver to run down my spine.

I hesitated for a minute while watching him text on his cell phone. I contemplated going out of the emergency exit at the



other end of the hall, but that was even more secluded if this guy happened to follow me.

I slipped my hand into my pocket where the small canister of pepper spray was and clutched it firmly as I walked past the man.

He lifted his face from his cell phone, smiled, and nodded in greeting before returning his attention to his phone. The action was friendly enough that it relieved some of my anxiety.

Maybe he was the boss of one of the many drug dealers that lived in the building. Either way, I hoped he was gone when I returned later.

When I reached the main level, my steps slowed when I noticed the same locksmith as a couple of days ago, changing the locks on the main doors of the building.

He smiled when he noticed me before saying, “Hey, I remember you. How’s the new locks?”

“Good, thank you. Did my landlord call to have these changed, too?” I asked hesitantly.

“He did. This door and the back one. Here, I might as well give you your copies now. If not, you’ll have to buzz the landlord when you return to get your new keys.” the locksmith stated as he reached into his bag and pulled out a key ring with four keys.

“Thank you,” I murmured, as I took the keys from him.

“The two square ones are for the front, and the two rounded ones for the back door,” he added.

“Okay, thanks,” I said awkwardly.

I was shocked that my landlord would spend the money to change the locks. I had asked him to do it multiple times. He told me he didn’t have the funds and that if I wanted them changed, I could pay for it myself.

“Have a good one,” the locksmith said as I left the building.

“You too,” I murmured, still frowning in confusion at the change of heart my landlord had.

I should just be happy. The new locks were added security. I reminded myself as I shoved the new keys into my backpack and walked toward my studio.

When I got there, I unlocked the front door and went inside to prepare for the class starting in twenty minutes.

Ten minutes later, the door opened, drawing my attention to it. Cassandra walked in with her face buried in her phone as she aggressively typed something out. She looked frazzled in comparison to her usual cheerful self.

“Hey girl, everything okay?” I asked when she let out a long sigh and tucked her phone into her bag.

Her gaze met mine, and she looked surprised, almost as if she had just now realized she wasn’t alone. I didn’t miss how her eyes were bloodshot, and she looked like she had been crying before getting here.

“Sorry, it’s just my stupid ex. You know how it is. He can’t pay child support again this month, because he needed the

money to buy beer.” She huffed and moved to the bench against the far wall, where she started preparing for the class.

I had never met her ex but heard lots about him from her venting during class. He sounded like your classic dead-beat dad, who did the bare minimum for his kid. I felt sorry for her because I knew how much she struggled financially to provide for her son. A little help from her ex would have certainly helped her.

“Don’t be sorry. You know I’m always here for you, if you need anything,” I offered sincerely.

“I know, thank you. I’m fine, though, promise,” Cassandra replied dismissively.

I could tell she wasn’t okay as she moved around aimlessly, looking lost in thought.

I decided to let it go. Cassandra would tell me if she wanted me to know. Since I didn’t like people putting their noses in my business, it would be best if I didn’t poke mine in theirs.

I returned to preparing for class as more girls arrived, including Olivia and Erika.

Erika had a bright smile on her face when she saw me and immediately came over.

“Hey, Pres. How are you?” she asked cheerfully.

“I’m good. You?” I replied awkwardly, wondering if Cruz had told her what happened between us the other night.

“I’m good,” she said before her smile dropped, and she asked more seriously, “I heard your apartment was broken into. Anything taken?”

“Nah, they just made a mess,” I lied, not wanting to worry her.

I knew she would offer me money if I told her mine was stolen, and I wanted to avoid that conversation. Plus, I still had enough for another month’s rent, so I had time to figure things out. I could always offer a few extra private lessons to make a few extra bucks if needed.

She didn’t look like she believed me when she said, “Well, let me know if you need anything. You know I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks, girl, but I’m good,” I replied with a forced smile.

“Have you heard from Cruz lately?” Erika asked.

“No. Why would I? We aren’t together,” I blurted out, making Erika raise an eyebrow. I immediately scolded myself for sounding far too defensive.

“He told me he was there the other night and was worried about you. He wanted to check in and make sure you were okay.” she said, watching me curiously before adding, “But the guys have been busy the past few days with work. He might not have gotten a chance yet.”

“Oh... No, I haven’t talked to him. He has no reason to call me, though, since he already had my locks replaced,” I added with a shake of my head.

“Okay,” she drawled, and I knew she wasn’t buying the bullshit coming out of my mouth. Luckily for me, she wasn’t pushing it.

“Anyway, gotta get the class started,” I said dismissively before heading to the front of the room.

I started teaching and quickly forgot all about my awkward conversation with Erika.

Halfway through class, my phone on the bench buzzed, drawing my attention to it. The only people who ever texted me were in class, so I decided to ignore it.

The rest of the session went by fast. Once finished, some of the girls started to leave.

Erika approached me as I started cleaning up the studio.

“Hey, Pres. Sorry about earlier if I made you uncomfortable. I wasn’t trying to be nosey or anything.” She sounded genuinely apologetic.

“Nah, you weren’t.” I sighed before adding, “I’m just uncomfortable with the situation, and I wish Cruz would back off.” I decided to be honest, knowing I could trust Erika and there really wasn’t any reason to lie.

“I get that, and I know Cruz can sometimes be a little... persistent,” she stated.

“Sometimes?” I said sarcastically with an eye roll.

“Alright, all the time.” She chuckled before adding in a more serious tone, “It’s not really any of my business, but I’m going

to say it anyway. I think Cruz might be good for you. He's funny and easygoing, plus I trust him with my life. I'm not saying you have to jump into a relationship with him, but having an extra friend never hurt anyone."

"Since when are you on his side?" I half-teased.

"I'm not on anyone's side." She chuckled and shook her head, adding, "I just saw how you two looked at each other when he joined our class. He actually managed to make you smile, a real smile. I think I can count on one hand the number of times you've done that."

"I smile lots," I said defensively.

"Hey, Ollie!" Erika shouted to her sister, who was packing her bag behind us.

"Yeah?" Olivia called back.

"How often have you seen Pres smile since you've known her? I'm talking a real, genuine, happy smile," Erika asked, never taking her eyes off me.

*Bitch.*

Olivia stopped what she was doing and focused on her fingers, looking deep in thought as she started to count.

"I'm going with two and a half," she finally replied.

"Two and a half?" I questioned with a frown.

"Yeah, there was one time at Erika's wedding when you did something with your lips, but I wasn't sure if it was a smile or

constipation, so I'm giving you a half point for that one," she replied with a shrug before going back to packing her bag.

"Haha...Funny," I said, and Erika chuckled.

"We're just teasing you, Pres. But the truth is, we would both love to see you happy," Erika added.

"I am happy," I argued, even though we both knew it was a lie.

Erika patted me on the shoulder as she grabbed her bag. "Anyway, just think about what I said. I'll see you next class, okay?"

"See you next class," I replied as she and Olivia left the studio together.

I turned around, expecting everyone to be gone, only to find Cassandra still sitting on the bench, looking deep in thought.

"Hey, girl. You okay?" I asked as I went over and sat beside her. The minute I did, the floodgates opened, and she started balling.

"H-He's trying to take my son from me," she said between sobs.

"Oh, Cass, I'm so sorry." I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her in for a hug.

"Do you have a lawyer?" I asked, and she nodded into my shoulder.

"Well, if he's not paying child support, I doubt a judge would grant him custody," I added, even though I had my

doubts about the court system. It was all about who you knew and if you had money to pay off the right people. I could tell that wasn't what she needed to hear, though, so I kept those thoughts to myself.

"His parents are helping him." She sniffled.

"Yeah, but you're that child's mother, and you've raised him alone this whole time. That must count for something," I argued as she finally started to calm down.

"You're right. I've just been so emotional the past couple of days. I've got no one to talk to about it," Cassandra admitted.

I could see so much of myself in Cassandra that it broke my heart. I knew all too well what it was like to be alone, even though our situations were different.

"I'm always here for you, Cass. How about I give you my number, and you call me if you ever need to talk to someone?" I offered.

"Thanks, Pres." She sniffled.

I stood and walked over to retrieve my phone from the other bench.

It buzzed again as I picked it up, indicating I had received another text message.

I looked down at the screen to see the text was from '*Sexiest Man Alive*,' which immediately made me smile. Cruz had programmed that name into my phone when he put his number in it, and I didn't bother changing it.



I flipped the phone open, and there were three messages from him.

**Cruz:** Sorry I've been MIA the past two days. I was busy with work. Let me make it up to you by taking you out for dinner.

**Cruz:** Don't ignore me. Remember what I said...

**Cruz:** I'm taking your lack of reply as a hint that you miss me and wanna see me again. Be at your place in an hour.

I chuckled to myself, as I rolled my eyes and typed out a reply.

**Me:** I'm changing your name on my phone to 'Drama Queen.' I didn't reply because I was busy, not because I missed you and wanted to see you.

**Cruz:** Lies. Be there in an hour with dinner.

"A smile like that, I would say you found yourself a boyfriend," Cassandra teased, reminding me I wasn't alone.

"No, I don't have a boyfriend," I replied, shaking my head.

“What about that guy from the last class? Cruz? He seemed totally into you, and he’s hot as fuck,” she asked.

A sudden flash of jealousy flared, remembering them together at the last class, but I quickly pushed it down before replying, “No, he’s a nice guy, but I’m not interested.”

“I’m sorry, it’s none of my business. I didn’t mean to pry,” Cassandra stated, probably noticing my sudden irritation.

“It’s fine. You’re not prying,” I reassured.

I gave Cassandra my number, and she typed it into her phone. She then dialed it and immediately ended the call so I would have hers, too.

“I’m really sorry about my meltdown, Pres. I guess the past couple of days have just taken a bigger toll on me than I thought,” she said with a heavy sigh.

“Seriously, you never have to apologize to me. I’m here if you need to talk,” I replied, giving her another comforting hug.

“Thanks, girl, and now you have my number too. If you ever need someone to talk to, just call,” she said.

“Thanks.”

I walked Cassandra to the door and watched her get into her old Buick, before waving at me and driving off.

Once she was gone, I grabbed my bag and walked out of the studio before locking the door behind me.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened the text message conversation with Cruz.

Even though a part of me wanted to see him tonight, it really wasn't a good idea. So, with that thought, I started texting.

**Me:** Sorry, got busy and couldn't reply right away. I don't think you should come over tonight. I already ate.

The three dots appeared seconds after I hit send, indicating he was replying.

**Cruz:** Who is this? I don't recognize the number.

I smiled when I saw his reply—such an asshole.

**Me:** Funny. I'm serious, Cruz. I don't want you coming over.

**Cruz:** Even though we don't know each other, maybe you could help me pick what I should eat for dinner tonight. Chinese or Mexican?

*Fucking guy is relentless.* I chuckled to myself as I started typing.

**Me:** Neither. I'm locking the door.

Once I hit send, I closed my phone and shoved it back into my pocket, deciding to ignore any more text messages from Cruz.

“Good luck getting into my building, now that the lock on the front door was changed,” I mumbled to myself, as I pulled the new keys out of my backpack and unlocked the front door to my apartment building.

Someone walking along the side of the building caught my attention, and I looked over to see a guy dressed all in black walking with a German shepherd. The guy’s shirt had the word ‘*security*’ printed on the back, and the dog had a vest with the same word written on either side of his torso.

I frowned as they walked past me. Why the hell would there be a security guard in this neighborhood? I watched as they walked along the front of the building, before turning down the other side and disappearing out of sight.

I stepped inside the building, deciding to let it go. I guess a security guard around here was better than a serial killer. Still fucking strange, though.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor and let out a relieved breath when that suspicious man from earlier was no longer loitering by the stairwell.

I continued to walk toward my unit while digging into my backpack for my apartment keys when a deep husky voice caused me to jump in fright. “I got pizza since Chinese and Mexican didn’t appeal to you.”

I lifted my eyes and found Cruz standing outside my apartment door with a satisfied smirk on his handsome face and a pizza box in his hand.

He nearly gave me a heart attack.

How the hell did he even get into the building?

## Chapter 9

# A New Plan

Cruz

It had been two days since I last saw or heard from Presley, and I fucking missed her. Like, actually missed her. Seriously, how was that even possible? I wasn't that guy, so what was different about this woman?

*Everything.* The word flashed through my mind, answering my question.

I wanted so badly to peel back all those layers and discover everything there was to know about her. She was mysterious and broken, drawing me in like a moth to a flame. I craved to be the one who put a smile on her face and brought back light to her dark soul.

Unfortunately, my plans had to wait. I had every intention of calling and texting Presley sooner, but the guys and I were busy tracking down the Lincoln brothers since they didn't contact us by the end of the weekend, as Blaise requested.

We found Conrad easily since he was always in the public eye, pretending to be the perfect citizen. On the other hand,

Owen was a bit more challenging to find, but we eventually did.

We set up surveillance on both of them. They were constantly in private meetings or on the phone. Owen met with a group of sketchy guys at one point. Unfortunately, they were careful about where they met, so we weren't able to get close enough to overhear anything.

We watched them for almost two full days, before finally deciding to send them another message. We picked Conrad since he was the one calling the shots. Given the reputation he had to uphold, our presence would impact him the most.

We waited outside his accounting firm in a coffee shop across the street. When he walked out with two of his colleagues and two bodyguards, we left the shop and stepped onto the street where he could see us.

All four of us stood there facing him, and it only took seconds, before he felt our presence and looked our way. His colleagues were oblivious as they continued to converse, but it was clear from the look on Conrad's face that he wasn't only nervous but furious seeing us there. It was the reaction we were going for. His guards saw us too, but they wouldn't do anything unless Conrad gave the order, which he wouldn't.

Conrad wore a charcoal grey business suit with his black hair slicked back. He was a good-looking man, in his late thirties, but something in his eyes made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. There was a darkness there, just like



his brother, which had me wondering how he could fool so many.

Our goal today wasn't to expose him in front of everyone. If we did that, it was a sure way to start a war. We didn't have enough information to warrant that yet, but if he didn't respond to this message, that would be our next move.

We stood there, dominating the sidewalk, letting our deadly aura roll off us in waves. We wanted Conrad to know that not only were we not afraid of him, but that we weren't the guys to fuck with.

We didn't exchange words with him, but the silent message was clear. *"Call us or else..."*

Before we left, he walked into a high-end restaurant around the corner from his office with his colleagues, who remained oblivious to our presence. One of the bodyguards went in with him while the other stayed at the front door.

We pretended to leave when, really, we just moved to a discreet location where Conrad couldn't see us and kept watching to see what he would do next.

Sure enough, after lunch with his buddies, he walked outside the restaurant and parted from the group. It wasn't long before he was on his phone shouting into the receiver, having an animated conversation with someone, as he headed for the parking garage with his guards.

He got into the back of a Rolls-Royce while his guards got into the front. They drove through the city until they reached

the outskirts. It was harder for us to follow them when the vehicle turned down a deserted dirt road that, based on the map, ended two miles in.

The guys we left to watch Owen, contacted us to advise he was also heading in our direction.

We hid our vehicle out of sight and got out to hike into the secluded area on foot.

Sure as shit, Owen and Conrad met at the end of the dirt road in an open area.

Conrad was furious, shouting and flailing his arms. It was apparent we got under his skin by showing up at one of his businesses.

Because of how open the area was where they were meeting, we kept our distance and could only make out bits and pieces of their conversation. We definitely overheard Conrad instruct Owen to arrange a meeting with us as soon as possible. He also ordered him to send a crew somewhere, but we couldn't hear all the details.

Either way, we would be ready for him if he sent anyone after us, so I wasn't worried about that.

An hour or so after the brothers parted ways, Blaise received a call from Owen to schedule a meeting in a few days at a neutral location, which we accepted.

The Lincoln brothers would soon learn that messing with us wasn't a good idea.

I was so fucking glad to be out of there. The first thing I did was message Presley.

Of course, she gave me a hard time. At this point, I would expect nothing less from my frigid beauty. Did that discourage me from going to see her? Hell no, if anything, it spurred me on further. I almost craved our push-and-pull relationship now, knowing deep down what came out of her mouth wasn't what she really wanted.

It took almost two days to buy her apartment building officially, but the minute it happened, I fired her piece of shit building manager and hired a professional one. One who I could trust. I had the new manager prepare and send out eviction notices to any of the tenants who posed a threat to Presley, which happened to be over half the building. They were instructed to get their shit off the premises before the end of the week. It wasn't exactly legal, but given their criminal backgrounds, no one reported us. Some were disgruntled, but the minute they saw my guys hanging around the manager's office, they backed the fuck off and left without issue. Those were the perks of owning this city; people feared us, even the scumbags.

Then, once we took care of the shitheads, I called Johnny, the locksmith, and had the locks changed on the outside doors of the building. I also hired a security company we had previously worked with to patrol outside her building twenty-four-seven.

Yeah, maybe it was a little overkill, but fuck it. There was something in my gut that felt off. Between the break-in to Presley's apartment, and the general way she acted, there was more to her story than what met the eye. Until I learned more about her past, being an overprotective asshole seemed like the right move if I wanted to keep her safe. I planned on keeping the fact that I bought her building on the down-low for now. Hopefully, I could move her out of the building altogether before she figured it out, and then I would never have to tell her.

I cringe just thinking about how that conversation would go if she did find out. Fuck, she would be so pissed.

Now that I owned the building, I had a key for the main door. I mean, I also had a key to all the apartments, but I wouldn't use that unless necessary, and I sure as shit wouldn't tell Presley I had a key to her unit. She would move out, and then all this would be for nothing.

I grabbed a pizza from one of the best places in town and a six-pack of beer before heading to Presley's apartment building and letting myself in. I waited by her unit for her to arrive.

Fuck, I felt a little bad when Presley got home, and I scared the shit out of her. She gasped and flattened her hand against her chest, but when our eyes met, they hardened and smoldered with irritation.

She probably thought the new locks were enough to keep me out. I chuckled at that thought. No locks could ever keep me

out, even if I didn't have a key.

"How'd you get into the building?" she snapped, frowning.

"One of the other tenants coming home was kind enough to let me in." I shrugged. I felt bad for lying, but it was necessary if I didn't want her to freak out.

"What's the point of new locks if we're going to let anybody into the building?" she grumbled to herself as she dug through her bag, probably for her keys.

"Not just anyone, but the sexiest man alive," I corrected with a smirk, which earned me an eye roll.

"Cruz..." she started, but I cut her off.

"Pick your battles' Presley," I warned before adding, "I'm not leaving until I feed you." I started and watched her eyes glance down at my crotch before her cheeks flushed, and she averted her eyes. Clearly, my naughty girl had something other than pizza in mind.

I had to hold back a chuckle when I said, "Pizza, Presley. I'm going to feed you pizza unless you want something else." I winked.

"I told you I already ate," she lied. I knew it was a lie because her stomach growled after the words left her lips.

"I swear I've met nuns who are better liars than you." I laughed before adding, "Now open the door before I bust it down and need to pay for the locksmith to come back and fix it."

“Do you know the locksmith who changed my locks?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

*Shit. Fuck. Think fast, Cruz.*

“No, I just Googled locksmiths in the area, and he was the closest,” I said with a shrug and prayed she didn’t Google it herself to see if I was lying.

Luckily, she seemed to believe me because she dropped it.

“If I eat a slice of pizza, do you promise to leave after?” she asked skeptically.

“Of course,” I replied with a grin. I didn’t even have to lie this time since Presley didn’t put a time frame on how long after we ate that I would have to leave. It could be a week, and it was still technically after she ate.

She furrowed her brows, as she took a minute to assess if I was being truthful before finally sighing and unlocking the door.

Presley walked into her apartment and left the door open. She dropped her bag on the counter and headed for her bedroom without looking back to see if I followed her in.

It was nice to see her getting more comfortable around me. She didn’t seem nearly as anxious as she usually was, just annoyed, which I knew was an act to push me away, so I didn’t take it personally.

She closed her bedroom door once she was inside without saying a word. I took the opportunity to set the pizza on the

counter and grabbed two beers from the six-pack case, before putting the rest in the fridge.

Fuck, there was nothing but a bottle of ketchup and a half-eaten sandwich in the fridge. Did I need to arrange a goddamn grocery delivery service, too, to ensure the woman ate? I made a mental note to bring some groceries the next time I came by.

As I closed the fridge, Presley appeared from her bedroom. She had changed into a pair of sleep shorts and a fitted, purple, long sleep shirt. She had also tied her hair up in a messy bun. God, the woman made my dick harden even in her comfy clothes.

I cleared my throat, and shoved the dirty thought away before asking, “Plates?”

“In that cupboard,” she pointed to the one above the sink, missing the handle.

I opened it and pulled out the only two plastic plates in there.

Presley opened the pizza box, and a slight moan left her lips when she stared at the pepperoni pizza with extra cheese. I silently thanked Erika for at least knowing what her friend liked to eat. It wasn't like she knew much else about her. I was still shocked by that. How do you know someone for over two years and not even know their last name? That was another reason for me to be suspicious about Presley's past.

I held the plates out while Presley placed a slice on each one. Handing her one plate and putting the other down, I twisted the caps off the two beer bottles.

Presley had already made her way into the living room and sat on the loveseat. After I picked up my plate in one hand and both beer in the other, I headed into the living room and dropped myself down next to her.

She tensed at first from how close we were. Our arms and thighs were rubbing together, but after a minute, she relaxed. For me, our closeness wasn't enough. I was tempted to pull her onto my lap and feed her the damn pizza. I resisted that urge, not wanting to get kicked out of her apartment within five minutes of being inside.

“Here,” I said, handing her one of the beers.

She eyed it for a few seconds, looking torn on whether she should drink, so I decided to put it down next to her on the floor and not pressure her. If she wanted it, it was there; if she didn't, she could leave it.

We sat in silence as we both dug into our food. I smiled when a loud moan left Presley's lips after taking the first bite. I glanced over to see her eyes closed as she savored the cheesy goodness.

“That good, eh?” I teased.

“So good. I haven't had pizza in forever. Thank you,” Presley said, and it was the first time she sounded legitimately thankful for something I did.

“You're welcome,” I replied with a beaming smile, probably looking like a puppy who just got praised.



I was even more ecstatic when she reached for the beer and took a big swig without even thinking about it.

We both had another slice of pizza and when she was full, I grabbed two more beers to settle on the couch beside her.

She took the beer without hesitation this time and leaned back on the couch.

The television played in the background, but neither of us watched.

“You fed me,” she pointed out, closing her eyes and looking exhausted.

I knew she was referring to my promise to leave after she ate, but she didn’t sound like she was expecting me to leave or even that she wanted me to.

“I did, but I’m not leaving just yet,” I replied and glanced over to see a soft smile spread across her face. Did she even realize she did it?

“Lift,” I ordered, putting my beer down on the floor beside me.

She opened her eyes to see what I meant and I patted my thighs, nodding my chin to her feet.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, shaking her head.

“I know I don’t, but I want to. Let me help you relax,” I offered.

She hesitated for a few seconds but then gave in and lifted her legs onto my lap. She leaned back against the armrest,

laying her bottom half across my thighs. It was the second time I was grateful for this pathetically small loveseat. It practically forced her to lay on me.

I wrapped my hands around her foot and massaged it, earning me a soft, appreciative moan from Presley.

“Long day?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She sighed before adding, “I had a few private lessons this morning, and then a group one. I don’t think I sat down once today.”

“Well, hopefully, this helps,” I said, as I massaged her feet and calves.

“I thought you might have come to your senses about me when I didn’t hear from you the last two days,” she said, opening her eyes to assess my response.

“You can’t get rid of me that easily,” I teased and paused before adding, “I was busy with work and couldn’t call. Sorry about that. If it makes you feel any better, I wanted to.”

“What do you do for work?” she casually asked, as she closed her eyes again.

I decided to keep my response vague since I was enjoying this moment. For once, she wasn’t pushing me away. Eventually, though, I would have to tell her the truth. “I own several businesses with Blaise, Jared and Dex. A few clubs, restaurants, and so on.”

She seemed content with that answer as she nodded.

“So, tell me about yourself, Presley. Any family?”

“No,” she replied, her tone clipped.

I remained silent for a moment, hoping she would elaborate, but she didn't. She seemed to be quickly closing off again, so I decided to tell her more about myself instead.

“I don't have any family either,” I started and paused before adding, “My mother raised me. She was an amazing woman, strong, independent, and feisty as hell.” I chuckled lightly, thinking back to a time when I was a kid and my mother chased me all around the kitchen with a wooden spoon. I had stolen a freshly baked cookie. Fuck, I missed her.

“What happened to her?” Presley asked softly.

“She died of cancer when I was eighteen. After that, I decided to join the military since I had no one left,” I said with a shrug, trying to keep my voice from breaking at the memory.

“I'm sorry, Cruz.” Her eyes opened to meet mine and I nodded appreciatively.

We were both silent for a few minutes before Presley spoke, “My dad left my mom and me when I was little, so I was raised by my mother too.”

“What happened to her?” I asked in a low voice.

“She had a severe heart condition and died when I was nineteen of a heart attack,” she replied solemnly.

“I'm sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, smiling weakly.

Finally, I was getting somewhere. Presley was opening up. Even though the conversation was gloomy, I had this sudden urge to fist pump the air, which I didn't do for obvious reasons.

“No siblings?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“Me neither,” I added.

I asked a few more questions but kept them light since I didn't want her to shut down again. I learned that she was twenty-six, loved cookie dough ice cream, and her favorite color was purple. She loved to dance and was allergic to bees.

The more we talked, the more relaxed she got and the more natural this felt. She even laughed a couple of times at my jokes which made me smile.

My hands moved on autopilot as we talked, working her tight muscles along her leg.

I didn't realize I had reached her upper thigh until I heard her breath hitch. I smirked when her cheeks flushed and she looked away, but I didn't stop.

I wrapped both my hands around her upper thigh and pushed my thumbs into her flesh with a decent amount of pressure before dragging them down along her leg. Her breathing changed to small pants, and she squirmed in my hold but didn't stop me.

I repeated the action, bringing my hands a little higher up her inner thigh this time where my fingers grazed the skin underneath the hem of her shorts. I was close enough to her

cunt to feel the heat radiating off it like an inferno. My cock hardened as I wondered if her pussy was wet for me.

“How does that feel?” I asked, my voice strained.

“G-Good.” She swallowed hard, looking a little hesitant.

“It’s just a massage, Presley, so lay back and enjoy it,” I ordered.

To my utter disbelief, she complied, leaned back against the armrest, and closed her eyes.

I moved to her other thigh and repeated the action, causing a light moan to leave her lips.

My thumbs were close to her cunt, but I didn’t touch her.

It was pure torture not to. My balls were so tight it hurt, but by the look on Presley’s face, I wasn’t the only one struggling.

*Good.*

I worked silently, moving from the top of her leg to her calf and back.

When I reached her upper thigh this time, my thumb snuck underneath her tiny shorts and lightly brushed her cunt through her panties, making her shudder. Her lips parted with a gasp.

“I bet your fucking soaked right now,” I murmured, as I continued turning her into a puddle.

I fucking loved how responsive she was to my touch. She could deny our connection all she wanted but her body didn’t lie.

Presley didn't respond, but another soft moan left her lips, which was an answer on its own.

"Oh fuck," she gasped when my thumbs brushed against her pussy again, and this time her back arch.

"Sorry, it slipped." I smirked before asking, "Do you want me to stop?"

"God, no," she blurted out, shaking her head vigorously.

I decided to up my game and pressed my thumb against her clit through her panties. Rubbing light circles over it, she bucked toward my hand in a desperate attempt to feel more of that delicious friction. Fisting the cushion next to her she parted her legs for me. I could feel how damp her panties were when I trailed my thumb down her cunt and over her folds, before returning my attention to her clit.

Fuck, this was a turning point for us, and I needed to play my cards right. I didn't want the same reaction to happen as last time, so I came up with a different strategy.

I pulled my hand away from her warm and wet pussy before lightly tapping her thighs.

"Well, it's getting late, and I should go. I have this eye thing. I shouldn't be driving when it's dark out," I lied, not even trying to make it sound believable.

Her eyes flew open and met mine. An inferno burned inside them as she looked at me in disbelief.

"Are you serious?" she asked with narrowed eyes, her cheeks a sexy shade of pink.

“Yeah, doctor’s orders.” I shrugged, pushing her legs off mine.

“B-But...” she stuttered and trailed off as I stood from the couch and readjusted my painfully hard cock in my pants.

“Unless you want me to spend the night again?” I offered.

Her mouth opened and closed several times as she tried to reply, but couldn’t find the words.

“Thought so,” I said, leaning down and kissing her lips softly. She kissed me back, and I could tell she wanted more when I pulled away. Her eyes were still closed, and her lips were reaching for mine.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” I threw over my shoulder as I headed for the door, smiling like a madman since she couldn’t see it.

I reached the door and opened it before instructing, “Lock the door behind me, beautiful.”

I glanced back to where she was still sitting on the couch, watching me with a look of disbelief on her face.

She was still too stunned to say anything but nodded her head as I closed the door.

I couldn’t help but feel victorious, even though I had the worst case of blue balls in history. I wanted to embed myself under Presley’s skin as much as she was under mine, and I was pretty confident that I accomplished that tonight.

I also wanted her to be the one to contact me for a change, so leaving her craving more seemed like a perfect way to make that happen. Hopefully, my plan would work, and she would be the one to message me tomorrow.

It was time to go home and take care of this painfully hard erection before I exploded.



## Chapter 10

# Don't Message Him

## Presley

**W**hat the fuck was that?

I had never felt so frustrated in my entire life.

Cruz worked my body with his big hands until I was a panting mess and couldn't think straight. Then left my apartment without a backward glance, leaving me sexually frustrated and stunned.

Besides his voice being a little strained and the obvious bulge in his pants, he looked utterly unaffected by his actions.

*Asshole.*

What game was he playing at? I knew the answer to that question, but it didn't settle the irritation flowing through my veins.

Even though I was frustrated, I couldn't believe I let him touch me like that. The worst part was how much I enjoyed it. My entire body came to life, and I desperately wanted him to

push my panties aside so he could properly explore my aching pussy.

I should feel relieved that he stopped when he did since I had been once again consumed by lust and unable to think straight, but I wasn't. I wanted his touch. Fuck, I craved it. Still now, almost a day later, it was still all I could think about.

What was happening to me? My mind was at war. A part of me still wanted to resist him, but the other part, the one that was quickly dominating the battle, was ready to stop fighting and see what would happen between us.

Would it be so bad to let him in? Maybe I could do it without having to divulge my secrets. I knew that was impossible, though. Once I gave Cruz an inch, he would take a mile and want to know everything about me, even the things that still haunt me from my past.

Was that a risk I was willing to take? Fuck, I wasn't sure I had a choice. I was already starting to develop feelings for Cruz. No matter how hard I tried telling myself that it was just lust, I wasn't sure it was. There was more there than just a sexual attraction. I felt a deep connection with him. He could see into my soul and knew what I needed when I didn't know myself. He awakened something inside me that I thought died long ago, and I craved for it to return. Even though he was all fun and games, I felt oddly protected whenever he was around, as if he could keep me safe from my nightmares.

I knew that was only wishful thinking, though. Not even Cruz could protect me from the demons from my past that still

haunt me. No one could.

I let out a heavy sigh as I stared at the phone in my hand, displaying Cruz's contact information.

*Don't do it. If you text him, there's no going back.*

I slammed the phone shut and stood up from the loveseat, the same couch where Cruz had intimately touched me not long ago and started pacing around my living room.

For over two years, I merely existed. I did nothing with my life but work, eat, try to sleep, repeat. Just once, I would like to feel alive again, and I knew what I needed to do if I wanted that to happen.

So, with that thought, I picked up my phone and started typing a message.

**Me:** Hey, Brad. Thank you for taking me out for dinner tonight. I had a great time.

I pressed send before I changed my mind.

Was I being cheeky by pretending I went out on a date tonight? Absolutely. But it seemed like the perfect payback for Cruz's little game last night. Plus, if I was being honest, I had no clue what else to say. I had been with one man in my life, so I wasn't exactly experienced when it came to dating or flirting. I was always that awkward girl who said the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Within seconds after I pressed send, the three dots appeared, indicating Cruz was responding. A sudden wave of nervousness hit me. I shouldn't have sent the message.

**Cruz:** The rational side of my brain knows you're fucking with me, but then there's this irrational side that wants to kill this fictional Brad you're talking about.

I smiled when I read his response. Of course, he could see right through my lie. I expected that since he was well aware of my social anxieties. He knew I wasn't exactly chomping at the bit to go out with people.

**Me:** Who says he's fictional?

**Cruz:** Fine, I'll bite. Where'd this Brad guy take you?

I chuckled when I read the message. Cruz wasn't buying my lies, and I wasn't good enough at this game to continue.

**Me:** Alright, you got me.

**Cruz:** Now, why don't you tell me why you messaged me?

Of course, he would get right to the point. I could practically picture his shit-eating grin as I read his last message.

What the fuck should I say?

*I can't stop thinking about you. I want you to finish what you started last night. I miss you.*

Fuck, all those options were far out of my comfort zone.

I started typing but then deleted the message and let out a frustrated sigh. I had no clue what to say.

Luckily, Cruz sent another message when I didn't reply.

**Cruz:** If you want to see me, beautiful, all you need to do is say the words.

Why was it so hard for me to admit that? Of course, I wanted to see him again, but admitting it felt too real.

**Cruz:** I'm on my way...

My eyes grew wide when I read his last message. Did he mean now?

**Me:** Not tonight. I'm heading to the studio for a bit. Tomorrow?

**Cruz:** You have class this late?

**Me:** No, but I have to fine-tune a new routine I'm teaching next week.

**Cruz:** Then I'll help.

Oh my god, I should have never messaged him.

**Me:** I think you'd be more of a distraction.

**Cruz:** Me? Never. \*Wink emoji\*

**Me:** How about dinner at my place tomorrow? I'll cook.

**Cruz:** She's beautiful and can cook. I think I'm in love.

I smiled at his playfulness.

**Me:** Don't speak too soon. By cook, I mean macaroni and cheese from a box.

**Cruz:** That just so happens to be my favorite. You got yourself a date, beautiful.

**Me:** Okay, my place around 6?

**Cruz:** I wouldn't miss it for the world.

I closed my phone and smiled as I grabbed my bag off the couch and shoved it inside the front pocket.

Butterflies invaded my stomach as I thought about tomorrow night. I was both nervous and excited since this would be our first *real* date. At least one that I was a willing participant in.

I left my apartment with a giant smile on my face, feeling on cloud nine. I thought I would regret messaging Cruz, but I didn't. If anything, I was proud of myself for stepping out of my comfort zone.

The minute I stepped outside, my smile dropped, and I frowned when the security guard with the shepherd turned the corner and walked toward me.

"Ma'am," he greeted me with a nod as he passed by and continued his patrol.

"Mmm... Excuse me," I called after him, making him pause and turn to face me.

"Yes?"

"Why are you here? I mean..." I shook my head before rephrasing my question. "Why are you always walking around my building?"

"Oh, the new owner hired the company I work for. I guess he's trying to clean the place up a little," he replied with a friendly smile.



“New owner? Why haven’t I heard about this?” I murmured, but it was more to myself.

“It just happened. I’m sure the new manager will contact you soon to introduce himself,” the security guard reassured.

“Thanks,” I said with a forced smile.

The security guard nodded before continuing on his way.

Having all this added security felt weird, but I guess I should be grateful. At least this new guy seemed to care about his building as opposed to the last owner. I had also noticed several of the sketchier tenants moving out over the last few days. I wondered if that was the new owners doing too.

I started walking toward my studio, deciding to let it go. I had a place to live and the added security was just a bonus.

My phone buzzed in my bag, indicating I had received a text message. A smile returned to my lips as I reached into my bag. Was it Cruz messaging me again?

I pulled the phone out and glanced at the screen, only for a pang of disappointment to hit me when I saw Cassandra’s name on the display.

I flipped my phone open and read the message.

**Cassandra:** Hey girl, I feel weird messaging you like this, but I didn’t know who else to contact. I need a favor.

I frowned when I read her message.

**Me:** I told you that you can message me anytime.  
What do you need?

**Cassandra:** I'm supposed to meet my ex the day after tomorrow, but I don't feel comfortable going alone. Would you come with me? I'm sorry to ask, but I don't have anyone else.

I huffed as I read her message. I really didn't want to get involved with her situation, but at the same time, if something happened to her, I would feel terrible. I knew she didn't have anyone else to turn to.

**Cassandra:** It will take less than 5 minutes, and I'll make sure we meet in public. I just don't want him twisting my words and using them against me in court.

**Me:** Of course. I'll come with you, just make sure it's in public.

**Cassandra:** Definitely, I don't trust that asshole enough to meet him privately. I'll text you the time tomorrow.

**Me:** Sounds good.

I closed the phone and shoved it back into my bag. I was not looking forward to that awkward meeting, but I would rather Cassandra not be alone, so I was glad she reached out. Maybe I could contact Erika and Olivia and let them know where we were going in case anything happened.

As I turned the corner and my studio came into view, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I suddenly felt like I was being watched.

My gaze moved around to see if there was anyone there, but I saw no one. I scanned my surroundings again and froze when a man stepped out of the shadows across the street, and his eyes were locked on me.

My heart rate picked up as I watched him watch me. He was in his mid-thirties with a shaved head and dark, baggy clothes. Tattoos covered every inch of his exposed skin, including his face and head. A chill rushed through me from how scary he looked.

There were plenty of guys like him in my neighborhood, but it was the way he watched me that set my nerves on edge.

I spun around, picked up the pace, and clutched my bag closer to my body.

The murder Cassandra had mentioned popped into my head, making me move faster.

My breathing became frantic when I glanced over my shoulder and noticed him walking in the same direction as me on the opposite side of the road.

I reached into my bag and wrapped my hand around the handle of my gun before glancing back again.

The guy was gone.

He just disappeared.

I froze and looked all around, but no one was there. Did he duck into a business? The alley, maybe? Was I being paranoid? I had a habit of doing that. Either way, my nerves were still frazzled.

I jogged the rest of the way to my studio and continuously looked behind me to ensure I wasn't being followed, which I wasn't. As far as I could tell, there was no one.

I quickly unlocked my studio and moved inside, before locking the door behind me and looking out the glass door to see if anyone would emerge from the shadows again.

I waited five minutes and saw no one who looked suspicious. I still had an uneasy feeling in my gut, though. My neighborhood had so many sketchy people, but how that guy looked at me set off alarm bells in my head.

*You're just being paranoid.*

I always did this to myself. I guess it was part of the PTSD that came with my past trauma. I probably would never stop feeling like I was being watched or followed.

After a few more minutes, I gave up and turned around, heading deeper into my studio.

I stripped off my pants and my sweater, leaving me in a navy blue body suit that had a cheeky bottom and a plunging neckline. It was one of my usual outfits for when I danced. It covered my midsection but didn't interfere with my grip on the pole.

I headed for the CD player but jumped in fright when there was a knock on the glass door.

I spun around as cold dread washed over me.

My eyes shot to the door, and a relieved breath left my lips when I spotted a grinning Cruz standing on the other side of the glass.

I walked over and unlocked the door, letting him in.

"Hey, you okay? You looked jumpy," he noted with a frown as he walked in.

"I'm fine. You just scared me," I lied.

What else was I going to say? Some thug scared the crap out of me on my way here even though he did or said nothing. I didn't exactly live in the best part of town, so I should be used to guys like that by now.

"You sure?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, of course." I waved a hand dismissively and turned to head back into my studio.

"What are you doing here anyway? I thought we agreed on dinner tomorrow night?" I asked over my shoulder, even

though I wasn't at all upset that he showed up when he did. I already felt more comfortable now that he was here.

"We did agree to dinner tomorrow night, but I never said I wouldn't show up tonight, too," he replied, and when I glanced over my shoulder, he shot me a mischievous grin.

"I told you I have work to do tonight," I said, but I couldn't help the slight smile that spread across my face.

"And I said I can help," he replied, as he moved deeper into my studio and pulled a chair resting against the far wall closer to the pole I always used.

"How are you going to help?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Ummm... You might not know this, but I'm practically an expert pole dancer," he replied confidently.

"You took one class and fell on your head," I shot back.

"Hey, I did that on purpose," he said, pretending to be offended before adding, "I bet you couldn't take your eyes off me." A cocky smirk appeared on his ridiculously handsome face.

I blushed and looked away because no matter how ridiculous he looked when he danced, he was right; I couldn't look away.

"By the way, you look hot as hell," he added, biting his bottom lip as he raked his hungry eyes over my body.

Goosebumps exploded everywhere his gaze landed, and a shiver ran down my spine.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my cheeks heating from the compliment.

“Now, show me this new routine so I can give you my honest opinion,” he said after clearing his throat and leaning back in the chair.

God, he looked so fucking sexy. With his dark faded jeans and a tight white t-shirt that clung to his muscular biceps and chest like a second skin, he sat in the chair. His knees were spread wide apart, and his arms were folded over his chest.

A wave of arousal washed over me as I nervously chewed on my lower lip and rubbed my thighs together.

“Stop that,” he groaned, drawing me out of my thoughts.

“What?” I asked.

“Chewing on your lip while you look at me like I’m a piece of meat,” he replied.

My cheeks flushed and I quickly averted my eyes.

“You can do that after you rehearse.” He smirked.

“I-I wasn’t checking you out,” I said defensively, and without even realizing it, I started walking toward the music player.

Was I really going to dance for him? I wasn’t that kind of woman.

I mean, what kind of woman was I? I didn’t even know anymore. I hadn’t been with a man in so long, that I was so out of the game it wasn’t even funny.

“Don’t overthink it,” Cruz’s low, husky voice said next to my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

I had been so lost in my thoughts that I didn’t hear him get up and move behind me. I could now feel his body heat radiating against my back.

He must have noticed the internal battle I was having.

“If you want to watch. Sit down,” I snapped, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

I spun around to find Cruz standing too close for comfort, and that hungry look in his eyes had returned.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Fuck, I like it when you’re bossy,” he groaned, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me into his arms.

“What...” My voice trailed off when his lips met mine in a passionate kiss.

I froze at first, but it didn’t take long before I melted into his embrace and parted my lips so he could deepen the kiss.

He devoured my mouth, exploring every inch as his hands roamed my bare back before sliding down to cupping my ass cheeks.

The arousal I felt last night returned with a vengeance when I felt his erection against my stomach.

Cruz broke the kiss with a cocky smirk, looking proud of himself for getting me worked up.



“Stop doing that,” I scolded, pushing at his chest to put distance between us.

“Doing what?” he asked innocently before adding, “Is this about last night?”

“No,” I said, but the flush on my face probably gave me away.

“Did I give you blue bean?” he asked with a mischievous smirk, causing me to look up at him with a frown.

“Blue bean?”

“Yeah, it’s the female version of blue balls.” He shrugged.

“That’s not even a thing.” I chuckled and shook my head.

“Yeah, it is. Google it. Well, technically, it’s called blue vulva, but that sounds too much like a car, so I took it upon myself to rename it.”

“Did you just compare my lady bits to a Volvo?” I asked incredulously.

“No, that’s why I took it upon myself to rename it,” he said defensively.

“You’re completely insane.” I chuckled and shook my head.

“Google it. I expect a *‘you were right, and I was wrong’* when you do.” Cruz smirked.

“There’s something wrong with you,” I laughed and pressed play on the music player before going to the pole.

Meanwhile, Cruz had taken his seat and waited patiently.

I was still smiling from the ridiculousness that came out of his mouth when I started dancing. Luckily, the distraction was enough to ease my arousal so I could focus.

I danced the entire routine, lost in the moves. Cruz remained silent until the song ended and a new one started. Then he started to clap.

“Fuck, I would break my neck if I tried that,” he said, making me chuckle as I went to turn off the music.

“You sure you don’t wanna try?” I asked teasingly.

“Nah, I’d much rather watch.” He grinned mischievously.

“Of course you would.” I rolled my eyes before asking, “So, expert, anything I should change or add?”

“Well, I liked that thing you did upside down with your legs spread. I think you should add a few more of those,” Cruz said, pretending to sound serious as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

I burst out laughing, “Upside-down splits?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Hey, I don’t know all the technical terms, but I liked that one.” He shrugged.

“Of course you do.” I shook my head and pressed play on the CD player to start the routine again.

God, that man sure knew how to make me smile. I had done it more in the last half hour than I had in years.

Cruz took his seat when I started dancing. I was halfway through the routine when I felt a change in the atmosphere. The light playfulness in the room had shifted to something far darker and more seductive. I could feel Cruz's hot gaze searing my skin as I moved to the music. Goosebumps covered my skin, and a fire ignited low in my abdomen.

It was hard to focus this time with him watching me the way he was, but I didn't shy away from his gaze.

I was lost in the music when I maneuvered my body so my legs were above my head and my front faced the pole. I did the splits mid-air while clutching the bar with my hands and held the position for a few beats.

I didn't notice Cruz had gotten up from his seat until his arm snaked between my front and the pole, pulling me against his hard body. His chest was to my back, and my legs hung wide open on either side of his head.

"Cruz." I gasped before asking, "What are you doing?"

"That's the move I like," he said in a deep husky voice, no longer sounding playful but hungry.

His mouth hovered between my legs, and I could feel his warm breath against my upper thighs and pussy.

Fuck, my arms clutching the pole started to tremble. If he hadn't been holding onto my waist, I would have collapsed to the ground.

"Do you want me to finish what I started last night?" he asked as he gently kissed my inner thigh directly beside my

pussy.

“C-Cruz, anyone passing by the door could see us,” I stuttered, my voice shaky but also husky with need.

I knew no one would walk by since the door was far from the street, and unless they were coming into the business, there was no reason to walk in front of the door, but still...

“Let them watch,” he growled before playfully nipping at my other thigh with his teeth.

“So, what do you say, beautiful? Want me to ease some of that sexual frustration?” he asked, running his tongue along my thigh dangerously close to the seam of my bodysuit. I shuddered and let my legs fall over his shoulder onto his back.

“I don’t...” I started, but he cut me off.

“I got you. Climb up that pole and wrap those thighs around my head,” he ordered, running his tongue over my covered pussy and making my entire body tremble with need.

Without arguing, I used my hands on the pole to move my body upward like a sit-up. He placed his hands on my back and helped guide me until I was on his shoulders, with his face buried between my thighs and my back leaning against the pole. He held me in place as if I weighed nothing.

“Good girl,” he praised, looking up at me with a feral look in his eyes.

It made me gulp nervously and squeeze my thighs together, trapping his head between them. The simple words “*good girl*” did something to me. It was as if he poured gasoline on

the fire that already burned inside my core and a raging inferno took its place.

Cruz growled appreciatively as he wrapped his arm over one of my thighs, holding me in place. He brought his other hand to move the crotch of my bodysuit to the side, baring my pussy to his face.

“Gorgeous,” he murmured before bringing his mouth to my pussy and running his tongue between my folds until he reached my clit.

I gasped at the sensation. I wasn’t exactly experienced when it came to stuff like this, and the feeling was overwhelming, but in a good way.

“Fuck you taste so good,” he groaned before sucking my clit into his mouth and running his teeth gently along the sensitive skin.

I moaned and used the pole behind me to arch my back, pushing my pussy against his face.

“That’s right, rub that cunt against my mouth,” he grunted before flattening his tongue against my pussy and letting me move my hips back and forth against it.

“Cruz,” I croaked out, grinding faster against his mouth and chasing my release.

“Are you going to come for me, beautiful?” he asked in a strained voice before thrusting his tongue between my folds.

“I’m going to... Oh god.”

His lips latched around my clit, and he sucked it into his mouth, sending me flying over the edge as I was consumed by my orgasm.

He wrapped both his arms around my thighs, holding me in place while he continued to lap, suck and nip at my sensitive flesh as I rode out the pleasure high.

“That was fucking beautiful,” he murmured before lapping at my pussy one last time and making my overstimulated body shudder.

Cruz readjusted my bodysuit before helping me down from his shoulders until I stood on shaky legs. He never let go of me, and I was thankful for that since my entire body felt boneless.

“How was that?” he asked with a cocky grin. His face was still glistening with my arousal.

“G-Good,” I whispered, unable to speak more than simple words.

He chuckled before guiding me over to the bench where my stuff sat.

“How about I get you home? You need your beauty sleep for our date tomorrow,” he suggested with a wink, and I could only nod.

Shit, that was probably the best thing I had ever experienced in my life. Sure, I had an orgasm before, but that? That was something else altogether. I could see myself getting addicted to the pleasure he gave me.

Cruz helped me slide on my pants since I was still very shaky, and then my sweater.

He moved to turn off the CD player, which I hadn't realized was still playing until just now.

Cruz helped me lock up my studio before guiding me to his truck and lifting me into the passenger seat. He moved around to the driver's side and climbed in.

I didn't live far, but my body felt so weak after what he had done that I was grateful for the ride.

"Did that makeup for the blue bean I gave you yesterday?" he asked playfully.

"No. You'll have to do that again for me to completely forgive you." I managed to joke, even though my voice was still shaky.

The deep chuckle that rumbled in his chest caused another jolt of electricity to shoot straight to my core and awaken my senses.

Fuck, what was this man doing to me?

# Chapter 11



# Our First Official Date

Cruz

I didn't mean to take things as far as I did with Presley, but what the fuck was I supposed to do when she was half-naked, dancing on a pole like a sex goddess? Fuck, her tight little body was something straight out of a wet dream, and I sure as fuck would be dreaming about it on a regular basis.

When I got her text last night, I was shocked that she actually contacted me. It had been my plan all along, but that didn't mean I expected her to do it.

The little vixen had tried to make me jealous. I had never been the jealous type before, but a part of that was because there hadn't been a woman who caught my attention long enough to give a fuck. I definitely would have been jealous, though, if I had believed Presley's message was meant for some asshole named Brad. Even though I didn't, I still had a sudden flare of irritation over a fictional man, which was utterly absurd.

Presley seemed different with me last night as if she had finally accepted that I wasn't going anywhere. Thankfully, she didn't seem regretful when I drove her home, which was a bonus. The last thing I wanted was to regress after all the progress we made.

I couldn't wait for tonight. It was another opportunity for me to learn more about her. I wanted to ask some of the more difficult questions, precisely stuff about her past. However, I needed to be careful how I broached that subject since I knew it was a sensitive topic.

"Cruz, are you even listening?" Blaise's sharp voice drew me from my thoughts.

Shit. I was in a meeting with Blaise, Dex, Jared, and Erika, and I had no clue what they were talking about. Presley had been the only thing on my mind.

I cleared my throat before saying, "Nah, I really wasn't. What did I miss?"

"Fuck, man, you need to get your head out of your ass. That meeting with the Lincoln brothers is coming up, and we need to make sure everything's ready," Blaise said sternly.

"Alright," I threw my hands up in surrender, "I'm all ears. What did you say?"

"Give the guy a break. He's in love," Jared teased with a mocking smirk.

"I'm not in love," I replied defensively.

“You bought Presley’s apartment building so you could up the security and keep her safe. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.” Jared chuckled.

“Leave him alone,” Erika defended from the couch, but the guys ignored her.

“No, you fucking didn’t.” Dex glared before shaking his head and adding, “There’s something wrong with you.”

“You’re giving off stalker vibes, Cruz.” Blaise chastised.

“Oh really? So, canceling your wife’s doctor’s appointment for her next birth control shot is fine?” I shot back.

“You did what?” Erika bellowed.

Blaise flinched at his wife’s outburst, making me smile victoriously.

“Asshole,” he muttered.

“He’s not the asshole. You. Are,” Erika gritted out before adding, “It’s gonna be hard to get me pregnant if we’re not having sex.”

“Come on, Hellcat, it’s not like that,” Blaise said, but all he got in return was a glare from his lovely wife.

“Can we get back to business?” Dex grumbled, looking uninterested in the drama going on around him.

“Yeah, I’ll deal with you later.” Blaise glared daggers at me.

I simply shrugged with a smirk. I didn’t feel bad at all for what I did. He deserved it for calling me a stalker when he had done worse. Plus, Erika wouldn’t stay mad at him. She had

recently told me she was ready for kids, but I knew she would be pissed that he did it behind her back. Again.

“No. I’ll deal with *you* later,” Erika said sharply.

Blaise didn’t bother replying since there was no point. Instead, he glared at me again before returning to business.

“Is the team ready for the meeting tomorrow night?” Blaise asked, a bitter tone lacing his words.

“They are. I got a dozen guys, and they each know their role,” I replied casually with a nod.

“It’s in a restaurant, so we need to be mindful of civilians. I doubt the Lincoln brothers would try anything in public like that, but if they do, I don’t want anyone hurt in the crossfire,” Blaise said sternly.

“They know that.” I nodded once.

I had trained our guys myself, so they were well aware that if they took a shot, it had better be clear of civilians, or there would be hell to pay. We weren’t cowboys, and we didn’t harm the innocent.

“Good. I want the front room reserved so we can have a sniper on the rooftop across the street with eyes on us through the front window,” Blaise added.

“The room’s reserved, and Brent’s already aware he’s on sniper duties,” I replied.

“Do you need me for anything?” Erika asked.

Erika didn't handle business as much as we did since she didn't always agree with some of the stuff we were involved in, but she helped sometimes.

She was a total badass and could handle herself. It took Blaise a while to accept that, but now that he had, he didn't try to keep her locked at home when we did the more dangerous stuff.

"I need you to run the show here and keep Georgia safe. Since we'll all be at the restaurant, I wouldn't put it past those assholes to try something at our house or one of the clubs. I'll have extra guards on duty for the night, but you'll be calling the shots if anything does happen," Blaise replied, and Erika nodded.

We reviewed the restaurant's floor plan where the meeting would take place. It was at a small Italian restaurant outside our border, which was neutral territory for us and the Lincoln brothers. We were familiar with the restaurant and the owner, so it worked to our advantage.

Once everything was set for the meeting tomorrow, I turned to Jared. "How'd the chat go with Antonio?" I asked.

Jared smirked before replying, "He paid what he owed us plus a twenty percent tax for our troubles. He'll probably be peeing blood for the foreseeable future, and I told him if it happens again, I'll carve his kidneys out next time and sell them on the black market. I doubt we'll have problems with him again."

I cringed at the visual in my head. Jared was a gentle giant to those close to him, but when it came to work, he was a beast.

“Well, shit. I almost feel sorry for poor Antonio,” I joked.

Once our meeting was done, Dex and Jared were the first to leave the room. Erika stayed behind, probably ready to beat the living shit out of her husband because of the trouble I stirred.

“Well, this was fun. I’ll talk to you guys later,” I said casually, standing and headed for the door.

“Hey, Cruz,” Blaise called after me, making me pause and look over my shoulder.

“What’s up, big guy,” I asked with a smirk.

“Just FYI, I’m taking my frustrations out on you every day my wife withholds sex from me,” he growled.

“I’m looking forward to it,” I grinned over my shoulder before leaving the room.

“He’s not the problem. You. Are.” I heard Erika growl as I walked down the hallway, snickering to myself.

I was such a shit-stirrer. I wasn’t worried about them, though. They would be back in the sack by the end of the day, probably trying to make a baby. Erika just liked having a choice, which sometimes Blaise overstepped.

It was only four-thirty, but I was done working for the day and had nothing better to do, so I decided to head over to Presley’s early and help make dinner.

I stopped at a bakery only a few blocks from her house. Erika told me it was Presley's favorite place, and I wanted to surprise her by picking up a few treats.

I was a little worried about dinner since the last time I was there, all she had was ketchup and a half-eaten crusty sandwich in the fridge. What the hell was she going to make? She said mac and cheese, but I felt like that was a joke. I hoped it was at least. If not, I would be putting on the performance of a lifetime since I rarely ate anything that came in a box.

I hated processed food; it tasted funny. I wasn't a health nut by any means, but I liked to cook, and I preferred fresh ingredients. I would have offered to cook, but I also didn't want to ruin the fact that she was the one to make the first move this time, so I kept my mouth shut and accepted her offer to make me dinner.

I wasn't sure what pastry was her favorite, so I played it safe and got one of each again. I knew Presley had a sweet tooth, so this way, she would have leftovers for a few days.

Once I picked up the dessert, I headed for her apartment.

I decided to play it safe this time and texted Presley that I was at the front doors of her building instead of letting myself in. She was surprised I was there already but buzzed me in, nonetheless.

When I reached her apartment door, I knocked once and tried the door handle, but it was locked.

She unlocked the door but only removed the chain once she peeked out and saw it was me.

“Hey, you’re early,” she said with a genuine smile.

Fuck me, I could seriously get used to that excited look on her face when she greeted me. It was a severe contrast to what I had gotten used to with her.

“Yeah, I finished work early, so I thought I would come help with dinner,” I replied and paused before adding with a cheeky smile, “I got you something, but I’m not sure if you’ll like...”

I didn’t get to finish the sentence before she cut me off. “No way! Cakes by Dhalia is my favorite. Gimme, gimme, gimme,” she chanted as she reached for the bag.

I chuckled but handed it to her before I lost a hand.

“I take it you like that place,” I said, but I had already lost her as she found the red velvet cupcakes and stuffed almost half of one into her mouth without a care in the world. It was such a contrast from our coffee date when she only nibbled on a muffin in front of me, looking far too anxious to eat.

I couldn’t help but smile as I watched her devour that thing.

She noticed me watching and suddenly looked embarrassed.

“Sorry. I got a little carried away,” Presley said sheepishly.

“Don’t be. I’m just glad I got something you liked.” I grinned.

“So, what’s for dinner? I figured since I’m early, I could help,” I added.



“Oh, you thought I was kidding when I said mac and cheese?” she asked awkwardly.

Shit. I didn't want her to feel bad if that was what we were really having, so I started rambling, “No, I love mac and cheese from a box. I could eat it every day. I swear, it should be its own food group...” I trailed off when I saw the mischievous smirk spread across her face.

“I'm joking, Cruz. But if you like Kraft Dinner that much, though, I'm sure I have a box in the cupboard for you,” she teased.

“No, I'm good, thanks.” I chuckled.

“Don't get too excited, though. I'm making a cheesy chicken crack casserole, which might not be from a box but isn't far off,” Presley added.

“Please tell me you don't actually add crack to the dish because I'm all for trying new things, but that's gonna be a hard no,” I said with wide eyes, faking shock.

Presley burst out laughing before replying, “No crack. It's just so good you'll quickly get addicted.”

“Ah, I get it now. It's like your sweet little cunt. One taste just isn't enough,” I said with a grin, causing Presley's face to turn bright red instantly.

“Oh my god, you're so crude,” she groaned, unable to look at me.

“What? It's the truth.” I shrugged, unable to stop grinning.

“I’m just going to pretend you never said that. Do you mind chopping the onion?” Presley asked as she pulled the onion out of the fridge along with the rest of the ingredients.

“Of course, you’d give me the job that’ll make me cry,” I scoffed teasingly.

“And I don’t even feel bad about it. I fucking hate chopping onions.” She scrunched her nose, looking unapologetic.

I loved this side of her. It was so easygoing and carefree. So different from how she was at the beginning.

“Good thing I don’t mind. I’ll do all the jobs you don’t like.” The words came out of my mouth without thought and I meant them.

“I don’t like cleaning the toilet either,” she replied with a mischievous smirk.

“Well, fuck. If I’m cleaning toilets too now, I expect something in return,” I grinned and winked.

We chopped all the ingredients for dinner and continued to banter back and forth like it was the most normal thing to do.

Once dinner was ready, she scooped her chicken concoction onto two plates, and we made our way to the loveseat so we could eat. She had no table or anywhere else to sit so the living room was our best option. I didn’t mind, though. It meant I would be sitting that much closer to her.

I was surprised by how fucking good the dish was. I totally understood where the crack in the title came from. It was

cheesy, flavorful, and loaded with chicken and bacon. What more could you want?

“This is so fucking good,” I groaned as I practically licked my plate clean.

She chuckled before asking, “You get why it’s called crack now?”

“Yeah, I totally do. It’s a solid second place for most addictive,” I replied while making a show of licking my plate and grinning mischievously.

Her eyes watched my tongue lick up the last bit of the creamy cheese sauce, causing her cheeks to flush a pretty shade of pink.

She was obviously thinking about my tongue licking something else, and the hungry look in her eyes had my cock stiffening. I sure as fuck hoped I got a chance for a second taste because if there was one thing better than this crack dish, it was her cunt.

Once we were both done with our plates, I carried them into the kitchen and grabbed the desserts before returning to where Presley sat in the living room.

“I hope you saved room for dessert,” I said with a grin as I sat beside her.

“There’s always room for dessert,” she said excitedly.

I chuckled, pulling one of the double fudge brownies out of the bag.

Presley went to take it from my hands, but I pulled it out of reach.

“Teasing me with chocolate is a quick way to end your life,” she warned, causing me to laugh harder.

“So violent,” I said, before bringing the brownie to her lips.

She hesitated momentarily, looking between me and the dessert before giving in and taking a generous bite.

Her eyes closed, and the most seductive moan left her lips.

*Fuck.*

I took a bite but was less enthusiastic about the sweet treat since I had every intention of consuming her for dessert. She just didn't know it yet.

Next, I pulled out a cream-filled pastry and brought it to her lips. She didn't even hesitate this time before taking a bite.

Presley let out a soft moan as she savored the sweet taste in her mouth.

The cream coating her bottom lip drew my attention to her pouty mouth, and I couldn't look away. I had to fucking kiss her.

“You got something right...” I said, moving my face closer to hers before finishing my sentence. “Here.”

I ran my tongue along her bottom lip before sucking it into my mouth.

She gasped when I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her onto my lap, forcing her to straddle me.

I took advantage of her surprised state and kissed her perfect little mouth before slipping my tongue inside to explore every inch.

She moaned and kissed me back with equal passion and need. Her hips started rocking against my already hard cock, making me groan into her mouth.

I moved my mouth to her neck and left a trail of kisses from her ear to her collarbone, then bit down gently on her flesh, making her shudder. Presley was panting as she ground against me, getting lost in the moment.

“I should go since it’s getting dark. Remember, I have that eye thing where I can’t drive at night,” I said cheekily against her skin.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she pulled back and narrowed her eyes, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

I had to hold back a chuckle when I saw the irritation on her face before I replied, “Hey, doctor’s orders.” I shrugged.

I wanted to see what she would do next. Would she let me leave or ask me to stay? I was hoping for the latter, but I wasn’t sure if she was ready for that yet. I guess I was about to find out.

“You are so irritating,” she groaned.

“I’ve heard that before.” I chuckled and grabbed her ass cheeks to pull her harder against my erection.

Presley moaned and then leaned down to kiss my neck before running her tongue along my skin and making my body

shudder.

I knew what she was doing, trying to get me to stay without saying the words, and as much as I was teetering on the edge of sanity with her warm cunt in my lap, it wouldn't work. I wanted to hear her say the words.

“What do you want from me right now, beautiful?” I asked as she continued to kiss my neck and throat, making a simple task like talking difficult.

“You're going to make me say it, aren't you?” She huffed.

“Sure am. Keep stalling, and I might make you beg for it too,” I replied, which earned me a glare that looked far more like a seductive glance because of the lust swirling in her eyes.

“Cruz, would you like to spend the night with me?” she asked, a sarcastic tone lacing her words even though her cheeks turned pink with embarrassment.

“I thought you'd never ask,” I grinned before bringing my lips to hers in another bruising kiss.

Suddenly, Presley broke the kiss and got off my lap, making me frown until she got on her knees between my thighs.

“Please, don't talk,” she said without meeting my eyes.

I could tell by the embarrassment on her face that she was stepping far out of her comfort zone by doing what she was about to do, so I respected her wishes and kept my mouth shut. I fucking loved when a woman took control, and although Presley wasn't all that confident yet, I knew I could get her there with time.

She worked my belt until it came undone, then popped the button on my jeans before pulling the zipper down.

I watched her every move as my painfully hard erection begged to be touched. It was taking everything in me not to strip her naked and fuck her savagely against this shitty loveseat.

Presley reached into my boxers and wrapped her tiny hand around my hard cock, making me groan. Fuck, it wouldn't take much for her to make me come.

She pulled my dick out and licked her lips as she admired my erection for a few seconds while pumping her hand up and down along my shaft painfully slowly.

I hissed when she ran her thumb over the sensitive tip, smearing the precum that had gathered.

I was trying my damn best to stay quiet, but I was about to fucking lose my shit if she continued teasing me like that. I didn't even think she realized she was doing it; she just seemed fascinated by my cock.

Finally, she ran her tongue over the head of my shaft and tasted the new bead of precum that had gathered.

My cock twitched in her hands. She then ran her tongue along the underside of my length before wrapping her lips around my head. I groaned at how fucking good her warm mouth felt.

She started moving her mouth up and down along my cock, taking me deeper and deeper until I felt the head of my dick hit

the back of her throat.

“Shit. That feels so fucking good,” I gritted out, and my words gave her the confidence she needed to move faster. My hips lifted to match her rhythm.

I ran my fingers through her hair and grabbed a fist full without using force.

“Are you wet for me, beautiful?” I rasped out, and she moaned a *yes* against my cock.

“Show me. Reach into your pants and sink your fingers into that tight little cunt for me,” I ordered, and Presley immediately did as I asked, slipping her hand into the front of her leggings until it was between her thighs.

She moaned when she found her slick pussy and closed her eyes as she sunk her fingers inside her tight little hole. I nearly exploded in her mouth when I heard the wanton sounds coming from her mouth that was still wrapped around my cock.

She pulled her fingers out and lifted them in front of my face. They were glistening with her arousal, making me salivate.

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand to my mouth before wrapping my lips around her fingers and savoring the taste of her sweet arousal while she continued to suck my cock.

She moaned loudly against my dick, and I knew I needed to stop her soon, or I would come down her throat.



“I’m so fucking close to coming, beautiful, but when I do, I want you to be riding my cock,” I growled as I pulled her head back, forcing her mouth to release my dick with an audible pop.

She was a panting mess as she nodded her head and stood. I stood, too, and grabbed the hem of her shirt before slipping it over her head and throwing it to the ground. I unclipped her bra before tossing it with the shirt.

Next, I yanked her leggings down with her thong until she stood before me naked.

“Fucking beautiful,” I murmured as I stared at her perky tits and hard nipples.

I ran my thumb over one of the peaks, making her moan and arch her back into my touch. I leaned down and sucked the other nipple into my mouth and gently bit down on it, causing her to gasp.

I released her tits and reached for the hem of my shirt before yanking it over my head as fast as possible. I dropped my pants and boxers until I was naked, too.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pulled her against me before grabbing her ass cheeks and lifting her off the ground, forcing her to wrap those long legs around my waist. My throbbing cock was nestled against her warm cunt.

“I need to be inside you,” I said, my voice strained as I carried her toward the bedroom.

She ground against my shaft, kissing and nipping at my neck as I moved briskly toward the bed.

“Do you have a condom?” I gritted out the question.

I was fucking hoping she did since I was an idiot and didn’t think to bring one.

“No, but unless you have some disease I should know about, we don’t need one,” Presley said before licking my throat.

I froze at her words, standing next to the bed with her still gyrating against my erection.

“I’m clean. I take it you’re on the pill, then?” I asked.

“I can’t have kids, so we’re good,” she said thoughtlessly, causing my frown to deepen. What the fuck did that mean? She was twenty-six. How the fuck could she not have kids.

“Fuck me, Cruz. Please,” she begged, sounding desperate.

I wasn’t done with the kid topic, but now wasn’t the time to get into it, so I let it go.

I laid her on the edge of the bed and reached between our bodies, aligning my cock with her entrance.

“Is this what you want, beautiful?” I asked, running the tip of my dick through her wet folds.

“Y-Yes, please, Cruz,” she moaned loudly.

With one hard thrust, I buried myself inside her. She gasped, but the sound quickly turned into a moan, as I slowly slid out and slammed back in.

“You’re so fucking tight,” I groaned, moving in and out, picking up speed with each thrust.

I threw her legs over my shoulders and leaned in closer so I could reach deeper.

“Oh god,” she groaned.

“It’s Cruz, baby. I want you screaming my name not some other man’s,” I growled as I pounded into her relentlessly.

Where did that possessive demand come from? I didn’t put much thought into it as I continued fucking her savagely.

“Cruz,” she shouted, and I could tell she was getting close, so I pulled out, making her whimper.

“I told you, beautiful, I want you riding me when we come,” I said before climbing onto the bed and lying in the middle.

I grabbed Presley by the hips and lifted her onto me, so she was straddling my waist.

She reached down and grabbed my dick and aligned it with her cunt before sinking down onto it.

I groaned when my shaft disappeared inside her warm hole, and she started grinding against me. I wasn’t going to last much longer. I was sure of that.

“Play with your tits as you ride my cock,” I ordered, and she complied, reaching up to knead her breasts while pinching and twisting her nipples.

I grabbed her hips and lifted her before slamming her back down on my cock.

“Come for me, beautiful,” I growled as she bounced up and down along my erection.

I reached for her clit and rubbed circles over it, sending her over the edge.

Her movements became spastic right before ecstasy consumed her.

“Cruz!” she shouted in a husky voice.

I used her hips to pound into her a few more times before I came with a savage roar. I had never felt anything so intense in my entire life, my balls tightened right before I filled her with cum. It felt like a never-ending climax as it washed over my body in violent waves.

Presley collapsed on my chest. Our bodies were drenched in sweat as we both panted heavily.

“That was incredible,” she said breathlessly.

‘You’re incredible,’ I corrected.

She buried her face in the crook of my neck but said nothing.

After a few minutes, she rolled off me and onto her back. I leaned on my side, facing her, and lightly ran my fingers along her stomach and tits, causing goosebumps to erupt all over her skin.

We remained silent for several minutes, and while she stared blankly at the ceiling, still trying to recover, I took the opportunity to assess the scars on her stomach next to her hip bone.

I was instantly overwhelmed with rage when I noticed the jagged lines that marred her skin. It was hard to read from how crooked the white lines were, but they looked like letters.

Before I could make them out, Presley noticed what I was looking at and covered them with her hand.

“How’d you get those?” I asked, unable to hide the rage from my voice.

“Cruz...Don’t,” she warned, but I couldn’t stop myself. I needed to know.

“Tell me, Presley,” I demanded, my jaw clenching.

I knew I shouldn’t push, but fuck, we just had the most passionate sex I had ever had in my life, and I was developing feelings for this woman. I couldn’t let it go.

“No,” she said sharply as she tried to get out of bed, but I grabbed her wrist, halting her.

“Why can’t you have kids?” I decided to try a different route.

Her body tensed as if she didn’t realize she had told me that, before she turned to face me, her rage matching mine.

“I knew this would happen. Why do you always need to take more than I’m willing to give?” she asked angrily.

“Because someone hurt you, and I need to know who so I can make them pay for it,” I gritted out.

“Listen, Cruz.” She sighed and softened her tone before continuing, “What just happened between us is all I have to

offer. You either accept that or move on because I can't give you any more than this right now."

I could see the exhaustion in her eyes, and I knew I wasn't winning this fight tonight, so I decided to drop it for now.

"Fine but get back in bed." I sighed in frustration before pulling on her wrist and forcing her to lie beside me. She didn't fight as she backed her ass up against me, and I wrapped my arms around her.

"One day, you'll give me answers," I grumbled, making her huff out a breath, but she didn't reply.

Stubborn fucking woman. Could she not see that I just wanted to protect her and make whoever hurt her pay for what they did?

We were silent for a long time before Presley's breathing evened out, and I knew she had fallen asleep.

I couldn't fall asleep, though. Thinking of someone hurting Presley was tormenting my mind and preventing me from relaxing.

## Chapter 12

# A Bad Feeling

## Presley

Everything was going perfectly between Cruz and me until he had to go and ruin it by pushing for information that I wasn't willing to divulge.

I couldn't believe I told him I couldn't have kids. I had been so caught up in the moment that the words slipped out of my mouth without thought. I was kicking myself for saying it when I should have just made him put on a condom and saved myself from his interrogation.

I also didn't once think of my ugly scars last night until I caught him staring, which was very unlike me. I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror without getting disgusted by the sight of them. Cruz didn't seem disgusted when I caught him looking, but he did seem angry, which I didn't think was directed at me, but rather at the person who gave me the scars.

Why couldn't he just be happy with what I was offering him? We had such a good night. We laughed, talked, and enjoyed each other's company without any awkwardness.



Then we had mind-blowing sex that I didn't regret until Cruz tried bringing up my past. That was a serious mood killer.

Things were weird between us this morning. I could tell Cruz was angry, even though he did his best to hide it. I didn't think his anger was directed at me but rather at the fact that I wouldn't answer his questions. Luckily, he didn't push me for answers this morning before he left my apartment.

I hadn't heard from him all day, but he said he would be busy with work until late. He would call me in the evening once done.

I wanted us to keep seeing each other like we had been, but only if he let my past go. It would get exhausting if he continued to push for information when I knew I would never be able to answer his questions.

Maybe when I got home tonight, I could talk to him and try to make him see reason. I was getting used to having him around and was really hoping this wasn't the end. Cruz made me feel alive and gave me something to look forward to daily. I wasn't sure I could return to my old ways of just surviving now that he had entered my life and taught me how to enjoy it again.

I let out a frustrated sigh when my phone dinged, drawing my attention from my thoughts.

Picking up my phone, I saw that I had gotten a text from Cassandra.

**Cassandra:** Hey girl, I'll pick you up in a half hour. I'm meeting my asshole ex at Java Hut on Glendale Ave. in an hour.

**Me:** Sounds good.

Once I texted her back, I opened my contacts and found Erika's number before pressing the call button. I wanted someone to know where we were tonight in case anything happened. At least we would be in public, so the chance of him doing something was slim.

After three rings, Erika picked up.

"Hey, you. Long time no chat," she greeted.

"Hey, it has been a while. Sorry, I've been busy," I replied apologetically.

"No need to apologize. I heard Cruz has been keeping you busy," she teased.

"That he has. Now, if only he could stop sticking his nose where it doesn't belong." I sighed.

"Oh girl, I know he can be a bit much sometimes, but he only wants to know about your past because he's protective and wants to make sure you're safe," she said sympathetically.

"I get that, but you're protective and didn't pry, so why can't he be more like you," I whined, making her laugh.

"Because I'm one of a kind," she said proudly.

“Anyway, I was calling because I’m meeting Cassandra’s ex with her tonight, and I want you to know where we’re going in case anything happens. We’re meeting him in public, so I’m sure it will be fine, but figure I’d tell you just in case,” I explained.

“Ugh... Cas told me about her loser ex. I would come with you guys, but I’m busy tonight. Want me to check with Olivia and see if she can go?” she asked.

“Nah, it’s fine. As I said, we’re meeting him at Java Hut on Glendale Ave, so we’ll be in public. She’s just worried he might take something she says out of context and use it against her in their custody battle,” I replied.

“Makes sense. What time are you guys going?” she asked.

“In an hour.” I sighed. I really wasn’t looking forward to this meeting and knew it would trigger my anxiety. I wasn’t a fan of men or public places, and I would be forced to tolerate both tonight.

I was half tempted to ask Cruz to come with me because I always seemed to feel safe when he was around. But I knew he was busy, and that safety I felt was an illusion anyway. He wasn’t my knight in shining armor, and I needed to remember that.

“Alright, well, why don’t you text me when you get home so I know you’re okay?” she suggested.

“I will,” I replied.

We said goodbye and hung up the phone.

Call me paranoid, but even though I didn't think Cassandra's ex would be a problem, I was still planning on being prepared. I guess when you had a past like I did, you could never be too cautious.

I grabbed my backpack from the closet and the loaded gun from the bedside table drawer. I usually slept with it under my pillow, but I moved it before Cruz arrived last night.

I stuffed the gun in the backpack and shoved my small canister of pepper spray into my front jeans pocket. I also ensured my whistle was still in the side pocket of my bag. You could never be too careful, and a whistle might seem like a ridiculous tool to bring, but it could be a lifesaver if you were ever dragged into a dark alley away from others.

Once I finished packing my bag, I grabbed an oversized black hoodie and threw it on before tying my hair up in a messy bun. The more invisible I could make myself, the better.

A half-hour later, I was ready to go. I left my apartment and headed outside.

Cassandra was already waiting in her Buick on the street in front of my building. I walked over and got into the passenger side.

"Hey, you ready for this?" I asked and glanced over to see the nervous expression on her face.

She tried to hide it with a smile, but I could see right through it. She wasn't looking forward to this as much as I wasn't, probably even less.

“Yeah, I just want to get this over with.” She sighed before putting the vehicle in drive.

“What is it you guys need to discuss anyway?” I asked casually.

“Oh, ummm... He wants a box of my belongings out of his apartment, and I want to talk to him about child support since he hasn't paid in months,” she replied.

“Do you think he'll be a problem?” I asked with a frown.

“No, I doubt it,” she said but didn't sound confident.

“Hey, don't stress girl. I'm here for you in case he gets out of line,” I reassured her before quickly adding, “I'll kick him in the balls so hard he'll regret ever messing with you.” I half-joked, trying to ease some of her anxiety.

I knew how she felt since I had my own dark past. Luckily, worrying about her seemed to keep my anxiety at bay, which was good.

“You've been such a good friend to me. I'm so sorry to drag you into this,” she said apologetically, looking over with a forced smile.

“Like I said, I would much rather you ask me than go alone if you don't feel safe.” I shrugged.

We drove in tense silence for several minutes until her phone dinged with a message.

Cassandra glanced down at the phone in her lap and cursed before reaching for it.

“It’s my ex,” she muttered as she read the message.

She scoffed before saying, “Of course, the prick would change the location at the last minute. He’s meeting friends at some restaurant and wants me to meet him there instead.”

“Do you think it’s legit, or do you think he’s messing with you?” I asked nervously. I didn’t like when plans changed, especially under circumstances like these.

“He always pulls stuff like this. It’s all about control for him, and since I picked the coffee shop, he’s taking control back by changing the location at the last minute.” Cassandra huffed.

“What’s the name of the place? I’ll text Erika and let her know where we’ll be in case he becomes an ass,” I asked.

“It’s on Davis Street, only a few blocks from the coffee shop. I don’t know the name of it. He lives near there, and when I lived with him, we would always go there,” she replied.

I suddenly had a bad feeling in my gut. Something felt off. Maybe I was putting too much thought into it now that my anxiety had set in, but I knew better than to ignore that feeling.

“Listen, Cassandra, I’m uncomfortable with this sudden change. Why don’t you reschedule, and I can ask Cruz to join us?” I suggested, but she didn’t even acknowledge me, looking lost in thought as she white-knuckled the steering wheel.

I pulled out my phone and sent Erika a quick message.

**Me:** Change of plans. We're meeting the asshole at some restaurant on Davis Street a few blocks from the coffee shop. Cassandra doesn't know the name of it.

**Erika:** Okay... Do you think something's up?

Erika and I were a lot alike. I wasn't surprised that she was questioning this change like I was. Her question only reaffirmed that I should trust my gut.

**Me:** I'm not sure. Cassandra seems off. I don't think she trusts him either.

**Erika:** Tell her to either cancel or drop you off. If she still wants to meet the son-of-a-bitch, she can do it alone.

Erika was right. I didn't feel comfortable with the change of location.

"Cas, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to some unknown location to meet him. You can either cancel or drop me off, and I'll cab it home," I said firmly.

After the words left my lips, the vehicle stopped.

"We're here. That's the restaurant," Cassandra murmured, and I followed her gaze to a restaurant nestled back from the

main road. The front sign read Vito's Ristorante.

There were only four vehicles in the parking lot, plus ours.

I sent Erika a quick message.

**Me:** Vito's Ristorante.

I quickly closed my phone and shoved it into my pocket so I could focus on everything happening around me.

I grabbed the pepper spray out of my pocket and shoved it into the front pouch of my hoodie before grabbing my date-rape whistle and shoving that in there, too.

Cassandra was too anxious and focused on the restaurant to notice what I was doing, so I discreetly pulled the gun out of my bag and jammed it into the back of my jeans. I wasn't an idiot; I had learned my lesson and prepared myself for unknown situations.

"I'm not going in there. If your ex wants to meet us out front, fine, but I don't trust him, and I refuse to set foot in that restaurant," I said firmly.

Cassandra looked over at me with an apologetic look before nodding and saying, "Okay."

Good, at least she was taking me seriously.

Cassandra picked up her phone and started typing. I assumed she was sending a text to her ex. I just now noticed the slight tremor in her hands as she sent the message.



“Okay, he’s coming to meet us out front,” she said, and I nodded once, not taking my eyes off the restaurant’s front door.

Cassandra opened her door and stepped out. I did the same since I didn’t want to be trapped inside the vehicle.

I followed her toward the front of the restaurant.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“He said two minutes,” she replied.

We moved closer just as my phone buzzed in my pocket.

I pulled it out and saw I received a message from Erika, so I flipped the phone open to read it.

**Erika:** GET THE FUCK OUT OF THERE  
RIGHT NOW. IT’S NOT SAFE.

My heart rate spiked as I read her message. I fucking knew it.

I lifted my gaze, getting ready to warn Cassandra when my eyes caught on the table closest to the restaurant’s front window. It looked like a private room with eight men sitting around it.

One man in particular caught my attention because I would recognize those cold soulless eyes anywhere, Owen Lincoln.

Fear settled in like a dark cloud and my entire body started to tremble. It couldn’t be.

My head spun violently, and the air left my lungs as if someone had punched me in the gut.

Bile rose in my throat when I noticed the other men. Cruz, Blaise, Dex, and Jared sat with Owen and three other guys I didn't recognize.

How could this be? They must know each other. How long have they known each other?

I didn't recognize the three other men with Owen but knew they worked for him by appearance. He always had a lot of rough-looking guys on his payroll, and these three had tattoos covering every inch of their bodies, including faces and heads.

Owen glanced at his phone almost simultaneously when Cruz glanced at his. Cruz's eyes lifted as if he could sense my presence, and in no time, they met mine through the window.

My entire world shattered right before my eyes. Tears blurred my vision, and my breathing became labored as fear held me in a chokehold.

Suddenly, Owen and a few others at the table started to laugh as if someone had said something funny and this was a friendly meeting.

It felt like someone stabbed a knife straight through my heart. How could I be so stupid to trust Cruz? He had been working with the Lincoln brothers this whole time. Had he been collecting information on me and relaying it back to them?

Oh god, was Erika in on this? Did she not want me to see them together? Was that why she sent the text?

As my mind reeled with possibilities, my feet finally decided to move, and I turned before taking off at a full sprint away from the restaurant. Owen never saw me, so I might have had a fighting chance to escape.

“Pres, where are you going?” Cas shouted, but I ignored her and ran for my life.

I couldn’t hear anything other than the pounding in my head. I pushed my body harder than I ever had.

I made it two blocks when a man dressed in all black stepped out of an alley and tried to grab my arm. He wore tactical gear and had no tattoos, which was odd if he worked for Owen.

I reached for the pepper spray in my pocket and didn’t hesitate to unleash it in his face.

He hissed from the pain as his hands reached for his eyes. I didn’t waste time before taking off down the road.

I turned the next corner and saw another giant man, but this one was covered in tattoos and looked rough. He was definitely one of Owen’s guys. Before he spotted me, I ducked into a business and ran to the back and out the emergency door that led into the alley. A store employee shouted something, but I ignored them and kept running.

I didn’t like being in an alley since I was far more at risk, but I didn’t have a choice, so I moved fast and stayed close to the wall so I wouldn’t be seen.

I reached the end of the alley and went to cross the road when my eyes locked with a pair of familiar ones. The sketchy guy who was loitering in my apartment building by the stairs a few days ago was walking toward me with a severe expression on his face. So many thoughts crossed my mind, but I didn't have time to dissect them, so instead, I sprinted across the street, dodging cars as I went. A few honked as they barely avoided hitting me, but I kept going.

I turned down a quieter street, trying to lose the last guy, but I didn't like that I was moving away from the main road. I felt like they were herding me into a quieter part of town where there would be no witnesses.

I spotted a car pulling out of a secure underground parkade and as it drove away, I snuck under the garage door before it closed.

Drenched in sweat, I could barely catch my breath, and adrenaline was the only thing keeping me going. I needed to get out of there before they caught me.

As I walked through the parking garage, a woman in her mid-forties exited a set of doors that looked like stairs inside. She started walking down the row of cars, completely unaware of my presence.

She stopped at a grey minivan and unlocked it with a fob.

"E-excuse me," I called after her, my voice shaky.

The startled woman turned around to face me. Her eyes widened when she took in my appearance. I probably looked

like a mess, with my hair falling out of my bun and sticking to my face. I was still panting heavily while trying to catch my breath.

“Yes?” she asked, her tone hesitantly.

“Could you drive me out of here? I only need to go a few blocks, and then I can call a cab. I’m being followed, and I think I’m in danger,” I pleaded. I knew I was definitely in danger but didn’t want her asking too many questions so I kept it vague.

She looked conflicted for a moment before asking, “Do you need me to call the police?”

“No, please don’t. That will only make things worse. If I can just get out of here, I can go to my friends, where I’ll be safe,” I replied, looking over my shoulder to ensure they hadn’t found me yet.

She watched for a moment, looking unsure, before finally sighing and saying, “Get in, but please lie down in the back. I don’t want to put my family in danger.”

“Thank you so much,” I said sincerely before opening the back door and climbing in.

I tucked between the two seats, so no one outside the van could see me. The woman got into the driver’s seat and started the ignition. She drove through the parkade until I heard the garage door opening.

My heart started thumping in my chest again as I prayed to god that they didn’t catch me.

She pulled onto the street and waited until we were a few blocks away before speaking, “Honey, I don’t know what kind of trouble you’re in, but I saw at least half a dozen men outside my building searching through bushes and parked cars. You sure you don’t want me to take you to the police station?” she asked, pity and concern lacing her words.

“No, please don’t. I just need to get a few more blocks away, and then I can make it to my friends on my own,” I lied.

I was relieved I made it out of that area without being caught, but I wasn’t in the clear yet. I still needed to get one of my getaway bags from my apartment or studio before I could leave town. I could leave without it but there were items in those bags that I really needed to start over, so going back to one of those two locations seemed like a risk I needed to take.

A few blocks later, the woman pulled the minivan over to the side of the road, and I thanked her before getting out. She tried to convince me to go to the police again, which I respectfully declined.

I flagged down a taxi and got in before giving them the address to my studio.

Grabbing the bag from there seemed less risky than going to my apartment building. Plus, it was closer to the subway.

My phone started buzzing in my pocket, making me jump in fright. I was still on edge from everything that happened.

I pulled it out of my pocket and saw Cruz’s name displayed on the screen, causing a fresh wave of mixed emotions to hit

me hard. I needed time to process everything that happened, but I would only get that chance once I was safe, or at least relatively safe.

I declined the call, and with shaky hands, I shoved it back into my pocket.

As we drove up to my studio, I scanned the area for anyone out of place, but it seemed clear. I had the taxi stop a block away and around the corner. I paid with cash before getting out.

Once the taxi drove away, I gulped nervously before tucking myself behind a bush and checking to ensure my gun was loaded and a round chambered. I shoved it into the front pouch of my hoodie and wrapped my hand around the handle as I made my way toward the studio.

My phone started buzzing in my pocket again, but I ignored it, too busy ensuring no suspicious vehicles or people were hanging around.

I reached the front door of my studio and glanced in through the glass window. It was dark inside, but nothing looked out of place. There was a storage room and a bathroom I couldn't see into, but other than that, it looked clear.

I pulled my keys out of my bag and unlocked the front door before glancing back again to ensure I wasn't being followed.

Once inside, I ran for the storage room and quickly opened it before retrieving the bag with my fake identification cards, cash, and other necessities.

As I turned to leave, the emergency door that led into the back alley was kicked open, making me screech.

Standing on the other side was the one person who terrified me even more than Owen Lincoln, Conrad Lincoln, my husband and biggest nightmare.

“You’ve been a bad little bird,” he taunted with a sadistic smile.



## Chapter 13

# Where Is She?

## Cruz

I hated how I left things with Presley this morning. I tried not to let it show that I was mad, but she could tell. I wasn't mad at her per se, but I was frustrated that she didn't trust me enough to tell me about her past. I wasn't a patient man, even though I knew I needed to be with Presley if I didn't want to scare her off.

I was mainly enraged because there was someone out there who hurt her not only physically but also mentally, and they needed to pay for that.

Fuck, I hated that I was busy today because all I wanted to do was to go over to her place and make it up to her.

Unfortunately, I couldn't do that today. The guys and I had that meeting with the Lincoln brothers tonight, and I needed to focus, so I shoved my thoughts of Presley aside and started getting ready.

I grabbed my black suit from my closet and got dressed. I hated wearing that shit, but it made us look sharp when we

attended these types of meetings, so I sucked it up and wore it.

Once dressed, I grabbed the loaded Glock off the bedside table and double-checked the magazine before shoving it in the back of my pants. I grabbed the two extra mags and threw them in my pocket.

I left my room and headed downstairs where I found Blaise, Dex, Jared, and a dozen of our men loading up the vehicles with the gear we needed for tonight.

“Hey, buddy. You got your head on straight tonight?” Blaise asked.

I couldn't blame him for asking, since I had been severely distracted by Presley lately and dropped the ball a few times. Tonight, I couldn't let that happen since the Lincoln brothers were dangerous, and for my brothers' sake, I needed to focus.

“You know it. Are we almost ready to go?” I replied.

“Yeah, we're heading to the restaurant early so the team can get set up,” Blaise replied.

“Good. Let's go get this shit over with then.” I sighed.

“You usually love this shit. Presley really got under your skin, eh?” Blaise asked.

He was right. I was usually like a kid in a candy store for nights like these that had the potential of ending in violence, but there was too much on my mind to get excited right now.

“I'm just tired, that's all,” I replied. I could tell Blaise didn't believe me but luckily dropped it.

“We’re ready,” Jared announced as he came to join us.

“Good, let’s get this show on the road.” Blaise nodded and walked to the front of the convoy to get in the passenger side of the black Range Rover.

I followed him and got into the driver’s side. Not long after, Dex and Jared joined us and got in the rear.

The guys talked strategy while I drove to the restaurant in silence, unable to stop thinking about Presley even though I knew I should keep my head clear.

We pulled up to the restaurant and parked in the lot directly in front of the building while the rest of our team hid the other vehicles out of sight and headed for their preassigned positions.

Jared and Dex stepped out of the Ranger Rover, and I was about to follow them when Blaise stopped me.

“You sure you’re good, buddy?” he asked with a concerned frown.

“Yeah, sorry. Just a lot on my mind, but I promise, my focus will be where it needs to be tonight,” I replied.

“Man, I’ve never seen you like this before. You really like Presley, don’t you?”

“I do. More than I’d like to admit.” I huffed, running my fingers through my hair.

“Well, from what Erika says, you’ve also made an impression on her. Erika’s never seen Presley give a man the

time of day like she has been with you.”

“I’ve been pushing her too hard for info about her past. I just can’t help it. She’s got a scar on her stomach that looks like someone carved letters into her flesh. Who the fuck does that? She told me last night she can’t have kids either but refused to answer my questions,” I blurted out.

“Shit. That’s heavy.” Blaise sighed before adding, “She might not be happy with you, but if I were in your shoes, I would keep fucking pushing her for answers. If someone hurt her, you need to find out who so we can deal with the fucker. Having said that, I’m probably not the best person to give advice about stuff like that since we both know I’m a bit of a brute.”

I chuckled lightly before saying, “I know, buddy, but I still appreciate the advice. This is all so far out of my comfort zone, I have no clue how to handle it,” I admitted.

“Let’s get tonight over with and then maybe talk to Erika. She knows Presley better than I do and might have better advice to give you than locking her up and forcing the information out of her like I would do.” He chuckled.

“Yeah, good call. Let’s get in there since they’ll be here within the hour,” I said, and Blaise nodded.

We got out of the vehicle and headed inside the restaurant. I had reserved the table at the front of the restaurant, which was in a private room. It gave our sniper a good view from the top of the building across the street, and we could also keep an eye

on our vehicle in case they were stupid enough to try and plant a bomb under it.

Blaise went to talk with Vito, the owner, while we set up in the private room. We installed a recorder in one of our bags and claimed one side of the table so we would all have a good view of the door and the window.

My phone pinged, indicating I received a message, and I glanced at it to see it was from Vlad, one of our guys set up on the outside of the building with the rest of the team.

**Vlad:** We're all set.

**Me:** Good. Give us a heads-up when they drive into the area.

**Vlad:** You got it.

We had radios, too, but we would only use those in public if absolutely necessary.

Forty minutes later, Vlad messaged again.

**Vlad:** I got eyes on 4 tinted-out SUVs. 2 just broke off and turned down the first street north of your location. The other two are pulling into the parking lot now.

**Me:** Got it.

“They’re here,” I told the others.

“How many?” Blaise asked.

“4 SUVs, two turned off before the parking lot,” I replied.

“I guess they brought reinforcements, too,” Jared noted, and we all nodded.

We stood from our chairs and waited for the door to open in the private room.

My hand was on the gun handle in the back of my pants, and I knew the others were doing the same. I wouldn’t put it past these assholes to come in here guns blazing, and we would be ready for them if they did.

A minute passed before the door opened, and Owen Lincoln walked in looking smug, followed by three other thugs. There were no signs of Conrad.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Owen greeted with a smirk.

Fuck, this guy was already rubbing me the wrong way. I hoped he gave me a reason to put a bullet between his eyes tonight because I was itching to take some of my frustrations out on someone.

“Where’s Conrad?” Blaise asked sharply.

“He sends his sincere apologies, but given he has a reputation to uphold, he won’t be joining us,” Owen replied almost mockingly.

I shot Blaise a *'Can I shoot this prick in the head'* look but he shook his head ever so slightly, silently telling me to stay calm.

“Given the circumstances of this meeting, we expected both of you here for it. I find it rather insulting that Conrad didn’t think this was serious enough to show up,” Blaise gritted out.

“I assure you; he would have been here if it didn’t risk tarnishing his reputation. I’m sure once we talk, you’ll be satisfied with our handling of the problem,” Owen replied, sounding slightly more serious.

“Very well, sit and explain to us why one of your dealers was on our territory selling your shit product,” Blaise stated, getting straight to the point and motioning to the other side of the table.

“I’ll ignore the comment about our product since it’s irrelevant to this meeting, but I suggest you keep those to yourself from now on,” Owen warned as he and his three goons sat on the other side of the round table.

You could tell Owen brought those guys with him to try and intimidate us. They were massive fuckers with tattoos covering every inch of their bodies, but we weren’t intimidated. If anything, it made him look like a coward for having to bring them along for protection.

“Or what?” Blaise shot back with an eyebrow raised.

You could see the rage bubbling in Owen’s cold eyes. His calm demeanor slowly started to crack, which wasn’t



surprising since he was a hot-headed psychopath. I secretly hoped it shattered so I could end this piece of shit right here and now.

“Let’s get to the matter at hand before this meeting takes a turn neither one of us can afford,” Owen gritted out.

“Then start explaining,” Blaise demanded.

“Tyler, one of our dealers, the one you guys caught in the south end of town, was skimming product from us. He was selling it on the side and keeping the profit for himself. He knew better than to do that on our territory, so that’s why he was on yours. You were the safer bet if he got caught,” Owen explained.

“And we’re supposed to believe that?” I scoffed.

Owen glared at me with a look so intense it almost seemed personal.

“After you guys caught Tyler, he ran from us instead of passing along your message. That’s why we never responded. After a few days of him being MIA, we started getting suspicious and sent some guys out to search for him. We only managed to track him down the day before you showed up at Conrad’s office.” he explained before adding, “Tyler and his family have paid for his sins. Let’s just say they now reside at the bottom of the river, and he won’t be a problem again. We will compensate you for any losses you incurred to make this right. We don’t want a war as much as you shouldn’t since it would be devastating for both sides. Wouldn’t you agree?” Owen asked, keeping his enraged gaze locked with mine.

“We don’t want your money. I will tell you though, Owen, that if we find out you’re lying, then war will happen, and we will burn your entire motherfucking empire to the ground. Is that clear?” Blaise asked, and I could hear the eagerness in his tone. He wanted a reason to destroy these assholes as much as I did.

“We have no reason to lie, but I will tell you this, if this does end in war, it will be your city that burns,” Owen stated as he finally broke his stare down with me to glare at Blaise.

My phone pinged in my pocket, and I figured it was likely one of the guys outside the building giving me an update, so I pulled it out to read the message.

It wasn’t from one of the guys. No, it was from Erika, and the message caused my blood to run cold.

**Erika:** HEADS-UP PRESLEY IS ON HER WAY TO VITO’S. SHE MIGHT ALREADY BE THERE.

What the fuck? Why the hell would Presley be coming here?

My eyes lifted from my phone, and the second I looked out the window and into the parking lot, they locked on Presley.

She stood there frozen, looking as white as a ghost as she took in the men at the table.

I was kicking myself for not telling her what we did for a living sooner. Owen and his goons looked like the definition of

bad news, and her seeing me in a meeting with those guys certainly didn't look good on me. She would definitely suspect that I was involved in shady business.

Laughter drew my attention back to the table. It seemed Owen had also gotten a text, and he and his men were laughing at something he said. I wasn't paying attention and couldn't care less about what they thought was funny. All that mattered to me was Presley.

Suddenly, Presley spun on her heels and sprinted away from the restaurant as if her life depended on it.

*Fuck.*

I pulled up Vlad's number on my phone and sent him a text.

**Me:** Remember that girl, Presley? She's here running westbound on Davis. I need you guys to stop her and bring her back to the house.

**Vlad:** If she doesn't want to go?

**Me:** Don't hurt her but get her there.

**Vlad:** Got it.

I closed my phone and shot Blaise an urgent look, silently asking him to speed this meeting up.

I knew he understood my demand when he said, “I guess we’ve made it clear what will happen if you cross us again, so this meeting is over.”

“What about dinner?” Owen asked with a smirk, knowing damn well we had no interest in socializing with them. Blaise had even told the owner that we wouldn’t be having dinner. He paid him generously for the room rental, instead, and asked that we not be disturbed.

“We’re done here,” Blaise snapped as the four of us stood, grabbed our things, and left the room without another word.

The minute we got outside, Blaise asked quietly, “What’s going on?”

My eyes scanned the parking lot since I was pretty sure I had seen Cassandra here too, but she was nowhere in sight.

“Presley was here. She saw us in there with those guys and took off running. I mean, those guys are sketchy-looking, so that may be what triggered her, but I’ve never seen her look that frightened before. Not even when her apartment was broken into. I need to find her,” I replied, moving to the driver’s side of the Ranger Rover.

“Got it. Let’s go then,” Blaise said, getting into the passenger side. Jared and Dex hopped in the back.

I drove out of the parking lot and toward where I saw her running when my phone pinged again.

**Vlad:** Fuck. She pepper-sprayed Carlson and ran across heavy traffic to get away from me. Now we can't find her.

I typed while glancing between my phone and the road.

**Me:** Don't fucking chase her into traffic. Goddamn it. What the fuck were you thinking?

**Vlad:** Sorry, boss, I didn't think she would do it.

I would fucking kill him if she had gotten hit by a car. He was lucky she didn't.

My entire body was vibrating with worry and rage. How the fuck did tonight end up like this?

**Me:** Where'd you last see her?

**Vlad:** Corner of Davis and Kent.

**Me:** Search that area and keep me posted.

**Vlad:** On it.

"The guys lost her." I sighed.

“Why don’t you drop us where they last saw her, and we can search the area. You and Dex go check her apartment and studio in case she headed that way,” Blaise suggested.

“Yeah, I’ll try calling her too, even though I doubt she’ll answer,” I replied, running my hand over my face in frustration.

I dropped Jared and Blaise off, where Vlad and a few others were still searching for Presley, and then started driving toward her apartment.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed her number. It rang three times before the call disconnected. I knew she didn’t have a voicemail, so the only way it disconnected that fast would be because she declined the call.

*Damn it.*

I swerved in and out of traffic as I made my way toward her place as fast as I could.

“We’ll find her, man. Relax,” Dex said, clutching the handle above his head for dear life as I drove like a maniac through downtown.

“She’s already run away once before, and the look on her face when she saw me in that meeting told me she was going to do it again,” I gritted out.

The rest of the drive was silent until I reached her apartment building.

My eyes caught on an Escalade with tinted windows parked down the road, running. It didn’t belong in this neighborhood

and stood out.

I pulled out my binoculars from the bag in the backseat and looked through them to get the license plate off the Escalade. Once I had it, I sent a message to one of our guys who was out with the computer tonight and asked him to run checks on it. Once I hit send, I shoved my phone back into my pocket.

“I’ll run inside and check her apartment,” I told Dex as I exited the driver’s side.

“I’ll come,” he replied, following me to the front door.

I unlocked the door before climbing the stairs two at a time until I reached the second floor.

I quickly unlocked her apartment door and shoved it open. It was dark inside her apartment, and it didn’t look like she had been back. Dex helped me search out her place, and when we didn’t find her or anything out of place, we left.

Once outside, I noticed the Escalade was gone, almost simultaneously as my phone pinged.

I pulled it out of my pocket and checked the message. The minute I read it, a string of curses left my lips.

“What is it?” Dex asked with a concerned frown.

“I fucking knew that Escalade was out of place. It’s registered to a guy associated with the Lincoln brothers. Were we followed here?” I asked, but it was more to myself.

I ran over to the Ranger Rover and quickly got in. Once Dex was in, too, I peeled away from the curb and raced toward

Presley's studio.

“We'll find her,” Dex reassured, but even he didn't sound convinced anymore.

I tried calling her again, but she didn't answer.

Fear was quickly consuming me as I thought of all the worst-case scenarios.

Did those assholes see her outside the window at the restaurant? Did they notice me watching her and maybe thought she was important to me? Fuck, if they hurt her, I'll fucking go ballistic. They better fucking run if they did something to her because when I found them, I would slaughter them all.

The second I pulled onto the street where her studio was, a bad feeling settled in the pit of my stomach.

I parked the vehicle outside her business and jumped out before sprinting to the door.

My heart sank in my chest when I tried the handle and found it unlocked. Not only that, but the sound of sirens moving into the area caught my attention.

It was dark inside her studio, but it looked empty. I flicked the light on, and the minute I did, my eyes landed on something on the floor that shook me to the core—a puddle of blood. Not only that but it was smeared across half the studio floor as if there had been a struggle.

*Red.* Red was all I saw, and it tormented my soul. Was Presley hurt? Or worse...



Fuck, I couldn't think like that, or I would crumble. I had to keep believing Presley was okay because I wasn't sure I could handle it if she weren't.

"Fuck, there's a casing over here," Dex said, pointing to the casing in the puddle of blood before drawing his gun.

I did the same as we moved to the studio's back door, where a trail of blood led.

Dex bent down and put two fingers in the blood before announcing, "It's still warm; we must have just missed them."

I didn't acknowledge him as I shoved the back door open and moved into the back alley.

Two more big puddles of blood were in the alley, but nothing else. There were no bodies, no vehicles, just the sound of sirens getting closer.

What the fuck happened here?

"We need to get out of here before the cops show up," Dex announced as he moved back into the studio and toward the front door.

My mind was a mess, but Dex was right; we needed to leave. I couldn't help Presley if I was tied up in a police investigation.

I ran after Dex and jumped into the driver's seat of the Ranger Rover as he got into the passenger side.

I left the parking lot just as flashing blue and red lights turned onto the road a few blocks behind us.

Someone obviously heard the gunshots and called the cops.

“What the fuck happened in there?” Dex asked, but it was more to himself.

“Call the guys. I need all the fucking help I can get to track her down,” I ordered.

“On it,” Dex stated before pulling out his phone and getting to work.

“I’m going to check the subway station since it’s only a few blocks away. If she got away, I’m guessing that’s where she’d go,” I said, but Dex was busy on the phone and didn’t reply.

*Please, God, let her be okay.* I silently prayed as I drove us out of the neighborhood.

## Chapter 14

# Running For My Life

## Presley

Coming face-to-face with the devil himself was terrifying. I thought the self-defense training Erika helped me with would have prepared me for this moment, but it didn't. It took everything in me not to curl up in the fetal position on the ground and cower from this monster, just like I used to.

My chest was tight, and my entire body trembled with fear, as he stood in the doorway with that sadistic smirk. He looked exactly the same as I remembered, with his dark hair slicked back and handsome face that could fool just about anybody into believing he was a gentleman. Now that I knew about the monster that lurked beneath the surface, I recognized the evil in his eyes.

“Miss me, wife?” he taunted.

I didn't reply, taking a step back from him.

“You've been a tricky little bird to find.” he drawled before adding, “I should thank you, though, for being dumb enough

to attend the wedding of one of the most dangerous men in New York City and being part of his wedding party—front and center for all the photos going around. Did you not think that might draw a little attention to yourself?” he asked mockingly.

I would have been shocked by his words if I hadn't just seen Cruz, Blaise, Jared, and Dex in a meeting with Owen and his cronies. It was apparent they were involved in something shady.

“Oh, that's right, you had no idea you ran from one monster only to get in bed with another. You're so fucking stupid you had no idea your boyfriend was one of the leaders of the biggest organized crime group in the city, did you?” he asked, his tone getting harsher.

His words made my heart rate spike. I figured Cruz and the guys were shady, but was Conrad telling the truth when he said they ran the biggest criminal organization in the city? That would make Cruz no better than Conrad. I didn't know what Conrad was involved in when I married him, but I wish I had because I would have run fast and far from him if I had known how dangerous he was.

“You dumb whore. Were you seriously stupid enough to believe Cruz was one of the good guys? That he loved you and wanted to protect you?” he laughed, but it was harsh and humorless, sounding almost psychotic.

Tears filled my eyes, and I stood there frozen, unable to speak.

“You thought I was manipulative. Who do you think bought your apartment building, Laura? Hmmm? That’s right, your new boyfriend because he’s such a good guy. He wasn’t trying to manipulate you at all,” he said sarcastically.

I shuddered when I heard my real name. I wasn’t that naive, overly trusting girl anymore, or at least I thought I wasn’t. After hearing Conrad’s words, I realized Cruz played me like Conrad had. Obviously, I wasn’t as bright as I thought I was for falling for the nice-guy act twice.

A sudden wave of nausea hit me. How could I have been so stupid? All this time, I thought I had learned my lesson, but obviously, I hadn’t. I was still that foolish, overly trusting girl.

“I was planning on tormenting you a while longer before dragging you home where you belong, but your boyfriend was starting to get in the way, so I had to move my plans up a little. No more time for birds on your doorstep, dead guys in your alley, or break-ins. It’s unfortunate because I like seeing the fear on your face, but I guess I can worry about bringing that fear back when we get home,” he mused.

That was all him? I shouldn’t be surprised but it still sent panic rushing through my veins. How long had Conrad known where I was?

Conrad stepped toward me, and it was enough to draw me from my dark thoughts. As much as I wanted to shatter into a million pieces and sob about my poor choices and stupidity, now wasn’t the time. If Conrad got his hands on me, I would rather shoot myself in the head than let him take me.

*The gun!*

The only good thing about the young and naive girl I used to be was that Conrad didn't expect me to have a backbone, and he certainly wouldn't expect me to be armed. I hated violence. I still do. I realized, though, that sometimes violence was necessary to survive this cruel and unforgiving world.

I reached into the front pocket of my hoodie and withdrew the pistol before pointing it at Conrad.

His eyes widened slightly before his sadistic smirk grew wider.

“What the hell are you going to do with that, *little bird*? Shoot me? Remember that time you held a butcher knife to my throat and knew if you didn't kill me, you'd get the beating of your life? You still didn't cut me. So, I highly doubt you'll shoot me now.” He chuckled darkly.

“I'm not the girl I used to be,” I gritted out, trying not to let the fear bleed into my words.

Conrad let out a cruel, deep laughter before suddenly lunging for me with his fist balled and aimed at my face.

I pulled the trigger, and a loud bang echoed throughout the studio, followed by a pained grunt from Conrad before his fist connected with my cheek and knocked me to the ground, with him falling on top of me.

Pain exploded on the right side of my face, my vision blurred, and the fall knocked the air out of my lungs, leaving me breathless.

“You fucking bitch. You shot me,” Conrad hissed as he grabbed for the gun.

He managed to grab my hand that held the firearm just as I reached into the front pocket of my sweater with my free hand and pulled out the pepper spray.

I unleashed the canister in his face, causing him to cry out in pain and release my hand.

Some of the spray fell onto my face, making me cough and my eyes burn, but I fought through the pain and used my legs to push Conrad off.

As soon as I was free, I got up and bolted for the rear door since Conrad was between me and the front one.

I opened the back door and came face-to-face with Conrad’s two bodyguards, Tony and Garth.

I knew them well since they were his bodyguards when we were together, and although they never personally hurt me, they certainly didn’t stop Conrad when he did.

They seemed shocked to see me emerge instead of their boss, probably thinking the gunshot was him shooting me, not the other way around. They thought I was the same weak little girl I was back then.

*Good.*

I lifted the gun toward Garth as he reached for his own, but he wasn’t fast enough. I pulled the trigger, and a bullet pierced through his throat before he collapsed to the ground.



I was aiming for his chest, but I quickly realized it wasn't as easy as it seemed, shooting under duress while my hands shook violently. Not to mention, a moving target was nothing like shooting an unmoving piece of paper down range. I was thankful for Erika's tips when she taught me how to shoot. *"Always aim for the biggest part of the body. That way, if your aim is off, you'll stand a better chance at hitting something rather than nothing."*

Thank god I hit something, or I probably would be dead.

I shifted the gun toward Tony just as he managed to draw his pistol and started lifting it toward me. I didn't even hesitate before pulling the trigger.

I hit him in the shoulder, causing him to drop his gun and a pained hiss to leave his lips.

I heard movement behind me from where I left Conrad. Before he could reach me, I took off running down the alley toward the main road.

The subway was nine blocks away. I just needed to make it there. If I did, I might survive this mess.

I ran as fast as my feet would carry me, darting around people on the sidewalk as I regularly glanced over my shoulder to ensure I wasn't being followed. It was just starting to get dark out, so the streets weren't as busy as rush hour, but there were still people out and about.

My lungs burned as I kept pushing my body past its limits. I was a block away from the subway station when screeching

tires drew my attention behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder to see a black Ranger Roger aggressively pull over to the side of the road. My eyes widened when an enraged Cruz exited the driver's side and ran toward me, looking like the Terminator.

As I turned to run, I noticed his friend, Dexter, getting out of the passenger side.

“Presley, stop!” Cruz shouted angrily, but like fuck was I going to listen.

I picked up the pace and silently prayed for a train to be there when I reached the station.

I got to the stairs and took my first step down when someone yanked me back by my backpack. I screamed and thrashed against the strong arms holding me in place.

“Stop fighting me,” Cruz growled as he spun me around to face him.

Tears started running freely from my eyes, but I wasn't ready to give up. I just needed him to think I had.

I stopped fighting in his hold and looked up at him, letting my bottom lip quiver. His angry eyes softened, and a look almost like pity flashed through them before his gaze moved to my cheek, where I was undoubtedly already starting to bruise from when Conrad punched me. Anger and something else flashed across his eyes before he quickly stepped back from me to look over the rest of my body.

The minute he released my arms, I took that as my opportunity to strike.

I kned him as hard as possible in the balls, making him grunt and buckle over from the pain, and then I was gone. A pang of guilt gnawed at my chest, but I ignored it.

*I did what was needed to get away.* I told myself.

I took the stairs two at a time until I reached the bottom and bolted through the doors toward the platform.

I didn't have time to buy a ticket, so I jumped over the bar and kept running. Several pairs of eyes watched everything unfold, but I ignored them. They couldn't help me. Getting out of this city was my only option.

Hope rose in my chest when the sound of a train approaching reached my ears.

*I might actually make it.*

The train pulled up and stopped. Several people got off, and as I was about to get on, someone yanked me back by my backpack, again.

I was so fucking close, and I wasn't stopping for anyone.

In a desperate attempt to break free, I reached into the front pocket of my hoodie and pulled the gun out, keeping it low so no one saw it. I let it blend into my black sweater as I spun around to point it at whoever held onto my bag.

Dexter's eyes widened when he saw the gun in my hand, and he immediately let go of my backpack that was still over my

shoulders and held his hands up in surrender.

“We’re not going to hurt you, Presley. Put the gun down,” he stated in a low, raspy voice, almost sounding gentle as if talking to a cornered animal.

I didn’t respond as I tucked the gun back into my hoodie pocket and darted onto the train, keeping my eyes on Dexter to ensure he didn’t try anything.

The doors closed just as Cruz reached the train with a look of sheer panic on his face. He banged his fists against the door and shouted something inaudible as his eyes locked with mine. I gulped nervously, backing away from the door.

The train pulled away, and I let out a relieved breath.

I wasn’t in the clear yet, but I was getting closer. I needed to be smart and change trains at the next station to throw them off my tracks.

I finally took a minute to look around and noticed everyone was watching me warily. I followed the gaze of one passenger to my jeans and realized they were covered in Conrad’s blood.

I got off as soon as the train stopped at the next station.

Seconds later, another train pulled up, heading in the direction I had just come from.

I got on that train. Cruz would never guess that I doubled back. At least, I was hoping he wouldn’t.

I found a spot at the back, away from the windows, in case Cruz and Dexter were still there.

I held my breath when the train stopped at the station where I had left them, but luckily, there were no signs of Cruz or Dexter. When the train left the station, I let out the breath I held.

After another four stations went by and I hadn't seen anyone else following me, I sat on a bench at the back of the train, away from the other passengers. Exhaustion was starting to settle in now that the adrenaline wore off.

I had no idea where I was going, but I knew I needed to get far away from New York. No matter how tired I was, I couldn't rest until I was at least out of the city.

I rested my head against the wall, remembering everything Conrad said.

Cruz and his friends were dangerous criminals. Cruz bought my apartment building. He wanted to control me just like Conrad had.

***\*\*Flashback\*\****

***Four years ago***

*My cellphone rang, and I looked at the caller ID to see it was the principal from the school I worked at. I frowned since it was almost eight in the evening, and she wouldn't call this late unless it was important.*

*I answered and brought the phone to my ear before asking, "Good evening, Brenda. Is everything okay?"*

*I had always gotten along with her, and I thought of her as a friend, even though lately she had become distant. Actually, all*

*my friends had ghosted me over the past few weeks.*

*“Sorry for the late call, Laura, but I thought it best to tell you immediately. Due to funding cutbacks, we need to cut some teaching positions at the school, and unfortunately, yours is one of them,” she said.*

*“What?” I gasped in surprise.*

*“It’s nothing personal. You’re just one of the newest hires,” Brenda added.*

*“I can’t believe this. Do you think this will be temporary? Until you get more funding? Or is it permanent?” I asked in disbelief.*

*“It’s permanent. I’m sorry.” She sighed.*

*I sat at the table in the kitchen, suddenly feeling lightheaded. Everything was going to shit lately. Last month, someone hacked into my bank account, causing the bank to freeze all my funds while conducting a fraud investigation. Two weeks ago, I was fired from the dance studio where I taught ballet on weekends, and last week, my car was stolen. Now this.*

*“Can you at least provide me with a letter of recommendation so I can try and find something at another school?” I asked in a small voice.*

*“I’m sorry, Laura, but your work here was subpar at best, so I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that,” she said dryly, making my eyes widen in shock.*

*“I’m sorry, what? I always did more than what was asked of me. I went above and beyond to ensure I had new material for*

*my classes and volunteered regularly. How can you say my work was subpar?" I asked, feeling completely blindsided.*

*"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lincoln, but my decision is final. Please don't make this any more difficult than it needs to be." Brenda said firmly.*

*Mrs. Lincoln? She never called me that. What was going on here?*

*"Okay...Thanks for calling," I whispered. What else was I going to do, beg for my job back?*

*I couldn't believe I had just thanked her for calling after she fired me, but that was the type of person I was. Always taking shit from people without fighting back.*

*"Have a good evening, Mrs. Lincoln," Brenda said before hanging up the phone.*

*I glanced up to see Conrad leaning against the doorframe in the kitchen.*

*"Who was that?" he asked with a frown.*

*"The principal at the school. She fired me," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.*

*"Well, that's not a bad thing. Now that we're married, you don't need to work." He shrugged, making my eyes shoot up to his. He knew how I felt about working even though I didn't have to.*

*"I like to work, Conrad. It makes me feel like I have a purpose and gives me independence. I don't want to rely on*

*you financially.” I said defensively.*

*His jaw clenched with irritation before he replied, “You might not want to rely on me financially, but it doesn’t look like you have a choice, do you? You have no job or money, so why don’t you show a little appreciation for what I’m offering you, Laura.”*

*My mouth fell open. Conrad had never spoken to me like that before. We had only been married for a few months, but he had been patient and sweet with me until now.*

*I wasn’t a mooch who didn’t want to work, and I had an inheritance from my mother that was enough money to live a comfortable life if needed. Unfortunately, due to the fraud investigation, all those funds were frozen by the bank. None of this was my fault. It was all just unlucky circumstances.*

*“I didn’t get fired on purpose, Conrad, or hack into my own bank account. I’m sorry if I sounded unappreciative because I really do appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I’m just used to having my independence, and I don’t want you to think I married you for money. I’m just frustrated with all this,” I explained.*

*Conrad sighed before walking over and leaning down to kiss my forehead.*

*“I know, baby. I just want you to see that maybe all this is a blessing instead of a curse. Now you can focus on keeping our house tidy, and maybe without work stress, you’ll finally get pregnant,” he replied.*



*My jaw clenched. Conrad was obsessed with having a baby. I wanted one, too, but we had only been married for two months. What was the rush? He blamed the stress in my life for why I hadn't conceived, which was ridiculous, even though I would never tell him that. We had only started trying after the wedding, so it wasn't unusual for it to take a few months before getting pregnant.*

*"Maybe," I murmured, forcing a smile onto my face. I wasn't a fighter and preferred to let things go if it prevented conflict.*

*"Why don't you go get a massage tomorrow? Maybe that will help you relax," he suggested as he turned and headed for the fridge.*

*"Oh, I was going to ask you. The credit card you gave me was declined today. Have you checked the balance lately," I asked with a frown. I wanted to keep our finances separate when we married, but since the bank froze my funds, Conrad made me a copy of his credit card so I had access to his money.*

*"What did you try to buy?" he asked casually, grabbing a beer bottle from the fridge and twisting the cap off.*

*"The microwave stopped working, so I tried ordering a replacement. I can't believe a custom microwave would cost so much. The girl on the phone said it was two thousand and fifty dollars," I explained.*

*"I'll order it tomorrow," he murmured before taking a sip of beer.*

*“But why was my card declined? Did you forget to pay the bill?” I asked.*

*“No, but there’s a three-hundred-dollar daily limit on your card, that’s why it was declined.” He shrugged, taking another swig of his beer.*

*“I’m sorry. Did you just say you put a limit on my credit card? Like an allowance?” I asked in disbelief.*

*“You can spend as much of my money as you want, babe. I just want to know what you’re buying first. So, if it’s above your limit, talk to me,” he said.*

*“Wow, do you not trust me? Do you think I’ll rack up your card or something?” I pursed my lips and immediately regretted my outburst because I hated arguing.*

*“Laura,” he said in warning before adding, “You’re starting to sound like a spoiled, entitled brat. I just told you that you can spend as much money as you want. I just want to know where my hard-earned money is going. Three hundred dollars is plenty to get your nails done, hair, or even a spa day, so I don’t see why you’re so upset. I feel like you’re taking everything that’s happened lately, out on me,” he chastised.*

*It wasn’t about the money because he knew as well as I did that I wasn’t a big spender. I didn’t get my nails done or go for spa days. My biggest treat was going to the bookstore and getting myself a new book. Maybe he was right, and I was being unreasonable.*

*“I’m sorry, you’re right. I’m just stressed lately,” I apologized, feeling embarrassed that he had just called me a brat. I really didn’t want him to think I wasn’t grateful because I was. Without a job or money, I didn’t know what I would have done if I didn’t have Conrad in my life.*

*“That’s better. Now, why don’t you draw yourself a bubble bath and read one of your books? I have to go meet a client tonight, and I’ll probably be home late, so don’t wait up,” he said, coming over to plant another kiss on my forehead before turning and walking off.*

*“Another meeting? I’ve barely seen you at all this week.” I called after him.*

*Conrad froze in the doorway and turned to face me. “You sure are pulling out all the cards tonight, aren’t you? First, you act like a spoiled brat, and now you’re the nagging wife?” he joked, but there was irritation in his tone, which made me blush in embarrassment and look away.*

*“Sorry, I was just hoping we could watch a movie or something,” I said softly.*

*“Another time, Laura. I need to work, especially now that you lost both your jobs and aren’t bringing anything to the table,” he said, and I felt the jab right in my chest.*

*How did I become this needy, clingy woman who relied on her husband for everything?*

*“You’re right. I’m sorry,” I whispered, as Conrad turned and left the room without another word.*

*Shame and guilt overwhelmed me as I sat in a giant mansion alone. How did I get here? No job, no money, and no friends.*

***\*\*End Flashback\*\****

I shuddered at the memory. I was so naive back then. Conrad had me believing I was the problem. I was young and always saw the good in people which made me ignore my gut when I felt something was off with him. I even scolded myself for thinking he might have had something to do with all my misfortunes. He had been nothing but good to me up until that point, so how could I think that of him?

Meanwhile, he was just setting everything up, so I was utterly dependent on him and wouldn't survive if I ever left.

Of course, things only got worse with Conrad from there. A lot worse.

Hearing that Cruz bought my apartment building made me feel like I was right back at the beginning of my marriage to Conrad, and Cruz was conspiring behind my back to control me just like him. Why else would he buy the building I lived in?

Never again would I let that happen.

## Chapter 15

# I Got You

## Cruz

I watched the train pull away from the station before turning to Dex, who already had his face buried in his phone, looking unphased that Presley had escaped us.

“What the fuck, man? Why didn’t you stop her?” I growled.

“I’m not sure about you, but I wasn’t exactly in the mood to get shot today,” he grumbled without looking up from his phone.

I wanted to punch the fucker straight in the jaw for acting like this wasn’t a big fucking deal because it was. Someone hit Presley. Her cheek was already bruising, almost double the size of her other one, and her clothes were drenched in blood. By the looks of things, it wasn’t her blood, but still, it was apparent I wasn’t the only one trying to get my hands on her. I was pretty confident that whoever else was looking for her didn’t have good intentions as I did. She also looked terrified.

Dex needed to pull his head out of his ass and see the severity of the situation.

“She wouldn’t have fucking shot you,” I scoffed.

Dex finally lifted his eyes from his phone and raised a brow. “You sure about that? How about your balls? Do they agree with that statement?” he asked in his usually harsh tone.

I cringed at the mention of my balls, suddenly remembering how badly they still ached from her kneeling me. Fuck, she didn’t hold back, not even a little.

“I’m not sure if I should thank Erika for teaching Presley all those moves or give her shit,” I muttered, but more to myself. I already knew the answer to that question, I was just a little disgruntled after having my balls shoved up into my body by her knee.

I didn’t even want to think what would have happened to Presley at her studio had Erika not taught her all that shit, so I was obviously grateful that Erika made sure she could handle herself.

“Presley’s in survival mode, Cruz. At this point, she’ll do just about anything if she thinks we intend to hurt her. For whatever fucked up reason, that’s exactly what she thinks. You need to be smart about this, so it doesn’t end with your funeral,” Dex pointed out.

“Alright then, genius, what’s the fucking plan now? How do we find her when we have literally no starting point?” I shot back, running my fingers through my hair in frustration.

“I put a tracker in her bag,” he replied simply and glanced at his phone before adding, “But right now, we need to get the

hell out of here since your little attempted abduction garnered a little attention. It won't be long before the cops show up.”

Without waiting for me to say anything, Dex turned and walked away while looking down at his phone.

“What? Are you serious? You put a fucking tracker in her bag?” I asked in disbelief as I ran after him.

“Of course, I did. Did you think I would let her get on that train and disappear? I always carry a tracker in my wallet. At least now we can do this discreetly without putting on a dramatic display for the entire city to watch,” he scoffed as if offended I ever doubted him.

“Fuck, man. I want to kiss you right now,” I blurted out, feeling a surge of hope.

“Please don't,” he growled.

“It's a figure of speech, Dex. I'm not going to kiss you.” I shook my head in disbelief.

“Good.”

I glanced over to see the corner of his mouth tilt up in a rare half-smile as he looked at his phone.

“What is it?” I asked, frowning.

“I'm watching the tracker. Presley's heading back this way. She got off at the next station over and then hopped on another train and doubled back,” he said, and I smiled, too. Presley was a savvy little thing. If we had gone after her, we would



have headed in the same direction she had left and would have never found her. It was a brilliant move on her part really.

“Fuck, I can’t even think straight right now. All I want to do is turn around and drag her off that train kicking and screaming if I have to, but I know that’s a terrible idea for so many reasons.” I sighed in frustration.

I was always the calm, tactical guy in our group, but this was the first time I was so overwhelmed with emotions that I couldn’t think past getting her to our house where she would be safe.

“I say we follow her from a distance and wait until she crashes for the night. She’s got to be exhausted after the day she’s had. Once the adrenaline wears off, she’ll need to sleep. When she does, we grab her and try not to fucking traumatize her any more than we must,” Dex suggested, and I liked that idea.

I wished she understood that I was trying to protect her, not hurt her. It would make things a lot easier, but unfortunately, that wasn’t the case.

“Alright. Let’s do that.” I sighed, hopping into the driver’s seat of the Ranger Rover.

Once Dex was in the passenger side, I pulled away from the curb in the direction Presley was heading.

“I sent a text to Blaise. He, Jared, and Erika are joining us,” Dex stated.

“Thanks, man.” I sighed.

“She’ll be fine, Cruz. You saw the blood at her studio. She obviously wasn’t afraid of pulling the trigger when it came down to it. And once you get her back to the house in a controlled environment, you can use your god-awful charming personality to make her trust you again,” Dex scrunched his nose at the end.

“I just hate seeing the fear in her eyes when she looks at me,” I muttered.

“She’ll come around. Let’s just focus on getting her back to the house where she’s safe. Then you’ll have all the time in the world to make her see that you’re trying to protect her, not hurt her,” Dex replied.

We drove in relative silence for forty-five minutes. Dex called out the directions from the tracker, and I followed the route. I was starting to fall behind since she moved substantially faster on the subway than I could on the road.

Luckily, she stopped on the city’s edge for fifteen minutes, where Dex said there was a Greyhound station.

Once she was on the bus, we easily caught up to it, and so did Blaise and the others. I felt a bit better knowing she was only a few car lengths ahead of us, and if anything happened, we could quickly intervene.

The bus was heading northwest, and it didn’t take long to figure out that she was heading to Canada. Dex started researching on his phone to see if he could figure out the bus schedule.

“That bus stops in Binghamton. She’ll have to get on another one from there, and it doesn’t leave until tomorrow morning.” Dex advised as he continued scanning his phone.

“That’s only another hour out. Good. The quicker we get Presley back to the house, the better,” I said.

“Agreed,”

We followed in silence. Blaise’s SUV was directly behind ours.

Dex had been right. The bus pulled into the station in Binghamton just after one in the morning. We watched from a distance as everyone got off, including a skittish-looking Presley who continuously looked over her shoulder.

She had changed from her blood-stained clothes and now wore black leggings and a dark purple oversized hoodie. The actual station was closed, so Presley walked along the side of the building, where she found a bench.

Blaise parked his SUV beside mine in the parking lot across the street. We had a clear view of the bus station but we were far enough away so she wouldn’t notice us. We lowered our windows so we could chat between vehicles.

We waited as the other passengers were picked up or got into taxis and left the station. Within an hour, the station was deserted except for Presley, curled up on the bench with her head resting on her backpack, looking to be sleeping already. I bet she was beyond exhausted and so uncomfortable on that bench.

*Don't worry, beautiful. I'll get you to a comfortable bed soon where you'll be safe.*

“Here,” Jared said from the passenger seat of Blaise’s SUV, drawing my attention away from Presley.

I looked out my window to see Jared holding a syringe.

“What the fuck’s that?” I frowned but grabbed it from him anyway.

“Dex asked us to bring it,” Jared replied.

“We need to get her back to the house, and it’s over a three-hour drive, Cruz. What do you think will be less traumatic for her? Being restrained the entire time or sleeping and waking up in a comfortable bed?” Dex asked, sounding annoyed.

“I wanna try talking to her first and see if I can’t calm her down,” I replied stubbornly.

I had a feeling Dex was right, and that trying to talk sense into her right now would be pointless, but I still had to try because drugging her certainly wasn’t going to win me any points.

“I want to talk to her too. She might listen to me,” Erika said firmly from the back seat of the other SUV, sounding just as against the idea of drugging Presley as I was.

“She’s got a gun, Erika, and already pointed it at Dex,” Blaise growled.

“I don’t give a shit—Presley’s my friend. If I can calm her down and get her to come willingly, that would be much better

than knocking her out. Don't you think?" Erika replied defiantly.

"I agree with Fred," I added.

"Fine, but we disarm her first," Blaise conceded with a heavy sigh.

"I'll do that," I said, hoping that if I held her, I could make her relax.

"If talking doesn't work, do you want me to be the bad guy who drugs her? Might help..." Dex started, but I cut him off.

"No. If it gets to that point, I'll do it," I said firmly, pocketing the syringe Jared handed me.

I knew Dex had good intentions. He was just trying to make this easier on me, but for whatever reason, my anger flared to life when I thought about someone else touching her. This whole incident made me realize just how possessive I was over Presley. I never thought I was that type of guy, but clearly, I was wrong. I didn't even want my best friend touching her, knowing he was only trying to help.

"Okay." he nodded in understanding before asking, "You ready?"

"Yeah, let's switch spots. I want to ride in the back with Presley on the drive home," I stated, and he nodded before exiting the vehicle to switch with me.

We pulled out of the parking lot and drove across the street to the bus station with our headlights off. We stopped the vehicle far enough away so Presley wouldn't hear our

approach and got out on foot. Dex stayed in the SUV so that when we had her, he could pull up next to us and make it easier to get her in the backseat.

Blaise and Erika went one way around the building while Jared and I went the other.

We turned the corner from our side simultaneously as Blaise and Erika did the other.

My eyes landed on Presley who looked so small and cold curled up on the bench. Her eyes were closed, and it looked like she was asleep. I couldn't see her hands since they were buried inside her giant hoodie, but I was almost certain she would be holding the gun.

I needed to move fast when I grabbed her.

I gave Blaise and Erika a nod, letting them know I was moving in before I approached the side of the bench by her feet and quietly leaned down to wrap Presley up in a bear hug. Before I could get my arms around her, she sprung up from the bench in fright, clutching the gun firmly in one hand.

I had no fucking choice, and it killed me to do it, but I tackled her, wrapping my arms around her chest and pinning her arms at her sides. As we started to fall, I spun us around so I would take the brunt of the impact, and she landed on top of me.

I grunted when we hit the concrete, and she groaned before thrashing in my hold.

“Let go of me,” she cried out, but I held firm.

I adjusted my hold so I could pin both her arms with one of mine and reached for the gun in her hand before twisting it out of her grip and handing it to Jared.

“Calm down, beautiful. It’s just me,” I said calmly, even though deep down I was far from calm. I felt so overwhelmed with guilt and anger that it was eating away at me. I had to suppress those emotions for her sake.

“Please let go of me,” she sobbed, continuing to struggle in my hold as I moved us to a sitting position and wrapped one of my legs over hers so she would stop trying to kick out. At this point, she would hurt herself more than anything.

“I would do just about anything for you, beautiful, but unfortunately, letting you go when I know you’re in danger isn’t one of them,” I said in a low, gentle voice next to her ear.

If I was being honest, I wasn’t sure I could let Presley go even if she wasn’t in danger. My feelings for this woman had gotten intense, fast.

“Please,” she sobbed, still struggling as if her life depended on it.

“Pres, it’s me, Erika. You’re okay, I promise. You’re safe now,” Erika tried comforting Presley, but Presley was so panicked that I wasn’t sure she even recognized Erika’s voice.

Dex had been right. She wasn’t in the right mindset to think clearly. Her sobs grew louder and more desperate. It was only a matter of time before someone heard and called the cops.

I pulled the syringe out of my pocket and removed the lid with my teeth before spitting it to the side.

The look on Erika's face told me that even she had accepted that this was for the best. She knelt down in front of me and gently, but firmly grabbed Presley's head to hold it in place.

"I'm sorry, beautiful. I promise when you wake up, you'll be safe," I said in a low, husky voice next to Presley's ear before quickly jabbing the needle into her neck and pushing down the plunger. She whimpered, and it was the saddest sound I had ever heard, making me feel so fucking guilty. I hated that I was doing this to her, but it was necessary.

Her sobs died down, and it didn't take long before her body was dead weight leaning against my chest.

Dex pulled the SUV to the edge of the building, and I lifted Presley's small, limp body into my arms before carrying her over to the vehicle.

"It's for the best, Cruz. As soon as I saw her, I knew she wouldn't be consolable," Erika said sadly.

"Doesn't make me feel any less guilty," I mumbled as I climbed into the back seat with Presley in my arms and laid her across the bench with her head resting in my lap. At least she finally looked at peace while she slept.

"We'll follow you guys back," Blaise stated before returning to his vehicle.

We drove in silence as I stroked Presley's hair.



At least she was safe, but now I had my work cut out for me. Not only did I have to earn her trust back, but I also needed answers about her past. She was in danger, and the quicker I took care of that threat, the better.

“I’ll need Carla to come by the house at some point,” I told Dex.

“I’ll talk to her,” Dex replied.

“Thanks.”

Carla had been incredible with the girls we rescued from Petrov’s human trafficking operation, so I hoped she could help me set Presley up with whatever she might need. Starting with a fucking counselor. I doubt she would talk immediately, but it was worth a shot. Carla had been through her own traumatic experience, so if anyone could relate to whatever Presley was going through, it would be her. I hoped anyway.

Fuck, she was going to hate me when she woke up. I wasn’t looking forward to that.

## Chapter 16

# Bad Reaction

Presley

**M**y head was pounding, and my entire body felt like I had been run over by a train.

I was lying on something much softer and more comfortable than my bed, which made me frown as I tried opening my heavy eyelids. I felt so tired, and opening my eyes felt like the most challenging task in the world.

What the fuck happened to me? I felt hungover, but I didn't remember drinking.

When my eyes finally opened, I found myself in an unfamiliar large bedroom. It was a big room with simple wooden furniture and a masculine navy blue decor. The blanket covering me was so soft it felt like silk against my skin.

I didn't have much time to assess my surroundings when suddenly, memories of everything that happened flooded my mind, causing my heart to practically beat out of my chest.

Cruz met with Owen at the restaurant. They knew each other. Conrad found me at my studio and tried to take me. Oh my god, I shot him and his two guards. I most likely killed one of them.

I thought I had gotten far enough when I reached the bus station almost three hours away, but I was obviously wrong. Somehow, Cruz still found me and then drugged me.

Panic shot through me when my eyes landed on a figure slumped in a chair by the window. I quickly realized it was Cruz sleeping there with a glass of amber liquid in his hand that rested on the armrest.

He must have brought me back to his place.

I quietly pushed the comforter off my body and nearly gasped when I realized I was no longer wearing my clothes but an oversized T-shirt and a pair of men's boxers. Did Cruz change me? What else did he do while I was unconscious?

I needed to get out of here. I slipped out of bed, trying to be as quiet as possible. I went to step toward the door but immediately had to brace myself on the edge of the bed from the sudden dizzy spell. Whatever drug Cruz gave me must still be in my system.

I waited a second with my eyes closed until my head stopped spinning, and then I tried again. I took slow, quiet steps toward the door. My body swayed like I was drunk, and my vision was blurry, but I kept going since this might be my only opportunity to escape while Cruz slept. I almost fell over

multiple times on the short walk to the door, but I managed to keep myself upright.

I reached the door and braced my hand against the wall when another dizzy spell hit me, making me nauseous.

I put my hand on the handle and tried opening the door, but quietly cursed when I found it locked.

My anxiety spiked at the realization that I was trapped. This room might have been big, but the locked door still brought my claustrophobia to life.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard Cruz's voice.

"It's locked. Every door in the house has a fingerprint scanner to open them," he explained in a raspy, tired voice.

I spun around with my back against the door to face Cruz, my anxiety reaching an all-time high as the severity of the situation sunk in. I was in the same position as before, only with a new monster keeping me hostage.

"You won't be stuck in this room forever if that's what you're worried about," he added as he assessed me with a concerned frown.

"W-Will you l-let me go?" I asked, my voice still slurred from the drugs and shaky with fear.

"No, Presley. Not while you're in danger." Cruz said firmly, shaking his head.

I wanted to say that I was in danger here with him but kept the thought to myself. I knew what happened when you pissed

off a monster, and I would rather avoid that if I could.

“How are you feeling?” he asked gently.

My legs wobbled as he asked the question, and I grabbed the door handle behind me for balance.

Cruz stood abruptly, put his glass on the bedside table, and ran over to me.

“No, please,” I flinched away from him, almost falling to the ground.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Presley. I just don’t want you hurting yourself,” he said gently, grabbing my arms to steady me.

My mind screamed at me to fight, but the drug in my system made it next to impossible. I struggled to pull away, but it was a pathetic attempt. I didn’t have the energy to keep going, so I stopped.

Cruz guided me back to the bed and forced me to sit down. My entire body trembled, and my breathing was labored, as the panic attack took control of my body. I couldn’t think straight because of the drug in my system, and the claustrophobia wasn’t helping with my anxiety.

“Hey, hey, hey, breathe, beautiful. BREATHE. You’re safe now.” Cruz sat beside me, wrapped his arms around my body, and pulled me against his chest.

I tried pushing him away, but he barely budged.

“P-Please don’t,” I sobbed, trying again to pull away and failing. I had no energy left, and my limbs weighed a thousand pounds.

I felt helpless while he cradled my tense body in his arms.

I was waiting for the nice-guy act to vanish and the punishment to come. It always did.

I kneed him in the balls. He wouldn’t just let that go. At some point, I would pay for what I did. I was sure of it. There were always consequences for my actions, either a mental game or physical pain. If I were being honest, I would take the physical abuse any day over the mind games. Those were what really broke me all those years ago.

“I told you I would never hurt you, Presley, and I meant it. I would rather cut my own dick off than lay a hand on you,” he said as he rubbed his hand soothingly up my back.

“Y-You d-drugged me,” I pointed out between panicked breaths and felt him wince.

“I feel fucking shitty for doing that, but I had to since you wouldn’t come willingly,” he stated.

“Don’t you get it? I just want to protect you,” he added with a frustrated sigh.

“W-Who’s going to protect me f-from you?” I asked and immediately regretted it. I shouldn’t be provoking him. I knew better than that.

“I know you don’t believe me yet, but I promise I will never hurt you,” he repeated, pulling back to look me in the eyes.

He was good. The pleading look he was giving me seemed genuine, and had I not lived with a manipulator before, I would have believed it.

“B-But have you k-killed people?” I wasn’t sure why I asked. I knew the answer already, but I needed to hear him say it for some reason.

Cruz didn’t lash out and strike me as I was expecting. Instead, he looked to be thinking of how to answer my question.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Presley, because I think you deserve the truth after everything I put you through. Yes, I have killed people, but only people who deserved to die. The guys and I own several legitimate businesses, as I told you before, but I didn’t tell you that we also run some illegal operations,” he explained and sighed before adding, “Blaise is one of my best friends. He’s like a brother to me, and when his family was brutally murdered while we were in the military together, I followed him here to seek revenge. It’s complicated. We don’t operate like most other criminal organizations and don’t kill and torture simply for fun. If we take someone out, it’s because they’ve hurt one of our own, threatened us, or did us wrong so badly they deserved to die.”

I immediately thought back to when I kned Cruz in the balls. If he counted that as hurting one of them, would he kill me?

As if he could read my mind, he said, “I don’t hurt those I care about. EVER. I protect them. With my life, if it came to



it. Do you hear me? I would die for you, Presley, and kill for you. That's how much you mean to me. Once you give me the names of those who hurt you, I'll prove how serious I am about that last one."

"Y-You bought my apartment building," I slurred. Cruz didn't deny it because it was a statement, not a question.

"I did it to protect you. You live in such a shitty part of town, and after your place was broken into, I felt overwhelmed with the need to keep you safe. That's why I bought your building. Not because I wanted to access your unit or anything like that, but to protect you." He let out a long breath.

I didn't know what to believe. I had been lied to so much over the years and manipulated that it was hard to believe anything Cruz said.

Suddenly, the room spun again, before another bout of nausea hit. This one was more intense than the last.

"Oh god, I'm going to be sick," I said before dry heaving.

Cruz picked me up off the bed and brought me into the bathroom, carefully putting me down on my feet.

I dropped to my knees before vomiting into the toilet. I had nothing in my stomach, so only bile came out, which burned my sore throat.

Cruz grabbed my hair and held it out of my face while I vomited some more.

"Fuck. I'm so sorry, beautiful. I feel like the biggest asshole in the world right now," Cruz stated as he soothingly rubbed

my back.

I rested my forehead against the toilet seat and closed my eyes to stop the room from spinning.

“I’ll get you some water,” he offered, releasing my hair and walking away.

I could hear water running from the faucet, but my eyes were still closed. I could only assume he was filling a glass. I wanted to tell him not to bother since I wouldn’t drink anything he gave me, but I was too nauseous and tired to speak.

“Here, drink this,” he stated, but I didn’t open my eyes, only shook my head.

“You’re killing me right now, Presley,” he huffed, sounding genuinely concerned.

I was surprised he was still putting on the nice-guy act. With Conrad, once the cat was out of the bag and I knew what kind of monster he truly was, he didn’t try hiding it anymore. I lived with a cruel psychopath from then on.

When I didn’t vomit again for several minutes, Cruz picked me up off the floor and carried me into the bedroom before laying me down on the bed.

“I think you’re having a bad reaction to the sedative. I’m going to have a doctor come check you out,” he murmured.

My eyes remained closed since they were too heavy to keep open. I felt like death.

I fought to stay conscious, but no matter how hard I tried, I was losing the battle.

***\*\*Flashback\*\****

***Three years earlier***

*I walked into the coffee shop and sighed when I saw the five-person lineup. I practically had to beg my husband's bodyguard to stop here, and I knew he would be pissed if I made him wait in the car for long.*

*It had become my new norm. After my car was stolen last year, I got a payout from the insurance company, but it wasn't much money since I drove an old Honda Civic. Since I couldn't find a new job after getting fired, I couldn't afford a new car. I had to rely on Conrad or his bodyguards to take me places, and they weren't always available, so I was often stuck at home for days on end.*

*"Laura?" A familiar voice, I hadn't heard in forever called from behind me.*

*I turned to see Crystal, my ex-best friend, standing behind me in line. I say ex since she stopped answering my calls and text messages almost a year ago and never explained why she ghosted me.*

*"Hey, how are you?" I asked, forcing a smile on my face.*

*Crystal looked nervously around the coffee shop and behind her before asking, "Are you here alone?"*

*"Yes. I mean, Conrad's driver is waiting for me in the car," I replied.*

*“How are you? Are you okay?” she asked, looking me over as if expecting to find something. I just wasn’t sure what.*

*“Yeah, I’m good. What about you? Are you still teaching at the school,” I asked awkwardly, changing the subject.*

*She wasn’t my friend anymore, so I couldn’t exactly tell her that I was miserable, jobless, and a giant disappointment to my husband for being unable to conceive children. So, instead, I lied.*

*When we were friends, she would have been the first person I called when I was struggling, but now, I had no one. I was alone.*

*“I’m sorry I stopped talking to you, Laura. I didn’t want to,” she rushed, looking genuinely apologetic.*

*“Then why did you?” I asked, unable to hide the hurt in my tone.*

*“He threatened me,” she whispered before looking over her shoulder again like a paranoid person.*

*I frowned before asking, ” Who?”*

*“Conrad,” she hissed, causing my jaw to drop open.*

*“What?” I gasped.*

*“He threatened all of us, said he would have his brother kill our families if we didn’t stop talking to you,” she said, glancing at the door again.*

*“Why would he do that?” I asked skeptically, but my chest felt heavy.*

*Crystal was my best friend. I trusted her with my life, and even though she stopped talking to me, I still did. Why would Conrad do that? I knew his brother was a really bad guy, but Conrad told me he had no communication with him.*

*“I think he didn’t want you to have any friends.” she replied and paused before adding in a hushed voice, “That’s not everything. Brenda confided in me at the Christmas party last year after a few too many glasses of wine. Conrad forced her to fire you. I wanted to tell you all this sooner, but I seriously thought he would follow through with his threat and go after my parents.”*

*I didn’t think my mouth could fall open any wider, but it did. What the hell?*

*“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked, her tone laced with concern.*

*“I don’t know,” I murmured, still shocked by what she said.*

*Conrad had only gotten physical with me once. It was after we saw a fertility doctor who conducted a bunch of tests and discovered I couldn’t have children. The doctor said I suffered from premature ovarian failure. He explained that my ovaries couldn’t produce eggs and therefore, I couldn’t have any biological children. I was devastated by the news, but Conrad was so mad, he backhanded me when we got into the car that day.*

*He never did apologize. I kind of felt like I deserved it for being such a disappointment. His words that day were what hurt the most, though. “You can’t keep a job, the house is*

*always a mess, the sex is mediocre at best, and now you can't even produce an heir. Tell me, Laura? What can you do?"*

*I was so stunned by his words that I said nothing. I just sat next to him in the car with a stinging cheek and tears falling freely from my eyes, feeling like the biggest failure in the world.*

*He changed after that day.*

*"I think he's trying to control you, Laura. Why else would he take away your income and friends?" she whispered.*

*"What can I get you?" the young barista asked as I reached the front of the line.*

*I suddenly felt nauseous and no longer wanted a latte. Was Crystal telling me the truth? She had no reason to lie.*

*"Miss?" the barista tried again to get my attention.*

*"I changed my mind. I don't want anything," I told the barista before leaving the line.*

*I went to walk away, feeling overwhelmed with everything Crystal told me, but she stopped me by grabbing my arm and pulling me aside.*

*"I'm worried about you, Laura. I think he's more involved with his brother's criminal activities than he lets on. Are you sure that you're safe?" she asked with a concerned frown.*

*I didn't know what to think. Was Conrad responsible for me losing my other job, too? What about my inheritance? Did he have something to do with that? The bank told me at first that*

*the funds in my account were frozen while they investigated, but later, I found out that the money was actually missing. Whenever I called for an update, I always got the same answer, "We're still investigating."*

*Conrad never seemed overly concerned with my missing money, which now had me wondering if he had anything to do with it disappearing.*

*I was about to reply to Crystal when Tony, my husband's bodyguard, stormed into the coffee shop looking furious.*

*"I gotta go," I rushed out and didn't wait for a reply from Crystal before meeting Tony at the door and leaving the coffee shop.*

*I tried acting normal on the way home, but I wasn't sure if Tony was buying it. He kept looking at me in the rear-view mirror with furrowed brows.*

*Conrad wasn't home when I arrived, so I did something I usually never did. I went into his office and snooped.*

*The minute my eyes landed on a file with my name on it at the back of his filing cabinet, my mouth went dry. Why did he keep a file on me?*

*I opened the folder with shaky hands and gasped when I saw the first page. It was a list of all my friends, where they lived, their families, and so much more. Then, there were several candid pictures of them and their families. Crystal wasn't lying. Everyone on the list had ghosted me just about a year ago. It couldn't be coincidental.*

*After the pictures, there was another sheet of paper with all my banking information for the frozen account. A handwritten note on the side that said, 'Paid off. Harold Thompson's personal number 267-588-9943.'*

*Harold was my accountant at the bank, the one who kept telling me the investigation was still ongoing.*

*"Find anything interesting?" Conrad's deep voice caused me to jump in fright.*

*My eyes shot to the door and found Conrad standing there with his arms folded over his chest and an unreadable expression on his face.*

*"What is all this?" I asked, my voice trembling with anger.*

*"A file folder," he said simply.*

*"I know what it is, but why do you have it?" I gritted out.*

*"Why don't you ask me what you really want to know, wife?" he asked, and something in his tone sent a chill down my spine.*

*"Fine. Did...Did you have something to do with me getting fired," I asked.*

*"I did." He nodded once, but didn't elaborate.*

*"What about my friends? Did you threaten them to stay away from me?" I asked, my voice getting louder by the second.*

*"I did." He nodded again, looking unashamed.*



*“Why Conrad? Why would you do all that?” I shouted, tears running down my cheeks.*

*I felt completely betrayed.*

*“It’s simple, you’re my wife. I didn’t want you working, so I took care of that. Your friends would eventually start poisoning your simple mind with bad advice, so I took care of them, too, before they became a problem.”*

*“My money?” I asked.*

*He didn’t answer, but at this point, he didn’t need to. I already knew the answer.*

*“I can’t believe you would do all this and then make me feel like a failure,” I shouted.*

*“Calm down, Laura. You’re overreacting,” he said when I moved from behind the desk and stormed toward the door, which he was still blocking.*

*“I’m leaving Conrad. Move,” I shouted when I reached him.*

*“No,” he growled.*

*“If you think I’ll stay with you after all this, you’re insane. You had me truly believing that I was a disgrace, a complete disappointment. Meanwhile, you set me up. How could...” I started, but the words got caught in my throat when he roughly gripped a fist full of my hair and slammed my face into the wooden door frame.*

*My nose and forehead exploded with pain, and stars invaded my vision. Something warm and wet slid down my face, and I*

*knew it was blood.*

*“You don’t have a choice, wife. Remember your vows? Till death do us part. You aren’t going anywhere. I think it’s time you learn what happens to those who betray me,” he growled before slamming my face into the door frame again.*

*The fear I felt was more intense than the throbbing pain on my face.*

*I tried fighting the darkness that threatened to swallow me, but it was a losing battle, and everything went dark.*

***\*\*End of flashback\*\****

After reliving that nightmare in my mind, I realized I was crying. I was too tired to open my eyes when someone wiped the tears running down my temple before a hand gently stroked my hair.

“Sleep beautiful, I got you,” Cruz said soothingly, but it didn’t have the intended effect.

I felt like I was back in that nightmare, fighting to stay conscious. I knew what awaited me the next time I woke up.

*Hell.*

## Chapter 17

# Puzzle Pieces

## Cruz

I had Tyson stop by to check on Presley after she passed out. He wasn't technically a doctor but a military medic and had enough experience and knowledge to deal with most things. I trusted the guy wholeheartedly and knew Presley was in good hands.

After checking Presley's vitals and running a few other tests, Tyson discovered that she was underweight, which wasn't a surprise to me after seeing her fridge contents. He said the sedative I gave her would take longer than usual to work out of her system and that she basically needed to sleep it off. He did give her an IV with fluids since she was severely dehydrated, but other than that, there wasn't anything else he could do.

When she woke up several hours later, I could tell she was feeling better because her face had gotten its color back, and her energy had returned. Whenever I got too close, she prepared herself for a fight. Presley wouldn't let me anywhere

near her, and I didn't push her. She needed time, and I would give her some, as much as I hated keeping my distance.

I tried getting answers from her that could help us piece together what went down at her studio and who else had been after her, but she kept her mouth shut and refused to answer my questions.

Erika also tried talking to Presley, but Presley wasn't having any of it. In her eyes, Erika betrayed her and led her straight into the arms of another, and I quote, '*monster*'. It fucking hurt to hear her call me a monster, especially since she believed it. I tried not to let it get to me and reminded myself that she must have been through something traumatic to act this way, but it still felt like a knife piercing my heart.

I had been so worried about Presley over the past forty-eight hours that I hadn't put much thought into everything that went down. So, after I brought Presley something to eat and drink, I left her alone in the room, hoping she would actually eat the food, and headed for my office to think.

When I arrived, Blaise, Jared, and Dex were chatting in the hallway. Zeus lay on the floor next to Blaise.

"Hey, how's Presley?" Blaise asked.

"Physically, fine. Mentally, she's a fucking wreck." I admitted with a sigh, running my fingers through my hair.

"Dude, you look like shit. Have you slept at all since you brought her back here?" Jared asked, looking concerned.

“Not really. I dozed off a few times in the chair beside the bed, but that’s about it,” I replied truthfully.

“You won’t be able to do anything for her if you’re a zombie, Cruz. You need to fucking sleep,” Dex chastised.

“I need answers before I can relax. My mind won’t shut off until I know who’s fucking trying to hurt her.” I said frustratedly.

“Let’s go into your office and figure out what we know so far,” Blaise suggested, and I nodded.

We all sat inside my office. Jared and Dex on the couch off to the side, me behind my desk, and Blaise in one of the chairs across from me.

“So, what do you know so far?” Blaise asked.

“Well, she showed up at the restaurant where we met Owen and his men. I have no idea why she was there, but I saw her outside with one of the girls from her dance studio, Cassandra. When our eyes met, she was deathly pale, then turned and ran off. At first, I thought she got spooked because of Owen’s goons. They don’t exactly look like law-abiding citizens. Then, the more I thought about it, her fear made no sense. Half the tenants in her building look like shitheads, so why would she be that frightened seeing me with a few rough-looking guys? I get she would have questions for me after seeing me there, but to run for her life like that? It didn’t make sense.” I shook my head.

The guys were all deep in thought, so I continued, “Then, when Dex and I arrived at her building, an Escalade was parked a block away that didn’t look like it belonged. I had the plate run, and it belonged to an associate of the Lincoln brothers. By the time I got the information on the plates back, it was too late, the vehicle was gone. It obviously wasn’t a coincidence, but did they follow us there?” I sighed. What a fucking mess.

“There’s a possibility that they saw Presley through the window at the restaurant at the same time you did and noticed how you were looking at her. They might have thought she meant something to you,” Jared suggested.

“Yeah, but we settled our beef with them. So why put the effort into following me there? Plus, there’s the whole incident at her studio. I have no fucking clue what happened there, but I’m guessing at least three people got shot. There were no bodies or vehicles, just blood. I figured that had something to do with her past that she wouldn’t tell me about. But the timing of it all was pretty fucked...” My words trailed off as it suddenly hit me: she recognized someone in that meeting, which was why she looked like she had seen a ghost from her past. She had.

Did she owe them money? Maybe she worked for the Lincoln brothers at some point. I doubted that. Presley didn’t have it in her to be a criminal. I could almost bet money on the fact that she used to be sweet and innocent, and whatever she went through hardened her.

“What is it?” Blaise asked with a frown.

“She recognized someone in that meeting. That’s why she ran for her life. How the fuck did I not figure that out sooner.” I let out a long, frustrated breath.

Then, another piece of the puzzle floated into my mind. Presley’s scars, I didn’t get a good look at them, but I was confident letters had been carved into her flesh, and I suddenly had a pretty good idea of what those letters spelled out.

“Conrad wasn’t there,” I mumbled, but more to myself as pieces started coming together, causing pure unadulterated rage to course through my veins.

My mind was racing and everything was becoming clear. Presley was brought there on purpose so she would see me with Owen. They wanted her to run.

“It was a fucking setup. That whole meeting was a setup. The Lincoln brothers fucking played us,” I growled and was on my feet and out the door before finishing the sentence.

“Hold up, buddy, what are you talking about?” Blaise asked as he jogged up beside me. I could hear the two others following close behind.

“There was absolutely no reason for Presley to be there that day. They wanted her to see me with Owen and his guys. Conrad wasn’t there because he was waiting for her at her studio. He had men set up at her studio and apartment, knowing she would run. They were after her this whole



fucking time. How the fuck did I miss it?” I cursed and stormed toward my room.

Once I reached the door, I scanned my thumb over the panel and threw the door open, causing it to bang into the wall.

Erika was sitting beside the bed, trying to talk to Presley, who was sitting on the bed, hugging her knees in front of her with her face buried against them.

They both jumped at the sound of the door slamming into the wall and turned their attention to me.

I was blinded by rage and unable to think of anything other than figuring out if my theory was correct. If I was right, people were going to die.

“How do you know the Lincoln brothers?” I demanded, stomping toward Presley, who now stood beside the bed.

Fear flashed across her face, but it barely registered since the murderous haze had already consumed me. I needed her to tell me the truth before I completely lost it. I was already close.

“Cruz, what the fuck are you doing? You’re scaring her,” Erika shouted, but I ignored her.

“Tell me, Presley. How do you know them? More specifically, Conrad,” I ordered through gritted teeth. I was so unhinged I didn’t even recognize my own voice.

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t answer as she took several steps away from me.

I lunged forward, grabbed her before she could get too far, and lifted her from the floor. She kicked and screamed, and I vaguely recall feeling Erika pull at my arm to try and free Presley, but I wasn't letting go. Not until I got answers, and I knew where to get them if she wouldn't talk.

I laid a kicking and screaming Presley onto the bed and climbed on top of her, straddling her legs and pinning her hands above her head with one of mine. Someone had pulled Erika off me since I didn't feel her fist slamming into my back and arms anymore.

I used my free hand to yank Presley's shirt up to her ribs and lowered the boxers she wore just low enough to reveal the entire scar on her abdomen.

She was sobbing, and if I were in my right mind, I would have registered that I was scaring the shit out of her, but I wasn't. My need to hunt the person, who hurt her, overtook my common sense.

My fingers traced the scars along her lower abdomen. The first word was hard to make out since it was a butcher job, but the last two letters below were clear as day: *CL*. Running my fingers along the scars again, I quickly figured out what it said and repeated the words out loud, "Property of *CL*. Property of Conrad Lincoln."

I glanced up at Presley, who was sobbing with her eyes so tightly shut it looked like she was in pain from my fingers tracing her old scars. I knew I wasn't hurting her since my fingers traced her scars gently, but by the look on her face, I

might as well have been carving the words myself. It was obvious that whatever pain she felt was in her head—ghost pains.

The problem was that seeing her respond like that only sunk me deeper into my murderous haze. I had no clue what kind of relationship she had with Conrad, but he fucked her up badly, and he needed to die for that.

“Who is he to you?” I asked, my voice strained.

She didn’t answer or open her eyes.

“Answer me,” I demanded, more forceful.

She whimpered but still didn’t answer.

“Cruz. That’s enough,” Blaise’s stern voice snapped me out of my haze just enough to see how terrified Presley was.

*Fuck.*

I got off the bed and wanted to apologize for scaring her, but my level of anger was still dangerously high, and I knew I needed to leave the room before I made things worse. So, I spun around and stormed out of the room, heading for the basement where we kept our weapons.

Jared and Dex caught up to me as I descended the stairs.

“Buddy, I get it. You want his head on a platter, but we need to think this through,” Jared tried reasoning.

“Yeah, we’re not letting you go out there on a suicide mission,” Dex added.

Neither of them understood. Presley had come to mean so fucking much to me, and now she saw me as a monster because of what that man did to her. He fucking carved his name into her flesh. Who the fuck does that?

Blaise caught up to us when I reached the locked room with all our weapons.

“Hold the fuck up, Cruz. Don’t fucking make me restrain you, because I fucking will,” Blaise warned, putting himself between me and the locked door.

“Move,” I gritted out, getting ready to attack.

A low growl drew my attention to Blaise’s feet, where I found Zeus, his Shepherd with his canines exposed, looking ready to eat me for dinner.

Fucking dog. Of course, I would have him to deal with too.

“Conrad will pay for what he did. You have my word, but going after him like a cowboy, guns blazing, ain’t gonna do anything but get you killed. Plus, he thinks Presley ran off. He doesn’t know we have her. We can use that to our advantage since, in his mind, we solved our conflict. They won’t see us coming when we take them out,” Blaise explained calmly, even though he looked ready to fight me if it got to that.

“He fucking carved into her like a piece of meat,” I growled, my voice crackling with unadulterated rage.

“Yeah, that’s all kinds of fucked up, and when the time’s right, he’ll get what he deserves. Right now though, we need to research and be smart about this. They have a lot of allies,

and if we declare war now, we'll lose a lot of our men, too, even if we win. If we're smart about it, we can hit them when they don't expect it and not risk our own," Blaise added, and his words were finally starting to sink in through the haze.

He was right, but it wasn't helping to calm the raging beast inside me who wanted to carve Conrad into a million pieces and then make his brother eat them. Or better yet, the opposite. I could make Conrad watch as I butcher his brother and feed the pieces to him before I end his miserable life.

"That's it, man, you know Blaise's right. Let's go upstairs, and I'll start digging up info on the brothers that we can use against them. Maybe I can even figure out how Presley plays into all this," Jared said.

"We got your back, Cruz. Always will. We want him to suffer just as much as you for hurting your girl, and he will," Dex added, drawing my attention to him.

My girl. It was weird hearing it, but it was the truth. I would die for her, and I was about to kill for her. I wouldn't do that for just anyone, but for her, I would burn this world down.

"You guys are right," I said defeatedly, and all three guys relaxed their postures now that I didn't look ready to fight anyone who got in my way.

We headed for the stairs when I murmured, "Presley must fucking hate me even more now."

"You certainly didn't do yourself any favors, but at least now we know who we're dealing with and can start planning. Had

you not figured it out, who knows when Presley would have told you the truth? She might never have, and then what? So yeah, I would have done the same thing,” Blaise stated.

“How the fuck did she ever get involved with a man like that?” I sighed.

“She was young, and he’s a good-looking, successful man at first glance. It’s not all that surprising,” Jared replied.

Fuck, thinking of them together had my blood boiling again.

When we got upstairs, we headed for Jared’s office. He was good with computers and would be our best shot at digging up information on Conrad Lincoln.

It took him less than five minutes before he found something that had my rage spiraling again. Conrad was married to a woman named Laura Lincoln, who had a severe stroke over two years ago and didn’t leave the house anymore. I knew it was Presley even before he turned the computer monitor to show me the picture of her and Conrad standing together at some fancy gala dressed up for the event. Both were smiling at the camera, but Presley’s eyes were blank as if it was a rehearsed smile she was used to putting on for the cameras. She looked beautiful in a floor-length dress, and her hair in a fancy updo, but she wasn’t happy, not even close. I had seen a real smile on her, and it looked nothing like that.

“They married less than five years ago, and Presley’s maiden name is Jackson. I’m running that now,” Jared stated as he typed away on his computer.

“Here we go,” Jared said before adding, “She’s smart, finished high school a year early, and then completed her degree early, too. She was twenty-one when she started teaching. Looks like she taught for a year and then stopped working after she married Conrad.”

“Interesting,” Jared drawled, reading something on the screen.

“You going to share with the room or keep us guessing?” I snapped.

“Sorry, buddy. I’ll have to do more digging into this before I know exactly what we’re dealing with, but a lot of Conrad’s assets are in Laura’s name. That doesn’t make sense unless he was hiding money. I wonder if she knows she owns more than fifty million dollars in properties, businesses, and investments,” Jared explained.

“I would ask Presley about it, but I think we all know how likely I am to get answers out of her,” I said bitterly.

“Don’t stress her with this yet. Let me do a bit more digging and see what I can find first, and then you can talk to her about it,” Jared replied.

“Thanks, man.” I sighed.

“No worries. We can get Erika to look into it too. I’m sure we can piece it together between the two of us, without having to stress out Presley,” he added.

Speaking of Erika, she chose that moment to come, storming through Jared’s open door like a raging bull ready to charge.

“What the fuck was that?” She asked angrily, nostrils flaring, and fists clenched at her side.

“Are you trying to traumatize her more than she already is? What the fuck, Cruz? That’s not like you,” she continued, before shoving at my chest.

She looked like she wanted to punch me in the face, and I would let her if she did because I knew I deserved it.

“Is she okay?” I asked, running my hands down my face.

“No, she’s not okay. She won’t stop crying and mumbling incoherently. It was as if I wasn’t even there after you left,” Erika replied, her rage shifting to concern as she thought about Presley.

“Fuck. My anger got the better of me. When I figured out it was Conrad she’d been running from, I needed her to confirm it,” I told her.

“I hope to fuck it was worth it to you because I don’t know if you can recover from this,” Erika snapped, running her fingers through her hair.

“She’s married to Conrad. I’d say it was pretty fucking important for us to know that detail as soon as possible,” Blaise piped up, and Erika’s eyes widened.

“Fuck,” Erika cursed, losing some of that steam she barged in with.

“I always assumed she was running from an abusive scumbag, but I underestimated how much trouble she was actually in,” Erika mumbled, looking guilty.



“You taught her how to defend herself and shoot a gun. That is the only reason she wasn’t taken at her studio or worse...” I said, my words trailing off and a cold chill rushed through my body at the thought of something happening to Presley.

“He’s right, Hellcat, you did the best you could do given the situation. She wouldn’t have told you the truth even if you had pushed her back then so don’t kick yourself over it,” Blaise added, wrapping his arms around his wife in a comforting embrace.

“What now?” Dex asked.

“I guess we wait to see what Jared finds. In the meantime, can you get Carla here tomorrow? She might be able to convince Presley to speak with a counselor,” I asked.

“Sure, I can do that.” Dex nodded.

I needed to make things right with Presley, but I didn’t know how. She already thought I was a monster, and me storming into the room like a raging maniac certainly didn’t help. I was such an idiot.

I guess one step at a time. Getting her some mental health help was the priority, then I could work on earning her trust.

## Chapter 18

# Broken

## Presley

Everything was too much. When Cruz entered the room earlier, I had never seen him look so angry. A vein pulsed in his neck, looking ready to explode, and his fists were clenched so hard at his side that his knuckles were white. He had never shown me that side before, but it was just another reminder that a good manipulator could hide the monster within.

Erika tried to talk to me, but I didn't want to hear any more lies. I felt mostly betrayed by her since I thought she was my friend. I trusted her, and that was the only reason I lowered my guard with Cruz in the first place. I figured he couldn't be that bad if she was friends with him. Look where that got me—locked in a room like a prisoner. Again.

A cold chill ran down my spine. It might not be a small box like the one Conrad locked me in, but I was still trapped, and it felt like the walls were closing in on me.

***\*\*Flashback\*\****

### ***Three years ago***

*My face throbbed and burned like it was on fire. My head was pounding from the worst headache I had ever felt, and I was utterly frozen to the bone.*

*I lay on something hard and cold.*

*I scrunched up my nose at the awful scent that assaulted my senses. It smelt like sewage or maybe something decomposing. I couldn't tell, but it made me gag.*

*I tried blinking my eyes open, but it was a struggle since something crusty kept them closed. That same crusty feeling was all over my face.*

*"She's waking up," a familiar voice said.*

*"I can't wait to officially meet my sister," an unfamiliar voice replied mockingly.*

*I stiffened as memories of what happened returned to me all at once.*

*Conrad was the reason I had no friends, job, or money. He made me feel like a disappointment when it was all his doing. He wanted me to be utterly dependent on him and I was. Then, when I threatened to leave him, he slammed my face into the doorframe until I blacked out.*

*Where had he taken me?*

*Who was the second person in the room?*

*"Open your eyes, wife," Conrad demanded cruelly.*

*I tried to move my arms and legs, but something restrained them.*

*I blinked harder and finally opened my eyes a little, only to close them again when a fluorescent light blinded me.*

*Slowly, my eyes adjusted to the bright light above me, and I took in two figures looming over my body.*

*The one on my left was Conrad. He was staring down at me with a cruel smirk on his face.*

*The other man I didn't recognize, but he looked like a younger version of Conrad, just rougher. A scar on his cheek started just below his eye and ended at the corner of his mouth. He had tattoos crawling up his neck and a mean look on his face. I realized he must have been Conrad's brother, Owen.*

*"Hey, sis. So, we finally meet," the unfamiliar man said before adding with a sadistic smile, "I'm Owen, your worst nightmare."*

*I shuddered from hearing his words and pulled at the restraints keeping me in place on what I now discovered was a metal table. Metal cuffs dug into my wrists and ankles as I tried to break free. There were no windows in the room I was in and from the musky cold air I was confident we were in a basement.*

*"I gave you everything you ever needed and treated you well. How do you repay my kindness? By threatening to leave me? I tried to do this the happy couple way, but clearly, that*

*didn't work, so now you get to see what happens to those who betray me," Conrad said calmly, causing a shiver to rake down my spine.*

*What would he do to me?*

*I didn't speak since arguing would probably only make matters worse.*

*"Don't worry, brother, I'll get her in line for you," Owen taunted with that same sadistic smile.*

*"P-Please, I'm s-sorry," I whispered, sobbing.*

*"A little late for an apology now, I'm afraid. I think it's time for you to see what I'm really capable of, wife. Maybe that will have you thinking twice before you try to leave me again," Conrad said harshly.*

*Conrad grabbed a knife off the table beside where I lay and held it in front of his face as he examined the blade.*

*Was he going to kill me? Oh god.*

*Fear like I had never felt in my entire life flashed before my eyes.*

*"Hold her," he instructed Owen, who leaned over my chest and pinned me to the table.*

*"No, no, no. Please," I screamed as Conrad got onto the table and straddled my legs, pinning them in place.*

*"Stay still, wife, or this will hurt much worse than it already will," Conrad warned with a psychotic glint in his eyes. He seemed to be enjoying himself.*

*I thrashed and screamed, but it was useless.*

*I couldn't see what Conrad was doing since Owen was blocking my view, but I felt my shirt being lifted and my pants lowered before something sharp poked my skin. The knife?*

*I hissed and sobbed when he dragged what I could only assume was the blade across my lower abdomen. It felt like he was peeling the skin off my body. Maybe he was. I cried out, but he didn't stop. The bastard even laughed sadistically at my expense.*

*"Don't cry, sis. This is just the beginning," Owen taunted before leaning forward and licking the tears off my cheeks.*

*It felt like hours passed when in reality it was probably only minutes before Conrad finally stopped carving into me and jumped off the table, looking down at his handy work with a cruel smirk.*

*"Now you won't ever forget who you belong to," Conrad said, looking satisfied.*

*Bile burned my throat, my entire body trembled violently, and I felt light-headed from the pain.*

*"What did you do to me?" I sobbed, my voice barely a whisper.*

*"Get that cleaned up so it doesn't get infected," Conrad ordered Owen, ignoring my question.*

*"I'm on it. What kind of brother would I be if I let my own sis get an infection," Owen taunted as he walked away.*

*I glanced down at my abdomen, but all I saw was blood. I quickly looked away before I was sick to my stomach. I never was good around blood but seeing my own flesh carved into like a piece of meat made it worse.*

*A whimper left my lips. How could my husband do this to me?*

*Owen returned with a bottle in one hand and a towel in the other. Was that vodka? I didn't have time to think about it before he poured the clear liquid over my cut, and I screamed from the sharp sting that followed. It hurt so fucking bad that I thought I would pass out.*

*He laughed darkly at my cries as he wiped over the wound with the towel. Once he was done, he taped gauze over the cut, and all I had managed to see was what looked like letters carved into my skin.*

*"Let's get her in the box. I'm late for a lunch meeting," Conrad instructed, sounding bored.*

*Owen unlocked my wrists and ankles, but I was too shocked to fight. I felt like I was in a dream. No, it was a nightmare, and this wasn't really happening. My husband loved me. He wouldn't hurt me like this.*

*Owen picked me up and carried me over to the other side of the room. I glanced over to see a box about half the length of a coffin but a little taller, sitting on the floor against the wall.*

*My eyes widened when I realized what he was doing, and the fight in me returned. I started kicking and thrashing as I tried*



*to break free, but it was pointless. I was so small compared to him, and other than a grunt, he looked in complete control.*

*Conrad opened the lid of the box, and Owen lowered me inside. I latched on to him, refusing to let go and widening my feet so he couldn't put them inside.*

*"No, please. I'll be good," I begged.*

*"Get in the box, or I'll carve out your face next," Conrad threatened, holding the blade to my cheek.*

*I whimpered before going slack in Owen's arms. He took the opportunity to lay me in the box with my legs bent since it wasn't long enough for me to stretch out.*

*"Remember, you made me do this," Conrad stated before slamming the lid shut and encasing me in darkness.*

*"Don't go too hard on her face. I already roughed it up enough, and she'll still need to attend some public events with me," I heard Conrad say.*

*"You got it. I won't even need to use violence for what I have planned. Your wife will be a pretty little broken doll in no time," Owen replied just before loud Opera music blared inside the box and prevented me from hearing anything else.*

*The music was so loud that I could hear it clearly when I covered my ears.*

*I sobbed and slammed my palms against the box lid, but it didn't budge. They must have locked me in. How long were they going to leave me in here?*

***\*\*End of flashback\*\****

“Presley, open the door,” someone shouted, drawing me from my nightmare.

The pounding on the door made me jump before the same voice that I now recognized as Cruz, ordered, “Open the door right now, Presley, or I’m busting it down.”

I wasn’t sure when I had moved from the bed, but I was now sitting on the tiled floor of the walk-in shower with ice-cold water pouring down on me. My lips were chattering, and I could barely feel my limbs because I was so cold.

A loud bang filled the room, making me screech and cover my ears. The door landed on the floor outside the shower before Cruz stormed into the room with worry etched on his face.

When his eyes landed on me, he let out a relieved breath, but that relief didn’t last long. When he took in the state I was in, a concerned frown appeared.

“What are you doing, beautiful? Your lips are blue, and you’re frozen,” he gently asked, ripping his shirt over his head and getting into the shower with me.

“Please, leave me alone,” I sobbed and tried to stand, but my legs wouldn’t work. I had no clue how long I had been in the shower, but it was long enough for my legs and arms to go numb.

Cruz ignored me and adjusted the water temperature to warm before sinking onto the tile floor next to me and hauling my

frozen body between his legs. He wrapped his strong arms around me and held my trembling body while the water warmed me. I didn't fight it. I couldn't if I tried. I was emotionally exhausted and utterly broken.

“I'm so sorry about earlier, beautiful. I never should have scared you like that. You just mean so much to me and it's killing me to know the person who hurt you is still breathing,” Cruz said next to my ear as he rocked me from side to side, letting me cry in his arms.

He sounded sincere, and I wanted to believe him, but my past wouldn't let me. My past had me questioning everything and everyone.

“What can I do to make this better, beautiful? I would do just about anything to fix this. To fix you,” he continued when I didn't answer.

I had no clue how long we stayed in the shower, but I vaguely recall Cruz taking off my wet clothes before lifting me out of the shower and carrying me into the bedroom.

I must have fallen asleep after that because I couldn't remember him slipping a dry T-shirt on me or putting me to bed.

I woke up to an empty room and someone knocking softly on the bedroom door.

I sat up in bed just as the bedroom door opened, and Erika's sister, Carla, poked her head inside with a shy smile.

“Can I come in?” she asked softly.

When I didn't answer, she opened the door further and entered the room almost tripping over her own feet. I spotted Dexter waiting in the hallway, but he didn't follow her. The door shut behind her, leaving us alone in the room.

Carla fidgeted nervously with her hands, looking uncomfortable. I didn't feel threatened by her presence. If anything, I felt confident I could take her down if needed, which was probably why Dexter was in the hallway. I would never hurt her though, not unless I had to.

I didn't know much about Carla, just that Erika and Olivia thought she had been dead for over two years and then suddenly she reappeared. I didn't want Erika prodding into my life, so I never asked her personal questions either.

"Can I sit down?" Carla asked nervously and pointed to the chair beside the bed.

I didn't answer, so she took a seat anyway.

She was so soft-spoken and shy, nothing like her sisters. They looked so different, too. You would never guess they were related.

"I know we don't know each other very well, but I wanted to come and see how you're doing," she said softly.

"I'm being held against my will. How do you think I'm doing?" I snapped and immediately regretted my harsh tone.

She didn't seem offended when she asked, "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

“No, I’m fine. Thanks,” I lied. I was starving, but even if Carla brought me food, I wouldn’t be able to eat since my stomach was unsettled.

“Okay, then,” she said, thinking of her following words carefully when she asked, “Did Erika ever tell you what happened to me?”

I shook my head but didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know what you’ve been through, Presley, but I know a broken soul when I see one. I would know since I’m still trying to piece my own back together,” she started and paused before continuing, “This isn’t easy for me to talk about, so bear with me.” She let out a breath.

“I got mixed up with the wrong crowd when I was younger and became addicted to drugs. Then I was raped, kidnapped by men involved in human trafficking, and shot in the back twice when I tried to escape. I thought I was dying. Hell, I wanted to die. How could I live after all that? Right?”

She released a shaky breath before continuing, “Cruz and the guys rescued me from the human traffickers. I was a complete mess, but they didn’t give up on me. They nursed me back to health, even when I didn’t want them to, got me into treatment, and looked after me. Without a doubt, I would be dead if it wasn’t for them. Before you ask, no, Cruz did not send me in here to tell you all this. I’m telling you this because you need to know you’re not alone. I’m in counseling, which doesn’t cure me of my past trauma, but learning to cope has made every day a little easier.”

I was frowning as I listened to her speak. I had no idea about any of her past. Hearing that Cruz and the guys rescued her was shocking, especially given what they do. Monsters don't save people. I guess she could be lying to me and making all this up to fool me into thinking Cruz was a good guy.

“After the guys got me back on my feet, they offered me a job. You see, I wasn't the only one they rescued. They saved over fifty girls from that human trafficking ring, and as you can imagine, they were all traumatized by what they went through. I was hired to help those girls get back on their feet. I got them counseling, shelter, medical care, and so on,” she stated and paused before adding, “I'm not telling you all this to make Cruz sound like a hero, even though, in my eyes, he and the guys all are. I'm telling you all this because I want to help you, too.”

“My counselor is fantastic. She doesn't push me to talk if I'm not in the mood, and she doesn't pity me when I do speak, which I personally prefer. I'm sure she would be willing to see you if you want,” she said, sounding hopeful.

“I don't want to talk,” I said, but that didn't deter her.

“You don't have to if you don't want to. I didn't talk for weeks when I first started seeing her. One day, she brought me a sketch pad and some crayons to fill our time together. Turns out I was better at expressing myself on paper. I'm not saying that would be the case for you, but I'm just saying she's good at reading people. I didn't even know I could draw before I started seeing her. Turns out I could be Leonardo da Vinci's

daughter, I'm that good," she joked, making a hint of a smile appear on my face.

Carla was easy to talk to and so sweet there was no way she was faking it. Without realizing it, I found myself nodding and saying, "Okay."

"Really?" she squealed before adding, "Don't judge me, but I kind of called her before coming to talk to you, and she really wanted to meet you, so she's downstairs now. Would you mind if she came in?"

"She's here now? I'm not dressed." My eyes widened.

After crying for hours and falling asleep with my hair wet, I must look like a hot mess. Not to mention, I was only wearing a pair of boxers and a T-shirt.

"Trust me, I looked a lot worse than you do when I first started seeing her. I'm pretty sure I hadn't showered in over a week," She said, scrunching her nose up at the memory.

"It's just to meet you. I'll introduce you two, and then you can set up your first appointment," Carla quickly added.

"Fine." I sighed defeatedly.

Carla looked so hopeful that I didn't want to disappoint her by turning down her offer. I knew I wouldn't talk to the counselor about my past, but I could at least appease them.

"Okay, great. I'll be right back," Carla said as she stood and practically ran for the door.

She opened the door, and I spotted Dexter still standing on the other side, waiting. When the door shut behind her, I took the opportunity to make myself presentable.

There was no door into the bathroom anymore. Cruz must have taken it out of the room after he broke it down earlier.

I washed my face before tying my hair in a messy bun and throwing on a sweater to cover myself further. I was right, my face looked horrible, with dark circles around my eyes and puffy red cheeks from crying.

By the time I finished making myself as presentable as I could, there was a knock at the door.

Carla poked her head inside to make sure I was decent before opening the door all the way. She let in a middle-aged woman with short brown hair and a friendly smile, behind her.

“Presley, this is Barbara Peterson. Mrs. Peterson, Presley,” Carla introduced.

“I’ll leave you guys to it. Just knock when you’re done,” Carla added before leaving the room.

“It’s nice to meet you, Presley,” Barbara said with a smile.

I forced a smile in return but didn’t reply.

We stood staring at each other for a minute before I asked, “You know I’m being held against my will, right?”

“I do.” She nodded once.

“And you’re okay with that?” I asked with a frown.



How could I trust someone who was okay with what Cruz was doing to me?

She let out a long sigh before saying, “These circumstances are different from what I’m used to, and I’m not sure I fully agree with Cruz’s approach, but I understand why he feels the need to keep you here.”

When I eyed her skeptically, she added, “Look, I’m here to help you cope with trauma, not convince you to trust Cruz or the others. I am going to ask you one question and I don’t expect an answer. I just want you to seriously think about the question.” She paused, making sure she had my full attention before asking, “If he didn’t care about you and only wanted to mess with your head, would he really hire a mental health professional to help you cope with the trauma? Sounds a little counter-productive to me. Don’t you think?”

My frown deepened because she was right, that didn’t make sense. Even though I wasn’t ready to believe Cruz’s motives were anything but bad, she had me thinking about it.

She talked a bit about how she ran her sessions and asked me what time of day I would prefer to meet with her, which made me laugh humorlessly since I didn’t exactly know my schedule now that I was being held captive. We settled on twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays.

I warned her I didn’t want to discuss my past, but she didn’t seem phased and said she could help me with general coping techniques until I was ready to talk.

After she left, I lay in bed feeling exhausted.

I oddly felt better after speaking to Carla and Barbara. If anything, they distracted me from the dark thoughts consuming me lately, and for that, I was grateful.

## Chapter 19

# Include Her

## Cruz

It had been almost a week since Presley broke down in the shower. I was giving her some space but refused to stay away from her completely. She needed me, and whether she realized that or not, I would keep pushing my way back into her heart.

She had fought long enough by herself. It was time for her to realize she didn't have to do it alone anymore. Hell, she didn't have to fight at all, if she didn't want to. I would be more than happy to do it for her.

She wasn't happy the first night when I slept on the couch in the same room as her, but I refused to leave, and she quickly realized it was non-negotiable, so she gave up and went to sleep. Neither of us really slept much that night, though. Her, because she thought I might do something when she fell asleep, and me, because, well, I fucking missed her. She was only a few feet away, but there might as well have been an ocean separating us since I couldn't touch her, and fuck did I

want to. Even just to hold her in my arms while she slept. I decided to give her the bed for a few days, but at some point, I would need to push my way back into that, too.

She had her first appointment with her new counselor yesterday, and although I doubted she talked about anything major, I did notice a substantial change in her mood after Barbara left. She was a bit more upbeat and actually got out of bed to explore around the house which was good to see.

At the very least, having someone to talk to, who wasn't what she deemed a threat, seemed to be good for her.

I gave Presley full access to the house after the shower incident, except for the weapons room, obviously. I didn't want her to feel like a prisoner because that wasn't why I was keeping her at the house. She was in danger, and staying at our home was safest until we could take care of the threat. We had the best security available at our house, and guards patrolled the fenced property twenty-four-seven. No one could get to her while she was here.

The first day Presley had full access to the house, I watched her through the surveillance cameras, walking the property's fence line. She was obviously scoping it out to see if she could escape, but she couldn't. The fence all around was twelve feet tall and not the kind that was easily climbable. The only way to leave would be through the main gates, and at least two armed guards were always posted there. They were under strict orders not to let Presley leave.

I hated that she still cowered away from me whenever I was near, but that was part of the process. She was still convinced I was a monster and expected me to lash out at her at any given moment. So, I needed to prove her wrong before she would lower her guard around me again.

“Hey, you busy?” Jared knocked at my office door, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Nah, man. What’s up?” I asked, leaning back in my chair to give him my full attention.

“So, I did some more digging into Conrad’s accounting firm. I was right the other day. He’s been stealing money from his clients, and when Presley was around, he hid the stolen funds by putting whatever he bought in her name. She would have had to sign several documents, though. I wonder if she knows anything,” Jared explained.

“I’ll ask her tonight, but I highly doubt it.”

“How are things going on that end? Is she warming up to you yet?” Jared asked.

“Same old. She still looks at me like at any given moment, I might pull out a gun and shoot her in the head,” I said and sighed before adding, “It sucks.”

“She’ll get there. She just needs time,” Jared said and paused before asking, “Have you thought about using Conrad to get close to her?”

“What do you mean?” I asked with a frown.

“You know her better than I do, so maybe I’m way off, but it sounds like this asshole did some horrible things to her. If I were in her shoes, I would want in on bringing him down. He has no clue she’s here with us, so you can draw out his torment for as long as you want, and it might help her cope with some of that trauma he caused.”

That wasn’t a bad fucking idea. In fact, it was brilliant. I wanted Conrad dead, like yesterday, but drawing out his suffering might help her feel avenged, especially if I involved her.

Plus, Conrad still had way too many allies for us to go to war against him. We would probably win, but not without losing some of our own in the process. I prefer to avoid that if I could. We needed to break down his strongest allegiances so that no one would back him. When the time was right, we would end his miserable life.

“I fucking like that idea. A lot.” I grinned, feeling like this was exactly what I needed to start chipping away at Presley’s walls.

“Do you have physical proof he was ripping off his clients?” I asked.

“Sure do. I can print off everything I found so far. Why?” He frowned.

“I think it’s time Conrad’s clients find out what he’s been up to. Don’t you? He’ll be so distracted with his reputation taking a beating that he won’t see us coming until it’s too late. Then

we can crush him bit by bit,” I explained, and a devilish grin spread across Jared’s face, matching mine.

This plan was brilliant, once his allies got wind of his fraudulent scheme, they wouldn’t trust the snake or back him against us. It was like killing two birds with one stone. Presley would start to realize I was on her side and Conrad would lose his reputation. It was perfect.

“Anonymous emails?” Jared asked.

“You know it. First, we need to ensure the stolen money won’t be linked to the assets in Presley’s name. I want her to walk away with something at the end of this, even though she won’t need the money now that she has me.”

“I’ll make sure her name isn’t at all connected with the money in the documents I print off. Those funds will be all hers when we’re done with the Lincoln brothers.” Jared nodded.

“Good,” I said and paused before adding, “I’m in the mood to blow shit up too.”

“You know I’m always down for fireworks. You tell me where and when, and I’m there for it, buddy.”

Jared stood, getting ready to leave my office, when I asked, “Hey, any luck finding that chick, Cassandra?”

After everything that happened, I asked Jared to try and track her down. She and I needed to have a little chat after what happened. I was almost certain she had something to do with setting Presley up that day because it was way too big of a



coincidence for them to have shown up at that restaurant while we met with Owen. The fact that Jared hadn't been able to track her down in over a week reaffirmed my suspicion.

“Yeah, I got a few leads I need to investigate. Looks like she's likely hiding out at a relative's house on the west end of town. She stopped going to work after everything happened. I'm going there with Dex tomorrow to see if she's there,” he replied.

“If she's there, bring her to me,” I ordered, my jaw clenching in anticipation.

If Cassandra did set Presley up, she was as good as dead in my eyes.

“You got it,” Jared nodded once before leaving my office.

I did a bit more work until Jared dropped off the documents that would incriminate Conrad.

“Here's the documents showing where he was skimming money,” Jared stated, putting a sheet with a ton of numbers down in front of me. It looked like a spreadsheet.

“And here's the emails to the clients you'll want to notify. When they see the spreadsheet, they'll know exactly what they're looking at. I also picked the shady clients who won't go to the police about the missing money. You might have some competition for who gets to kill Conrad, but at least he won't get arrested for fraud,” he added with a chuckle, as he put down another sheet of paper in front of me with names and email addresses.

I wasn't too worried about someone getting to Conrad before me. He was well protected and had decent security at his house. Conrad sweating, though, knowing people were out to kill him would make things that much sweeter for Presley's revenge. She could watch his whole world crumble until he had nothing left, no reputation, no allies, no money. Only then would we end his pathetic life.

"Thanks, man. I really appreciate you guys' help on this," I said honestly.

"Buddy, I've known you for over ten years and never seen you this tormented. That's how I know this thing between you and Presley is serious. If she means that much to you, she's family to us too, and we'll take care of her as we do with our own. You don't need to thank me because this is what we do for family," he replied and didn't wait for me to say anything before leaving my office.

Fuck, I was grateful for my brothers. They were keeping me grounded during this challenging time.

I decided it was time to check on Presley. Aside from the surveillance monitors, I hadn't seen her in a few hours, and I missed her. Plus, I was a little excited, okay, a lot excited, to see her reaction to what I had planned.

I stood up, grabbed the papers Jared had brought me, left my office, and headed for my room, where I knew Presley was from the surveillance footage.

When I got there, I found Presley sitting on the bed, reading a book. She stiffened the minute she noticed me, causing my

jaw to clench. I fucking hated that reaction, but I forced a playful grin on my face and asked, “Miss me?”

She didn’t respond as usual, but I didn’t let it show that it bothered me. I headed for the chair next to the bed and sat down.

“I brought you a present,” I told her cheerfully, dropping the papers on the bed before her.

“What’s this?” she asked with a frown as she picked up the first sheet that proved Conrad was skimming money from his clients’ investments.

“Did Conrad ever make you sign documents you didn’t know what they were for?” I asked.

Presley thinned her lips in a tight line, clearly still not ready to discuss the Conrad situation with me. That was fine, she really didn’t need to answer that for us to move forward with my plan.

“You don’t have to answer that.” I held my hands up before continuing, “Jared did some digging this week, and he discovered that you have over fifty million dollars worth of investments in your name. I’m guessing by the look on your face, this is news to you.”

It was true; her eyes went wide, and her mouth went slack as she listened to me speak.

“So, after Jared discovered that, he took a deeper look. Turns out Conrad was stealing from clients. He was throwing his stolen funds into properties, businesses, and other investments

but using your name to avoid drawing attention to himself. He can't touch any of those assets without you, which is likely part of why he's so desperate to get his hands on you," I explained.

"I signed a lot of documents. I knew better than to ask what they were for, so I had no idea," she practically whispered. Her eyes scanned the sheet of paper in her hands.

It was my turn for my jaw to drop open. Presley fucking talked to me. I mean, she actually said something about her past. That was a big deal.

I recovered and closed my mouth before she noticed and spoke without making a big deal out of it. "Well, it looks like you're going to be a very rich woman at the end of all this."

"I don't want that money; it's tainted with blood," she snapped bitterly, dropping the paper on the bed before her.

"What you do with that money will be entirely up to you. If you don't want to keep it, you can donate it for all I care. You can turn blood money into something positive. Think of all the lives it could change. It's your call," I said and watched Presley's eyebrows pull together into a deep frown.

She was probably trying to figure out if I was being sincere because criminals didn't donate money to good causes. I didn't let her think about it for too long before I kept explaining my plan.

"Anyway, you have time to think about what you want to do with the money. That's not why I'm here. I'm here to see if

you'll help me destroy Conrad's life. I mean, like, *destroy* it. First, we can start with his reputation which he seems so fond of, then we can blow up all his properties and drain his bank accounts. I'm talking about taking everything away from him. When all he has left is his life, we'll take that too," I said, probably sounding far too excited, but I couldn't help it. The thought of making him suffer like he did to Presley was appealing.

When she just stared at me with a blank expression, I said, "I know. I know. I'm getting a little carried away. Today, we would start with step one, sending anonymous letters to some of his clients with the proof that he was stealing from them."

"Are you serious?" she asked with a frown.

"Very." I grinned.

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"I told you. Conrad hurt you, so I'll make him pay with his life for that, but before that happens, we might as well take everything from him as he did with you. An eye for an eye, right?" I said, and tears gathered in her eyes, which made me start second-guessing my plan.

Did I upset her? Maybe this was too much for her after everything she had been through.

"I'm sorry if I upset you. I just thought..." I started rubbing the back of my neck, but she cut me off.

"No, you didn't. I always wanted to make him pay for ruining my life, but it was never a possibility, only a dream.

I'm just overwhelmed, that's all," she said, swiping a lone tear that rolled down her cheek.

"Well, it's happening, and you can be involved as much as you want or let me handle it without hearing the details," I offered.

She eyed me for several minutes, looking torn as if she wanted to believe me but wasn't there yet. She still didn't trust me, which was okay. I would work on that. Today, I just needed her to agree to my plan.

"I want to be involved," she finally said, but her tone was still unsure.

My grin grew wider as I stood and said, "Great. I'm going to take a quick shower, and then we can go to my office and come up with super witty anonymous letters to send to his clients. Like, I'm talking 007 style," I said, and I swear I saw a hint of a smile on her face, but I might have imagined it.

I moved around the bed while pulling my shirt over my head. Next, I unbuckled my jeans and yanked them down with my boxers before tossing them in the laundry basket.

"What are you doing?" Presley gasped as I strode toward the doorless bathroom naked. I never put it back up after I had busted it down last week.

I stopped just outside the doorway and fully turned, giving her an eye full of my naked body before saying, "I told you, showering." I winked.

Presley's cheeks flushed, and she glanced at my cock before averting her eyes. At least she was still attracted to me. That was clear by the sudden flicker of arousal in her eyes before she averted them.

I turned and headed into the bathroom, throwing over my shoulder playfully, "You're welcome to join me if you want."

I knew she wouldn't, but there was no harm in teasing her, making her squirm a little while she thought of me naked. Fuck, just the thought of her coming to join me in the shower made my cock hard. It had been well over a week since we fucked, and I missed being intimate with her. I wasn't talking just about sex but kissing her and holding her. I missed it all.

I glanced in the mirror ahead of me in the bathroom and saw Presley watching my naked ass walking away. I smiled victoriously at that.

I got in the shower and quickly washed before exiting. I grabbed a towel and noticed Presley was still in the same spot on the bed. Her eyes never left my body while I dried myself off. I tried my best to hide the smug smile on my face, but it was hard. This was the first time in a week that she looked at me with something other than hatred or fear in her eyes.

Once I dried myself off, I wrapped the towel around my waist and headed for the walk-in closet. I slipped on a pair of gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt since I was done with work for the day.

When I exited the closet, I asked, "You ready? Once we're done sending off our super secret, ruin Conrad emails, I'll

make you dinner.”

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes before standing from the bed and following me out of the room.

We went to my office and sent off around ten anonymous emails from an untraceable network. That should be a good start with our plan. Conrad would be losing his mind in no time when he started receiving death threats and angry phone calls from his so-called allies and clients that he ripped off.

*Let the shitstorm begin.*



## Chapter 20

# Revenge Part Two

## Cruz

**O**ur plan worked. Conrad was hiding, and his clients were hunting for him now that they knew what he had done. No matter how powerful he thought he was, there were far too many people after him for him to do anything about it. Conrad's world was slowly crumbling, and he could do nothing.

Word spread like wildfire, and a lot of his so-called allies dropped him on the spot, after hearing of his big fraud scheme. Political parties turned their back on him, too. It looked like no one wanted to be dragged down with him.

There was a glimmer of excitement in Presley's eyes that I hadn't seen since our first official date. I liked being the one responsible for bringing that spark back. Presley seemed happy with our accomplishments and eager to move forward with our mission, which was happening tonight. The guys and I were going out tonight to do more damage.

Presley wouldn't be coming with us since it wasn't safe, but I had every intention of bringing her home a present that would hopefully put a smile on her face.

It was nice that Presley was no longer in her cowering phase around me. Having said that, now she had done a one-eighty and was always trying to provoke me. I had a feeling deep down she believed I was being genuine and I wasn't the monster she initially thought I was. Because of whatever she had been through, she still had doubts. So, this was her way of testing me to see if I would eventually snap.

She started calling me all the names in the book when the opportunity presented itself, asshole, killer, kidnapper, scumbag, dickhead, and a few other creative ones. Seriously, what the actual fuck is a douche canoe? She also started arguing with me about anything and everything, just trying to irritate me. It wouldn't work, though. If anything, it was kind of entertaining to see her acting like a brat because it so wasn't her.

Every time she did say something vindictive or mean, her eyelashes fluttered as if saying the harsh words went against her natural instincts. I could tell she felt guilty every time she said something nasty. It was almost comical to watch. Presley didn't have a mean bone in her body, so seeing her trying to act like a royal bratty bitch was awkward and unnatural. I had to look away a few times so she wouldn't catch me laughing.

It was obvious that Conrad must have started out as a nice guy and then showed his true colors somewhere along the line.

That was the only explanation that I had for her behavior. She was goading me into showing what she thought was my true nature: a monster. Soon, she would realize she was wrong and likely feel guilty for how she acted with me.

I let her play mean girl for a few days to prove that I wouldn't snap, but that attitude was about to end. I would never physically hurt her, but there were other ways to bleed the attitude out of her system.

"We'll be ready to go in fifteen minutes," Blaise's voice drew me from my thoughts.

I looked up from my computer to see Blaise standing in my office doorway, dressed head to toe in camo gear, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He looked ready for war.

"I just have to get dressed, and I'm good to go," I replied, shutting my computer off and standing.

"We'll meet you out front." He nodded before walking off.

I headed for my bedroom.

When I arrived, I found Presley standing by the window, staring out at all the men dressed in army gear, loading up the vans and SUVs in the driveway.

I told her the plan for tonight, and I could tell she was excited but also nervous.

"Hey, are you going to be alright tonight while we're out?" I asked.

She looked at me over her shoulder and tried her best to hide the concern in her eyes as she snarked, “I’ll be safer without a bunch of killers here, so yeah, I’ll be fine.”

That was a perfect example of the new attitude I was dealing with.

“Okay,” I drawled, stripping off my shirt before disappearing into the walk-in closet.

I removed my jeans and changed into beige camo-print cargo pants, a soft panel bulletproof vest, and a long-sleeve, breathable camo shirt. I strapped a leg holster for my Glock on one side and a hunting knife sheath on the other before picking up my combat boots and walking into the room.

Presley had turned to watch me from where she stood by the window.

She gulped when her eyes roamed over my outfit and suddenly started to squirm, rubbing her thighs together. My beautiful girl liked what she was seeing.

*Good.*

“You sure there’s nothing at the house that you want me to grab for you?” I asked as I sat in the chair beside her and slipped my boots on before tying the laces up.

“No,” she replied with a slight shake of the head.

“Alright, well, we’ll probably be late, so don’t wait up. Unless you’re worried about me, of course,” I teased.

“Trust me, I’m not worried,” she scoffed, but it was a lie. I could see it in her eyes. She didn’t like that I was going to the home where many of her bad memories occurred. It probably brought a lot of those memories to the surface.

“Lies,” I called her out with a smirk.

“I’m not worried. I couldn’t care less what happens to any of you criminals,” she snapped and then flinched from hearing her own words. A flash of guilt crossed her eyes.

Before she knew what was happening, I snatched her wrist and pulled her onto my lap so her back was against my chest. She gasped as I snaked my arm around her waist and held her against me. She didn’t struggle, which surprised me a little but also made me smile.

“What are you doing?” she asked breathlessly.

“I know what you’re doing, beautiful, and it won’t work,” I said in a low, husky voice next to her ear.

“W-What do you mean?” she asked nervously.

“You think if you keep provoking me, I might snap. I already told you I would never hurt you. Not physically or mentally.” I said calmly and paused before adding in a low seductive drawl, “But... Even I have limits on what I’ll put up with, and at some point, you’ll reach my limit. I won’t ever hurt you, but I have other ways of dealing with that mouth. I might just bring you to the brink of orgasm and hold you there for hours until there’s nothing left of that attitude, and you’re begging me to make you come.”

She shivered and squirmed on my lap. My cock was already hard, thinking about what I could do to edge her.

“You wouldn’t,” she said breathlessly, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

There was no fear in her tone, just lust and something else. Excitement?

“Wanna know a secret?” I asked in a whisper, running my bottom lip along her earlobe.

She shivered again and leaned closer to my mouth as she asked, “What?”

“I’m hoping you call my bluff and keep up with the attitude just so I can follow through with my threat,” I said with a mischievous smirk before nipping at her neck.

Goosebumps exploded along her skin, and she tilted her head, giving me better access. I kissed her neck and nipped at the sensitive flesh, earning a soft moan from Presley.

I smiled against her skin, trailing my hand along her bare thigh to the hem of her shorts, where I gently ran my fingers along the edge, making her shudder. They were short shorts, so my hand was only inches from her pussy, and I had to fight the urge to reach under them and check to see if she was wet for me.

As if a light switch went off in her beautiful head and she realized what was happening, she jumped off my lap and moved back, putting distance between us.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes half hooded as I chuckled lightly, enjoying how she had melted in my arms without even realizing it.

“Remember what I said. If you want me to edge you when I get back, all you have to do is keep up with the insults and low blows.” I winked at her with a grin, standing and readjusting my uncomfortably hard cock in my pants.

She said nothing as I returned to the walk-in closet and came out with a balaclava and my Glock before heading for the door.

I paused at the door to check the magazine in my gun before holstering it.

“Be careful,” she said softly, this time not trying to hide the concern in her tone.

I glanced over my shoulder with a smirk and said, “Always, beautiful. Be good for me tonight, and I’ll bring you a surprise.”

I left the room, grinning from ear to ear. I had learned early on with Presley that she needed to be pushed a little, or she would never give in. Tonight was a perfect example of that. Had I not forced her onto my lap, I wasn’t sure she would ever willingly let me touch her, even though she craved it.

I walked out the front door of the house and found the four tinted-out vehicles parked in the driveway and our men standing around waiting, including Blaise, Dex, Jared, and Blaise’s dog Zeus.



“You’re smiling like a kid on Christmas morning. I take it you made progress with Presley?” Blaise asked with a lopsided smirk.

“Sure did. She told me to be careful tonight,” I said proudly.

“A smile like that, I was expecting at least a dick touch or something,” he teased, making Jared and I chuckle.

“I’m working on that. Maybe the surprise I bring her tonight will earn me one,” I joked.

As much as I wanted intimacy with Presley, I wanted more for her to be comfortable around me like she was before everything went to shit. She had finally stopped pushing me away and had accepted me in her life. I wanted her to trust me like that again.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Jared said, smacking his hand on the hood of the black SUV leading the convoy.

Dex handed me a rifle, and I climbed into the vehicle’s backseat. Dex got in beside me from the other side, Blaise in the driver’s seat, and Jared in the front passenger side.

Just as we were about to pull away, I rolled my window down and looked up to see Presley watching us through the window with her arms across her chest. I winked and grinned. She smiled back, but it didn’t reach her eyes. It was better than nothing, but I had every intention of changing that soon. I wanted to bring back that real happy smile that I had the honor of seeing before everything happened.

It took about an hour and a half for us to reach Conrad's neighborhood. We sent a team to watch his house after we sent those emails and knew he took off as soon as the threats started coming in. He probably went to one of his many safehouses in the city that he thought no one knew about.

Besides a few guards, the large mansion was empty.

We parked down the road from Conrad's mansion out of sight, and Jared got to work on his computer. He hacked Conrad's security system and shut off the surveillance cameras and alarms.

The house was set back from the road and surrounded by a six-foot tall fence. Two guards were at the main gates, a few others were walking the property line, and one was near the front door.

Conveniently, there were no neighbors anywhere near the place.

Once Jared shut off the security system, we exited the vehicles and broke into our previously assigned groups before turning our radios on and covering our faces with balaclavas.

"Everyone knows their job?" I asked, waiting for my guys to nod before announcing, "Let's move out."

I lifted my rifle in front of me and crouched as I moved along the shadows toward the front of the property with Jared and four more men. Dex, Blaise, two other guys, and Zeus headed for the back of the property. The fence would be easy for them to get over since it wasn't that high.

Once the front gate came into view, I quickly spotted the two guards casually leaning against the fence smoking.

They didn't see us coming, so I quietly lowered my rifle and flung the strap over my shoulder before reaching for my knife. Jared did the same thing, while the others kept their guns aimed toward the guards.

We wanted to be quiet for as long as possible so the other guards around the property weren't alerted.

We moved slowly behind the guards while they continued to converse. I reached through the fence next to one of the guards while Jared moved simultaneously beside the other guard. It was too late by the time they noticed our presence, we had already slit their throats, silencing them with fatal knife wounds.

Their lifeless bodies dropped to the ground before we climbed over the main gate and moved toward the front of the house.

"Two down," I announced over the radio.

"Copy. One down at the back," Blaise replied.

That left us with two guards, and I was no longer concerned with making noise.

The front door and the guard sitting on the steps with his face buried in his phone came into view.

I pulled my Glock out of the holster, and as I fired a round aimed between the idiot's eyes, I heard another shot at the

back and knew the other team had taken care of the last remaining guard.

“Clear front,” I announced on the radio.

“Clear back,” Blaise replied.

“We’re clear for the van,” I added.

We left a couple of our men with the vehicles, so they could move the equipment closer once we handled the guards.

Jared moved to the front gate to let them in while I headed inside the house.

The first thing my eyes landed on when I walked through the front door was a large portrait of Presley and Conrad hanging over the fireplace.

Once again, her eyes looked empty in the picture, even though she was smiling. Seeing her standing beside Conrad with his arm wrapped possessively around her waist had my blood boiling. I couldn’t fucking wait to end that piece of shit.

A couple of our men and I cleared the house to ensure no hidden guards were in the place while Jared went to work on the other part of the plan.

When all was clear, I searched for anything we could use against Conrad. Unfortunately, I didn’t find much.

Being in a house where I knew Presley had lived for a few years felt weird. Especially since I knew they weren’t happy years for her. I wanted to know everything he did to her so I

could take it out on him, but I knew it would destroy me when I did find out.

I moved to Conrad's office, but the place already looked ransacked. The computer was gone, and so were a lot of documents. He had obviously taken the essentials with him when he left in a hurry.

I looked through his filing cabinet anyway, and that was when my eyes landed on one of the folders left behind. It had Presley's real name on the tab, Laura Lincoln.

My heart started beating faster as I wondered what information was inside the folder. Would it be an invasion of privacy if I looked at it? Who the fuck was I kidding? Of course, I was going to look. What if there was something inside that could help us with our plans? But still, the guilt was there. I would have preferred to learn about Presley from her, not from a file folder I found in her soon-to-be-deceased husband's office.

Before I opened it, Jared popped his head into the room.

"Everything's set. We're ready to go when you are," he said.

"Got it. I'm coming," I replied, grabbing the folder and heading for the door.

I could look through the folder later. Right now, I just wanted to get back to Presley and finish step two of our master plan, hopefully putting another smile on her face.

## Chapter 21

# Waiting Game

## Presley

**A**fter Cruz and the guys left, I sat in the chair next to the window and stared at the night sky, while my mind worked in overdrive.

I tried telling myself I wasn't worried about Cruz, but that was a lie. Conrad was a psychopath capable of horrible things, and I didn't want Cruz or any of the guys getting hurt tonight, or worse.

If I was being honest, I didn't want Cruz anywhere near Conrad or that house that reminded me of hell.

The only saving grace was that Cruz and his men seemed like a force to be reckoned with. They all looked like well-trained military men with the confidence and intimidating presence to go with it.

I had watched from my window as they loaded the vehicles with weapons and gear. They seemed so calm, cool, and collected, like this was just another ordinary day, and they

weren't going off on some dangerous mission. I was envious of that confidence.

Even though they looked like they could handle themselves, I was still worried. Conrad was a snake and didn't play fair. Nothing was off-limits to him, and he would do anything to ensure he came out on top.

I just hoped everything went smoothly and they made it home safe.

I let out a long sigh, recalling my conversation with Cruz.

I had been such a bitch to him the past few days, and I couldn't understand why I was acting that way. It was as if I had no control over the cruel words that left my lips. I was trying to hurt him.

Then Cruz called me out on it, and what he said made so much sense. I was subconsciously trying to provoke him so he would lose his temper and hurt me. If he did, that would confirm he was just like Conrad, acting like a nice guy when, deep down, he was a monster capable of heinous things.

The thing was, when I was with Conrad, I always felt that something was off, even when he acted like a *'good guy'*. I was just too naive back then to trust my gut. With Cruz, it was different. My gut was the one telling me to trust him, and my brain was the one not ready to give in.

I guess I still was that naive girl since I still didn't trust my gut. Honestly, I didn't know what to trust anymore or who. It seemed no matter what I did, I ended up in bad situations.



I let out a long, frustrated sigh. I was such a mess.

What confused me even more was when Cruz walked out of the closet dressed head-to-toe in camo gear. There was no denying how aroused I was. He looked so intimidating but also sexy as sin. At that moment, I wanted him and felt it straight to my core. The man set every nerve ending in my body on fire and hadn't even touched me.

How could I think a man was a monster but still want him to throw me on the bed and ravage my body? I was utterly fucked. Completely certifiable.

When he grabbed me and pulled me onto his lap, I should have been terrified, but surprisingly, I wasn't. I was a little nervous but mostly aroused and anxious to see what he would do next.

Maybe that part of my brain, that believed Cruz was genuine, was starting to win the war in my head.

A knock at the door drew me from my thoughts.

When I said nothing, the door opened, and Erika walked in.

"Hey, I thought you could use a distraction right now," she chirped, walking toward the bed.

I didn't reply since I was still mad at her for her role in my kidnapping. I turned my head back toward the window, giving her the cold shoulder.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? You seem to think I betrayed you, but I didn't. I never lied to you, Presley. Did I withhold information? Yes, but it wasn't with malicious intent. You kept

stuff from me just like I kept stuff from you,” she said with a frustrated sigh, as she sat facing me on the edge of the bed.

I still didn't say anything and kept my eyes fixed out the window.

Deep down, I knew she was right, but I wasn't ready to admit it.

I was hurting inside and mad at the world for everything that happened.

“I guess you're not ready to talk to me yet, so I'll go.” Erika huffed, standing from the bed.

“No, stay. Please,” I blurted out.

I didn't want to be alone with my thoughts. No matter what happened, I still loved Erika like a sister and needed her now more than ever.

She sat back down, and we were silent for a few minutes before she spoke.

“You know, when I found you all those years ago, I figured that you were running from some abusive asshole,” she said and paused before adding, “You were scared and broken, but I could tell you still had some fight left in you. So instead of pushing you to tell me who the asshole was who hurt you, I focused on building you back up and teaching you how to fight back. I always figured if the scumbag from your past came back into your life, you would pop a cap in his ass and show him who's boss,” she chuckled lightly before turning serious. “I just didn't realize how much danger you were

actually in. I kick myself now for not pushing you for information back then. Had I known who you were running from, I would have done more...”

I faced Erika and cut her off, “Even if you had pushed me, I would have never told you who I was running from. Never. So don’t beat yourself up over something out of your control.”

“But why? Why couldn’t you tell me about your past? It’s not like I would have handed you over to him. I could have protected you better if I’d known who we were dealing with,” she said frustratedly.

**\*\*Flashback\*\***

### ***Three Years Earlier***

*I don’t know how long I had been in the box. Hours? Days? A week? I had no idea, but it must have been more than a few hours since I had soiled my pants multiple times.*

*At times, as I stared into the darkness around me while the music blared, I wondered if maybe I had died and was in hell. Then the intense cramping in my awkwardly positioned legs, the hunger, extreme thirst, and severe pain all over my body reminded me I was still alive.*

*My sanity was slipping as I lay praying for death to take me. The mental torture of being in that box was a million times worse than the pain I felt when Conrad sliced through my flesh.*

*I had no tears left, and my will to survive was fading rapidly.*

*Suddenly, the music shut off. Or did it? I could still hear the opera song playing in my head, but was it actually playing, or was I imagining it? Was this all part of losing your mind when you could no longer tell what was real or not?*

*My question was answered when the lid to the box opened, and my eyes slammed shut from the blinding light that assaulted them. I struggled to lift my weak arm to cover my eyes.*

*“Holy shit sis. You stink,” Owen’s taunting voice mixed with the sound of the opera music still playing in my head.*

*“Get out,” he ordered.*

*I tried to move, but all my muscles seized.*

*“I thought three days would be enough, but maybe you need a couple more,” he said, sounding annoyed.*

*“N-no, p-please,” I croaked. My mouth and throat were so dry it was difficult to speak.*

*“Then get out,” he barked.*

*I tried to stand but couldn’t.*

*Owen grabbed my arms with an irritated huff and roughly hauled me out of the box.*

*I cried out as pain shot through my weak limbs. Everything hurt so bad.*

*My eyes were finally adjusting to the light, and I opened them slightly to take in the room as he dragged me toward a wooden chair in the middle. It faced another wooden chair*

*with a body slumped in it. A black mesh bag covered the person's face, but from the petite body and breasts, I knew it was a woman.*

*"Sit, sis. You get a front-row seat today," Owen said, pushing me roughly onto the chair.*

*I didn't struggle or speak since I had nothing left.*

*Owen walked away, whistling to himself like a true psychopath. I took the time to take in the unresponsive person sitting across from me.*

*She was wearing a filthy white blouse and a black pencil skirt ripped halfway up her thigh. One of her black heels was missing, and blood ran down her shins from injuries to her knees.*

*Her wrists and ankles were restrained to the chair, and her head hung forward as if unconscious. I knew she wasn't dead because her chest rose and fell with each shallow breath she took.*

*Owen returned seconds later and roughly grabbed my wrist before I felt a sharp pinch. I looked down to see he had slammed a handcuff against it. Owen then secured the cuff to the chair's armrest before repeating the action on my other wrist with a second pair of cuffs.*

*I didn't fight. I knew it was pointless. If I was being honest, I just prayed he would make it quick if he killed me.*

*"Aww... Don't tell me we broke you already. We haven't even gotten to the main event yet," Owen taunted, walking over to*

*the other woman.*

*I didn't respond as I sat slumped over in my chair, barely able to keep my head up.*

*Owen grabbed the bag covering the woman's head and looked over at me with a sadistic smile, before yanking it off.*

*My blood ran cold, and bile burned in the back of my throat when I saw the face that had been hidden under the bag.*

*I thought I was completely broken, but I wasn't. When I realized the other person was my best friend, Crystal, the fight in me returned with a vengeance.*

*I screamed and thrashed against the restraints.*

*"You fucking asshole. Let her go. She didn't do anything. Hurt me, not her." I screamed, and for the first time in my life, I wanted to hurt someone.*

*My screaming caused Crystal to stir awake. She seemed out of it, though, and her eyes were unfocused.*

*"Good, I was hoping we hadn't completely broken you, yet," Owen said to me, sounding pleased.*

*"You son of a bitch. Don't fucking hurt her." I growled, not recognizing my own voice.*

*"Pay attention, sis, you're about to find out what happens to those who betray us," Owen ordered, walking over to a table covered with stainless steel instruments.*

*He selected a tool and walked back toward Crystal.*

*“Crystal, wake up. Please,” I begged, my voice coming out desperate.*

*“I didn’t realize you’re just as twisted as us. You want her awake for what I’m about to do to her? I like your style,” Owen chuckled darkly.*

*“Please, Owen, I’m begging you, don’t hurt her. Hurt me. I’m the one who needs to be punished,” I begged, tears pouring freely from my eyes. I didn’t think I had any tears left, but it turned out I was wrong.*

*“This is just as much your punishment as it is hers,” he said calmly, reaching for her blouse, and tearing the front open, sending all the buttons flying.*

*Crystal started coming to a little more, and her unfocused eyes met mine.*

*One of her eyes was swollen shut, her lip was spit, and her nose looked broken with blood running from it.*

*My heart broke for her. It was all my fault.*

*“I’m sorry,” I whispered between sobs.*

*Owen produced a knife and sliced down the center of her skirt, nicking her abdomen with the blade.*

*Crystal cried out in pain and thrashed against the restraints.*

*“Oh, shit, sorry about that,” Owen said mockingly, ripping the skirt free from her body.*

*Crystal was now only wearing black panties and a black bra. Her shirt hung off her shoulders but did nothing to cover her*

*body.*

*“Please don’t hurt me,” she sobbed, seeming to sober from the fresh wave of pain.*

*“You should have thought about that before having your little heart-to-heart with her,” Owen said calmly, pointing the blade at me.*

*“She didn’t tell me anything. I found the information in Conrad’s office,” I blurted out, desperate to protect her.*

*Owen looked at me and shook his head before raising the knife and bringing it down onto Crystal’s thigh. The knife pierced her skin and sunk deep into her flesh.*

*She cried out in pain as spit flew from her mouth, and her body shook violently.*

*“See what happens when you lie?” Owen tsked.*

*He withdrew the blade, causing Crystal to cry out again.*

*Owen moved to the table full of tools and put the knife down before selecting something else. I couldn’t see what it was.*

*He returned to a sobbing Crystal, and that was when I noticed the pliers in his hand.*

*Owen proceeded to rip every one of her fingernails off.*

*Every time I thought it couldn’t get worse, it did. Being forced to sit there and do nothing, while he inflicted pain on my best friend, was the worst kind of torture.*

*Her gut-wrenching screams filled the air, as I sobbed and desperately pleaded for him to stop.*



*At some point, I vaguely recall Owen switching to a blow torch and the instant the smell of burning flesh assaulted my senses, I leaned forward and vomited bile on the concrete floor.*

*I sat there rocking back and forth in my chair as he tortured her for what felt like hours.*

*Whenever I closed my eyes, Owen forced me to open them by threatening to drag out her torture if I didn't watch.*

*I tried to block everything out, but it was impossible. Crystal's blood-curdling screams would forever haunt me.*

*"Are you done yet? I need to get Laura home and cleaned up," Conrad's bored voice asked from somewhere behind me.*

*"Already? I was just getting started," Owen replied.*

*I glanced at Crystal, who didn't even look alive anymore. If she was, it was by a thread. She was covered head-to-toe in blood, chunks of her skin were missing, and cuts and burns littered her body.*

*A whimper left my lips. I did that to her. None of this would have happened if she had just stayed away from me.*

*"I think Laura's learned her lesson. Isn't that right, wife? The next time you try to leave me, it will be you in that chair," Conrad stated harshly.*

*I whimpered but said nothing. I couldn't. I was in shock.*

*"Fine," Owen said, sounding almost pouty as he retrieved the knife and walked over to Crystal.*

*Looking bored, Owen dragged the blade across her neck, slicing it open. Blood sprayed from the open wound as Crystal's eyes flew wide open. Gurgling sounds filled the room as she struggled to breathe. I swore time slowed as the life faded from her terrified eyes. I was forced to watch my best friend die right in front of me.*

*My body shook violently, but no more tears would fall.*

*I vaguely recall someone unlocking the cuffs around my wrists and stripping my clothes off before cold water drenched my body. A hose?*

*Then, I was carried away as my world went black.*

***\*\*End of flashback\*\****

I shuddered at the memory, and a lone tear slid down my cheek.

So much changed after that day.

“You meant too much to me to risk losing you too. The less you knew back then, the safer you were,” I whispered, wiping my cheek.

“Too?” she asked, and when our eyes met, a knowing look spread across her face.

“He took my best friend from me because she tried to warn me about him,” I added, leaving out the vicious way Owen killed her.

“I’m sorry, Pres,” she said sympathetically, coming over to wrap her arms around me in a comforting hug.

“You don’t have to worry anymore. Conrad’s days are numbered. He can’t hurt you ever again. Cruz won’t let that happen. None of us will,” Erika added.

I wanted to believe her, I did, but until I saw his cold, dead body, I couldn’t.

Could the devil really be killed? I wasn’t so sure.

Erika stayed with me for hours. We talked a little but also sat in comfortable silence for long periods.

My anger with her faded the more time we spent together, and it felt like old times when we would sit around and talk about nothing and everything. Just having her with me was comforting. It was probably the only reason the memory of what happened to Crystal didn’t shatter me all over again.

At around one in the morning, Erika left my room and went to hers.

I stayed by the window the entire time, unable to sleep until I knew the guys were safe. More specifically, Cruz was safe.

It was past three in the morning when headlights appeared down the road from the main gate.

I stood up abruptly and held my breath as the same four vehicles that left earlier returned.

They stopped by the front of the house before the doors started to open, and men dressed in camo exited.

My eyes frantically scanned the bodies, searching for one specific person, and when I spotted him climbing out of a

black SUV, I let out a relieved breath.

The first thing Cruz did when he got out was look up to the window where I stood watching. His eyes twinkled when he spotted me, and a grin spread across his face.

I couldn't help but smile back. My stomach was doing backflips, and my heart fluttered. I told myself it was because I was relieved to see him alive, not because I had developed feelings for the man.

Even though I knew that was a lie. Once again, Cruz was breaking through my heavily guarded heart like a wrecking ball, and no matter how much I tried to stop him, he wasn't having it.

The scariest part, I wasn't sure I wanted him to stop fighting for me.

## Chapter 22

# A Surprise

## Presley

I spun on my heels and left the room hurriedly, taking the stairs two at a time down to the main level.

The front doors opened as I reached the living room, and the guys started coming in.

The second Cruz stepped inside, my eyes scanned his body again to ensure he wasn't injured.

I had this sudden urge to run and leap into his arms and kiss him. Of course, something held me back and kept me rooted in place. Instead, I stood awkwardly, fidgeting with my hands as I shuffled from foot to foot.

When Cruz spotted me, he didn't hesitate as he came over, wrapped his strong arms around me, and lifted me off the ground. Adoration swirled in his eyes as he stared down at me with a goofy grin.

I squealed in surprise, and my legs automatically wrapped around his waist for support.

His lips crashed with mine before I could protest. His hands moved to my ass, as he kissed me passionately. I hesitated at first, but then I kissed him back with equal need. A fire ignited in my lower abdomen and spread through my body like wildfire.

I could feel his growing erection against my core which made my pussy throb with need.

The fact he was still dressed head-to-toe in camo gear, looking lethal and sexy, only added to my arousal.

God, what was this man doing to me? Whenever he touched me like that, I turned into a puddle.

After a minute, he pulled away and stared at me as if seeing me for the first time. He said nothing for a long moment, which made my already flushed cheeks grow hotter. I looked away, sobering from my moment of weakness.

Cruz released me so I could stand on my feet, and at that moment, I remembered we weren't alone in the room.

A dozen men, also dressed in camo, stood around watching us. Erika had joined them at some point. I suddenly wished the ground would open up and swallow me. I hated attention, but being around a large group of dangerous-looking men made it worse.

Cruz wrapped a possessive arm around my waist when he noticed my discomfort, which surprisingly helped.

He spoke to Jared, drawing everyone's attention away from me and to them. "Is it ready?" he asked.

“It is,” Jared nodded once.

“Is what ready?” I frowned.

“I told you I would bring you a surprise, didn’t I?” he said, looking down at me with a crooked smile. He had mentioned it, but I didn’t think he was serious.

Dread settled in the pit of my stomach. What could Cruz have possibly brought me from my old house that I would want? Was this a trick? I hated everything about that house because it reminded me of the hell I endured while I lived there. I certainly didn’t want to keep a souvenir.

“It’s okay. I really don’t want anything,” I said nervously, trying to pull away from Cruz, but he didn’t let me go. His grip on my waist tightened.

Ignoring me, he nodded once to Jared, who picked up the remote on the coffee table and pressed a button.

I gasped, and my eyes widened when my old house appeared on the large flat-screen television mounted to the wall.

Was this a fucking joke? I didn’t want to sit here, watch that house, and reminisce about the good old times. Note the sarcasm since there were no good times in that house. What the fuck was he thinking?

As if Cruz could sense my change in demeanor, he explained, “I thought you would want to do the honors of destroying it.”

His excitement had vanished and was replaced with concern.



I had no idea what he was talking about, so I didn't reply. My eyes stayed fixed on the house that would forever haunt me. I couldn't even blink as I took in the white three-story Venetian-style mansion. At first glance, it looked like a beautiful home. No one would have ever suspected the horrendous things that happened inside that house.

"Fuck, maybe this was a bad idea," Cruz murmured before adding, "We rigged the house with explosives so we can blow it up. I thought you should have the honor of pressing the detonator, but I can do it if it's too much for you."

My eyes reluctantly left the screen to look at Cruz with a frown. What? Was he serious? How was that even possible?

"I know I told you we went there to see if we could find evidence to use against Conrad, but really, our main reason was to blow up the house. We blew shit up all the time in the military, so it was nothing for us to rig it," he said and paused before adding, "I must admit, though, pissing off Conrad was just a bonus. I really did this for you since I figured this house probably held bad memories, and watching it burn might help put some of that behind you. I hope I didn't overstep my boundaries," he said, sounding almost sheepish.

"You did this for me?" I asked in disbelief.

"Of course. I would do anything for you. I told you that." Cruz nodded.

My eyes filled with tears. No one had ever done anything like this for me before. I was so overwhelmed with emotions that I didn't know what to say.

“Is this too much?” he asked, his voice laced with concern.

“No, I’m just overwhelmed,” I admitted, wiping a tear from my cheek.

“Do you want to do it, or do you want me to?” he asked as Jared handed him a laptop.

“I want to,” I said with a sniffle before asking, “What do I do?”

“All you have to do is press enter, then watch the fireworks go off,” he replied, turning the keyboard toward me.

“Seriously? That’s it?” I asked in disbelief.

“That’s it.” Cruz smiled down at me.

I brought my shaky hand to the keyboard, and my pointer finger hovered over the button for several seconds before I finally slammed it down on it.

My eyes lifted to the screen just in time to see a flash of white light inside the house before all the windows exploded simultaneously and the house engulfed in flames.

There was no sound on the screen, but it didn’t matter. Watching that hellhole burn to the ground was satisfying enough.

The men in the room hooted and hollered whenever a small explosion went off in the house, lighting up the night sky.

I had no idea how long we watched before flashing lights flickered across the screen and emergency services arrived.

There wasn't much remaining of the house by that point, and definitely nothing inside would be salvageable.

A warm feeling washed over me, knowing that the house was forever gone. I needed that more than I realized.

"You okay?" Cruz asked with a frown. He was probably concerned because of the tears running freely down my face, but they weren't sad tears; they were happy tears.

"I'm more than okay. Thank you," I said sincerely, smiling up at him.

He leaned down and kissed me gently.

"Anything for you," he said against my lips.

I was so tempted to ask if there was any chance that he could burn down another place for me, but I didn't. If I did, Cruz would ask what that place meant to me and I wasn't ready to talk about that part of my life yet, so I decided against it.

What I wouldn't give, though, to see Owen's warehouse burn down. The place where my nightmares truly began. Where I watched my best friend die and could do nothing to stop it.

"Well, buddy. It's been a long night. I think it's time for us to hit the sack," Blaise said to Cruz, patting him on the shoulder.

"Thanks for all your guys' help tonight," Cruz said to the room.

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world. You know how I like my fireworks," Jared replied, coming over and gently

squeezing my shoulder and offering me a sympathetic smile.

Jared was a big, scary-looking guy, but something about his demeanor was friendly and gentle. I smiled back at him.

Erika came over and hugged me, and I returned it without hesitation.

“You did good, girl. I’m proud of you,” she said next to my ear.

“Thanks,” I replied before she and Blaise headed for their room.

The room quickly cleared out until it was only Cruz and me remaining.

Things had changed between us tonight. I could feel it, but I didn’t know what exactly that meant.

There was no way Cruz would have gone to all that effort if he didn’t honestly care about me. It was time for me to accept it—no more fighting.

“Tired?” he asked, and I nodded.

Butterflies invaded my belly at the realization that I would try and let Cruz back into my heart. It might not happen overnight, but I was ready to work at it.

Cruz pulled me by the hand and led me up the stairs.

I was nervous because I wasn’t sure what to do now. How would I tell him about my thoughts? I wasn’t exactly good at expressing myself. The only two men I had ever been with were Conrad, which obviously wasn’t a happy time for me,

and Cruz, but he was the one who initiated everything. I was clueless about how to approach this.

We reached the bedroom, and Cruz released my hand before disappearing into the walk-in closet.

I stood at the foot of the bed, fidgeting with my hands as I thought about what I should say to Cruz.

I had my back to the closet when I sensed his presence, so I turned to face him.

My mouth dropped open, and my eyes blinked several times as I looked him over. He was in his boxers, but that wasn't what threw me off. No, it was the jockstrap fastened over them and the mouthguard he was sliding into his mouth.

What the fuck? Was he about to play street hockey at four in the morning?

“What are you wearing?” I snorted, unable to stop myself. He looked ridiculous but somehow still sexy.

“I'm getting in that bed one way or another,” he mumbled through the mouthguard, looking determined as he pointed to the bed with his bare chest puffed out.

“I'm not sure my balls will survive another blow, so I thought this was appropriate,” he added, pointing to the cup.

“And I like my teeth.” He pointed to the mouthguard.

He had been sleeping on the couch since everything happened, and I wanted to laugh at how cute he looked, all determined to get his way. Should I tell him I had intended to

let him sleep in the bed with me tonight, or should I let this play out? Seeing as though he went through all the effort of putting on a jockstrap, I decided to go with the latter.

“I’m really sorry about kneeing you in the balls, Cruz. I was just desperate to get away and I thought you wanted to hurt me. As for sleeping together...” My voice trailed off. I was having difficulty keeping a serious face while he stood before me with his legs wide and his hands on his hips, looking ridiculous.

“Fine, I guess it’s going to be a struggle-snuggle then,” he slurred matter-of-factly through the mouthguard, as he slowly stalked toward me like a weird-looking predator.

I squealed and laughed as I ran to the other side of the bed, screaming, “You’re insane!”

“What did I tell you about those insults?” He tsk’d even though it was hard to understand with the mouthguard.

“You wouldn’t dare,” I said in a high-pitched tone, remembering his edging threat.

I leaped on the bed, trying to evade the jockstrap-wearing lunatic.

“Oh, but I would,” he laughed maniacally, grabbing my ankle and pulling me toward the bed’s edge.

I squealed and laughed so hard that my stomach hurt as he climbed on top of me and settled between my thighs. I struggled in his grasp, but not really. I didn’t actually want to get away from him.

“You’ve lost your damn mind,” I said between fits of laughter. He grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head.

Being restrained would normally trigger me, but the way Cruz did it in such a non-threatening and playful way, it didn’t. If anything, everything he had just done, settled my nerves.

“Are my teeth safe? Can I take this off? Because I really want to kiss you, but it might get a little drooly if I do it with this thing on,” he said, pointing to his mouth.

“Yes, your teeth are safe.” I chuckled.

Cruz slid the mouthguard out and flung it across the room before grinning down at me. “Fuck, I’ve been dying to kiss you.”

“You kissed me downstairs,” I pointed out.

“Not like this,” he said before lowering his mouth to mine and kissing me like his life depended on it. It was rough, needy, and passionate. I felt like he was devouring me as his tongue explored every inch of my mouth.

My body came alive under him, and I desperately wanted more. I needed him to touch me.

Cruz broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against mine as we both panted heavily.

Why was he stopping? I needed this. I was sure he did too.

He groaned almost painfully, making me frown.

“What’s wrong?” I asked breathlessly.

“Our little struggle-snuggle made my dick hard, and it feels like it’s folded in half inside the cup,” he admitted, sounding pained.

I blinked up at him again before busting out into another fit of laughter.

“You can take it off, Cruz. I promise not to hurt your balls,” I said once my laughter died.

“Thank Christ,” he huffed, releasing my wrists and removing the jockstrap.

He wasn’t kidding when he said he was hard. His cock was straining against his boxer briefs, and I could only imagine how uncomfortable it must have been crammed inside that cup.

I had almost forgotten how big his cock was. I licked my lips at the sight, remembering how it felt when he thrust inside me.

“You see something you like?” he asked in a growl, as his eyes watched my tongue wet my lips.

I nodded, and instead of saying anything, I reached for his cock and stroked it through his boxers.

“Fuck beautiful, I missed your touch,” he grunted, voice strained.

His words spurred me on. I wasn’t very confident sexually, but still, I reached into his boxers and pulled out his erection so I could stroke it bare.



He cursed before adding, “I need to be inside you so fucking bad it hurts.”

“What are you waiting for?” I asked breathlessly.

“Take off your clothes,” he ordered, yanking his boxers off and throwing them aside. His hard length jutted out in front of him from the sudden motion, drawing my eyes to it.

I quickly pulled the T-shirt I wore over my head and he pulled my shorts off, along with my underwear.

I lay on the bed, fully naked, with him kneeling between my spread thighs.

“I can see how wet you are without even touching you,” he rasped, his dark, hungry eyes staring down at my glistening pussy.

His fingers ran along my inner thigh until he reached my folds, where he ran them along my slit up to my clit. I shivered and moaned when he gently rubbed circles over it eliciting a delicious friction.

“Oh God, that feels so good,” I said, arching my back and grinding my pussy against his hand.

He kept moving his finger over my clit as he used his other hand to thrust two fingers inside my warm, wet hole. I gasped at the sudden intrusion but then moaned when he moved them in and out.

“I’m so close, Cruz,” I panted as he moved his fingers in and out faster.

When I was about to come, Cruz suddenly withdrew his fingers.

“No, no, no. Don’t stop,” I groaned and looked up to see him smirking down at me with hooded eyes.

“I told you there were consequences for all that attitude,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“You’re torturing yourself, too,” I pointed out.

“Totally worth it. I want to hear you beg, beautiful. Until then, I’ll leave you on the edge,” Cruz said, leaning down to kiss me.

His lips moved to my neck, where he nipped and sucked at the sensitive skin before moving lower to my chest. He sucked one of my nipples into his mouth, while his hand tweaked the other. I gasped and arched my back, feeling my pussy clench around nothing at the slight bit of pain mixed with pleasure.

Cruz continued to kiss down my abdomen until he reached my pussy.

He used his big hands to hold my thighs open, as he ran his tongue along my slit up to my clit, making me moan.

He flicked it with his tongue before sucking it into his mouth. I ran my fingers through his hair and gave it a hard tug as he brought me to the edge for the second time.

The pressure building in my lower abdomen was intense, something I had never felt before.

“Yes!” I shouted, reaching the crest.

Cruz pulled away again, making me curse.

“Asshole,” I growled.

“Saying words like that is how you got yourself in this position in the first place, remember?” he teased.

“Please, Cruz. I’m sorry, okay? Please, let me come,” I said desperately.

“God, I like the sound of you begging me,” he groaned.

Instead of bringing his mouth back to my core, he lay beside me on the bed.

What the actual fuck?

I was about to throw a tantrum like a petulant child when he said, “Come here, beautiful, and sit on my face.”

Well, shit, I wasn’t expecting that.

“What?” I asked, frowning.

“Come here and sit that pretty little cunt down right here,” he pointed to his lips before adding, “That way, you can apologize to my balls in person for hurting them, while I eat your pussy like it’s my last meal.”

I didn’t think my cheeks could get any hotter, but they did.

I was so desperate to come that I didn’t argue and moved to his face. He lifted me so I was straddling him, facing his body.

“Sit,” he ordered, causing me to shiver at the feel of his warm breath against my sensitive skin.

I pushed my knees out further, bringing my pussy down on his mouth.

“Oh, God,” I moaned at the first lap of his tongue between my folds.

Without hesitation, I leaned forward until my stomach lay on his chest, and his hard cock bobbed in my face.

I was suddenly eager to bring him to the edge, just as he had done to me.

I gripped his cock in my hand, and he groaned against my pussy.

I wasn't going to last long at this rate. I was already getting close.

I licked the tip of his cock where precum had gathered and savored the masculine taste. I then took the head of his cock into my mouth and hollowed my cheeks.

As I took him deeper, Cruz started thrusting his tongue into my pussy as if he was fucking me with it.

His actions spurred me on to match his speed as I bobbed my head up and down along his length. His cock pulsed in my mouth, and I knew he was getting close.

I thought about stopping just like he had, but I couldn't. I wanted to feel him lose control.

He sucked my clit into his mouth and bit down lightly. That was all it took to send me flying over the edge while a toe-curling orgasm tore through my body.

I ground my pussy against his mouth, drawing out every last bit of my orgasm.

He barely let me come down from the climax before he flipped me onto my back, making me gasp.

“I want to be inside you when I come,” he growled, pushing my legs wide with his knees before settling between my thighs.

He lined his cock up at my entrance, and with one hard thrust, he buried himself inside me.

I gasped and arched into him, feeling so full. My pussy was still convulsing from the remnants of my climax.

“I’m going to fuck you hard, beautiful. If it’s too much, tell me to stop,” Cruz gritted out, his voice strained.

“Fuck me, Cruz. Fuck me with everything you have,” I moaned, and that was all he needed to hear before he pulled almost all the way out and slammed back into me.

“God, you feel so fucking good,” he growled as he fucked me hard and fast. The headboard slammed into the wall with each punishing thrust.

“Come for me again, beautiful. I want to feel your cunt clenching around my cock when I fill you with cum,” he grunted, reaching between us to pinch my sensitive clit.

“Fuck. Shit!” I shouted as I came a second time, and stars invaded my vision from the intensity of the climax.

“You come so beautifully,” Cruz growled as his movements became uncoordinated.

With one final thrust, he buried his cock deep inside my pussy, threw his head back, and roared his release, filling me with his cum.

My pussy clenched around his cock and milked every last drop from him.

Cruz collapsed on top of me, making sure not to crush me with his weight.

“Fuck, that was even better than I remembered,” he said breathlessly.

“Mmm... So good,” I moaned.

He rolled onto the bed next to me before wrapping his arms around my body and pulling me against him. My back was to his front.

“I will never get sick of that,” he said, burying his face in the crook of my neck, giving it a gentle kiss.

We were both silent for several minutes as we caught our breath.

I was exhausted, but I needed to say something to him before I let myself fall asleep or chickened out.

“Cruz?” I asked, checking to see if he was still awake.

“Yeah?” he replied sleepily.

“Don’t say anything, okay?” I instructed, feeling like it would be easier if I didn’t see his face or hear his voice. I

could pretend I was alone.

He said nothing, so I said, “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, but you told me not to speak.” He chuckled.

“Fair point,” I laughed lightly before adding, ” I’m sorry for how I’ve treated you. I just have a hard time trusting people.”

He didn’t speak, so I took a deep, shaky breath and continued, “Conrad threatened my friends so they would stay away from me. He had me fired from my job and drained my bank account, so I was forced to rely on him financially. I had no idea he had done any of it. I just thought I was unlucky, and bad things kept happening. He controlled everything when it came to me and made sure I was completely dependent on him. That’s why it triggered me when I found out about you buying the apartment building. I felt like you were trying to control me, too. Then, when you locked me up in this house, it reminded me of my old prison. I realize now that you were trying to protect me, but my head still struggles to believe it.”

His grip on me tightened the more I spoke, and I could imagine it wasn’t easy for him to hear all that, but he needed to know.

I wasn’t ready to talk about the physical abuse yet, but I felt like explaining the mental part was a good start for him to understand why I was the way I was.

“I honestly don’t know why you’re even bothering with me. I’m a mess,” I chuckled humorlessly. Tears slipped from my eyes as I added, “My head is so fucked up that I don’t know if

I'll ever be able to let you in entirely. Things will always trigger me, no matter how much counseling I get. Plus, I can't even have kids. Don't you want someone who isn't permanently damaged and can provide you with a family?"

"Can I speak now?" he asked, only half joking. His tone was strained, but I could tell he was trying to sound calm even though he wasn't.

I nodded my head but remained silent.

"Thank you for opening up, beautiful. Conrad will pay for everything he did to you. Mark my words." he said and let out a long breath before adding, "You need to tell me everything that triggers you, Presley, so I can make sure I don't accidentally do it. I would have done things differently had I known what it would do to you."

"As for why I want to be with you. I knew from the first time I laid eyes on you that you were special. You were guarded and cold, but I could see right through that act. Deep down inside, you were hurting and needed someone to fight for you. It was like your soul called to mine, and I knew I needed to break down your walls, so you wouldn't be alone anymore. Then, once I did, I got a glimpse of the sweet, intelligent, funny, and caring woman hiding behind that cold front. I knew then and there that you were mine. I realize it won't always be easy, but I'm not going anywhere. So, let's just take it one day at a time. Okay?" he asked, and I nodded since I didn't trust my voice with all the emotions trapped in my throat.



“As for kids. Well... I was an only child growing up, and I’d like to keep it that way,” he joked, making me laugh. I swiped at my tear-stained cheek. He definitely was a man-child, but he was my man-child.

“In all seriousness, I never thought about having kids before. I’m not saying I don’t want any, but the fact you can’t have any doesn’t scare me off in the slightest. If we decide down the road that we want a family, then there are other ways to have one. We can adopt or foster. Hell, there’s even surrogacy. My feelings for you won’t change just because you can’t have kids, so get that out of your head. Got it?” he added.

I nodded my head without saying a word. He obviously wasn’t happy with my silence when he rolled me over, so I was facing him.

“You get that? I don’t care that you can’t have kids. I like you just the way you are,” he repeated sternly.

“Got it,” I whispered, as tears continued to fall from my eyes.

“Now kiss me, damn it,” he ordered before bringing his lips to mine.

Cruz seemed so perfect, and he said all the right things. Now, I just needed to convince my brain to stop second-guessing everything.

Like he said, one day at a time.

## Chapter 23

# Pool Day

Cruz

**L**ast night was fucking perfect. I couldn't have asked for a better ending to the day.

Not only did I make Presley smile and laugh, but she opened up a little and told me about some of the shit Conrad put her through. Even though it made my blood boil hearing how he controlled her, I was glad she felt comfortable enough to tell me.

I knew it took a lot for her to open up like that, and honestly, I wasn't expecting it, so it was a huge step forward. It meant she was starting to trust me again.

I was also glad that I knew some of her triggers now to avoid upsetting her unintentionally. There were probably many more I didn't know about yet, but for now, I would accept my small victory.

*Baby steps.* I reminded myself.

As for Conrad, everything was on track. His allies had dropped him, we burnt his house down, and I had Jared and Erika working on hacking into his bank account to drain his funds just like he had done to Presley. It only seemed fair after all. He took her money when they were together. Now, we would take his. When we killed Conrad and his brother, Presley could decide what she wanted to do with the money since it was meant to be hers as his widow anyway. I couldn't wait for her to claim that title since I hated that she was still legally his wife.

I wasn't worried about Conrad leaving town. He had far too much at stake in the city to run away. By leaving, he would be giving everything up, and I knew he wouldn't do that unless it were vital. One of our sources did inform us that Conrad was trying to mend some of his broken alliances in a desperate attempt to self-preserve. I doubted it would work, though. The evidence we sent out was far too damning for him to recover from.

Since there wasn't much to do while Jared and Erika worked their magic, I decided to spend the day with Presley. Things were finally looking up for us, and I wanted to keep the momentum going.

Given everything going on, though, I didn't feel comfortable leaving the property with her, so instead, I decided we would have a chill day by the pool and relax a little. We both could use it after the past couple of weeks. Since summer was here and the weather was nice and warm during the day, the pool would be perfect.

I finished up in the home gym and grabbed my towel to wipe the sweat from my face, before walking out.

When I woke up this morning, Presley was still asleep. She looked so peaceful, and I knew she needed the rest, so I let her sleep in and went for a workout.

Once I reached the room, I scanned my thumb on the door panel and walked inside. The bed was empty, but I spotted movement inside the bathroom, which still didn't have a door. I could have put it back on, but I liked it this way, where I could see her sexy ass going in and out of the shower. I figured I'd wait for her to demand I put it back on before I bothered to do it.

"Good, you're up," I noted as Presley walked out with a towel wrapped around her chest, looking fresh out of the shower.

Fuck, if I had arrived a few minutes earlier, I could have joined her in that shower.

"I am." She smiled shyly.

I took the opportunity to look her over. I fucking loved her long, slender legs. The towel was short enough that I could see most of her thighs.

My cock swelled as I imagined those sexy, long legs wrapped around my waist like last night, but this time with both of us naked.

"Wanna take a shower with me?" I asked with a grin.

"I just had one." She chuckled and shook her head.

“So? You’re already wet, why not?” I said, stalking over to her.

“I have to go talk to Erika about something. I can’t,” she said just as I reached her.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her against me, sliding my hands down her back and under the towel until I cupped both her ass cheeks. I gave them a firm squeeze, making her gasp.

“Cruz, you’re getting sweat all over me,” she whined.

She groaned when I pushed my erection against her stomach, showing her the effect she had on me.

“I guess you’ll need another shower now that I got you all sweaty,” I said with a victorious smirk.

“I need to talk to Erika about my studio, Cruz. It’s been almost two weeks. The other girls will start wondering what happened to me, and the police are probably looking for the owner after they found all that blood there,” she said thoughtfully.

“I think Erika said she took care of it,” I told her, leaning down to kiss her neck.

She shivered and leaned her head to the side, giving me better access.

”*I think*’ isn’t good enough. That’s my business, Cruz, my only source of income. I need to ensure it’s being looked after while I’m not there,” she said firmly.

I knew her studio was important to her, so I would reluctantly let her go and check with Erika, but only after making her smile first.

I sighed before saying, “Fine, show me your boobs, and I’ll let you go.”

She chuckled and slapped my chest. “In your dreams.”

“No, in my dreams, you’re not just showing them to me, I’m sucking on them.” I grinned and let go of her ass to grab the front of the towel.

Before I could undo the front knot, she stepped out of the way and ran into the walk-in closet.

“Not happening,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“Evil,” I groaned before adding, “We’re chilling by the pool today, so put a bathing suit on.”

After the first few days that Presley arrived here, I sent Erika to her apartment to gather some of her clothes and other essentials so she would be more comfortable. And I knew there was a one-piece swimsuit amongst her things.

“Isn’t there stuff to do regarding Conrad?” she asked, poking her head out of the closet and frowning.

“There is, but I want us to spend the day together and relax. We both need it after the past few weeks,” I replied.

When she looked ready to protest, I added, “Plus, I have Jared and Erika working on a few things, so until they’re done, there isn’t much for us to do.”

“Oh, what kind of things are they working on?” she asked curiously.

“Show me *one* boob, and I’ll tell you,” I bargained playfully.

Presley rolled her eyes, but a smile appeared on her face. “You’re impossible.”

“I’m a guy. What do you expect? Plus, you happen to have really nice tits,” I said with a shrug before adding, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to shower and deal with this erection.”

I stripped out of my basketball shorts, leaving me naked in front of her.

Her eyes immediately darted to my cock, and her pupils dilated at the sight of my erection. I smiled in satisfaction when she rubbed her thighs together.

I then turned and walked into the bathroom with a bit of sway to my hips for dramatic effect.

I heard Presley chuckle in response.

God, I loved that sound.

I turned the water on in the shower and waited for it to warm before stepping in.

I didn’t actually jerk off since I intended to slide inside Presley at some point today. Maybe I would in the pool, even. That thought made my dick even harder. The idea of fucking her where we could get caught excited me. I wondered if she would let me.



“I’ll meet you downstairs when you’re done in the shower,” Presley announced.

“Sounds good, beautiful,” I replied, as I continued to wash my body.

At some point, my erection did settle, but I knew the minute I saw Presley in a bathing suit, it would come right back to life. That woman was so damn sexy; she turned me into a teenage boy whenever she was around.

Once done in the shower, I dried myself off and threw on some board shorts. I didn’t bother with a shirt.

I grabbed two fresh towels before leaving the room and heading downstairs.

I found Presley lounging on the couch in Erika’s office while Erika worked away on her computer. Erika was laughing at something Presley said.

I was glad to see them mending their friendship after everything that happened. Presley needed people in her corner, and Erika was perfect for that. She would always have Presley’s back, even when it came to me.

“Hey, you sort out your studio?” I asked.

“Yeah, Erika took care of it. She paid one of my most advanced girls to teach the classes while I was away and the police think the blood was from a break-in gone wrong. They spoke to the shop owner already, and since he rents the place to me illegally for cash under the table, he didn’t even give them my name,” she said, looking relieved.

“Good. Now, let’s go,” I ordered.

“Why do you guys get to have fun, while I’m stuck at my computer?” Erika pouted.

“Why don’t you join us when you’re done?” Presley suggested.

“Oh, I might just do that. I’m almost done with this anyway,” Erika replied with a grin.

I groaned my disapproval at her response, but they ignored me.

How the hell was I going to fuck Presley in the pool if there were others around? Once again, Erika was being a cock-block.

“I’ll see if Georgia wants to join us too,” Erika added excitedly.

“Why don’t you invite everyone, Fred?” I said with a slight sarcastic edge that I hoped she picked up on.

“You know what? I bet Carla would love to join us, too,” she replied, and when I glared at her, she smiled innocently. She knew what she was doing.

*Bitch.*

“Awesome. We’ll see you out there then.” Presley smiled, oblivious to the battle I was having with Erika.

We left her office and headed outside.

I set up the towels on two lounge chairs while Presley took off her purple cover-up dress, revealing a black one-piece

bathing suit that dipped low between her breasts and raised high on her hips.

I was right earlier, my cock was getting hard just seeing her in her swimsuit, and it wasn't even that revealing. Most girls with a body like hers would be sporting bikinis that resembled dental floss between their ass cheeks, but not my girl. I found what Presley wore sexier. It left more to the imagination and made me want to unwrap her like a present.

Presley laid down on one of the chairs while I applied sunscreen. She didn't look all that relaxed, but I figured it would take a bit of time for her to unwind with everything going on.

“Want me to do your back?” I asked, holding up the sunscreen.

“Sure,” she said softly, flipping onto her stomach.

I got on the chair and straddled her legs. Her bathing suit dipped low down her back, so I applied a generous amount of lotion and massaged it into her skin. Then I squirted more lotion onto my hands and did her upper thighs.

“I can reach there, you know.” She squirmed as my hand massaged along the edge of her bathing suit over her ass, which hung out from the suit a little.

“Yeah, but I'd be a fool to let you do it yourself.” I chuckled.

My thumbs brushed a little lower along the inside of her thighs along the edge of her swimsuit, and I felt her body

shiver. I didn't touch her, though. I wanted to tease her a little first and make her crave it.

After a few strokes, she moaned and parted her legs a little more, giving me better access.

Just to be a total tease, I ran my thumb lightly over the material covering her pussy and then pulled away. I got off her and laid on my chair.

Presley groaned in frustration and glared at me with her half-hooded eyes. I simply gave her an innocent look, pretending like I had no clue what her problem was.

"You want me to do your back?" she asked, sounding slightly breathless.

"Sure," I replied and flipped onto my stomach.

I was expecting her just to lean over and rub lotion on me, but she surprised me and straddled my legs doing the same as I had done to her.

Once she did my back, she also did the back of my legs. I went stiff when her hands reached up under my shorts, way higher than she needed to. I glanced over my shoulder to see a wicked smile on her face as her hand lightly stroked my balls and dick.

"You're playing with fire, little one," I growled playfully.

"What? I just want to make sure you don't burn." She shrugged innocently.

“Burn through my shorts?” I questioned, making her chuckle.

Fuck, that sound. It did things to me.

Presley got off and laid down on her chair.

We sunbathed for over an hour, lying in comfortable silence. I glanced over and noticed that Presley looked a lot more relaxed than when we first came out.

I was overheating from the warm sun, so I got up from my chair and cannon-balled into the pool, knowing it would splash Presley.

I heard her squeal and chuckle as I sunk into the cold water.

When I reached the surface, I moved to the side of the pool and rested my arms on the edge.

“Join me,” I ordered.

I expected her to say *no*, but to my surprise, she got up and moved to the steps. She climbed down into the pool, hissing from the cold water that engulfed her.

This woman was full of surprises today because once she was in, she came to me and wrapped her arms around my neck and legs around my waist. She looked awkward doing it as if she was pushing herself out of her comfort zone, but I was appreciative nonetheless.

I gripped her ass as I walked us around the pool, enjoying her closeness.

“So...” she started, looking unsure how to proceed before asking, “What happens after all this?”

“After I kill Conrad and his brother?” I asked, watching her eyes light up excitedly as she heard my words.

She said nothing but nodded.

“Well, I can finally take you out on a proper date,” I said.

Presley smiled before I continued, “We’ll take it as slow as you need, Presley, but I want to be with you, so I’m not going anywhere.”

“So, I can go home once Conrad’s no longer a threat?” she asked softly, looking a little unsure.

“I don’t want to say *no* flat out, but you know as well as I do that you live in a shitty part of town, and if you go back to that place, I’ll be worried about you and probably never leave your apartment. So, having said all that, I would prefer if you got a better apartment in a nicer part of town or moved in with me, but I won’t force you.”

She thought over my words for a few minutes before finally agreeing. “Okay.”

“Really? Just so we’re clear, which one are you okay with? The moving to a nicer apartment or in with me?” I asked, probably sounding far too eager, but I didn’t care. I wanted her to move in with me.

“A new apartment,” she replied with a soft chuckle.

“Damn, I was hoping for the other answer,” I half-teased, and she blushed.

I had a feeling her not wanting to move in with me had to do with the guards constantly walking around inside and out of this house. She wasn't comfortable around people, and there were always a dozen men walking around this place at any given time. I wouldn't push her on the matter, though. Not yet. I was just happy she agreed to move to a better location, and I could sell that shithole apartment building of hers.

Plus, I could always move with her. I didn't have to live here with the guys. We all moved in initially because we were single, and it was easier. What happened, though, when Erika and Blaise had kids? Would we all still want to live under the same roof?

Either way, we had time to think about all that, and I wouldn't push Presley about it yet.

“How have your counseling sessions been going?” I asked casually.

“Good. I really like Barbara. She's not pushy, and she's given me a few tricks that help ground me when I'm feeling overwhelmed,” she replied enthusiastically.

“That's good. I'm glad you like her,” I replied honestly.

I sat on the pool's edge on a bench with Presley still straddling me. Half our bodies were submerged, and the other half was above water.

We stayed like that for a while just chatting about unimportant things. It was nice and easy.

Presley looked up at the blue sky and sighed. "I could get used to this."

"Me too," I murmured, but I was referring to her on my lap, not the beautiful weather and pool.

She caught on to my meaning and brought her eyes to mine. I watched her throat bob as she swallowed.

Presley was about to say something, but I silenced her by bringing my mouth to hers.

One hand massaged her ass and the other rubbed her back as I kissed her.

I would never get sick of kissing this woman. Her lips were so soft, and I loved the feel of them moving against mine.

She was the one that deepened the kiss and started grinding her core against my hardening cock, which made me groan. I fucking loved it when she initiated things, it drove me wild.

Her hands tangled in my hair, holding my head in place as we kissed.

I brushed my fingers along her cunt over her swimsuit. Presley moaned into my mouth.

Fuck, she was going to be the death of me. The sounds she made drove me insane. What I would give to bend her over the edge of the pool and pound into her from behind.



When I moved the crotch of her swimsuit aside and ran my fingers between her pussy lips, I could feel her slickness even in the water.

She reached down and massaged my cock through my shorts. It felt so fucking good.

I slammed two fingers inside her cunt and a groan left her lips. My mouth attacked her neck where I nipped, sucked, and licked her smooth skin. We were both panting heavily, needing more.

Just when I was about to pull my cock out and sink inside her tight little hole, the backdoor to the house opened. Presley immediately broke the kiss and readjusted her swimsuit.

“I hope we’re not interrupting,” Erika chirped.

I glared at her, only to see a smug smile on her face as she came outside, knowing damn well she was interrupting. Blaise, Georgia, Jared, and Carla followed her out.

“Perfect timing,” I grumbled, causing Presley to snort.

Erika ignored my comment as they all made themselves comfortable around the pool.

Presley got off my lap and went over to chat with the girls.

Blaise came over to sit on the pool’s edge and handed me a beer. He dangled his feet in the water next to me.

“Thanks, man,” I said, taking the beer and tapping my bottle with his.

“She seems happy,” Blaise noted as we watched the girls chatting and smiling together.

“She is, or I think she’s getting there,” I replied.

“Erika was right. You’re good for her,” he said honestly with a nod.

“I hope I am. She needs something good in her life.” I sighed, thinking about all the shit she had been through.

“Once we handle the Lincoln brothers, you’ll have all the time in the world to ensure she’s happy,” he said, sipping his beer.

“Yeah. I’m looking forward to us moving forward after all this,” I said truthfully.

We stayed out for a few more hours, enjoying the warm sun and company. By the end of the day, Presley was full of smiles and seemed completely relaxed, which made me happy. I was glad I could give her this, even though it was only temporary.

It was getting close to dinner time when we decided to head inside.

Presley was walking ahead of me next to Erika when Jared came up beside me.

“I know now’s not the best time to bring this up, but I thought you’d want to know right away. We went to Cassandra’s cousin’s house, where we thought she was lying low, but she wasn’t there. Her kid was, and her cousin was concerned that she hadn’t heard from Cassandra in a few days. I thought that maybe she bailed on her kid and left town, but

her cousin was adamant that she would never leave her kid behind. According to her cousin, her kid is the most important thing in her life,” Jared said in a low voice.

I had hoped Presley didn't hear him, but her shoulders tensed, and I knew right then that she had. Jared probably thought that she wasn't paying attention because she was conversing with Erika, but she was always alert to her surroundings, and today was no different. It was how she survived.

What if Conrad got his hands on Cassandra?

I was confident Cassandra helped set Presley up that day at the restaurant, but there was a possibility Conrad forced her to do it.

How was Presley going to react to this new information? I needed to talk to her about it.

## Chapter 24

# Conflicted

## Presley

The day was going great until I heard Jared talking to Cruz as we headed inside. They were hushed, but I still heard enough to know what they were talking about.

Cassandra was missing.

Dread flowed through my veins because, like her cousin, I knew she would never leave her son behind. That little boy was her whole world, so something must have happened to her.

Since the restaurant incident, I had a lot of time to think about everything that happened and was pretty sure Cassandra had helped Conrad set me up that day. It was too big of a coincidence for her not to have been involved.

Plus, she hadn't been acting like herself leading up to that incident, and at the time, I figured it was because of her ex, but now I realize it was because she knew what awaited me.

I was initially furious when the realization dawned on me, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized Conrad likely forced her to help him and that thought made my anger toward her fade.

Did he threaten to hurt her if she didn't help him? Worse, did he threaten to hurt her son? It wouldn't have been the first time he threatened someone in my life.

Cassandra was a good person. She wouldn't have helped him unless he forced her. I was confident of that.

But now she was missing. Was it because Conrad's plan wasn't successful? Did he take her? Or worse...

I shuddered at that thought. If Cassandra did get hurt because of me, I wouldn't be able to live with myself. I already carried the heavy guilt of Crystal's death on my shoulders. I wasn't sure I could handle another.

I was quiet throughout dinner, but no one seemed to notice except for Cruz, who glanced at me several times, looking concerned.

I wanted to tell him what was going through my mind, but I couldn't find the words.

Plus, there was something I needed to check before I said anything anyway.

I got up from the table, and Cruz gripped my wrist to stop me.

"Where are you going?" he asked with a frown. All playfulness from earlier had vanished.

I forced a smile before saying, “The bathroom.”

Cruz reluctantly released my wrist, and I quickly turned and headed for the bathroom before he asked any further questions.

I felt the panic attack creeping through me, but I used the new breathing techniques I learned to suppress it.

Instead of veering right down the hall toward the bathroom, I turned left toward the offices.

I reached Cruz’s office and looked down the hallway to ensure no one was around. When I was sure I was alone, I scanned my thumb over the panel next to the door and unlocked it.

I quickly stepped inside before closing the door behind me.

My breathing was rapid, and my heart was thumping fast. I was dreading what I might find in my search.

I moved behind Cruz’s desk and sat in his chair before turning on his computer.

When the screen lit up, I punched in the password I had seen him use a few days ago, and it unlocked the computer. He had made no effort to hide his password from me, and even though, at the time, I had no intentions of using his computer, I still made a mental note of it.

I pulled up my old email account and entered my username and password.

Since arriving at Cruz's house, I hadn't checked my old email account. I had a feeling there would be new messages from Conrad and even though I was dreading what they said, I needed to know if he had Cassandra.

Ever since I had run away from Conrad, he had regularly emailed me. I never replied, so there was no way for him to know if I received them, but he still sent them almost weekly. I had a feeling he knew me well enough to know that I would always check my emails even if I didn't reply. Plus, that was his only way of communicating with me since he didn't know where I was.

My email account popped up on the screen, and I had two new messages in my inbox. Both were from Conrad. I shivered, and my breath caught in my throat.

I clicked on the oldest message from almost two weeks ago, sent the day after I shot Conrad. In the subject, it read '*Bad girl.*'

*Stupid little bird.*

*Do you think it was wise to shoot me? To kill one of my men and injure another? When I get my hands on you, you will pay for what you've done.*

*Run along, little bird, because the wolf is coming, and you won't like what happens when he catches you.*

A cold chill rushed through me when I finished reading his taunting message. I did not doubt if he found me, I would pay



for what I did to him and his men. I didn't even want to think about it because my nerves were already frazzled.

I clicked on the second email with no subject, sent yesterday.

My blood ran cold when the message opened, and a picture was the first thing that appeared.

The room started to spin, I couldn't breathe, and my entire body began to tremble.

I had suspected Conrad had something to do with Cassandra's disappearance but thinking it and having it confirmed were two very different things.

The picture was of a person slumped over on a wooden chair with a bag covering their head. I knew immediately it was Cassandra from some of the tattoos on her torso. She was restrained to the chair and only wearing a dirty white bra and a matching pair of panties. Cuts, bruises, and blood covered her body.

The setup was what really made my stomach churn. Cassandra was in the same room where Owen tortured Crystal, and she was set up the same way in the same chair. There was even a second chair across from hers that was empty. A reminder of where I was forced to sit and watch.

I read the message under the picture as tears pricked my eyes.

*How much does she mean to you, little bird?*

*Can your conscience handle being responsible for another innocent person's death?*

*If you want to save your friend, I suggest you hurry and come alone.*

*You have 3 days at most before she's dead.*

*I'll send you a picture of Owen's handy work if you don't show up. You'll love it.*

*PS. If you don't come this time, I'll keep picking random women from your classes until there isn't anyone you know left in this world.*

I buried my face in my hands as I sobbed. I was overwhelmed with emotions and didn't know what to do. Why couldn't Conrad leave me alone?

Cassandra didn't deserve any of this, but what could I do? If I went there, they would probably kill her anyway and make me watch.

If I didn't go, and they killed her, I would forever carry that guilt on my shoulders. For some reason, the second option seemed worse. I didn't want more blood on my hands. Crystal's death was already hard enough to bear.

A noise down the hall startled me.

I didn't want Cruz to find me in his office, so I hurriedly turned the computer off and left the room. I ran to the bathroom and quickly went inside before closing the door behind me.

I splashed water on my face and then dried it off with a hand towel. I lifted my gaze to the mirror and let out a shaky breath. My eyes were bloodshot, and my cheeks puffy.

I felt like *her* again. Laura. The weak, naive, and innocent woman I used to be. The one who cowered from everything and never fought back.

*You're stronger than this. Don't let Conrad break you again.*

I wiped my eyes and took a few deep, calming breaths while staring at my reflection. Anger quickly took over my emotions. I was so done with being a victim. I would rather die than continue to live in constant fear. This wasn't a life, and I would never truly be able to move on while he was still alive.

I took a few minutes to recompose myself before I opened the door and left the bathroom.

I walked into the dining room and took my seat. Cruz wasn't at the table, but everyone else turned to look at me.

Erika leaned over and asked in a hushed tone, "You alright, Pres?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I think I got a little too much sun today." I said with a soft smile.

"Okay," she replied but didn't look convinced.

"Hey, I was looking for you," Cruz said from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder just as he entered the room and came over to sit beside me.

"Sorry, I was just telling Erika that I think I got too much sun today. I went to find some Tylenol since I have a bit of a

headache,” I lied. I felt guilty about it, too, since things had been good between us.

I wanted to tell him the truth so badly, but something held me back. I wasn’t sure if it was the right move yet. I needed to think about everything first. Conrad wrote in his message to come alone. If I told Cruz the truth, he would never let me go there. He would insist on going with his men, and then what?

Cassandra would be dead.

“You want to go lie down?” he asked with a concerned frown, placing an open palm on my forehead to see if I was warm.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” I nodded.

Cruz stood first, and I followed his lead before turning toward the others.

“Thanks for today. It was a lot of fun,” I said with a soft smile.

“I hope you feel better,” Carla said sympathetically.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Come find me in the morning. I’ll show you what Jared and I were working on today,” Erika added.

“Sounds good.”

Erika had told me by the pool earlier that she and Jared had managed to hack into Conrad’s bank and gain access to his account. I had been excited to see what they had done, but that

excitement was gone now. All I could think about was Cassandra.

Cruz and I said good night to everyone before he guided me toward the stairs with a hand on my lower back.

He said nothing until we reached his room, and the door closed behind him.

“You’re upset, aren’t you?” he asked, as he turned me to face him.

His gaze burrowed into me as if trying to read my thoughts.

“Why would I be upset?” I replied, deciding that playing dumb might be my best option.

I never turned toward Cruz and Jared when they spoke, so Cruz shouldn’t know I overheard their conversation.

“You heard Jared when he told me Cassandra was missing. I saw you tense when he said it,” he said bluntly.

Shit. I hadn’t realized I did that. There was no point in lying. He would see right through me.

Maybe this was a sign that I should tell him the truth.

“Yeah, I’m upset about that,” I said truthfully, pulling out of Cruz’s grasp and walking to the bed.

“You know she likely helped Conrad, right? I doubt it was a coincidence that you showed up at the restaurant when you did,” he asked cautiously, looking unsure how I would react to his words.

“I know.” I let out a shaky breath before adding, “But Cassandra wouldn’t have done it unless he threatened her or had something to hold over her head. If that’s the case, I don’t blame her for what happened.”

“Even if he did threaten her, she could have given you a heads up when she drove you to the restaurant. She let you walk into that mess without so much of a warning. What would Conrad have done to you at the studio if you didn’t have the gun and defended yourself? I’m sorry, but I have no sympathy for her. She was willing to sacrifice you to save her own ass,” Cruz said, anger lacing his words as his jaw clenched.

My mouth dropped open from his harsh words. I didn’t see it that way at all and I was surprised at how much he seemed to believe his words.

“Conrad’s a monster, Cruz. He’s done some horrendous things, and I don’t blame her for fearing he would follow through with his threats. Most people would.”

Cruz sighed and ran his hand through his hair before sitting on the bed next to me. “I know, I’m just fiercely protective over those I care about, and if you haven’t noticed already, I care a lot about you. Thinking of what could have happened to you that day is almost unbearable. So yeah, I still hold a grudge against everyone involved.”

There was a vulnerability in his voice when he spoke that pulled at my heartstrings. I understood where he was coming

from, but I didn't agree with him. In my eyes, Cassandra was just as much a victim as I was.

“What if I was the one who was threatened? Let's say I had to set you up to save my ass. What would you want me to do? I would never do it, but I have a feeling you would want me to save myself,” I asked softly.

I wasn't trying to start a fight but wanted him to understand why I didn't hold her responsible.

Cruz chuckled humorlessly. “That's not fair, beautiful. You know I would want you to do whatever it takes to save yourself, even if that means setting me up.”

There was a long pause before he spoke again.

“I get what you're saying, though. I'm just struggling with the idea of something bad happening to you. She should have warned you before throwing you to the wolves,” Cruz added, shaking his head as if the thought alone of something happening to me was torturing him.

“It's not Cassandra's fault, Cruz. She's a victim in all this.” I reiterated.

We didn't know for sure that Conrad threatened Cassandra, but in my heart, I knew he did. Cassandra and I weren't super close, but I liked her and knew she didn't have a mean bone in her body. Had I not been such an introvert because of my past, we definitely would have been friends outside the studio.

“You're right.” He sighed defeatedly and paused before adding, “I'll put some feelers out tomorrow and see if we can't

figure out if he took her. And if he did, where he's holding her.”

“Thank you,” I practically whispered.

Cruz's reaction to Cassandra's involvement was enough to make up my mind. I couldn't tell him about the email.

I had no doubt Cruz would go to the warehouse where Cassandra was being kept, but the second Conrad or Owen noticed his presence, they wouldn't hesitate to kill Cassandra. I wasn't sure Cruz would care all that much about the loss of her life. He said it himself; he still thought she was responsible for her part in what happened.

“You're a better person than I am, Presley. Even after everything you've been through, you care more about others than yourself. You're a good person and a good friend. Don't worry, okay? We'll find her.” He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his chest in a warm embrace.

I buried my face in the crook of his neck and inhaled deeply, needing to add his scent to my memory in case this was the last time I smelt him. Tears blurred my vision at the thought of never seeing Cruz again. I didn't want to do any of this, but what other choice did I have?

One thing was for sure, I wouldn't let Conrad or Owen get their hands on me. If I couldn't kill them first, then I wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in my own head before they had a chance to take me captive. It would either be their funeral or mine, but this was going to end. It had to because I couldn't keep living like this.



I had the night to think about it since I wouldn't be able to leave without raising suspicion until tomorrow. If I did this on my own, I needed to wait until Cruz and the others were busy before I tried to leave. Even then, it would be difficult with all the security around the house. I internally groaned at the thought.

"Let's get you in bed, and we can figure everything out tomorrow," Cruz said, reaching for the hem of my dress before pulling it up.

I stood from the bed so it would be easier for him to get the dress off.

Cruz then stood and walked over to the dresser before pulling out one of his T-shirts.

He returned to the bed and slipped my bathing suit straps off my shoulders. He pulled it down my body until I was naked in front of him.

I instantly felt self-conscious about my scars but didn't try to cover them. Cruz had already seen them up close so there was no point.

He didn't stare at them or try to touch me. He simply grabbed the T-shirt and slipped it over my head.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked, sounding unconvinced.

"I'm just tired," I lied.

Cruz pulled the blankets back and motioned for me to get in, which I did.

I knew I wouldn't sleep, but I felt like curling up in a ball and wishing this was just a bad dream.

Cruz stripped out of his clothes and slipped on a pair of boxers before climbing into the bed behind me.

He wasted no time wrapping his strong arms around my body and pulling me flush against his chest.

“This will all be over soon, beautiful, I promise. Then, after that, I'll make sure you never have to worry about anything again. I'll take care of you,” Cruz said in a low, husky voice next to my ear.

I wish I could tell him everything. God, I wanted to.

But I couldn't.

## Chapter 25

# No Going Back

## Presley

I could do this alone. I had been surviving on my own for as long as I could remember. Things weren't any different this time. Right?

*Except they were.* A nagging voice in my head pointed out.

Cruz cared about me, there was no doubt about it. Over the past few days, he had proven that he wanted to make Conrad pay for what he did to me.

He protected me and made sure I had everything I needed.

Maybe I didn't have to fight this battle alone.

Hope sprung in my chest at the thought, but then I remembered Cassandra, and that hope died.

I would be signing her death certificate if I got Cruz involved. Conrad said, '*Come alone.*' I knew what it meant for Cassandra if I didn't.

*Death.*

I spent the entire night wide awake, going back and forth between telling Cruz about the email and not telling him.

If I told Cruz, he likely wouldn't allow me to go to that warehouse, and Cassandra would die if I didn't show up.

Cruz and his men would go and maybe successfully kill Owen and Conrad, but what about Cassandra? She had a young son who needed a mother, and she was too young and innocent to die.

I wished I was more like Erika. If I had her mental strength, this would be a no-brainer. She was like the real version of *Angelina Jolie* in any one of her many action movies.

Erika was fearless; she wasn't only physically capable, but her determination and mental strength were next level. Not only that, but she also enjoyed violence, almost to a disturbing level.

She taught me a lot, including how to fight, but still, I wasn't her. I hated violence. Yes, I had learned over time that it was sometimes necessary, but that didn't make it any easier.

The incident at my studio proved that I could pull the trigger if I had to, but that incident still haunted me at night. I killed a man. He deserved it, and it was either him or me, but still, it was hard to process what I did.

Then there was my aim. On the range, I felt like a sharpshooter, consistently hitting the bullseye, but that incident with Conrad proved that my sharp-shooter skills went out the

window when I was under duress. I was lucky I hit those men at all.

So, I might have been stronger and more prepared than I was all those years ago, but I still wasn't untouchable.

I knew doing this alone wouldn't be easy, and there was a good chance I wouldn't leave that warehouse alive, but I felt like I had no other option.

I felt so alone even though Cruz was lying next to me.

Cruz held me so tight throughout the night, that breathing was sometimes difficult. It was as if he knew something was wrong, and even while he slept, he was worried I would disappear.

I didn't mind his tight hold on me, though, because I needed his closeness more than I realized. It was the only thing keeping me from crumbling.

I pretended to be asleep when Cruz got out of bed in the morning. I heard him ruffling through his dresser, likely getting changed into his workout gear, before he came over and kissed my forehead. He obviously believed I was still asleep because he left the room without a word.

I wanted to open my eyes and say something, but I knew he would see right through me if I did. He would see the pain and regret in my eyes and probably not leave my side. I couldn't risk it.

Once I was alone, it was potentially my only shot at leaving this house without being caught.

I got out of bed and quickly dressed in jeans and a black tank top. After I tied my hair in a messy bun, I left the room.

Cruz usually hit the gym for an hour and a half, sometimes more if he was stressed, so I knew I had time to devise a plan.

I went to Erika's office and was relieved to find her working on her computer.

"Hey, how'd you sleep?" she asked when she spotted me at her door.

"Good, you?" I replied, moving into her office.

"Not bad," she said before asking, "Wanna see what we did to all of Conrad's finances? Unless he has cash on him, he's fucked." She grinned mischievously, looking far too excited by whatever she had done.

"Sure." I smiled even though I wasn't overly excited about messing with his finances anymore. What if he took out his anger on Cassandra?

Of course, he didn't know it was us who fucked with his money. He probably thought it was someone he defrauded getting back at him for the shit he pulled, but still, nothing was stopping him from taking it out on Cassandra.

"We drained this account, which seemed to be his primary account, and then we froze all these credit cards and these investments. He's royally fucked right now," Erika explained as she pointed to a bunch of stuff on the screen that I didn't understand or care to look at.

"Great," I replied, hoping I sounded more excited than I felt.

“I heard about Cassandra. You okay?” Erika asked, spinning her chair around to face me with a frown.

“I’m worried about her,” I admitted, my voice shaky.

“If Conrad has her, we’ll find them. Cruz already has Jared and Dex working on it,” she said.

“I know, and I appreciate it.” I sighed and moved back to the couch.

It was silent for a few minutes before I asked, “You have any plans today?”

“I’m actually meeting Olivia for coffee in less than an hour. I would bring you, but I doubt Cruz would allow it. It’s probably unsafe for you to leave the house anyway,” she said with an apologetic smile.

I forced myself to remain still and uncaring after hearing her words when, in reality, hope blossomed inside me. Erika leaving might be the perfect opportunity to get out of here.

The guards at the gate wouldn’t let me walk out without notifying Cruz, but if I hid in a vehicle, no one would know.

“Yeah, I understand. Don’t worry about it,” I said, shrugging before asking, “Is Blaise driving you?”

“Nah, he’s trying to figure out which safehouse Conrad’s been using the past few days. He’ll probably be busy most of the day.”

That meant she was likely driving herself. Even better.



“Okay, well, say hi to Olivia for me. I miss her,” I said, standing from the couch.

“I will. Maybe we can do something this afternoon?” Erika suggested, sounding hopeful.

If only she knew. If everything went as planned, I wouldn't be here this afternoon. I suddenly felt sad and guilty and had to force a smile on my face.

“Sure,” I said softly and quickly left the room before tears fell from my eyes. I hated lying to Erika just as much as I did Cruz. She was like a sister to me, and it made me second-guess myself all over again.

I shook that doubt away and headed for Cruz's room. I had made up my mind and needed to follow through with my plan.

I returned to Cruz's room and pulled my backpack from the walk-in closet. I stuffed a sweater inside the bag and then went to the nightstand, where I knew Cruz kept his gun. I pulled it out and checked to ensure the magazine was loaded before shoving it into the front pocket of my bag. I grabbed the two extra magazines and put those in the pocket too. There was also a knife in a holster inside the nightstand, so I took that and strapped it around my calf under my jeans.

I left a note on the nightstand saying I went for a walk around the property, hoping it would buy me a little more time when Cruz returned to the room. The property was a couple of acres, and since I had been stuck here the past few weeks, I had been walking the perimeter daily for some exercise. When Cruz read my note, he would hopefully think nothing of it.

Leaving the room and heading for the garage, I avoided the main parts of the house so no one would see me.

I reached the hallway where I would access the door and had to duck into the closet when I heard footsteps approaching.

Once they passed where I was hiding and faded down the hall, I waited a few minutes before slowly opening the door and peering down the hallway to ensure it was clear.

Once I was sure it was, I ran for the door that led to the garage and ducked inside. Luckily, there was no one inside the garage when I got there.

I jogged over to the black Audi sedan and opened the trunk before climbing into it. I looked for the emergency release before I closed myself inside. I wanted to ensure I wouldn't be stuck because that would be an epic failure on my part. Luckily, the trunk release was there and functioning.

I curled up on the floor with my bag clutched to my chest, waiting in the dark for Erika to leave.

My heart felt like it would beat out of my chest at any moment. Would my plan work? I knew it was the vehicle Erika used whenever she drove herself somewhere, so I hoped that didn't change today.

My claustrophobia came to life as I lay there in a small dark box. The only thing that saved me from having a full-blown panic attack was the fact that I knew there was a latch to open the trunk so, although it was a small space, I wasn't locked in. I had to open the trunk an inch a few times to satisfy my mind

that this wasn't the same box Conrad and Owen had locked me in. I could escape if I wanted to. A few times, I could hear the opera music playing in my mind, making my body shudder. I closed my eyes tight, willing my mind to think of anything else but that.

*Cruz.*

I already missed him and hadn't even left the house yet. I was sad I didn't get a chance to say goodbye. I thought about leaving him a letter, but it would have ruined my plans if he had found it before I escaped.

What would he think of me after this? I knew he would feel betrayed, and that thought killed me. I wish I could have explained everything to him and made him understand that I had no choice. I hope he didn't hate me for leaving him.

The longer I waited in silence, the more my thoughts wandered. Was I making a mistake? Should I have asked Cruz and the others for help from the start?

I didn't have much time to dwell on everything because the door opened from the house to the garage.

Light footsteps approached the vehicle, and I heard one of the doors open and close. The car swayed with the motion, so I knew it was the one I was hiding in.

The garage door opened before the engine roared to life, and the vehicle started moving.

The vehicle stopped, and I held my breath, hoping I wouldn't get caught, as I heard voices not far from the trunk. It sounded

like Erika was talking to the guards at the gate, but I couldn't make out what was said.

A few seconds later, we started moving again, and I let out a relieved breath.

My plan was working.

Although I was relieved, there was still that nagging feeling at the back of my mind, second-guessing my decision.

*Too late now.* I told myself as the vehicle drove further from the house, picking up speed along the way.

It felt like we drove for hours when, in reality, it was probably only fifteen to twenty minutes before we finally stopped.

I felt nauseous from all the abrupt turns and sudden stops, but I held the nausea down. Now wasn't the time for me to get sick.

I heard the driver's door open and close, but I waited in the trunk for several minutes to make sure Erika had left.

I had no idea where she parked. It could be on the side of the road or in a parking lot, for all I knew. I couldn't hear anything, not even the sound of traffic, so I had no idea what awaited me when I popped the trunk.

After a few minutes of hearing nothing, I felt confident enough that Erika had left the vehicle. I pulled the latch to the trunk open but only lifted it enough so I could peek outside.

I frowned when all I saw was bushes. The vehicle was backed up almost into some shrubs so that I couldn't see past them. Erika wasn't the best driver, but I swear she parked inside the bush, not just on the edge of it. What the fuck?

I groaned at the realization that I would need to crawl into it to get out of the trunk.

I opened the trunk a little more and started rolling out. I couldn't even open it entirely; that was how badly Erika wedged the vehicle inside the bush.

A few grunts and groans left my lips as I was whipped in the face by branches. I was cursing Erika for making my escape so difficult. It was as if she knew my plans and was trying to make it hard on me.

Oh god, what about spiders? I would die if one landed on me.

Finally, I was out of the trunk and hidden in the bushes.

I gently closed the trunk so it wouldn't draw attention and started to fight my way out of the dense shrubs.

Fucking hell, what a giant pain in my ass.

The minute I was free and opened my eyes, I gasped and froze, throwing my hand over my heart.

What the actual fuck.

## Chapter 26

# Feeling Feral

Cruz

I knew something was up with Presley from the moment we sat down for dinner last night.

Instead of confronting me over what she heard Jared telling me about Cassandra, she acted as if she hadn't heard anything and pretended to be fine.

I knew she wasn't. Something was bugging her, and it seemed like more than just hearing about Cassandra going missing.

I felt uneasy when she left the dining room and went to the bathroom.

I waited a few minutes, but when she didn't return, I got up and searched for her.

The bathroom closest to the dining room had been empty, and the sink was dry, letting me know she hadn't been there. I then checked my room, and that was empty, too.

I felt a little surge of panic, wondering where the hell she went.

I was racing to my office to check the surveillance cameras when I heard her angelic voice in the dining room and let out a relieved breath.

Where did she go though?

When I returned to the dining room, I asked her where she went, and she gave me some lame excuse that she got too much sun and had a headache, but I wasn't buying it. She was hiding something, and I wanted to know what it was.

I had every intention of sneaking out of the room after she fell asleep and checking the surveillance footage to see what she had been up to. Of course, Presley was wide awake all night though, so I never got a chance to check.

I could feel her internal battle and desperately wanted to know what was tormenting her.

Since I wasn't able to sneak off, I held her tightly and hoped my presence eased some of the anxiety I felt rolling off her in waves.

I was pissed off that she still didn't trust me enough to confide in me, but at the same time, I understood. It would take time, and I needed to be patient with her even though I wasn't a patient man.

She also needed to learn that she didn't have to do everything on her own anymore, but trying to get that through her thick skull was proving to be a challenge.



That woman was just as stubborn as I was.

In the morning, I rolled out of bed and got dressed in my workout gear, pretending to believe she was still asleep. I kissed her forehead and left the room without a word.

Instead of going to the gym, though, I went to my office and fired up my computer.

The first thing I did was open the surveillance feed in my room to see if Presley had moved, and sure enough, she was already out of bed and hurrying to get her clothes on.

I kept that monitor open as I pulled up a new one on the second computer screen. I rewound that one to when she went to the bathroom last night.

When the footage came up on the screen, I followed her through the hall, flicking through camera angles as she moved. Instead of going right toward the bathroom at the end of the hall, she turned left toward the offices.

“What were you up to, beautiful?” I murmured to myself as she reached the door to my office.

I had given her access to the entire house except for the weapons room, so I wasn't surprised that the door opened when she scanned her thumb.

I watched her sit behind my desk and fire up the computer.

She looked beyond nervous as she punched in my password and waited for the screen to unlock. I knew she had seen me typing it in a few days ago, and I didn't care. I had nothing to

hide from her, so if she wanted to snoop, she was more than welcome to. I had a feeling she wasn't there to snoop, though.

She typed a few more things on the keyboard before waiting and staring at the screen.

Something popped up on the screen and whatever it was, it upset her. I could see the change in her face as fear and anguish took over her features. Her hands shook as they hovered over the keyboard, and she looked on the verge of breaking down.

What the fuck was she looking at?

It only got worse the more she clicked on the keyboard. At one point, she had her face buried in her palms, and I could see her chest rising and falling as she sobbed.

I glanced at the other screen just as Presley hurriedly left my room.

I had my hand on my office phone in case she headed for the main gates, but she didn't. She headed my way. I got up in a hurry and closed my office door, hoping she wasn't coming to my office. I locked it from the inside just in case she did.

Luckily for me, she bypassed my office and headed for Erika's. Once she settled on the couch in Erika's office, I returned my attention to the other screen while maintaining an eye on Presley in my peripheral.

I needed to figure out what she had looked up that upset her so much.

I went to the Google search bar and pulled up the history. I frowned when the last thing searched was *Hotmail.com*. I didn't have a Hotmail account, so I knew that must have been what she looked up.

I was ready to call Jared into my office to help me figure all this out, but the moment I clicked on the link, it opened an email account. The '*sign me in automatically*' button must have been pressed for that to happen. I wasn't complaining, though.

The account belonged to Laura Lincoln.

Almost every single email in her inbox was from Conrad—hundreds of them.

I clicked the most recent one and let out a string of curses when a picture of a woman tied to a chair, all bloodied and bruised, appeared. I recognized the tattoos on her body from when I took the class at Presley's studio. Without a doubt, it was Cassandra.

The message below the picture made me clench my jaw and grind my teeth. Conrad wanted Presley to come to him alone in order to save her friend. Obviously, Presley knew where the picture was taken since he never provided an address. No fucking wonder she had been so conflicted. She was too fucking caring for her own good and didn't want to risk Cassandra's life by going against his orders.

*Fuck.*

I opened a few more emails, and my blood started to boil. The messages were all taunting, dating back over two years.

*I can't wait to find you, little bird. I have so much planned for us...*

*Little bird, when I get my hands on you, I'll beat you within an inch of your life, then nurse you back to health, only to do it all over again.*

*You've earned yourself a week in the box now, little bird, which will keep growing the longer you hide from me. I don't even care if you die of dehydration anymore. You deserve it.*

**I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU MYSELF WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON YOU.**

*My brother can't wait to break you again. Clearly, you need worse than last time after the stunt you pulled. I'm looking forward to seeing what he does to you this time.*

*Little bird.*

*Little bird.*

*Little bird.*

Fuck. I was trembling violently with unadulterated rage after reading through a few messages. That man needed to die a slow and painful death, and these messages only reaffirmed it.

I felt feral, and it took everything in me not to punch my fucking computer screen.

Who the fuck treated a woman like that? Put her in a box for a week? I had no idea what the fuck that meant, but the images

in my mind weren't helping to calm me down.

Beat her within an inch of her life? Had he done that before? Oh, fucking god, help me, my head was spinning I was so beyond angry.

No fucking wonder she didn't trust me, or anyone else for that matter. What a piece of shit. No, Conrad was worse than a piece of shit, he was a psychotic lunatic.

Movement on the other screen drew my attention to it. Presley was leaving Erika's office.

I wanted to pull her into my office and confront her, but I was far too angry to do that now, and I would only end up scaring her like I did when I realized it was Conrad she was running from.

I reluctantly let her leave Erika's office.

I watched her head back to my room in a hurry. I was worried about what she had planned, but needed to talk to Erika before I did anything. The way I felt right now, I couldn't be anywhere near Presley.

I rushed down the hall and into Erika's office, panting and puffing like an angry gorilla.

"What the fuck?" Erika protested at my rude entrance.

"What'd she say?" I demanded, pacing in front of her desk like a lion.

"Who? What the fuck is wrong with you?" she asked, an edge of concern now lacing her tone.

“Presley. I think she’s planning on leaving. What did she say?” I repeated the question.

Erika’s eyes widened before saying, “She asked me what I was doing today. I told her I was meeting Olivia for coffee but said it was probably too risky for her to come. You’re being paranoid. She’s not planning on...” Her words trailed off as something clicked in her head.

“Motherfucker, she lied to me. She is planning on leaving. That little devil was digging for info. She wanted to know if I was leaving today so she could sneak out in my car. Fuck, is this what it feels like to be used? I swear, I feel like I just took it in the ass without lube. I’m going to get her back for that. Why the hell would she lie to me?” Erika ranted, but I ignored her as I thought about what to do.

Presley wasn’t going anywhere. I didn’t fucking care if I had to tie her to my bed and keep her there until Conrad and Owen were dead. It might traumatize her a little, but it was better than the alternative, and I was currently angry enough to do it. She wasn’t thinking straight. Going there would be a suicide mission, and no fucking way in hell was I letting that happen.

“I take it this has to do with Conrad?” Erika’s voice pulled me from my thoughts.

“Yeah, he has Cassandra,” I replied, not going into detail. There was no time. I needed to get eyes on Presley again soon before she managed to sneak out.

“We know that for sure?” she asked.

I nodded and a few curse words left Erika's lips.

“How about this? I told Presley I was leaving soon to meet my sister, and if I'm guessing correctly, she's likely sneaking into the trunk of my car as we speak or getting ready to. Why don't I take her for a little joy ride, give you some time to talk to the guys, and devise a plan? Then I'll bring her back here,” Erika suggested.

“It's too risky. If Presley manages to get out before you get back here, we might not find her again,” I shook my head, pacing her office floor.

“Cruz, I won't fucking stop the car until I get behind the gate. She won't get out.” Erika reassured me.

Fuck, I needed time to think and calm down. I was far too angry to confront Presley now. I pulled at my hair while growling, “Fine.”

“Go watch your girl through the cameras, and I'll tell the guys to meet you in your office before I head to the garage,” Erika suggested.

When she noticed how angry I still was, she added, “Hey, calm down. You figured it out before she left. She's safe.”

If only Erika knew what I knew. She'd be just as angry as I was and would probably want to go find Conrad herself to deal with him.

I said nothing further before turning on my heels and leaving her office, heading for my own.

When I got there, the surveillance monitor was still up on my computer, and I switched it to the camera in my room.

I let out a relieved breath when I found Presley still in there getting her stuff ready.

She was in the process of stuffing a sweater in a backpack. Then she moved to my bedside table and withdrew my gun before checking the magazine and placing it in the front pocket of her bag with the two spare magazines. Then she grabbed my knife and strapped the Velcro holster to her calf.

I was so fucking mad it wasn't even funny. Then, why the fuck was I getting a boner watching Presley handle my weapons? Seriously, I had a problem when it came to that woman.

Once done in my room, she left and headed downstairs toward the garage.

I followed her every move through the monitor until she climbed into the trunk of Erika's Audi. She looked nervous when she did it, and then I noticed the trunk open and closed a few times after she was inside as if double-checking that she could get out. My mind was still in overdrive, and I immediately thought of the box Conrad referred to. Fuck, I bet she was claustrophobic.

I barely blinked while I watched the monitor. I was uncomfortable with Erika's plan, but it seemed like my best option since I wasn't thinking straight and needed to talk to the guys.



Blaise showed up a minute later, followed by Jared and Dex.

“Heard we got ourselves a situation that needs to be dealt with,” Blaise said as he sat across from me.

Jared sat next to him, and Dex moved to the couch.

“Yeah, it’s fucking bad. I take it Erika filled you in?” I asked.

“Vaguely. You confirmed somehow that Conrad has Cassandra, and Presley knows. Now, Presley’s trying to sneak off alone to save her friend,” Blaise replied.

“It’s a lot fucking worse than that. Come see these,” I said, motioning to my computer screen, where Presley’s email account was still open.

The guys stood without a word and came to stand behind me.

I opened the latest email from Conrad with the picture of Cassandra.

“Fuck,” Blaise cursed.

“What the fuck? I take it that’s Cassandra?” Jared asked.

“Yeah, read Conrad’s message,” I replied, moving my eyes back to the other monitor to ensure I didn’t miss Presley leaving while they read the email.

“What a sick bastard,” Dex mumbled.

“You think that’s bad? Click on a few of his other messages. He’s a fucking psychopath,” I growled.

Blaise took the mouse, and they started reading through some of the messages.

“Holy fuck. No wonder the girl’s so skittish.” Blaise sighed.

“What the fuck does he mean *lock her in a box for a week?*” Jared growled when Blaise got to that message.

“Your guess is as good as mine, but if it’s anything like what I’m envisioning, that fucker is going to suffer,” I gritted out.

“I take it Erika doesn’t know about these, right? She seemed concerned and pissed when she told me about Presley trying to leave, but not angry enough to have known about these,” Blaise asked.

“Nah, there wasn’t time. Erika just knows that Conrad has Cassandra, and Presley was leaving,” I replied.

“Good. Don’t tell her about this, or she’ll want to come with us when we deal with the Lincoln brothers, and I can’t have that right now,” Blaise said, and I nodded, not even caring to ask why.

We watched Erika enter the garage through the surveillance monitor and get into the driver seat of the Audi.

My nerves started acting up, temporarily overshadowing my anger as I watched the vehicle leave the garage and then the secured compound.

*Please, bring her back.* I silently prayed as the vehicle disappeared down the road.

“What’s the plan?” Jared asked once the vehicle was out of sight.

“Do you know where Conrad’s holding Cassandra?” Blaise asked.

“Nope,” I said, popping the ‘p’ as I ran my fingers through my hair.

“I need to get that information out of Presley because clearly, she knows, but I don’t want her to know that I read these emails yet. She’s been opening up to me lately, and I don’t want her to shut down again,” I added.

“Alright, so I take it we’re going to talk to her when she gets back, and hopefully, she willingly gives up the info we need?” Blaise asked.

“Why’d you let her leave?” Jared asked with a disapproving frown.

“I needed time to cool off and talk to you guys. I don’t want to scare her like last time,” I admitted, and he nodded, seeming satisfied.

“Are we doing this tonight?” Dex asked.

“Yeah, we don’t have much choice with Cassandra’s life on the line. That’s if she’s even still alive. Conrad could have already killed her and sent the pic to lure Presley there anyway,” Blaise pointed out.

“Even if Cassandra wasn’t a concern, we need to deal with them immediately anyway. I can’t have them constantly tormenting Presley like this. She needs to feel safe, but they keep pulling shit like this which obviously fucks with her head,” I said, my tone laced with anger.

“We got this man. We’ll wipe those scumbags off the face of the earth soon enough,” Jared reassured, squeezing my shoulder in a comforting manner.

“Let’s go outside and wait for Erika to come back. We need to get the information from Presley before we start planning,” Blaise added, and I nodded.

We left my office and headed outside to wait.

Fifteen minutes later, Erika was pulling back into our gated compound.

My heart was beating fast, hoping that Presley was still in that goddamn car.

Erika didn’t drive very much before she met Blaise, and you could tell by how jerky her driving was. I got nauseous whenever I was in the passenger seat with her.

I watched her pull up at the far end of the driveway and then reverse into a bush.

I cringed, thinking she was going to hit the actual trunk, but then she stopped just shy. The branches and leaves completely covered the back end of the car. What the fuck?

Erika got out with a mischievous smirk on her face. She purposely parked like that to get back at Presley for lying and using her as a scapegoat.

*Evil.*

Erika came to stand next to us, only a few feet away from the bush, and remained silent.

We all said nothing as we waited for the trunk to open. All five of us crossed our arms over our chests, looking stern.

I didn't want to scare Presley, but at the same time, she needed to know this was unacceptable. At some point, she needed to start trusting me. Had I not figured all this out, who knows what would have happened to her? I couldn't even think about it without being blinded by rage and the fear of losing her.

The trunk opened slightly, and had I not been so angry, I would have laughed at how ridiculous Presley looked trying to climb out into the bush, cursing and groaning every time a branch whacked her in the face.

I heard Jared snort at one point and shot him a death glare.

Erika was smirking, but she was in the dark about a lot. Had she known the entire story, I was confident that smirk wouldn't have been there.

Presley finally wiggled her way out of the bush, and the minute her gaze landed on us, her eyes widened, a gasp left her lips, and her palm covered her chest.

Guilt flashed through her eyes when they landed on me.

"I think we need to have a little chat," I said sternly.

She gulped, tears pooling in her eyes, but she said nothing, simply nodded.

"I'm disappointed in you, Pres. You know I've always had your back. Why didn't you come to me?" Erika asked, a little irritation lacing her words.

Presley lowered her head before whispering, "I'm sorry."

"Let's go talk in my office," Blaise suggested before turning and walking toward the front door.

Jared, Dex, and Erika followed, but I waited for Presley.

She stiffened when I moved my hand to her lower back, making me clench my jaw. She was back to fearing I would hit her for fuck's sake.

"I told you I would never hurt you, beautiful. I still mean that." I gave her a reassuring look.

She let out a little breath as more tears filled her guilty eyes.

I snuck my hand under the back of her shirt as we headed inside and brushed her bare skin with my thumb in a calming way.

I was still furious, but not an ounce of that rage was directed at her. I was disappointed in her a little, but not at all angry. What could I expect after everything she had been through? She was still in survival mode and everything she was doing was normal behavior for someone who had been through trauma.

"I know," she whispered, and it was so low, I wasn't sure if she had actually said it, or I had imagined it.

I glanced down at her, and her eyes portrayed a clear message that I desperately needed to hear from her, "*I know you won't hurt me.*"

## Chapter 27

# Mine

## Presley

**W**as it wrong that relief was the first thing I felt after the initial shock of finding Cruz, the guys, and Erika standing before me?

I nearly pissed my pants because the guys looked terrifying, all big and buff, looking serious as hell. Oddly, I wasn't fearful. That gut feeling that I still needed to learn to trust told me they wouldn't hurt me.

Erika had driven me around the block and right back into their compound. I wasn't even mad about it. As I said, relief was my first emotion when I realized where I was. Relief that they had taken the choice away from me and I wouldn't have to do this alone, even if a part of me still wanted to.

Erika was the only one with a smirk on her face, even though I could tell she was mad at me. I didn't blame her; she wasn't the kind of woman you used, and that was what I tried to do to escape.



Blaise, Dex, and Jared looked concerned and angry but not nearly as bad as Cruz. He looked damn right homicidal.

When he put his hand on my lower back to guide me inside, I stiffened, and he took it as a sign that I feared him. I couldn't blame him for that. That was exactly what it looked like. But really, it was just my body's natural reaction to the sudden movement, almost like a tick. I was nervous, but I wasn't scared of Cruz. I could sense his anger wasn't directed at me, at least not all of it.

I believed Cruz. He would never hurt me, no matter how mad he got.

We walked in silence until we reached Blaise's office, where everyone else was already waiting.

All eyes turned to me the minute I walked into the room, and I hated it. I wished I could hide behind Cruz to avoid their intense gazes.

"Have a seat, Presley," Blaise ordered sternly, motioning to the seat across from his desk.

He sat behind it, Dex and Erika were on the couch, and Jared was sitting on the edge of the desk facing me.

I hesitated momentarily, but Cruz took my hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze before leading me to the chair. I sat down, and he sat in the one next to me without letting go of my hand. I was beyond grateful for his presence because my anxiety was through the roof, and he was somehow grounding me.

“Now, wanna tell us where you were going today?” Blaise asked in a deep, raspy voice that sent a chill down my spine. The man was huge and highly intimidating. I mean, they all were.

I glanced at Cruz, who gave me a reassuring nod even though he still looked ready to combust from the rage stewing inside him.

“Conrad has Cassandra. He threatened to kill her if I didn’t go to him alone.” I admitted, my voice shaky.

“How do you know for sure?” Erika asked.

I glanced at Cruz again before lowering my gaze and replying, “He emailed me.”

“What? How would he have your email?” Erika asked in disbelief.

Before I could reply, Blaise cut in. “That’s irrelevant for now. We need to know where he’s keeping Cassandra so we can act. Tell us where he is, Presley.”

Erika narrowed her eyes at him but didn’t argue before she turned her attention back to me.

“I can’t tell you,” I replied, my voice low.

“You have to tell us, Presley,” Cruz gritted out.

“If I tell you they’ll kill Cassandra, and her blood will be on my hands,” I argued, my voice determined.

“They’ll kill her anyway since we won’t let you go there alone,” Blaise pointed out before adding, “At least if we take

them out tonight, we stand a chance of saving your friend.”

He had a point. If they didn't let me go alone, Cassandra was dead anyway. Conrad had said three days, and that was tomorrow.

“If I tell you, you have to let me come,” I said firmly, lifting my chin so they knew I wouldn't take no for an answer.

I felt like if Conrad and Owen saw me first, it might be a good distraction for Cruz and the guys to take them out before they killed Cassandra. If Conrad and his brother saw Cruz before me, they would probably kill Cassandra on the spot. In my head, it seemed safer if I was at least there as a distraction.

“Absolutely not,” Cruz growled.

“Then, I'm not telling you where they are because they'll kill Cassandra the moment they realize I'm not there,” I replied, staring directly into Cruz's narrowed eyes in a silent challenge.

The room was tense and quiet as everyone waited for one of us to break the silence or avert our eyes. I wasn't going to, not first, anyway. If Cruz truly wanted to help me, he would accept my demand. I wasn't asking to be front and center, but it might make all the difference if I was there.

Cruz sighed defeatedly before saying, “It's too dangerous, beautiful. I can't risk them getting their hands on you.”

“I know it's dangerous, but those are my conditions. This is my mess, and Cassandra's life is on the line because of me. I won't sit at home and wait while you guys risk your lives,” I replied, my voice confident, but I kept it soft.

“We can have a team shadow her, Cruz. She won’t ever be alone in there,” Blaise said, earning him a glare from Cruz.

“Remember, Cruz, they think she ran away from you. They have no clue that we are involved, and they probably think she either won’t show up at all or will show up alone like they asked. We should have the upper hand. As soon as we know the location, we can send in a team to scope the place out and get a head count on how many men they have there,” Jared added, earning himself a glare from Cruz, too.

“Having her there might be useful, Cruz. Once the brothers see her, they won’t be looking anywhere else. That will allow us to move in and wipe them out before they can even react,” Dex added. You guessed it, he also got a glare from Cruz.

“We’re not using her as bait,” Cruz snapped.

“She won’t ever be in danger. You have my word. We’ll have so many fucking snipers in there the brothers won’t ever get close enough to touch her,” Blaise stated.

I watched as Cruz had an internal battle over what to do. His face was pinched, and the conflict was evident in his eyes.

“Please, Cruz. I’ll do whatever you say when we get there. I just really need to be there for Cassandra,” I pleaded, and his features softened slightly.

“Fine, but you’ll fucking stay by my side the entire time and do everything I tell you,” Cruz said sternly.

When Cruz stormed into my room a few weeks ago after he found out that it was Conrad, whom I was running from, I had

been fearful of his aggressive demeanor. Now that I had come to terms with the fact he would never hurt me, I found this side of Cruz sexy. He was so rarely stern and severe that hearing it now ignited a fire in my core and made my lower abdomen flutter. I liked his protectiveness.

“I will, I promise,” I said, nodding vigorously.

“Good. Now that we have that settled, where are they keeping her?” Blaise asked.

“I don’t have an address, but it’s a warehouse outside Philly. If you have a map, I can show you exactly where it is. Owen practically lives there since that’s where he does his dirty work,” I explained and shivered, remembering the kind of *dirty work* I was referring to.

“Have you been there a lot?” Jared asked.

“Enough,” I replied vaguely.

I had no clue where I was the day Owen killed Crystal. I had passed out before someone carried me out of there and when I woke up a few days later, I was at home, attached to an IV. After that incident, Conrad had nothing to hide anymore, so he frequently brought me there when Owen had someone to torture. I knew it was meant as a reminder of what would happen to me if I stepped out of line again.

“Okay. Let me pull up a map on my computer screen to pinpoint a location and, hopefully, an address. Then, Jared can dig up the floor plan. Once we have that, you can look it over

and point out anything you remember from inside,” Blaise stated, as he typed something on the keyboard.

I was surprised by how quiet Erika had been. She seemed almost distracted by something.

I didn’t have much time to think about it before Blaise called me over to his side of the desk.

I stood, and Cruz reluctantly released my hand so I could go to Blaise.

I pointed out where the warehouse was located on the map. Jared had moved behind us to look at it as well.

“Can you find an address and hopefully a floor plan?” Blaise asked Jared.

“Should be simple. Doesn’t look like there’s much around that area,” Jared replied.

“There isn’t. It’s all forest. I didn’t see any other buildings nearby,” I clarified.

“Okay. Give me an hour, and hopefully, I’ll have something for us to work with,” Jared stated, and once Blaise nodded, he left the room to accomplish his task.

“I take it you need a minute with Presley before we start planning?” Blaise asked Cruz with an eyebrow raised.

I gulped nervously. I wasn’t sure what Blaise meant by that, but it was mildly terrifying.

“Yeah. Dex, if you don’t mind getting the team together this time, I would appreciate it,” Cruz replied, turning his attention

to his broody friend on the couch.

“Sure,” Dex nodded once, looking stern as always.

“Alright. Let’s reconvene in an hour when Jared hopefully has a floor plan for us, and we can start planning,” Blaise said.

“I’m so fucking angry; I can’t come. I want to watch those pieces of shit die,” Erika growled.

“Don’t worry, Hellcat, we’ll give them an extra shot to the nuts for you,” Blaise replied with a low chuckle.

“We’ll see you guys back here in an hour,” Cruz said as he stood from his chair and motioned to the door with his head, his eyes fixed on me.

Why was I so nervous to be alone with him? Not scared, but definitely anxious.

I moved toward Cruz, and he grabbed my hand before practically dragging me out of the room and toward his office.

Once we were inside his office and the door closed behind us, Cruz dragged me to his chair behind his desk and sat down before pulling me onto his lap so I was straddling him.

I squealed in surprise at the sudden motion but didn’t resist.

He buried his face in the crook of my neck and wrapped his arms around me so tightly it was difficult to breathe.

After a few minutes of breathing in my scent, he finally pulled away from my neck and looked me in the eyes.

“Don’t ever do that again, beautiful. Promise me,” Cruz demanded, his voice holding an edge of vulnerability.

“I won’t. Promise,” I said softly.

“Good, because you need to realize you’re no longer alone. You have me now and those guys back there.” he motioned toward the door with his head before adding, “They see you as family now too, and we protect our family.”

Tears pricked my eyes as I fought not to cry. God, what he said sounded so good. My mother was the only family I ever had, and she died a long time ago. Since then, I have been alone. I thought Conrad would be my family, but that was far from the case.

“I know this is probably not the right word to use with someone who has been severely controlled in their past, but I don’t care. I need you to hear and accept it because it’s the damn truth,” Cruz said firmly, and he waited for my eyes to connect with his before he continued, ” You’re mine, Presley. Not mine to control, but mine to protect, mine to care for, and mine to worship. You will always be mine.”

The raw determination and possessiveness in his voice opened the floodgates, and tears started pouring freely from my eyes.

“Do you understand that?” he asked sternly.

His words scared me, but not in the way he thought they would. I wasn’t worried he was trying to control me, but the emotions swirling in his eyes showed how much he meant what he said, and that was terrifying.



Before I could reply, his lips crashed with mine. I could feel the desperation seeping out of him in the punishing kiss. His tongue pushed through my lips and explored every inch of my mouth.

The sudden movement initially surprised me, but it didn't take long before I melted in his arms and kissed him back with equal passion.

We both needed this more than I had realized.

One of his hands moved along my back while the other found its way into my hair, where he fisted a handful at the base of my skull.

I gasped when he tugged my head back before attacking my throat with his mouth, kissing and nipping at the sensitive skin.

"Mine to kiss," he growled before kissing a spot next to my throat column.

"Mine to mark," he said against my skin before sucking it into his mouth and leaving his mark.

"Oh god." I moaned when his other hand moved to my ass, and he pulled me along his erection.

"Mine. Say it," Cruz demanded, sounding like a man possessed.

"I'm yours." The words came out so quickly that I was even surprised to hear them.

Cruz froze, obviously not expecting me to give in so easily, but then reached for the hem of my shirt and tugged it over my head in a hurry.

“I need to be inside you, beautiful. I fucking need it more than I need my next breath,” Cruz panted, ripping his shirt over his head.

Without saying a word, I stood from his lap and lowered my jeans and underwear before stepping out of them, bearing myself to him.

I wasn't at all scared of the crazed man in front of me, if anything, he had turned me on more than I ever had been.

Cruz growled in satisfaction. His eyes took in my naked body as he undid his belt buckle and worked at the button of his pants.

Once his pants and boxers were pulled down, his lips met mine again in a violent kiss. His erection pressed against my abdomen, and the thought of him thrusting inside me made my pussy throb.

“Turn around,” He gritted out after breaking the kiss, and before I could do as I was told, he spun me around.

I gasped in surprise and then felt his big palm between my shoulder blades before he pushed me down until my chest met the cold, hard surface of the desk.

“Are you ready for me, beautiful?” he asked in a strained voice, kicking my feet apart so he had better access.

“Yes,” I said breathlessly, feeling my arousal leaking down my inner thigh.

His hand moved between my legs, and he ran his fingers along my slick folds until he reached my clit and circled it, earning him a moan from me.

“You’re so wet. You need this just as much as I do, don’t you, beautiful?”

“Yes. Please, Cruz,” I begged.

“Good girl,” he praised, running his hard cock along my slit before aligning it with my entrance. Fuck, if those two words didn’t make my knees weak.

He leaned over me, his mouth hovering next to my ear. “Mine to fuck,” he growled, impaling me with his cock in one hard thrust.

“Oh, fuck,” I gasped, feeling fuller than ever.

Cruz groaned as he stayed still for a few seconds, letting me adjust to his large size.

“You were made for me, beautiful. Every inch of this body was made for me. Look at how well I fit inside you,” he said huskily as he slowly pulled out, only to thrust back in.

One hand pressed down on my upper back to keep me in place. The other roughly gripped my hip while he fucked me hard and fast against his desk.

The only sounds in the room were his groans, my moans, and skin slapping against skin.

I was reaching the peak, and my vision blurred from the explosion building inside me. It wouldn't take much more before I went off like fireworks.

"I want to feel you come on my cock, beautiful. Can you do that for me?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, yes." I moaned loudly, uncaring who could hear us.

"Good girl," he praised, reaching between my body and the desk and flicking my clit with his finger sending me flying over the edge into pure ecstasy.

A few more hard thrusts and Cruz grunted before stilling inside me. I felt my pussy clench around his length as he filled me with cum.

He collapsed on my back, making sure not to crush me as we both panted for breath.

After a minute, he asked, "You okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?" His voice was laced with concern.

"No, you didn't hurt me. That was amazing," I said, still trying to catch my breath.

Cruz pulled out of me and reached for his shirt before wiping my pussy clean with it.

He then helped me stand since my legs were still boneless from the mind-blowing sex and helped me put my panties and pants back on, before sliding my shirt over my head.

He put his pants on after I was fully dressed but left his shirt off since it was covered in cum.

My cheeks flushed in embarrassment, but he didn't seem to mind when he sat on the chair and pulled me onto his lap.

“Do you see what you do to me? You turn me into something feral. I can't even imagine a life without you in it now that I've had a taste. Promise me you'll talk to me if you're struggling with something in the future,” he pleaded.

“I promise,” I whispered.

“Good because I care too much about you to lose you, beautiful,” he said, before kissing my lips gently—a hard contrast to the previous kisses.

“How did you figure it out?” I found myself asking when he broke the kiss.

Cruz stiffened before his eyes met mine. He looked conflicted again but sighed and said, “I don't want to lie to you anymore, so I'll tell you the truth. You were still signed into your email account on my computer. I saw Conrad's messages.”

It was my turn to stiffen. How many did he read?

“I read enough. That piece of shit is going to pay for what he did to you. I promise you that, Presley,” he said, answering my silent question.

I looked away, unable to meet his eyes, knowing he probably read some fucked up shit.

“Don’t. Look at me,” Cruz demanded, grabbing my chin firmly and turning my face so I was looking at him.

“What he did is on him, and he’ll pay for his sins. You have nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about. If anything, you’re a fucking survivor who should keep her head held high and proud,” he said sternly, causing fresh tears to blur my vision.

How did he always know the perfect things to say?

“Say it,” he commanded, and when I looked at him with a confused frown, he added, “Say, ‘I’m a fucking survivor.’”

I smiled softly. How could I not after that?

“I’m a survivor,” I practically whispered.

“I didn’t fucking hear you. Louder,” Cruz demanded, his voice getting louder almost like an announcer at a sporting event.

I chuckled lightly at his contagious positive energy before shouting, “I’m a survivor!”

“That’s more like it, beautiful,” he said, kissing my forehead before adding, “Now let’s go fuck some shit up.”

I was much more confident after spending time with Cruz. I felt like I was on top of the world and untouchable.

That man sure knew how to build a woman back up after she had been broken.

## Chapter 28

# A Fighter

## Cruz

I still felt uncomfortable with Presley coming tonight, but I told her she could. It would be a dick move for me to go back on my word. I would let her come, but not without heavy protection. Presley's safety was my utmost priority. I assigned a team of six, plus myself, to shadow her when we got there. The team's only job was to keep her safe and ensure those fuckwit brothers didn't get anywhere near her.

Once Jared had figured out the address and printed off the warehouse floor plan, Presley described the inside of the building the best she could.

Supposedly, there was a basement where Owen did all his torturing and killings. That was also where Presley said the picture of Cassandra was taken.

We held a team meeting with all our guys and devised a game plan.

While we strategized, we sent a team of six to the site ahead of time to get a headcount of how many men Owen and



Conrad had at the site and what type of security we were dealing with.

After a few hours, we got a report from our surveillance team that they believed there to be about seven guards around the building. Obviously, they couldn't confirm the numbers on the inside.

As for security systems, there wasn't any that they could see.

It looked like an old, run-down building that Owen used to conduct his dirty work. It didn't appear they kept any product or anything else of value there, hence the low security, which was perfect for us.

Owen was spotted exiting the building at one point to speak with a guard before he disappeared back inside, but there had been no signs of Conrad. That didn't mean he wasn't there. It just meant they hadn't seen him yet.

I was hoping they were both there so we could be done with this tonight, and Presley and I could finally move on without her constantly being in fear or looking over her shoulder.

It was almost time to head out, so Presley and I were in my room getting ready.

I dressed in my tactical gear inside the walk-in closet while Presley dressed inside the room.

It was the same outfit I wore last time: beige camo-print cargo pants and a matching long-sleeve shirt over a bulletproof vest. I attached my gun holster to my upper thigh and my knife to my hip.

Once dressed, I entered the room to find Presley in black cargo pants, fastening the bulletproof vest I had provided her over a sports bra. Holy mother of God, she looked sexy as sin in tactical gear. I instantly got hard as I stood staring at her getting dressed.

Once she finished fastening the vest, she slipped on a black long-sleeve shirt over top. Then she fastened the knife holster I gave her to her belt and tucked the Glock into the back of her pants. All the weapons were hidden, but just knowing they were there was a total turn-on. She looked like a force to be reckoned with tonight. Her hair was tied in a high ponytail, and she already had her game face on, looking fierce.

I planned on fucking her when this was all done, wearing nothing but that vest and my hand wrapped around that ponytail.

I groaned at the visual in my head, which got Presley's attention, and she finally noticed me standing there staring.

"If we weren't running late, I would bend you over that bed, slide those pants down your thighs, and fuck you just like that. You look so fucking sexy," I said in a deep raspy voice, barely able to resist doing what I described.

Presley shivered from hearing my words but then looked down at herself with a frown, probably wondering what I found attractive since her outfit covered most of her body. She didn't realize how much of a tactical nut I was, and to see her ready for war was way sexier than any lingerie she could buy.

“You think this is sexy?” she asked with an eyebrow raised, but I didn’t miss her gaze running up and down my outfit as she said it, looking a little more flushed.

Obviously, we both had a thing for tactical gear.

“Sexy is an understatement, beautiful. Seeing you like that; I’m having some of the dirtiest thoughts I’ve ever had. For example, I would be totally okay if you pulled that gun from your pants, pointed it at me, and demanded I remove all my clothes. Hell, I encourage you to do it.” I grinned.

“You’re insane,” she chuckled softly, shaking her head in disbelief.

“What can I say? I’m a guy.” I shrugged.

I was glad I could make her smile before we left since tonight wouldn’t be easy on her. First, we didn’t know if Cassandra was still alive, and second, seeing Owen and potentially Conrad would be hard for her. Hopefully, having me by her side would help.

“You ready?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she replied, and her voice wavered a little.

“Hey, it’s not too late to change your mind. If you want to stay home, we can handle this without you,” I offered, tilting Presley’s chin up with my knuckle so she was looking at me.

“No, I’m coming,” she replied, sounding determined.

It was worth a try. I was hoping she had changed her mind, but no such luck.

“Alright then, let’s go meet the guys downstairs.”

We left the room and went downstairs. Some of our guys were in the process of carrying gear out the front door and toward the vehicles in the driveway.

We always brought a lot of shit with us when we went out. It was better to be overly prepared than under.

“Hey, you guys ready?” Blaise asked as we stepped outside.

He was dressed similarly to me and held a rifle in each hand with his dog, Zeus, practically attached to his leg.

“You know it,” I said with a curt nod, as he handed me a rifle.

“Let’s head out then. It’s going to take us a while to get there,” he added.

We were just about to get into the backseat of one of the SUVs parked in the driveway when Erika came out of the house with a pout on her face.

“I really want to come,” she huffed.

“Not happening,” Blaise said sternly before whispering something into Erika’s ear, which made her blush.

I wasn’t sure what all that was about, but I didn’t bother asking since we were already behind schedule.

“Be safe and shoot someone in the balls for me. Will ya?” Erika said, making us all chuckle. The woman was savage.

“I promise to get a shot in for you, Hellcat,” Blaise said before kissing her.

“You got this girl. Be the badass I know you are tonight,” Erika said to Presley before hugging her.

“Thanks, I’ll try,” Presley replied.

“Stay out of trouble tonight, Fred,” I teased.

“Never,” Erika replied with a smirk, earning her a glare from Blaise.

“I swear to fuck, woman, you better stay out of trouble,” Blaise growled.

“Oh, settle down, caveman. Gia and I have a movie date planned, that’s all.” Erika rolled her eyes.

We said goodbye to Erika and got into the backseat of one of the SUVs, giving Blaise a minute alone with his wife.

I rested my rifle on the floor between my thighs before wrapping my arm around Presley’s waist and pulling her into the middle seat, so she was closer to me.

She gasped at the sudden action but didn’t try to pull away.

I needed to be touching her, and more importantly, I knew she needed me close, too. She always seemed to relax when I was near, and I was hoping tonight would be no different.

“I’ll be by your side all night, Pres. You have nothing to worry about,” I reassured, and she gave me a weak smile before nuzzling into my side.

A few minutes later, Jared hopped into the passenger seat, and Blaise opened the SUV hatch for Zeus to jump in. After that, Blaise got into the driver’s seat.

Dex volunteered to go in one of the other vehicles since we had Presley with us tonight.

We drove in relative silence most of the way. I was getting anxious to get there mainly because the fucker, Zeus, kept drooling on my shoulder. Every time I glared back at him, he growled as if I were the one offending him with my presence.

*Fucker.*

I kept my arm around Presley's shoulder the entire drive, and it seemed to be helping her stay calm. She was a tough woman, and I knew she could take care of herself, but I was still slightly worried about how she would react tonight, facing her worst nightmares. I hoped this didn't end up being a mistake.

After an almost two-hour drive, we pulled off the main road, headed down a gravel one, and stopped by two black vans, which I knew belonged to the men we had sent to survey the property. The vans were empty since the guys were still on foot keeping an eye on the place. They had instructed us to park our vehicles where theirs were since it was far enough from the warehouse and out of sight.

We exited the SUV at the same time as the other vehicles arrived and parked behind ours.

Our men got out and gathered for a last-minute brief before we broke into teams.

The plan was simple: we would take out the guards outside the warehouse silently so no one inside the building was

alerted. Then we would move inside and kill anyone we encountered except Cassandra, of course.

Ideally, we got a shot on Owen and whoever else was inside the building before they even noticed us, but if that wasn't possible, we might need to use Presley as a distraction. I would only allow that to happen if Owen was within reach of Cassandra. I knew Presley was safe with the team I assigned to watch over her, but still, using her as bait felt all kinds of wrong.

Once we broke into teams, I introduced Presley to the guys shadowing her.

She was obviously uncomfortable with all the attention but tried not to let it show.

As everyone headed out through the dense forest with their night vision goggles on, I grabbed Presley's arm, stopping her so I could speak with her in private.

"Remember, you don't leave my side and do everything I tell you. Got it?" I asked sternly.

"I know, and I will," she replied with an eager nod.

"Good, let's go."

I slipped on my black balaclava mask and checked my rifle before leading us through the forest. Presley stayed close enough behind me that I could feel her presence.

As we got closer to the warehouse, Presley and my team stayed back as Dex, Jared, Blaise, Brent, and their respective teams silently took out the guards outside the building.

“Two down, north,” Jared announced through the radio.

“One to the east,” Dex followed.

“We got two in the west,” Brent, one of our top soldiers, added a few minutes later.

Brent led one of the four teams since I oversaw Presley’s protection and couldn’t do both.

“One more to the south.” Blaise was the last one to report.

That was a total of six guards down. We had at least one other inside the building, plus Owen. It was still unclear if Conrad was there but I had a feeling that would make this too easy if he was.

Now that the outside guards were dead, it was time for my team to move toward the backdoor.

Supposedly, based on what Presley explained, that entrance wasn’t used often and was the most discreet way into the building. It was also closest to the stairs that led into the basement. She said that as soon as you enter the building, you could see down into the basement but not into the room where Owen did his torturing. That room only had one door and there were no windows.

I swapped my rifle for my Glock before we went inside.

Three of my men went in first and broke off to clear the entrance. Then Presley went in, flanked by me and another one of my men. Two more followed close behind watching our backs.



Presley had drawn her own gun and held it low and ready as we moved toward the railing that would give us an elevated view into the main part of the basement.

As we got closer, a noise drew our attention behind us, and I turned just in time to watch Vlad, one of my guys, slice the throat of a man who had come from a room on the main level.

The guy's eyes were wide as blood spurted from his open gash. I glanced at Presley to make sure she was okay, and other than the fact her nose was crinkled as if she didn't like the sight of blood, she didn't seem disturbed by the sight of my guy killing someone.

*Good girl.*

We reached the railing that allowed us to look down, but there was no one in sight below.

Presley pointed to the metal door that led into the room where she believed Cassandra was being held.

We were about to head down the stairs when a gunshot echoed through the building, making us all freeze.

“Fuck. I came across another one of their guards and he got a round-off before I could finish him,” Brent announced on the radio.

I cursed under my breath—so much for us doing this discreetly. Now, whoever remained in the building was alerted that something was up.

I grabbed Presley and pulled her behind me. My men knew the drill and tightened their positions around her, too.

She was basically surrounded by walls of military men with guns.

“Another down to the south,” Blaise announced.

Still no sight of Owen or Conrad, though.

As the thought crossed my mind, the door Presley pointed out swung open.

“Sis? Is that you?” A voice I recognized belonging to Owen asked. It was taunting and loud, echoing through the open warehouse.

Owen was still inside the room, and from our angle, there was no way of getting eyes on him unless he moved closer to the opened door.

Presley gave me a pleading look, silently asking permission to answer him. I reluctantly nodded, knowing that Cassandra was as good as dead if he suspected it was anyone but Presley.

I used my hands to signal my men to move away from Presley but remain close enough to react if needed. That way, if Owen peered outside the room, all he would see was a partial view of her. Hopefully, he would move further into the open when he thought it was just her, and we could shoot him.

“Where’s Cassandra?” Presley asked in a firm voice.

“Shit, sis, I have to be honest with you, I didn’t actually think you’d come.” Owen chuckled loudly, adding, “You’ve grown some balls since the last time I saw you.”

My jaw clenched, and my finger twitched, ready to move to the trigger of my gun the moment Owen came into view.

I saw movement inside the door and readied myself a few feet away from Presley behind a large metal post.

Owen would first see Presley on the upper level near the railing if he stepped out. My guys and I were hidden in the shadows, waiting for our shot.

I silently cursed when Cassandra came into view with a big, tattooed arm wrapped around her neck that I knew belonged to Owen.

She looked rough and filthy, wearing only underwear and a bra. If Owen wasn't holding her, it didn't look like she would have enough energy to stand on her own. She was also caked in dry blood, making it difficult to see how severe her wounds were.

Owen was doing a good job using Cassandra as a human shield. I couldn't get a shot unless he stepped out a bit further.

"Cassandra. Oh, thank god you're alive," Presley exclaimed, sounding relieved.

Cassandra's unfocused eyes moved to Presley, and her mouth opened, but Owen tightened his arm around her throat, preventing her from speaking and cutting off her oxygen.

"Did you come alone like we asked?" Owen asked while Cassandra continued to flail in his arms, trying to get him to loosen his hold.

"Please, Owen. I'm alone," Presley pleaded.

Fuck, I hated that there was nothing I could do until I got a shot, and unless she convinced him she was alone, he likely wouldn't step out of that room.

“Don't think I didn't hear that shot earlier, sis. I'm also curious as to why none of my guards are responding to me. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?” he asked suspiciously.

He seemed to have loosened his hold on Cassandra's neck since she stopped struggling and appeared to be breathing again.

“You always did have idiots working for you, Owen. They didn't exactly make it difficult to sneak up on them and slit their throats,” Presley replied without hesitation.

*Good.*

She needed to convince him she was alone and so far, she was doing a great job.

Owen was silent for a moment, obviously contemplating her words before he spoke.

“My, my. You really have grown a set since the last time we saw each other. I didn't believe Conrad when he told me his weak little bird shot him and his two guards. I guess I underestimated you.” He chuckled darkly before adding, “It's going to make it so much more entertaining to break you this time.”

*Holy. Fucking. Shit.*

Owen was a dead man. He needed to hurry up and give me that shot before I lost my goddamn mind or stormed down there like the fucking Hulk and started tearing him limb by limb.

Presley shot me a warning glare, not long enough to draw attention to me, but her warning was clear, *'Don't you fucking dare show yourself yet.'*

Damn that woman, I was the one who was supposed to be calling the shots, but here we were. If shit wasn't so intense right now, I would have laughed.

"Lower the gun, sis, and any other weapons you have on you. Disobey, and you can say goodbye to your friend," Owen ordered.

As he made his demands, he stepped another foot forward to get a better view of Presley. He still didn't have a good view of her though, just enough to see the gun in her hand.

I was so close to getting a shot. I just needed him to take another step, and I would have it.

"Okay, I'm doing it. Please don't hurt Cassandra, Owen. She's innocent," Presley pleaded, raising the gun in the air for him to see before slowly lowering it in front of her until it was on the ground.

She reached for her belt and removed the knife from her holster before also lowering it to the ground beside her gun.

"Now, get your ass down here, sis," Owen barked.

It was my turn to shoot Presley a warning look. She wasn't going down there, no matter what he said. If she couldn't lure him out, we would have to figure something else out, but I wasn't risking her safety.

Presley laughed humorlessly, and I had to give it to her. She wasn't showing fear even though I could see her hands trembling slightly at her side.

“Not until you let Cassandra go. I'm the one you want, and I came here to trade myself for her. I know you too well, Owen. The minute I step down there, you'll kill her anyway, so I'm not giving myself up unless you release her,” Presley said firmly, leaving no room for argument.

My girl was a fucking fighter. The woman continued to impress me every single day.

“You think you get to make demands here, sis? You don't. How about I start torturing her right here and now? Whatcha gonna do then?” Owen asked, and to prove his point, he pulled a knife from behind his back and dragged the blade across Cassandra's throat.

She cried out in pain and struggled in his hold. He had cut her enough to draw blood but not deep enough to cause severe damage.

I was worried his actions would make Presley react irrationally, and I was ready to intervene if it did. To my fucking surprise, Presley didn't. She obviously knew Owen was looking for a reaction out of her, and she wasn't going to give it to him.

“You kill her, and I’ll put a bullet in my head. It’s up to you, *brother*. What’s it going to be? Her or me? You can’t have both,” she asked tauntingly, and although I didn’t fucking like what she said, it was bloody genius. It was obvious they wanted her alive or they wouldn’t have gone through all this effort.

“You little fucking bitch. You don’t get to give me ultimatums. Get your fucking ass down here now, or this time I’ll slice right through her throat until she chokes on her blood,” he growled, losing his temper and holding the knife firmly to Cassandra’s throat.

“Do it,” Presley challenged, picking up the gun off the ground and pointing it at her head.

What the actual fuck? That wasn’t part of the damn plan. What part of *‘listen to my orders’* did she not understand?

Her reaction caught Owen by surprise, and because of his obstructed view of Presley, he leaned forward to see what she was doing and unintentionally lowered the knife from Cassandra’s throat in the process.

I nearly missed my opportunity because I had been too shocked by Presley’s actions, but then I snapped out of it. I turned my attention back to Owen through the sights of my gun, and now that he had leaned forward, I had a decent shot of his shoulder.

I wasted no time and fired off a round.

Owen cried out when the bullet tore through his shoulder, and Cassandra screamed before falling to the ground and crawling away from Owen.

My men jumped into action. Four of them charged down the stairs while the two others and I flanked Presley.

Presley lowered the gun as her chest heaved a relieved breath. I was fucking pissed that she had done that, but now wasn't the time to talk about it. My men were subduing Owen and clearing the rooms on the bottom floor.

“Target secure. Move in,” I announced on the radio, giving the other teams the go-ahead to clear the warehouse's upper level.

“You okay?” I asked Presley as my eyes continuously scanned our surroundings.

I wasn't going to lower my guard until I got the *all-clear*.

“Yeah. Can I go check on Cas?” she asked, her voice shaky.

“No. Wait,” I said firmly.

She didn't argue, and we waited ten minutes while the teams tore through the building searching for anyone else before Blaise announced on the radio that it was all clear. I guess we still needed to hunt down Conrad when this was all done.

I holstered my gun and turned to Presley, who was visibly trembling.

“Let's go check on your friend,” I said and was about to put my hand on Presley's lower back, but she took off in a full



sprint down the stairs and toward Cassandra, who was being tended to by one of my men.

The other three had dragged Owen back into the room, where I knew they were securing him for me.

We had discussed it ahead of time. If it was possible to keep Owen and Conrad alive, we would, but if it wasn't possible, then we would have killed them on the spot. Luckily, I was able to shoot Owen without killing him.

I made my way down the stairs where Presley was holding a sobbing Cassandra. Cassandra looked like death. The girl had been roughed up and by the smell I would say she had soiled herself at some point too. I felt bad for her and knew deep down she wasn't to blame for what happened. I guess I was just fiercely protective over Presley and wasn't thinking straight when I told Presley that Cassandra was partly to blame for her actions.

"He made me do it. I'm so sorry," Cassandra cried.

"Shhh... I know it's okay," Presley soothed.

"No, you don't understand. Conrad threatened to kill my son. He had pictures of him at school and even some of him sleeping in his room. They got into my house, Pres. I knew they weren't messing around. They would have hurt him if I didn't do as they asked. You know how much my son means to me. He's my whole world." Cassandra sobbed, her voice hoarse as if she hadn't had water in days, which was probably true by the looks of her.

“I know, and I’m not mad. You did what you had to do to protect your son. Let’s get you out of here and to a hospital, okay?” Presley reassured, and Cassandra nodded.

One of my men picked Cassandra up in his arms and carried her toward the door.

“Wait, you’re not coming?” Cassandra called after Presley.

“No, I need to stay here, but I’ll come check on you as soon as I can,” she said, giving Cassandra’s hand a gentle squeeze before my soldier carried her away.

Once I was alone in the open area with Presley, she turned to me, her bottom lip quivering. She had been so strong this whole time, but I could tell this was taking a toll on her. It didn’t help that Conrad wasn’t here, so this didn’t end tonight. We needed to find him.

“You did good, beautiful,” I said, taking her into my arms and squeezing her tight as I kissed the top of her head.

“What now?” she asked in a vulnerable tone as her glossy eyes met mine.

“I’m going to have a little chat with Owen, but you don’t need to watch that. It’s not going to be pretty,” I told her.

“No, I want to,” she said.

“You sure? I mean it, it’s going to get ugly in there,” I warned.

“I want to be there. I have to face the demons from my past if I ever want to move on,” Presley said, and I nodded in

understanding.

“Okay, if it ends up being too much, you know you can walk out at any point,” I said, and she nodded.

“You guys good?” Blaise asked, coming down the stairs with Jared, Dex, and his dog Zeus.

“Yeah, we’re just about to have a little chat with Owen. You guys wanna join?” I asked.

“Fucking right, we do,” Blaise replied.

Jared grinned excitedly, and even Dex looked eager to get in there and do some damage.

It was time to get some revenge for my girl. After that, we would hunt down her scumbag of a husband and end him too.

## Chapter 29

# The Full Experience

## Presley

**M**y hands shook, and my heart was hammering in my chest. I couldn't believe our plan worked. Cassandra looked rough and smelled terrible, but I was confident with medical help, she would pull through.

Seeing her so weak and beat up brought up old memories that I wished to bury.

I wanted to go with Cassandra to ensure she was okay, but I also wanted to finish what we started, so I stayed while one of Cruz's men carried Cassandra away.

It was time to face Owen, and I was beyond anxious. Talking to him from a distance was one thing, but being face-to-face with one of your tormentors was another story.

Cruz told me that Owen was restrained before we entered the room, and I was grateful for that. I was also relieved that, for once, I wouldn't be facing him alone. Cruz would be by my side, and many of his men were also there.

Cruz gave my hand a reassuring squeeze before releasing it and leading us into the room. I instantly missed his touch but understood that he needed to focus on what was coming.

Blaise, Dex, and Jared followed me as we entered.

I held my breath as my eyes took everything in. It looked just like I remembered, and the smell was the same, too, making me wrinkle my nose. It smelled like death, and now I understood why, unlike the first time I had woken up in here.

My eyes landed on the box against the far wall, and I whimpered, drawing Cruz's attention to me. I didn't mean for it to happen but seeing the box with the lid open felt like it was taunting me. Had Cassandra been locked in it before we arrived?

"What's wrong, sis? You taking a walk down memory lane?" Owen chuckled darkly, drawing my attention to him, right before Cruz's fist connected with his jaw.

Owen's face whipped to the side, and blood flew from his mouth as a pained grunt left his lips.

Cruz's men had restrained Owen to the same chair where Cassandra had been tied up.

"Don't talk or fucking look at her," Cruz growled before slamming his fist into Owen's face a second time.

Owen laughed like a psychopath. Blood coated his teeth and ran down his chin, making him look even more terrifying.

"Awww... My little whore of a sister found herself a protective boyfriend. How cute," Owen mocked.

“Call her a whore again, and I’ll cut your dick off and use it as a gag,” Cruz gritted out before pulling his knife from his holster and stabbing it into Owen’s shoulder, the one that didn’t have the gunshot wound.

Owen screamed loudly and leaned his head forward. Blood mixed with saliva ran from his mouth and onto his lap.

Blaise gave Cruz a look, and even I knew what he was silently saying, *“Owen’s goading you, trying to get you to kill him quickly. Don’t fucking fall for it.”*

Cruz’s chest rose and fell rapidly, and seeing the rage burning in his eyes sent a chill down my spine. He looked like a man possessed. I had never seen him like that before. Even the few times I had seen him angry didn’t compare to this.

He took a few calming breaths before he gave Blaise a subtle nod and returned to Owen.

I was glad he was here to deal with Owen. As much as I had learned that violence was sometimes needed, I still preferred not to use it unless I had to. Had I been the one dealing with Owen, I would have put a bullet in his head just so it would be over quickly, and even my non-violent self knew he deserved worse than that.

“Where’s your sick fuck of a brother, Owen?” Cruz asked with a sneer.

“Like I’m going to tell you,” Owen wheezed out, before breaking into a coughing fit.

Cruz grabbed the knife in his shoulder and pulled it out, making Owen cry out again from the pain. Blood poured freely from the large gash, staining his shirt crimson red.

“Heat that metal press. We wouldn’t want the asshole bleeding out before we’re done with him,” Cruz instructed Vlad while pointing to a long metal stick with a flat end.

I watched Vlad grab a blow torch off the table and start heating the flat portion of the metal stick until it turned bright red.

In the meantime, Cruz grabbed Owen’s shirt where there was now a hole and tore it open so both wounds on his shoulders were visible.

I watched with wide eyes as Cruz put on a fire-resistant glove that was on the table and grabbed the red-hot stick from Vlad, before returning to Owen. Without warning, he pressed it against the knife wound. Cruz didn’t even flinch. He looked savage. I was a little turned on and a little terrified at the same time. I knew he would never hurt me, but I really couldn’t imagine him being this violent before today. I mean, the guy once twirled on a stripper pole before landing on his head in one of my classes. Now, he was torturing a man as if it were his favorite pastime.

The sounds of skin sizzling and Owen screaming filled the room, causing goosebumps to erupt all over my skin.

I thought I would be a little more disturbed being in here while Cruz tortured Owen, but surprisingly, I wasn’t. An odd



little thrill rushed through me every time Cruz made Owen scream. It felt like we were avenging Crystal in a way.

Vlad reheated the metal pole twice more, and Cruz cauterized the bullet wound on Owen's shoulder that had gone straight through.

"Hey, boss. I just found this in that leather jacket. It's probably his," One of the other soldiers in the room said, pointing to a jacket and then handing Cruz an iPhone.

Before Owen realized what was happening, Cruz held the device before his face to unlock the screen using facial recognition.

"You won't tell us where your loser brother's hiding, but I bet I can lure him out with this," Cruz goaded Owen, motioning to the device.

"Fuck you," Owen spat. Obviously, he knew Cruz was on to something with his phone.

"Hey, brother. How about I take over for a while," Jared offered, looking excited at the thought of inflicting pain on Owen.

"You want a piece of this asshole? Have at him," Cruz replied before coming over to stand next to me. He immediately wrapped his arm possessively around my waist and pulled me to his side.

"Hey, Pres. Any requests?" Jared asked casually, motioning to the table of tools.

I didn't even hesitate before pointing to the pliers.

“Fingernails?” I said in a questioning tone.

“Damn. I like your style,” Jared chuckled before picking up the tool. “Your wish is my command,” he added.

“He once made me watch him do it to a friend, so it’s fitting,” I blurted out bitterly, and everyone froze to stare at me. I shouldn’t have said it, but I wanted Owen to suffer like Crystal had.

Cruz’s grip tightened on my waist, and I glanced up to see the fury burning in his eyes before he instructed Jared, ”Fucking pull out his teeth too while you’re at it.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Jared drawled.

I wasn’t sure how long it took, but Jared worked away at ripping Owen’s nails off first and then his teeth. The sound of never-ending screams filled the room, and it was like music to my ears, but at the same time, it wasn’t enough. Crystal had begged for her life while Owen laughed at her pleas. I wanted him to suffer so much worse for what he did to her.

“You okay?” Cruz asked in a low voice so Owen wouldn’t hear. Not that he would have with the sound of his screams swallowing all other noise in the room.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I replied, and it was the truth. Knowing that Owen would be dead soon was almost therapeutic.

“Anything you wanna say to him or do?” Cruz asked, his eyes burrowing into mine as he waited for an answer.

“No,” I said, and Cruz nodded.

There was a lot I wanted to say to Owen, but at the same time, it wouldn't change anything, and it would just give him more satisfaction knowing he still affected me.

Once Jared finished his task, Blaise took over, dragging more screams from Owen as he used his chest as a canvas for his blade. He cut him up, but not deep enough to bleed out.

While Blaise went to town on Owen, Cruz opened the iPhone. He must have removed the passcode entry since he didn't need to scan Owen's face to get into the device this time.

Cruz let me watch as he opened a text message conversation on the phone between Owen and '*brother,*' who I assumed was Conrad.

Cruz and I read their previous messages together. The conversations were short and the last one was Conrad telling Owen that he was still laying low but demanded that Owen contact him if I showed up.

Cruz started to type a message and my eyes stayed glued to the screen, reading along as he wrote.

**Cruz (from Owen's phone):** She's here.

Almost instantly, the three dots appeared, indicating Conrad was replying.

**Conrad:** No shit. I wasn't even sure if she still checked that email account. You doing your thing?

Cruz's grip on the phone tightened, obviously knowing what Conrad was asking as he started typing.

**Cruz (from Owen's phone):** She's about to go in the box.

Cruz glanced down at me with an apologetic look as he pressed send. I smiled weakly, letting him know I understood what he was doing. He was making sure Conrad believed it was Owen and not him texting.

**Conrad:** Leave that little whore in there. I'll be by the day after tomorrow to have her sign some shit. Then, she can go back in the box for a week. I want that bitch broken properly this time.

Cruz's jaw clenched. He looked ready to lose it as his fingers tapped violently across the screen.

**Cruz (from Owen's phone):** Sign what?

**Conrad:** Someone fucked with my bank accounts. All my money's frozen. I've been using the cash in the safe, but that won't fucking last. I need her to sign over the shit in her name.

No wonder he didn't want me dead. That would complicate things since all that money was in my name only.

**Cruz (from Owen's phone):** Why not come sooner?

**Conrad:** Got a meeting tomorrow with Victor. I'm hoping to get him back on board with us.

**Cruz (from Owen's phone):** I'll take good care of my sis until you arrive.

**Conrad:** If she gives you trouble, cut her fucking tongue out. She only needs to smile when we're out in public, not speak.

**Cruz (from Owen's phone):** You got it.

When Cruz finished texting Conrad, I finally turned my attention back to the room. Dex was now using the blowtorch on Owen, but his screaming wasn't nearly as loud anymore. He looked to be going in and out of consciousness.

“Stop,” Cruz ordered, and Dex listened.

“Conrad’s coming here the day after tomorrow. Put Owen in the box for his brother to find. He likely won’t even make it until then, but I want his last breath to be taken in that shoebox,” Cruz added.

“You got it.” Dex nodded, and he and a couple of the other guys got to work on untying Owen.

I was filled with satisfaction when I heard Cruz’s words. I liked the idea of Owen experiencing some of the torture he inflicted on me, Crystal, and Cassandra. And the box had been the second worst part for me. The first was watching Crystal die.

The guys dragged Owen over to the box easily since he was too weak to fight and lowered him inside. Then they stepped aside and made room for me.

I walked over to the box and looked down at the broken, bloodied man, whose body barely fit inside the tiny box. Cruz’s men had folded the bottom half of his legs behind his thighs so that he would fit, and it looked extremely uncomfortable. I did not pity him, though. He deserved worse.

“Don’t worry, we won’t forget the music. Wouldn’t want you to miss out on the full experience,” I sneered before slamming the lid shut and pressing play on the music machine next to the box.

The sound of loud opera music was heard playing inside the box, making me shudder.

God, I never wanted to hear opera music again after today.

I turned around only to find everyone watching me. Some looked like they pitied me, which I hated, and others, like Cruz, Blaise, Jared, and Dex, appeared furious.

Cruz looked like he was contemplating nursing Owen back to health, only so he could start the torture all over again.

“Why don’t you take Presley home? I’ll get everything set up here while we wait for Conrad,” Blaise suggested.

“Thanks, man, I appreciate it,” Cruz replied.

“Let’s get you home, beautiful. It’s been a long night,” Cruz said, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and guiding me out of the room.

Some of the guys nodded to us as we passed them and headed upstairs.

Cruz grabbed my hand when we got outside, and we walked silently through the forest toward where the vehicles were parked.

Cruz still seemed to be struggling with his anger, so I said nothing and waited for him to speak.

I was surprised by how well I was holding up after everything that happened tonight. I wasn’t sad, or even mad, just relieved that we were that much closer to the end of this nightmare.

We had been walking for a while and were getting close to the vehicles when Cruz suddenly pushed me up against a large

tree, making me gasp in surprise.

He pinned my body with his and had an intense look on his face that both aroused and unnerved me.

“W-What are you...” I started but trailed off when he spoke.

“I don’t recall any part of the plan, including you putting a gun to your head,” he said calmly, though he looked anything but.

So that was what he was upset about. I hadn’t meant to do it, but the idea came to mind when Owen threatened to hurt Cassandra in front of me.

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I knew it would distract Owen from hurting Cassandra any further, and I hoped it would cause him to step out of the room more so you would have a shot. He and Conrad wouldn’t have gone through all this effort unless they wanted me alive. It was a risk, but I was hoping it would pay off, and it did,” I explained, not wanting him to be mad at me for what I did.

“Don’t ever do that again. Okay?” Cruz asked, sounding stern but also vulnerable.

“Okay,” I said softly.

“God, beautiful. Hearing a bit of what he did to you is still making the beast inside me feral. I’m trying to calm down, but I’m fucking struggling. I promise, though, it’s not directed at you if I seem angry. I just can’t seem to pull myself together right now,” he said with a frustrated sigh.



“It’s okay. You did more for me today than anyone ever has,” I said softly, trying to ease some of his fury.

“No, it’s not okay. You’re the one who should be inconsolable right now, not me. You’re so fucking strong, Pres, you have no idea,” he huffed, running his fingers through his hair and stepping away from me, looking almost embarrassed with himself for not being able to control his emotions.

“Look at me,” I demanded, putting my hands on his cheeks and turning his face until his eyes met mine.

“You make me stronger every day, Cruz. You taught me how to trust again when I never thought I could. You made me laugh and smile when I thought I had forgotten how. You gave me hope that maybe there will still be a happily-ever-after for me when this is all over. I’m stronger because I have you in my life,” I said.

“I get why you’re mad. You’re a good man, and hearing what that vile man did to me was hard for you to process. I don’t hold that against you. If anything, I’m grateful to have you in my corner. Besides Erika, I haven’t had anyone I could count on in a long time, so I’m glad you’re mad on my account,” I added.

“I fucking love you, Presley,” he blurted out, and my eyes widened.

Well, shit. That wasn’t what I was expecting to hear. Cruz didn’t allow me to think about it for long before his lips met mine in a bruising kiss.

Before I knew it, Cruz had me pinned against the tree with his body again. One of his hands held the back of my neck while he deepened the kiss by thrusting his tongue into my mouth.

I wanted to show Cruz that I meant what I said, even though I wasn't ready to say the 'L' word just yet.

Cruz had been the one putting in all the effort so far. All I had done was push him away repeatedly. For once, I wanted to be there for him, even if it was simply to release some of his pent-up rage.

So, with that thought, I reached for his belt buckle and started to undo it.

“Beautiful, I wouldn't do that,” he growled, reaching for my hand to stop me while his chest heaved with each heavy breath he took.

“You helped me tonight, Cruz. Let me help you,” I said and my cheeks instantly heated. I wasn't used to taking the lead and felt a bit awkward about it.

Cruz's grip loosened on my hand enough so I could resume my task.

His predatory gaze remained locked on me as I unbuttoned his pants and lowered his zipper. It was a bit more work with all the extra gear attached to his belt, but I managed.

I reached into his boxers and wrapped my small hand around his already rock-hard cock. A guttural growl rumbled in his throat as he thrust his hips forward.

I pulled his erection free from his boxers before lowering myself to my knees.

We probably weren't in the best spot to be doing this since one of the other guys could come across us, but I didn't care. If anything, the thought was exhilarating. Especially with the hungry look in Cruz's eyes as I swirled my tongue around the head of his cock.

"Fuck, you're killing me," he groaned.

I loved how powerful he made me feel, even while I was on my knees in front of him. Nothing could make a woman feel sexier than a man about to lose control over her touch.

I took his cock into my mouth, flicking my tongue along the underside and hollowing my cheeks. One of my hands held the base of his shaft while the other moved to play with his balls. He grunted his approval and thrust his hips forward when I took him in deep.

"Fuck," he cursed, gripping my pony tail at the back of my head and holding me in place for a few seconds. I gagged, feeling his large cock twitch at the back of my throat, but I didn't hate it. In fact, I was so wet and aroused by his dominance that I moaned around his cock, causing him to groan.

He guided my head back and forth along his length with a firm grip on my hair, picking up speed as he got closer to his release.

Just when I thought he would come, he withdrew his cock from my mouth, making me whimper from the loss.

“I want to fuck you up against this tree, beautiful. Take your pants off.” He ordered in a deep, husky voice that I barely recognized.

I didn't argue. I got up from the ground, took the gun out from the back of my pants, and placed it on the ground before practically ripping my pants and panties down my legs.

I probably looked like a hot mess skipping on one foot as I tried to pull off one of my combat boots without undoing the laces. It wasn't easy, but it came off after a few seconds of tugging. I swore I heard a snort from Cruz, who was watching me struggle.

My eyes shot up to his, and sure enough, one side of his mouth was lifted into a subtle smirk, and there was amusement swirling in his eyes along with that raw hunger. The asshole wasn't even trying to help me.

I got my one boot off, and somehow managed to get the other boot through the pant leg with it still on my foot.

Cruz didn't seem to care that I still had one boot on because he quickly grabbed both my ass cheeks and lifted me off the ground.

I wrapped my legs around his waist just in time for him to thrust his cock inside me. I gasped at the sudden feeling of being filled but then moaned when he pulled his cock back

out, dragging along my inner walls and eliciting that addictive friction.

“God, Presley, you feel so good,” he groaned, thrusting back inside my pussy and slamming my back against the tree trunk.

He fucked me like the beast I had seen in him earlier, hard and fast without remorse, and I loved every minute of it. Every time he bottomed out, the tip of his cock hit my G-spot, edging me closer to my release.

“Harder,” I panted, and the word was like a trigger to the animal inside him.

He turned savage, fucking me like it would be the last time. I thought he might tear me in two, yet I wanted more. I wanted our bodies to somehow mold together.

A tingling pressure built in my core as I got ready to explode and every nerve ending in my body came to life. It was the most intense build up I had ever experienced. I never wanted it to end, yet I couldn't wait to free-fall over the edge.

“I'm going to... Oh fuck...” I shouted just before a blinding light invaded my vision, and pleasure consumed me.

My toes curled, and I shattered from the intensity of the orgasm that tore through my body.

“Your cunt's squeezing my cock like a goddamn boa,” he gritted out, and with a few more hard thrusts, he threw his head back and came inside me with a savage roar.

He held still, filling my pussy with his cum until nothing was left.

Cruz rested his head against my shoulder. We remained against the tree panting heavily.

“I fucking love you, beautiful. I don’t expect you to say it back, but it’s true. You’re absolutely perfect,” Cruz said between heavy breaths.

He was right. I wasn’t ready to say it. He meant a lot to me, but the only man I had ever said the ‘L’ word to destroyed me, and I wasn’t ready to go there yet.

So, instead, I asked, “Did that help reign in some of that anger?”

His deep laughter caused his dick to slip out of me, so he put me down on my feet.

“Yes, yes, it did,” he said after his laughter died down.

“Thank God. I was worried I would be trapped with a grunting gorilla the entire two-hour drive home,” I said jokingly.

Cruz chuckled again as he helped me put on my pants.

“Is that really what I sound like when I’m mad? A grunting gorilla?” he asked while chuckling and shaking his head.

“Kinda, yeah,” I said truthfully.

“I guess since I don’t get angry often, I make it count when I do,” he half-joked.

“When Erika started teaching me how to fight, I had a lot of pent-up anger to get out of me. She said I looked like an angry blowfish. I guess I would puff out my body and cheeks to try

and look bigger than I actually was,” I said, and Cruz buckled over with laughter.

“I don’t know about your body puffing out, but after what your mouth just did with my cock, I would say she was spot on with the blowfish reference,” he teased.

“A gorilla and a blowfish. Sounds like a match made in heaven.” I chuckled.

When I was finished putting my pants and boot back on, I tucked my gun into the waistband, and we headed for the SUV.

I had a feeling it would be a much more relaxed drive home now that we had burnt off some of that negative energy.

## Chapter 30



# Memories

## Cruz

The drive back to the house was quiet. Presley seemed deep in thought, and I was too.

She had managed to calm me down substantially before we left, and I was grateful for that. It was embarrassing how I handled myself. Instead of being there for her, the person who should have been upset, I was a raging maniac who couldn't get the images of her locked in that box out of my head. I felt like I was going insane, and the more I thought about it, the angrier I got. How could anyone do that to a person? Especially someone as sweet and innocent as Presley?

Presley was a strong woman. I didn't think she saw it, but I did. After everything she had been through tonight, you would think she would have been a blubbering mess. Maybe cried a little or got angry, but instead, she seemed calm and relieved on the drive home. I guess she saw tonight as being one step closer to freedom. Once we took out Conrad, she wouldn't have anyone to fear.

I couldn't wait for that to happen. I wasn't sure what I would do to Conrad yet, but he deserved the worst for what he did to Presley.

Once we had gotten home, I did exactly what I had promised earlier and fucked Presley, bent over the bed with only her bulletproof vest on, and my hand wrapped around her ponytail. It was fucking glorious. The image will forever be imprinted in my head.

Then we showered and got in bed.

We faced each other, my fingers trailing a feather-light path along her arms as her eyes got heavy with sleep.

I had told her I loved her tonight, and I fucking meant it. How could I not fall in love with that woman? She wasn't just beautiful on the outside, but on the inside too. I was obsessed and finally understood why Blaise had acted so crazy at first with Erika. Like him, I would do anything for the woman I loved.

Was I disappointed Presley didn't say she loved me back? A little, but I understood her hesitation. It was too soon, and she needed more time, which I would give her. It wasn't like we were in a rush. Once we handled Conrad, I would have the rest of our lives to make her fall in love with me.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked her as she watched me with a slight frown between her gorgeous hazel eyes.

"Just how lucky I am to have found you. Most men would have run the other way with all the baggage I brought along

with me, but not you,” she said truthfully.

“It’s not your baggage to carry. Everything that happened to you is on Conrad and Owen. I’m just glad I can help you get the revenge you deserve,” I replied.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“You don’t need to thank me, beautiful. I would do anything for you,” I admitted.

“That room today was where it all started. My real nightmares, I mean,” Presley said, her voice shaky.

I remained silent, waiting to hear what she would say next. I had managed to calm myself down completely, and I would remain that way no matter what horrors she revealed.

“I had just found out how Conrad had manipulated my entire life. He scared off my friends, drained my bank account, had me fired, and even had my vehicle stolen, all so that I couldn’t get around without asking him for a ride. He had managed to control every aspect of my life.

One of my best friends, Crystal, whom Conrad had threatened to stay away from me, told me everything in a coffee shop one day. I had been completely blindsided. In hindsight, I knew something was off, but I ignored that gut feeling and convinced myself that I was the problem, not him.” She let out a long, shaky breath before continuing, “Anyway, he caught me snooping in his office. I found a file folder with my name and was looking through it when he found me. I never managed to see everything in the folder, but

I did see enough to confirm that what my friend had told me was accurate.”

The minute she mentioned the folder, I tensed. I had forgotten about that thing. It was still in my office, and I never did look inside. Luckily, she didn't feel me tense and continued talking.

“I told Conrad I was leaving him, that I couldn't believe he would hurt me like that. Then, his true nature came out. He rammed my face into the doorframe until I blacked out. When I woke up, I was lying on the metal table in the room we were in tonight. Conrad carved his ownership into my skin before they locked me in the box for three days. I honestly didn't think it could get much worse than that, but it did.” she chuckled humorlessly, a tear running down her cheek at the memory.

I wiped the tear away before continuing to run my fingers along her skin in a comforting gesture. I was fuming inside, but this time, I managed to keep it under control for her benefit since I wanted her to feel comfortable enough to open up. I would be there for her and not let my own emotions control me this time.

“Owen pulled me out of the box. Conrad wasn't there when he did, but another person in the room was strapped to a chair with a bag over her head. My heart sank when Owen removed the bag and I discovered that it was my best friend, Crystal. She is the person who warned me about Conrad. Owen tortured her and made me watch. It was the worst thing he

could have ever done. I was forced to sit there helplessly while she begged and screamed for her life, but he didn't even react other than laugh at her."

Fuck, I suddenly wanted to go back to that warehouse so that I could inflict more damage on Owen. What a sick fucker.

"I'm so fucking sorry, beautiful. Those two psychopaths deserve to rot in hell for what they put you through," I said, trying my best to keep the venom from my tone.

A few more tears spilled from Presley's eyes before she continued, "Conrad eventually showed up, and Owen slit Crystal's throat. I watched the life drain from her terrified eyes and could do nothing to help her. After that day, everything changed. Conrad brought me home and didn't try to hide the true monster inside him anymore. He had a similar box in our basement that he put me in whenever he felt I needed a reminder of what would happen if I betrayed him again. He would hit me if he had a bad day, but only on the stomach or back since *god forbid*, he messed up my face and couldn't take me to business events. Sometimes I would hide in the house when he was in a really nasty mood, but I quickly learned that he liked it when I did that. The sick fuck got off on my fear, and he would take his time searching me out. He called me his little bird as a reminder of how easy it would be for him to crush me. I was weak, a little bird trapped in his cage." She said the last part bitterly.

"Since I couldn't have kids, he would bring other women home and fuck them, telling me that since I couldn't do my job

of providing him with an heir, he would find someone else who could. I didn't even care anymore by that point. If he was fucking them, he was leaving me alone," she said dryly.

I wanted to ask if he ever forced himself on her, but I already knew the answer, and it made my head spin with a fresh wave of rage. Conrad was sick, and he was going to pay for everything he did to her.

"One day, he was at work, and I had reached my limits of what I could take. The night before, he had punched and kicked me in the stomach so hard, I was coughing up blood. I couldn't take it anymore, so I snuck a knife from the kitchen when the guards weren't looking and locked myself in the bathroom. I sat on the cold tile floor with the blade against my wrist, contemplating ending it all, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. The thing was, I didn't want to die. I just wanted a better life, one away from him," she said, looking me in the eyes for the first time since she started talking.

It destroyed me to think about how Conrad tormented her so much that she almost ended her life. I would have never met this amazing woman if she had, and that thought was devastating.

"In that bathroom, I made a promise to myself. I wouldn't let him hurt me anymore. I would try to escape his clutches, and if I failed, I would end my *own* life on my terms. It was my way of taking back control. Anyway, the two guards assigned to watch over me twenty-four-seven had become complacent since I was an obedient little pet who never stepped out of line.

They often left me alone in the house while they did god knows what. I waited for one of those moments when I was alone and snuck into the trunk of the cook's vehicle. It was just after lunch, so I knew he would be leaving soon, and sure enough, not long after, the vehicle was moving. Once the vehicle stopped, I waited a while before finally opening the trunk and stepping out. I had no idea where I was, but it was a residential area. I ran as fast and for as long as I could. I kept going until my legs could barely function anymore.”

That was where she got her little trunk escape plan from. It was smart really and had I not been so observant it would have worked when she got in Erika's trunk yesterday.

“I reached a gas station when my legs finally gave out. I couldn't run anymore. I was contemplating my next move, when I overheard an older couple at the gas pump talking about how long it would take them to drive to New York. How they were excited for their granddaughter's birthday. A plan came to mind, and I approached the old couple and asked them for a drive to New York. They were hesitant at first, but I knew they could tell I was running from something since I kept looking over my shoulder. Eventually, they gave in and drove me to New York. It wasn't that far from Conrad, but I figured he would have expected me to move to the other side of the country or even leave the country altogether. He would never suspect I stayed so close to him. At least that was my thought process at the time. That night was when I stumbled into Erika and well, you know what happened after that. She

helped me get back on my feet.” She breathed a long sigh of relief when she was finally done telling me her story.

Presley had been through the worst and yet still cared more about others than herself. She was a bloody warrior, and I wished she could see that. Conrad thought she was weak, but boy, was he wrong. Her mental strength was stronger than anyone I had ever met.

“You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met, beautiful. Conrad’s an idiot, and he seriously underestimated you because you’re a fighter through and through. Most people wouldn’t have hesitated to end their lives after all he put you through, yet you weren’t ready to give up. Instead, you kept fighting, and look at you now. You started a new life and did it alone without money or an identity. That couldn’t have been easy, but you fucking did it. Don’t ever think you’re weak because that’s far from the truth. I’ll remind you of your strength whenever you do have those moments where you second-guess yourself,” I said, and she smiled softly.

“Thank you for telling me all that. It wasn’t easy to hear, but I know it must have been harder for you to talk about, so I’m grateful you trust me enough to open up,” I added.

“I feel relieved now that I told you. It’s like I’m not alone anymore now that someone else knows the truth,” Presley said softly before a yawn left her lips.

“You won’t ever be alone again. You have me now, and I’m not going anywhere,” I said as I pulled Presley against my chest.



Presley buried her face in the crook of my neck and let out a content little sigh as her body relaxed in my hold.

“Sleep, beautiful. I know you need it after today.” I kissed the top of her head.

It wasn't long until I felt her breathing even out and knew she had finally fallen asleep.

It took me a lot longer, though, since my mind was working hard to figure out how I would make Conrad suffer for everything he did to Presley.

## Chapter 31

# Checking In

## Presley

I woke up this morning feeling lighter than I had in a long time. Telling Cruz my story wasn't easy, but I was glad I told him. Even though it was hard for him to hear, I could tell he was happy that I had opened up.

I felt closer to Cruz now that he knew my deepest, darkest secrets. Also, I was relieved that he didn't judge me or think I was weak for not trying to leave Conrad sooner. If anything, I saw fondness swirling in his eyes as I told him, and of course, anger.

Since we only made it to bed after four AM, we slept most of the morning away.

When we got up, Cruz made me breakfast and then went to his office to make a few phone calls. He wanted to check with the team that we had left at the warehouse and ensure everything was in order.

I started getting restless once I finished breakfast, showered, and dressed for the day. No one was around since the guys

were either still at the warehouse or asleep, and Erika had texted me that she and Georgia had gone to an appointment together.

I really wanted to check on Cassandra, so I headed to Cruz's office to see if he had finished his calls.

As I got closer, I heard him talking on the phone.

"Yeah, that's right." he said, and there was a pause before he added, "I know it's an odd request, but I'm hoping you can get them to me by tomorrow morning."

I frowned, wondering what he was talking about.

Cruz noticed me standing at the doorway, so he said to whoever was on the phone, "I gotta go. Call me when you have them." He didn't wait for a reply before hanging up.

"Hey, what was that about?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, ummm... Just ordered a few things for tomorrow," he replied awkwardly before asking in an attempt to change the subject, "Want me to take you to see Cassandra?"

I frowned at his odd behavior until I heard his question. My eyes lit up with excitement, and all thoughts of his weird phone call vanished before I replied, "Yes, please."

"Okay, I just have to go change. I'll meet you by the front door in five," Cruz said, walking to the door, pecking my lips with his, and leaving the room.

That was strange, but I didn't think much of it since I was anxious to see how Cassandra was doing. I was really hoping

she was recovering okay and wasn't too traumatized by what happened to her.

A few minutes later, Cruz came down the stairs dressed in a pair of faded dark blue jeans and a black T-shirt that strained against his large biceps. God, the man was sexy. I bit my lower lip, watching his muscles flex as he casually strolled closer.

“See something you like, beautiful?” he asked with a smirk.

“A few things,” I replied, shamelessly roaming my eyes over his large, muscular body.

It was insane how fast Cruz had managed to boost my confidence. I would have blushed a few weeks ago and looked away in shame, but not anymore.

“Keep looking at me like I'm a piece of meat you want to devour, and we won't be going anywhere,” he growled playfully, wrapping his arms around my body and pulling me in for a passionate kiss.

If I didn't want to check on Cassandra so badly, I would have said *fuck it* and let him drag me up to the bedroom. Seeing her was important, so I pulled away and said, “As much as I would love for us to stay home and have a repeat of last night, we should go. I wanna make sure Cassandra's okay.”

“Fine,” Cruz pouted with a dramatic sigh, looking adorable as he intertwined our fingers and pulled me out the front door.

While we drove, I noticed Cruz was heading the opposite way from the hospital.

“Where are we going? The hospital’s back that way,” I said, motioning behind us.

“We bring our injured to Tyson. You haven’t met him yet since he was out of town for Erika and Blaise’s wedding, but he’s a good friend of ours. We were all in the military together, and he was a medic. He’s just as good, if not better, than a doctor. Don’t worry, I’m confident he’s taking good care of Cassandra,” Cruz replied, glancing over at me.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about Cassandra not being at the hospital. Now I was even more concerned, wondering if she was freaked out being alone in some stranger’s house. I should have gone with her.

“I promise, she’s in good hands. We avoid the hospital when we can, so we don’t draw attention to ourselves,” Cruz added.

I guess that made sense, given their line of work. Still, I didn’t like that Cassandra was there alone.

As if Cruz could read my thoughts, he said, “She’s not alone. I had one of my guys pick up her cousin and son to stay with her. That way, they’re all safe while we handle Conrad.”

I let out a relieved breath after hearing that. I felt a lot better, and I was glad he thought about the safety of her son and cousin.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, beautiful.”

We drove in comfortable silence until we left the city and headed into a forested area.

I looked at Cruz with a curious frown, wondering where his friend lived. There weren't many houses this far out.

“Tyson's a bit of a lone wolf. He likes living out of the city and takes security really seriously, so don't freak out when you see his place. It's a bit of a fortress. I promise, though, he's a good guy, just a bit... extreme,” he explained.

Now I was getting really nervous, wondering what this guy, Tyson, was like.

We were pulling up in front of a gorgeous but massive log cabin a short while later. It didn't seem at all over the top as Cruz had explained. In fact, the rustic vibes made it look cozy, even though it was enormous.

We left the vehicle and walked to the front door, where Cruz punched a code on a panel next to it that I hadn't noticed until now. The door opened, and we walked in without knocking.

I gave Cruz a curious look, wondering if it was a good idea to walk into the house unannounced when he said Tyson was over the top about security.

“If he's busy with Cassandra, I don't want to disturb him. Plus, he already knows it's us. He has motion-sensor cameras set up for miles down the road. No one gets close to this place without him knowing about it,” Cruz explained.

We walked into the house, and I gasped at the inside. He wasn't fucking kidding when he said this guy was over the top. The walls weren't made of wood like they seemed from the outside. Instead, they were made of solid metal and thick,

too. The windows had bars above them that I assumed lowered if you were trying to keep people out, or in.

That thought sent a shiver down my spine.

The place looked bomb-proof from the inside, and there was practically no furniture.

“Hey, you made it,” A deep raspy voice that I didn’t recognize said.

I turned to look at the man who had appeared from down a long hallway.

I gulped nervously. He was fucking huge. At least six foot five, maybe taller. And rough looking, like what you would envision a scary biker to look like. He had a thick beard and a stern face, not to mention he was covered in tattoos.

“Yeah, we did. This is Presley. I don’t think you two have met yet. Presley, Tyson,” Cruz introduced us.

“Presley, it’s nice to meet you,” Tyson said in that gruff voice, extending his hand to shake mine. God, this man was a beast and scary as hell.

“Nice to meet you,” I said meekly, hesitantly extending my hand to shake his.

I had been too distracted by the scariness of the man before me to notice the possessive arm Cruz had wrapped around my back. I felt like he was making sure his buddy knew I was spoken for, and after meeting Tyson, I was okay with it.



“Everything went okay after Brent brought Cassandra?” Cruz asked.

“Yeah. Cassandra’s a tough woman. Given everything she’s been through, the only thing she cared about was being reunited with her son.” Tyson chuckled lightly before adding, “She’s got a few broken ribs, her hand’s also broken, and a few cuts look infected, so I have her on antibiotics. She’s got a decent concussion that made her vision blurry, but I expect that to get better over time. She needs to stay for a few days so I can keep an eye on her,” he explained.

“Fuck. That’s a lot.” Cruz sighed.

“That’s not all,” Tyson said and his voice became grave when he added, “She was undoubtedly raped, too, from the evidence I saw. I’m not equipped here for that type of medical care. She’ll have to go to an actual hospital for that treatment once she leaves here.”

I gasped and covered my mouth as tears started running down my cheeks. Poor Cassandra. She had been through so much, all because of her connection to me.

Cruz’s grip on my waist tightened, and he looked about ready to say something when Tyson beat him to it, “Honestly, the girl’s a fighter. All she cared about was wrapping her arms around her son. Now that he’s here, she’s been laughing and talking like everything’s fine. I’m not saying she’s not traumatized because I realize everyone deals with shit differently, but I have a good feeling that with the right care, she’ll be okay.”

“Can I see her?” I asked before sniffing.

The guilt was eating me alive, and I needed to see her to believe what Tyson said. After everything she had been through, I would have expected her to be terrified of her own shadow.

“Of course, they’re in that room,” Tyson said, pointing to the first door in the hallway.

I frowned when I heard laughter coming from inside the room.

I opened the door and found Cassandra lying on what looked to be a normal hospital bed while a little boy lay beside her, reading from a book with farm animals on the cover. From what he said, I didn’t think he was reading but making his own story up.

Another woman sat next to Cassandra’s bed. She seemed only a few years younger than us and looked like Cassandra. I was sure she must have been her cousin.

My attention returned to Cassandra when her little boy said something that made her laugh. No one had noticed me yet, and I couldn’t help but just stand there and take everything in.

Cassandra was wrapped all over in gauze and looked rough, but the relief on her face that she was back with her son was more than evident. Tyson was right, she was handling everything better than expected. I was sure she was putting on an act for her son’s benefit, but still, I had a feeling that with the right help, she would pull through this traumatic

experience. I made a mental note to ask Carla for help in getting her the right care once she left Tyson's.

"Pres. You came," Cassandra's hesitant voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I wiped away my tears and put on a smile as I walked toward Cassandra's bed.

"Of course. I just had to deal with some stuff before I could see you. You look... better," I said awkwardly, feeling unsure what to say.

"I can't thank you guys enough for coming to rescue me, even after what I did..." she said, looking away sheepishly.

"Don't. I told you, none of that was your fault. If anyone should be sorry, it's me," I said with a sad smile.

Before Cassandra could say anything, the little boy asked, "Mummy, who's that?"

"She's a good friend of mummy's, sweetheart. Nathan, this is Presley. Presley, Nathan," Cassandra introduced us.

"It's nice to meet you, cutie. Have you taken good care of your mom while she's sick?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. I've been reading mummy lots of books and feeding her applesauce," he said proudly, making all three of us ladies laugh. He was absolutely adorable and so innocent.

"Good job. Mummy's going to need your help until she gets better. Will you keep helping her?" I asked, and he nodded eagerly.

“Presley. This is my cousin Anabel. Anabel, this is Presley,” Cassandra introduced.

I turned to the blond woman who had stood when she saw me approach. She shook my hand and smiled warmly.

“Thank you for saving her,” she said sincerely.

“I’m just glad we got there in time,” I replied.

I stayed for over an hour. We didn’t talk much about what happened since Nathan was in the room, but I felt a bit better by the end knowing she had her cousin and son with her and wouldn’t be alone.

After a while, Cassandra looked like she was about to fall asleep. She said the pain medicine Tyson gave her made her really groggy and she could only stay awake for a few hours at a time.

She also shocked me by gushing about how well Tyson took care of her. She said he was allowing her, her cousin, and her son to stay with him for as long as needed. I couldn’t believe she was talking about the same man I had met. He scared the living daylights out of me. I guess I shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.

Cruz had come in at one point, but only to see how Cassandra was doing. After that, he left.

Once Cassandra started dozing off, I left the room.

Cruz was inside an office a few doors down, talking to Tyson.

They must have heard the door to Cassandra's room open because they quieted down almost immediately. Not in a way that I felt they were trying to hide anything from me, but rather they wanted to ensure it wasn't a little person overhearing their conversation.

I walked into the office, and both their eyes landed on me, making me suddenly feel uncomfortable.

"How is she?" Cruz asked.

"Better than I expected," I said truthfully.

"I told you. She's a fighter," Tyson said, leaning back in his chair as he crossed his arms over his broad, muscular chest.

"You were right," I nodded and turned my attention to Cruz, "I still want Carla to help her with resources, though."

"Absolutely. I'll call her when we get home." Cruz nodded.

"Thank you." I sighed in relief, suddenly feeling tired myself.

"You ready to go?" Cruz asked, and I simply nodded.

We said goodbye to Tyson before leaving his house.

Once we were in the car and on our way home, Cruz asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just glad Cassandra seems to be in good spirits, all things considered," I admitted.

"Good. We'll get Cassandra whatever she needs to heal. You have my word," he said, and I could hear the sincerity in his tone.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

I let out a relieved sigh. We didn't have to worry about Cassandra anymore, or at least not as intensely as I had when she was missing. She was safe and Owen was dead or at least close to it.

We could now focus our attention on taking out my biggest nightmare, Conrad.

## Chapter 32

# Where Is He?

## Presley

**M**y anxiety was through the roof. Today was the day I would hopefully bury my past for good and start fresh without constantly living in fear.

What if Conrad didn't show up, though?

*He will.* I told myself, praying I wasn't wrong. I had to remain positive.

Cruz and I argued this morning over my coming back to the warehouse with them. He didn't want to risk my safety now that Cassandra wasn't in danger. I understood where he was coming from, but I needed to be there.

My brain wouldn't let me believe Conrad was really dead unless I saw it with my own two eyes. He was my worst nightmare and I desperately wanted to watch him take his last breath. More importantly, I wanted my face to be the last thing he saw when he took it.



Cruz eventually conceded and agreed that I could come as long as I followed the same two rules as last time: stay by his side and follow his orders. I had no problem doing either of those things.

Cruz and the guys had set up a team at the warehouse to watch and wait for Conrad, in case he showed up early. They stayed in the shadows and made sure they were out of sight. A few of Owen's men showed up throughout the day, but Cruz's men took them out without incident.

We had no idea when Conrad was planning on making an appearance, so we got ready early in the morning and headed for the warehouse to wait.

Like last time, Cruz had a team of six, plus himself, shadowing me. They were always within a few feet.

There were another two dozen guys, maybe more, set up around the warehouse, including Blaise, Dex, and Jared.

I felt safe, but that didn't stop my anxiety from roaring to life. This was it; so much was resting on today that I couldn't help but stress and hope everything went smoothly.

Ideally, Conrad would show up alone, unaware of our presence, and head for the room where his brother's remains were waiting for him in the box.

One of Cruz's men had checked on Owen earlier and he was already dead. He was still warm, though, so they figured he had died recently. At least he was stuck in that box for over

twenty-four hours before he passed. That gave me some satisfaction.

Cruz had a team ready to ambush Conrad once he entered the torture room. There was only one way in and out, so the plan seemed straightforward and foolproof.

Still, something in my gut told me it wouldn't be that simple.

Conrad wasn't stupid. He had built his empire from scratch. Many people wanted him dead, yet he had managed to stay alive all this time. That wasn't coincidental. He knew how to manipulate, cheat, and instill fear into people to get what he wanted and make them comply. I worried that the guys were underestimating him.

I talked to Cruz about my concerns in bed this morning. He seemed so confident that he and the guys could take Conrad down easily, but I still worried. I knew Conrad better than anyone, and he wouldn't go down without a fight.

I suppose if he showed up alone, it didn't really matter. We would outnumber him, so even if he did fight, it was a losing battle.

Cruz kept me in the warehouse, far away from any doors, hiding in a small alcove where I wouldn't be seen.

He stayed with me, and so did the other six.

I had my gun tucked into the back of my pants and the knife holstered on my hip in case I needed it. I also had the bulletproof vest underneath my long-sleeved shirt.

Cruz had been constantly on his phone all morning or communicating with the others through his radio.

He looked all business in his military gear, and if I wasn't so damn stressed, I probably would be lusting over him right now. Okay, maybe I was a little, but I did my best to ignore the heat building in my core since we needed to focus.

"How are you doing, beautiful? Need anything?" Cruz asked, drawing me from my thoughts.

I was sitting in a fold-up metal chair doing nothing but waiting while all the men with me stood in their assigned positions on high alert.

"I'm good," I replied with a soft smile.

Cruz had enough to worry about, so I didn't want him stressing over me more than he needed to.

"Let me know if you need anything. One of the guys will bring some food by in a bit," Cruz said.

He was so different when he was working, all serious and business. The playful guy I knew was nowhere to be seen. I didn't mind it, though; this side of him made me feel safe and confident he had everything under control.

"Okay," I said softly.

Cruz nodded and returned to his phone, making calls and ensuring everything was in order.

The day went by painfully slow. Cruz had sent Conrad a text in the afternoon asking where he was but didn't receive a

reply.

It was now early evening, and still no signs of Conrad.

Dread pooled in the pit of my stomach. Maybe Conrad wouldn't show up, and this wouldn't end tonight.

Cruz ran his hand through his hair, the first sign of him looking frustrated as he paced while talking on the phone. His voice was hushed, so I couldn't make out what he was saying or who he was talking to.

Once he hung up, I asked, "Do you think Conrad figured out it was a trap?"

"I'm not sure. It's possible. Blaise called out extra men just in case. They should be here within two hours," he replied with a thoughtful frown.

"Do you think he might try something?" I asked, but a phone in his pocket pinged before Cruz could reply.

He pulled out an iPhone and looked at the screen, appearing to read a message.

"Fuck," he cursed.

"What is it?" I asked, frowning. A cold chill washed over me.

"Conrad just texted Owen's phone. He said he needed to go to his office tonight and handle something. He'll be coming here tomorrow morning instead," Cruz replied, and before I could say anything in response, he was talking on his radio,

giving the other guys a heads-up of the text message he had received.

Frustrated tears pricked my eyes. I wanted this to be over so badly, but it looked like it wouldn't happen tonight.

Cruz was on and off his phone several times over the next hour before he turned his attention to me.

“We sent a few guys to Conrad's accounting firm when I got the text. His vehicle just pulled into the parkade there, so it looks like the text was legit. These guys will drive you home while we readjust our plans,” Cruz said, motioning to the six other men in the room.

“What are you going to do?” I asked with a frown.

“We know where he is now, so there's no point in waiting for him to show up here. We'll go to him instead,” he replied and paused before adding, “I'll walk with you guys to the vehicles. Let's go.”

As we started walking through the warehouse, Blaise jogged up to Cruz.

“I sent the extra bodies that were heading here to Conrad's office instead, so they can watch him for us until we get there,” Blaise said.

“Good. We'll have to leave a team here, too, in case any of Conrad's men show up tonight before we get to his office,” Cruz replied.

“Of course. We need to move fast though. Conrad might not stay at his office for long, and it's over a half-hour drive from

here. I sent Vlad to get one of our vehicles and drive it closer while we assign tasks,” Blaise stated.

Cruz turned to me, looking conflicted. He wanted to walk us to the vehicles, but there was a lot for them to do still.

“Stay and sort things out here. I’ll go straight home. I promise,” I reassured.

Cruz turned his attention to one of the six guys behind me. “Brent, you’re in charge. If anything happens to her, it’s your balls on the chopping block.”

Brent didn’t even look disturbed by Cruz’s words. He simply nodded and said, “You have my word.”

Cruz kissed me. It was brief but intense. A promise that this would all be over soon.

“I love you, beautiful. Do whatever they say. Okay? I trust these guys to take care of you,” Cruz stated, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I will,” I said softly.

Brent motioned for me to follow him, and I complied, shooting one last look over my shoulder toward Cruz. He was already engulfed in a conversation with Blaise and Dex who had joined them.

We walked through the warehouse and out the main entrance. The six guards flanked me on every side with their rifles in hand. There was no doubt they meant business.

It was dark outside now, and I didn't have night vision goggles like the others. It was daytime when we arrived in the morning, so I never thought to ask for a pair.

Once my eyes adjusted, I could see a little, thanks to the bright moon above us, but it wasn't ideal. I was slowing us down substantially.

One of the guys, I believe Brent, grabbed my upper arm and helped guide me through the forest. He was firm but not rough.

We had been walking for a while when we reached a denser portion of the woods, where the moonlight barely broke through the trees. I could see even less now and had to rely mostly on Brent to maneuver through the forest.

"Shit," one of the guys cursed.

"Fuck," another hissed.

"What the fuck do we do now? We're still about five minutes from the vehicles," another behind me asked.

"We'll hold here. We're concealed and far enough from the main path that they hopefully won't find us," Brent replied firmly.

"What's going on," I asked, panic rising in my voice.

"The eyes spotted around twenty vehicles heading toward the warehouse. They think it's Conrad," Brent replied.

My heart sunk in my chest after hearing his words. I knew what Brent was talking about when he mentioned *the eyes*.

Cruz had explained it to me. They had a team hidden a mile down the dirt road. Their job was to report any movement heading toward the warehouse, so they weren't blindsided.

Twenty vehicles, though? That meant there could be eight-plus men in there.

*Holy shit.*

That was four times what Cruz had back at the warehouse. To make matters worse, six were busy babysitting me.

"We can't stay here. They'll need you guys back at the warehouse," I said frantically.

"She's safe. We're too far from the vehicles to make it," Brent said, and I frowned for a minute before realizing he was probably talking on his radio.

They each had an earpiece so they could communicate with each other. Unfortunately, I didn't have one.

"Cruz's orders. He wants us to stay put and let them deal with the new arrivals," Brent said firmly.

I let out a frustrated sigh but knew arguing with these guys was pointless, so I didn't bother. They were all mostly ex-military and very disciplined. They took their orders seriously and wouldn't go against Cruz.

"Back up against this tree and don't move unless I tell you to. Understood?" Brent asked sternly.

"Yeah. I understand," I replied anxiously.



Brent guided me backward until I felt the tree against my back. I hated that all I could see was shapes. I wouldn't be able to recognize someone even if they were right in front of my nose.

We waited in complete silence for what felt like hours when, in reality, it was probably only a few minutes. The guys stood around the tree facing away from me. They didn't talk and were on high alert, listening for any noise around us.

Suddenly, a shriek left my lips when a loud explosion went off back toward the warehouse.

"They made contact," Brent announced, sounding far calmer than he should be.

I was overwhelmed with panic, fearing for Cruz and the others. What if something happened to them? They were severely outnumbered.

"They need you guys. You need to go help," I pleaded.

"They're well trained, Presley. They know what they're doing," Brent replied, but it did nothing to ease my worries.

Gunfire started after the explosion, loud and continuous, sounding so close to us.

Oh god, all of this was my fault. They wouldn't be here if it weren't for me.

"Heads up, I think I saw movement to the left," one of the guys guarding me announced, low enough so only we could hear him.

My heart felt like it was going to pound out of my chest. What the hell was going on?

A cloud must have partly covered the moon because suddenly, I could see even less. I was overwhelmed with fear, not for myself, but for Cruz and the others. I didn't want them to die because of my mess.

Someone laughed hysterically, making me freeze.

"Little bird, little bird. Did you think I wouldn't find you?" A chilling voice I recognized echoed through the forest around us. I couldn't tell where it came from, but he sounded close. Too close.

My blood ran cold after hearing that voice and nickname. Conrad sounded so confident as if he had already won the war happening all around us.

"You're safe with us," One of the guards reassured me, but it did nothing to calm my racing heart.

They obviously couldn't see him even with their night vision goggles or they would have shot him.

I drew the gun from the back of my pants. I couldn't see shit, but I still felt better with it in my hands.

"I was a little taken aback when my brother didn't attend a meet at the docks yesterday with one of our buyers. You see, my brother can be a hothead sometimes, but he's reliable and never misses a meeting. That's when I got suspicious. Luckily for me, we have a motion-activated camera in one of the trees outside the warehouse. You can imagine my shock when I

pulled up the app and spotted my little whore of a wife and her boyfriend strolling in like they own the place. I bet you were so excited at the prospect of me walking into a trap tonight,” Conrad said bitterly.

He sounded so close, but I couldn’t tell which direction he was coming from. The gunfire in the background was still loud, making it difficult to pinpoint his location.

The guys around me said nothing but remained on high alert with their rifles pointed in different directions.

My fear quickly morphed into anger. I was so sick of these games. Conrad wanted me scared because he feasted on my fear, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Never again.

He could go straight to hell, and I would gladly send him there myself.

Suddenly, flashlights shined through the trees from every direction like spotlights, causing the guards surrounding me to hiss and grunt as they quickly reached for their night vision goggles and ripped them off.

Fuck, this was bad. They found us.

## Chapter 33

# A Fight

Cruz

**W**e underestimated Conrad. The sneaky fucker had been on to us the entire time.

He obviously had someone else drive his car to his office to throw us off and thin us out. He knew we would send some of our resources there, leaving us vulnerable at the warehouse. I couldn't believe we fell for his trap.

*Motherfucker.*

We sent all the extra guards to his office instead of here. Plus, another half dozen who had been here with us all day had left fifteen minutes ago, heading downtown. We called them back, but they wouldn't arrive in time to help us.

We only had twenty-two men left at the warehouse and the six with Presley, but their only job was to keep her safe. They had better do just that, or I would kill them myself if Presley got hurt.

Presley had even warned me this morning not to underestimate Conrad. I thought I wasn't, but obviously, I fucked up because now we were in this mess for that exact reason.

I wasn't worried that they outnumbered us. What had unadulterated rage and fear coursing through my veins was the fact that Presley wasn't with me. What if Conrad got to her before I could? She only had six of my men to guard her, and Conrad had brought all the manpower he could find, almost four times what we had.

We needed to kill these fuckers fast so I could find Presley.

The minute we had gotten word of Conrad's arrival from the guys keeping watch down the dirt road, we got into position.

Our men were capable and didn't need to be hand fed what to do in a situation like this. I gave them a quick rundown of the plan, and they broke off to do their job.

A handful of our men hid in the forest around the warehouse while the rest moved inside and hid. We waited less than three minutes before Conrad's convoy pulled up out front.

"Stay hidden until they move into the building," I instructed over the radio.

We waited for most of Conrad's men to storm through the doors into the building with their guns drawn before reacting.

"Cut it," I instructed Jared through the radio.

We had discussed it ahead of time. Jared would cut the power and kill the lights when they made it inside.

The second darkness fell upon us. I grabbed a grenade from my bag, pulled the pin, and launched it toward Conrad's men by the main entrance.

I waited for the explosion and the blinding lights to wear off before slipping on my night vision goggles. There were screams of pain and panic coming from everywhere, and a sick satisfaction settled in my stomach.

There would be a lot more of that tonight.

It was fucking *go* time.

These assholes didn't even know what was coming. They might have thought they had the upper hand with their numbers, but we had the skills and training to put us on top.

They had charged into the building confident they would win this war. That was a fucking mistake that would cost them their lives.

My men and I popped out of our hiding spots and opened fire.

Conrad's men barely had time to react as we took them out one by one.

A few had slipped on night vision goggles, but most were scrambling toward the door like cowards.

Our men waiting outside would handle those who managed to get out, so I wasn't worried about them. None of them would be leaving here alive tonight.

We were taking out these guys faster than a game of *duck hunt*. They had no skill and were just blindly shooting off their guns. My men and I aimed with precision, ensuring every round hit its mark.

Before we knew it, most of Conrad's men were dead or dying on the floor. Only a handful were left, and I knew my men could handle them.

What worried me the most was that I hadn't seen Conrad yet. He was possibly too much of a coward to show up, but something told me that wasn't the case. He was here; he just had another target. He was going after Presley.

*Fuck.*

I ran out of the backdoor of the warehouse. Jared came with me, leaving Blaise, Dex, and the others to deal with the few remaining inside the building.

The second we were outside, I tried radioing Brent to see where they were, but there was no answer.

Panic washed over me. Were we too late? Did Conrad get to them?

Moments later, gunfire broke out in the forest a distance away. I didn't hesitate before sprinting toward the sound.

Jared was right behind me, and I heard him tell the others that we needed backup over the radio.

I ran faster than ever, praying I wasn't too late. I would go ballistic if there was even a hair out of place on Presley's head.



The gunshots were getting closer, so I slowed my steps and lifted my rifle in preparation for what was coming.

As I cleared some thick bushes, I was forced to take my night vision goggles off because of the light streaming through the branches. I had a flashlight attached to the barrel of my rifle, but I wasn't going to use it unless it was necessary. We all had them but turning it on was like painting a target on your back because anyone with a brain would obviously shoot toward the light. Instead, I used the lights that were already flickering through the trees to guide me closer.

As the gunfight came into view, I spotted a few men on the ground who looked dead. None of them were my guys, which was a relief.

Then I saw Brent behind a large tree trunk shooting west. He wasn't using his flashlight but was shooting toward where the flashlights were shining. Beside Brent, firing from the other side of the large tree trunk, was Philip.

A few feet away, Theo and Kenny, two more of our guards, were also shooting in the same direction from behind another large tree.

Where the fuck was Presley and the two other guys?

Jared and I crept through the forests toward where Brent and the guys were shooting but made sure to use a wide berth, so we didn't get hit by our own men.

We snuck up on Conrad's men. They didn't see us coming since their focus was on Brent and the others.

I counted six of Conrad's guys hiding behind trees firing eastbound. They weren't aiming at anything, just shooting like in a *Wild West* movie. It was pathetic, really. No wonder my guys had already taken out a bunch of them.

Jared and I set up behind a few large trees and took them out one by one. They had no cover from us, only from Brent and the others. The sound of our rifles firing mixed with all the other gunshots, so they never even noticed us until it was too late, and they were all dead.

Everything went quiet, and Jared and I cautiously moved toward Brent and the others, ensuring we didn't miss any of Conrad's guys along the way.

"It's us," I said on the radio, ensuring my men didn't shoot us when we stepped out from behind cover.

My guys were in rough shape. Brent was limping, looking like he took a round to the leg.

Kenny was holding his shoulder where he had been shot, and Theo was pulling out a bullet stuck in the center of his vest.

Thank Christ we wore protection; it likely saved his life.

My eyes scanned the area, but there were no signs of Presley or the other two.

Where the hell was my girl?

## Chapter 34

# Little Bird

## Presley

**E**verything happened so fast. Brent and the guys jumped into action after those flashlights blinded us.

One of the guards, I couldn't tell which one, pulled me behind a tree and laid on top of me, covering my body with his as gunfire erupted around us.

I could only see a bit from my position on the ground, but it appeared the flickers of lights and gunshots were slowly moving away from us.

"Stay down," The guy lying over me said, and I recognized his voice. It was Aaron.

I didn't reply since it wasn't like I could move with a couple hundred pounds weighing me down. I could breathe either, really, for that matter, but I wasn't about to complain since he was protecting me.

"It's working. They're about twenty-five yards away now," Another voice said, and I recognized it. It was another one of

the guards assigned to babysit me, Colin.

Aaron got off me, and I could finally suck in a proper breath as I got to my feet but stayed crouched.

Aaron and Colin stood on either side of me with their rifles lifted, watching the gunfire in the distance. It was getting even further away.

Were Brent and the others drawing them away from us on purpose? It seemed that way.

I had underestimated how well-trained these guys were. They had barely said two words to each other when this all started, yet they all seemed to know their roles and worked as a team. It was impressive, really.

There was a small space for me to peek around the tree between the trunk and Aaron's legs.

Everything had happened so fast that I didn't get a chance to panic. Now that things had slowed, my mind was racing a mile a minute. Were Cruz and the others okay?

Did Brent and the guys manage to kill Conrad? God, I hoped so.

Suddenly, I heard something behind us. Rather, I sensed something.

I was still gripping the gun when I spun around and punched my hands out in front of me.

There was a guy only a few feet away with a gun pointed at Aaron's head. I didn't even hesitate before pulling the trigger.

A loud bang echoed, followed by agonizing screams. My eyes widened when I realized I shot him in the crotch. I was still crouched down, so it was where my gun automatically lined up when I lifted my hands.

*I just shot a man's dick off. Holy shit.*

Aaron and Colin turned and cursed when they saw how close they had been to being executed.

Aaron walked over to the screaming man on the ground before putting a round between his eyes, silencing him.

“Jesus, you shot him in the dick,” Aaron noted while cringing before adding, “When this is all over, I’m buying you a beer for that one.”

I almost wanted to laugh—a hysterical laugh, of course. Aaron sounded so calm, considering he almost died.

“A beer? I think you owe her a bottle of something hard, buddy. She saved your ass,” Colin corrected, his rifle still lifted and ready in case any more of Conrad’s men showed up.

I didn’t say anything since I was stuck between being shocked that I had just shot a man in the dick and fearing for our lives.

Their banter was interrupted when someone spoke.

“I underestimated your boyfriend, Little Bird.” Conrad’s bitter voice echoed through the forest with the distant sound of gunfire.

My two guards moved tighter against me, scanning the forest for movement. They hadn't put their night vision goggles back on, but the light flashing in the background helped us see better.

"Give her to me, and we'll leave," he added.

"Sure, come get her," Aaron scoffed sarcastically.

A shot was fired hitting the tree above our heads, causing us to jump for cover behind another tree. This one was much smaller than the last one and didn't cover us nearly as well.

More bullets flew past us, but we couldn't see anyone.

Aaron and Colin didn't shoot back since they didn't have a target.

It was hard to watch all directions when there were only three of us. Aaron was facing west, and Colin was facing east. West seemed to be where the gunshots were coming from, and since I wasn't as disciplined, my eyes naturally stayed locked that way.

I heard another gunshot followed by a pained hiss.

I turned toward Colin just as he fell to one knee.

"I'm hit," he announced, but miraculously, kept his rifle lifted in front of him.

"Where?" Aaron asked, sounding all business, keeping his attention west.

"Leg. I'm fine," Colin gritted out, not sounding fine.

Another round came from the north, hitting Colin again. I had no idea where he got hit, but his body went limp before he fell to the ground in a heap.

A scream tore from my throat as I leaned over to check on him. Before I could, a hand gripped my hair, and I was yanked back into a hard chest.

I hissed from the feel of my hair being ripped from my head.

“Drop the gun, wife,” Conrad growled next to my ear, and I felt the cold metal of a gun barrel against my temple, causing a terrified chill to rush through me.

I complied and let the gun fall to the ground.

Three more guys surrounded Aaron with guns pointed in his direction.

“Put the gun down if you want her to live, asshole,” One of the guys barked.

Aaron didn't even hesitate before lowering his rifle.

Panic surged through me. We were fucked. How could we get out of this mess?

How was it that Conrad always won? Once again, I was his victim, and I could do nothing about it.

“Any last words?” One of the guys surrounding Aaron asked with a snicker.

For some reason, the thought of Aaron dying snapped me out of my pity party. I didn't want Aaron to die because of me. I was the only reason he lowered his gun in the first place. If it



hadn't been for me, he would have, without a doubt, fought them. I needed to do something and fast.

*The knife!*

I slowly reached for the handle of the knife on my hip holster, making sure to keep my body still so Conrad didn't notice.

“Yeah, I do, actually. You should take a shower every once in a while. Your putrid smell is making me want to shoot myself in the head, ” Aaron taunted with a fake gag, causing the guy who had asked the question to lose his shit and punch him in the face.

I knew Aaron had seen my hand going for the knife. He was drawing their attention away from me.

I grabbed the handle and slowly withdrew it from the holster. Conrad had the gun resting on my shoulder as he watched the show before us.

One of the guys was lifting his gun toward Aaron's head. Adrenaline pumped through me, and when Aaron's eyes met mine, I slammed the knife into Conrad's leg while throwing my head back and slamming it into his face.

He cried out in pain as I twisted the knife lodged in his thigh.

I heard three consecutive gunshots, making my blood run cold as I lifted my eyes to see if Aaron was okay. It was three against one, and even though Aaron was skilled, he was now unarmed, and his opponents all had guns.

I released a relieved breath when I took in the scene before me.

Cruz, Jared, and a few others had arrived. The three guys surrounding Aaron were lying lifelessly on the ground.

Jared went straight for Conrad and disarmed him while Cruz ran toward me, looking like a violent storm ready to take anything or anyone out that got in his way.

He wrapped his arms around my body and lifted me in his arms before kissing me. I could feel the desperation in the action.

“Are you okay?” he asked urgently when we finally broke apart.

“Yes,” I replied breathlessly.

He held me for a long time before finally putting me down and stepping back to look me over for injuries. Some of the other guys had pulled out flashlights now that there didn't appear to be any more of Conrad's men around.

When Cruz was satisfied that I wasn't injured, he pulled me back into his chest. I didn't argue because I needed to feel him just as much as he needed to touch me.

“Colin's still alive,” Aaron announced, and I released another relieved breath.

“Take him to the van. We sent the other injured guys there. They'll be heading to Tyson's soon,” Cruz instructed.

“On it,” Aaron replied before he and another guy lifted Colin and carried him off.

“You fucking bitch. You’ll pay for this,” Conrad seethed, drawing my attention to him.

“The only one who’s going to pay tonight is you,” Cruz spat before turning his attention to Jared, “Bring him to our warehouse. We need to get out of here before the cops show up.”

I had to admit, I was mildly disappointed that Conrad wouldn’t get to see his deceased brother in that box, but we had already been here a while. With all the gunshots, it wouldn’t be long before the police swarmed the place.

“Burn the building down before you leave,” Cruz commanded another group of men. They nodded and went to accomplish their task.

“Come on, beautiful. We have one more thing to do tonight to finally put your past to rest,” Cruz said, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and guiding me toward the waiting vehicles.

“Did you lose any of your men?” I asked in a low voice, scared to hear the answer.

“No. A few have gunshot wounds they need to have looked at, but my men are well-trained. They know how to stay alive,” Cruz replied.

“Thank God.” I let out a long breath.

We made it to the vehicles and loaded up.

Jared and Blaise were in the front, while Cruz and I were in the back seat. I didn't know what they had done with Conrad, but I didn't care. I knew they were handling him. I was more interested in snuggling into Cruz, who refused to let me go. He had dragged me onto his lap the minute we got into the backseat and had his face buried in my hair ever since.

"You good, Pres?" Blaise asked from the driver's seat as we took off on the dirt road.

"Yeah. Thanks for everything," I said truthfully.

"No need to thank us. You're family now, and we take care of our own," he nodded.

"I heard you shot a guy in the dick back there. Nice work," Jared stated, winking at me over his shoulder.

"Really," Cruz asked in disbelief, finally pulling his face out of my hair to look at me.

"I wasn't aiming for it, but yeah. I was crouched and happened to hit his crotch," I said, sounding a little embarrassed. At least it was dark in the vehicle so they couldn't see my flushed cheeks.

"Erika is going to be so proud of you," Blaise chuckled, shaking his head.

"No shit. She's gonna get one of those lady boners she always gets when something violent happens. She loves that kind of shit." Cruz chuckled, too.

"I'm nervous about living in a house full of violent women. Remind me never to piss any of you off," Jared joked.

I smiled but said nothing while resting back against Cruz.

We had been driving for a while. My adrenaline was starting to wear off, and exhaustion was settling in.

Finally, after another fifteen minutes, we pulled up to another warehouse closer to New York City.

“You ready for this, beautiful? I had the guys bring Conrad ahead of us. They should have everything ready when we walk in there,” Cruz said.

“What’s the plan?” I asked with a frown.

I figured they would do the same thing to Conrad as they did with Owen, but the twinkle in Cruz’s eyes told me that he had something else planned.

“You’ll see,” he hummed before stepping out of the vehicle and holding his hand out for me.

I grabbed it, and he helped me out before guiding me toward one of the doors that led into the warehouse.

I gasped when I saw Conrad strung up naked in the open space. His arms were above his head chained together, and he was lifted off the ground with more chains wrapped around his ankles. He was already bloody from the rough treatment he must have gotten on the way here.

There was barely anything inside the warehouse besides a few boxes in the corner, making Conrad the center of attention.

“Aww...Isn't this cute? My Little Bird came to watch me die. You think you've won, don't you? I know our time together will forever haunt you though, even after I'm buried six feet under,” Conrad taunted when he noticed our presence. He let out a dark chuckle that echoed through the empty warehouse.

Blood coated his teeth and trickled down his chin, making him look even more psychotic.

Dex stood next to Conrad and threw a hard punch into his abdomen to shut him up. Conrad groaned and coughed but kept laughing psychotically through the pain.

I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth to prevent it from trembling. I hated that Conrad wasn't wrong; I would never forget my time with him.

I thought seeing him die would end it all, but now I was second-guessing myself again.

“Go stand up there,” Cruz instructed, pointing to a set of stairs that led up to a ledge above with a metal railing.

I looked at him with a frown but complied and went up to the elevated level. Why couldn't I watch from down below?

“You tormented Presley for years. Tried to break her, but all you did was make her stronger. You thought she was weak. What did you call her again? A weak little bird? The funny thing is, she'll still be standing when all this is done, and you'll be nothing more than bird food. Ironic,” Cruz taunted Conrad, his voice lethal as he spoke.

“She’s still just a weak little bird with a boyfriend to fight her battles,” Conrad laughed, earning him another punch to the gut from Dex.

I didn’t let his words get to me. I could have easily put a bullet in his head, but Cruz’s way made him suffer for all the torment he put me through. I liked that better.

“Bring it in,” Cruz ordered Vlad, who nodded and left the warehouse.

A minute later, the large metal bay door lifted, and a truck backed in. It wasn’t as big as a semi, but almost half the size.

What the hell was he planning?

All the guys from down below came up to join me on the top level, away from Conrad, which confused me even more.

I gave Cruz a curious look as he came to stand behind me.

“Just watch,” he said and nodded toward Conrad before kissing the back of my head. His arms boxed me in as he held the railings on either side of my hips.

Once the truck stopped a few feet away from Conrad, who didn’t look nearly as amused anymore, Vlad got out and walked to the back. He grabbed the handle that opened the rear door and waited for Cruz’s order.

“Now,” Cruz ordered, and I had no idea who he was talking to, but suddenly, a large bucket hanging over Conrad’s head tipped over, and a thick red substance coated his body.

“Pigs blood,” Cruz whispered next to my ear.

I frowned curiously, wondering what he had planned, but said nothing and kept watching.

Vlad opened the truck's back door before quickly stepping out of the way. Almost simultaneously, a large brown bag suspended above Conrad tipped over and what looked to be easily over a hundred pounds of seeds fell onto him, clinging to the blood coating his body.

The sound of the seeds hitting the ground must have triggered something because suddenly, hundreds of black birds flew from the back of the truck and straight to Conrad's strung-up body, where they savagely feasted on the food.

Were they crows?

Conrad's agonizing cries echoed through the room as the birds violently pecked at his body, tearing his flesh apart in the process. It was a scene straight out of a horror movie, yet I couldn't look away.

There was a pang of satisfaction in my chest, knowing it was *weak little birds* causing him pain.

"He tormented you for years, but I bet the memory of these birds pecking at his flesh will haunt him in hell long after he's dead," Cruz said in a low, husky voice next to my ear, sending an excited shiver down my spine. I liked the sound of that.

Maybe I was starting to get used to violence. At least when it involved the Lincoln brothers I certainly was.

The birds were relentlessly picking away at Conrad's body for what felt like hours.



Conrad screamed the entire time but seemed to be losing steam now. The birds were also losing interest and flying toward the open bay door after a full meal.

“What do you say, beautiful? Do you want to put a bullet in your tormentor’s head, or would you rather I do it?” Cruz asked.

“I’ll do it.” The words were out of my mouth without thought.

I might not have wanted to torture him personally, but putting the final bullet in his head that ended his miserable life was a different story. I looked forward to that.

Cruz pulled his gun out of his holster and checked that a round was chambered before handing it to me.

He then put his hand on my lower back and guided me down the stairs and toward Conrad.

The closer we got, the more I realized just how badly those birds tore into Conrad. Chunks of flesh were missing from parts of his body, one eye looked like it had been completely pecked out, and an unfortunate glance at his crotch made me realize that was in rough shape too.

He was still alive, though. I could see his chest rising and falling even though he couldn’t open his eyes.

“Not so smug now, are you? Funny what kind of damage a *little bird* can do, isn’t it?” I taunted before raising the gun and pointing it at his head.

He said nothing. I wondered if he even had a tongue left after screaming with an open mouth for so long.

“I hope you burn in hell, you son of a bitch,” I said between clenched teeth before pulling the trigger.

My hands were surprisingly steady as I watched his head flop back, and his entire body went limp.

I did it. Conrad was finally dead.

“Are you okay?” Cruz asked tentatively, taking the gun from me.

I took a minute to figure out how I felt before answering.

Given what I just witnessed, I was surprisingly calm and relaxed, relieved that it was finally over, and most importantly, excited to put all this behind me.

“Yeah, I’m better than okay,” I said with a slight smile.

“That was terrifying to watch, you twisted motherfucker,” Blaise said as he came over and patted Cruz on the shoulder.

“You’re cleaning up all that bird shit because I ain’t doing it,” Dex grumbled as he came over too.

“Oh god, look at his balls. I’m pretty sure those birds thought they were real nuts,” Jared mumbled, looking like he was going to be sick.

I didn’t look because I believed him and it wasn’t an image I wanted ingrained in my head.

“Where the hell did you get all those birds?” I asked Cruz as I watched another straggler fly out of the warehouse.

“I own this city, beautiful. I can get whatever I want, whenever I want. You need a kidney? I’ll have one delivered by the end of the day. You want a...” Cruz went on bragging until I cut him off.

“You mean a kidney that someone likely didn’t volunteer to donate?” I asked with an eyebrow raised.

Cruz’s smile fell as he realized his mistake.

“Way to put your foot in your mouth, big guy. Smooth,” Blaise coughed the words out under his breath earning him a glare from Cruz.

“Fuck, I totally see where I went wrong there. I swear I would never condone the illegal harvesting of organs. I was just trying to impress you but obviously, I missed the mark,” Cruz said, looking sheepish.

I burst out laughing because he looked adorable. I knew he would never be involved in the sales of illegally harvested organs. He just sometimes spoke before thinking it through. The guys laughed, too—even Dex, who was trying to hide the amusement on his face with his hand.

“Just so we’re clear, it’s over if you come home with a kidney or any other organ you purchased from the so-called *black market*,” I said, half-jokingly.

“Got it. No organs,” Cruz said with a curt nod before his classic goofy grin spread across his face.

Things had been so tense lately, that I missed the easygoing, funny side of Cruz. He had been so serious and focused, but

now we both could finally be ourselves again.

“Let’s go home, beautiful. It’s time for a fresh start,” he added and guided me toward the open bay door.

“What the fuck? What about this mess?” Dex called after him.

“My girl’s upset, and I need to comfort her. You don’t mind, do you?” Cruz called back. He didn’t even slow his steps.

“I’m gonna kill that fucker,” Dex grumbled behind us, making us both chuckle.

I felt so much lighter. Both Conrad and Owen were dead. They could never hurt me again, and it was all thanks to Cruz. He made it happen.

I looked over at him, and the realization hit me like a freight train. I loved this man. The man who helped me bury my past and protected me from the monsters. I couldn’t imagine not having him in my life.

## Chapter 35

# A Shocking Discovery

## Presley

I had just left Cassandra's cousin's place after a short visit and was driving home.

Cassandra was doing so much better. Now that I had introduced her to Carla, she was getting the help she needed to recover from the traumatic experience.

All of Cruz's men were doing well too. Colin was in the worst shape, but Tyson patched him up and said he would make a full recovery. I was relieved to hear it.

It had been a week since I killed Conrad, and it felt like I was finally getting my life back on track.

I was officially a widow, and I couldn't be happier.

I could finally leave Cruz's house without constantly looking over my shoulder. Having said that, I rarely went out on my own anymore. Cruz was usually attached to my hip, but I didn't mind. I loved spending time with him, and we had spent almost every waking moment together this past week.

I hadn't told Cruz yet that I loved him, but only because I hadn't found the right opportunity. I was awkward, and the words got stuck in my throat whenever I tried to say them.

Cruz, on the other hand, had no problem saying the words. He constantly told me how he felt about me as if it were the easiest admission in the world. I envied that. One day, when the moment felt right, I would tell him. At least, I hoped I would. I didn't want it to feel forced, so I was waiting for it to leave my lips naturally.

When I returned to the house, no one was around except for the guards by the gates. I headed inside and grabbed a bottle of water from the kitchen before sitting in the living room and I flicked on the television.

Cruz had texted me that he had something to deal with this afternoon and that he would be home before dinner.

As I flicked through the channels, my mind returned to my appointment with my counselor yesterday. I finally felt comfortable enough to open up and tell her about my past. I really liked the fact that she didn't stare at me with pity in her eyes. Instead, she just remained silent and processed my words. I felt lighter after the appointment. Even though I still had a long way to go, I knew with my counselor's help, I would eventually get to a place where I was truly happy with my life.

I had settled on a romcom which I didn't really watch, but it played in the background while I thought of the past few

weeks. They had been crazy, and I still couldn't believe it was finally over.

Almost an hour went by when the front door opened, and Cruz walked in with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Hey, I wasn't expecting you back this early," I said with a soft smile.

"I finished what I had to do early and needed to see you," he replied, his tone sounding off.

"Are you okay?" I sat up straight on the couch.

Something was wrong. I could tell.

"I don't want you to panic, okay? We'll deal with whatever happens," he said, but his words only added to my anxiety.

He got down on his knees between my thighs, and that was when I noticed the folder in his hand. It only took a second for me to recognize it. It was the folder I had found in Conrad's office with my name on it all those years ago. My breath hitched, wondering why the hell Cruz had it. When did he get it?

Then I noticed his knuckles were bloody as if he had punched something or someone...

My eyes went wide at the realization. What happened?

"I found this in Conrad's office when we burned his house down. I had it in my office this whole time, but with everything going on, I forgot about it. I found it this morning and was going to shred it since whatever was in here wasn't



relevant anymore, but then a page fell out, and it caught my attention,” he said, looking apologetic.

“It’s okay. I’ve already told you everything that’s in there, Cruz. I’m not mad that you looked.” I let out a shaky breath. I knew he was telling me this because he didn’t want to keep secrets from me, and I appreciated that, but honestly, I wished he had just shredded it after he saw whatever he saw.

“No, you don’t understand. The page I found was significant, Presley.” He shook his head and let out a heavy sigh before his eyes met mine.

“When’s the last time you had your period?” he asked with an unreadable expression on his face.

I laughed, then looked at him and said, “Cruz, if you’re worried I’m pregnant, you don’t need to be. I can’t have kids, remember?”

“Presley,” he started and paused, looking concerned before adding, “Conrad lied about that, too. He paid the fertility doctor to make you believe you couldn’t have kids when there was nothing wrong with you. You were perfectly fertile.”

My heart sank in my chest. Not being able to have kids was the only thing I didn’t second-guess when I found out the truth about Conrad. I mean, why would he lie about that when he was so desperate for an heir? He wanted kids so badly that he made my life miserable because I couldn’t have them.

I had wished it was another one of his manipulations, but then I squashed that thought since there wasn’t any benefit to

him fabricating that lie. Everything else he did served a purpose. Like my finances. Without money, I was dependent on him. Getting rid of my friends, made it so I had no support aside from him. He did those things for a reason, but when it came to having kids, he had no reason to lie and tell me I was infertile. At least none that I could think of.

“No, that doesn’t make sense. Conrad wanted kids so badly that he was livid when he found out I couldn’t have any. He was furious with me and threatened to get one of his mistresses pregnant so he could finally have an heir,” I said, my eyes welling with tears.

“Did any of them get pregnant?” he asked gently.

I thought about his words, and the answer was no. He had been using the same line for months, and yet none of the women he fucked ever became pregnant. Even after I ran away, he probably still tried, yet we heard nothing of him having children. It would have been announced in the paper if he had, given his position in the city.

“I wanted to know for sure before I brought it up because I didn’t want to cause you any more stress unless I had to. I visited the fertility doctor that’s listed on this sheet today. Conrad paid him to lie because Conrad couldn’t have kids. He was shooting blanks, Presley. It was another way for him to manipulate you into believing you were the problem when, all along, it was him,” he said gently, his hands holding my thighs in place as if worried I would run.

“No. That can’t be,” I shook my head in disbelief, my heart beating hard in my chest.

The more my mind thought about it though, the more I realized how much it made sense. Conrad always had a purpose for doing things and liked making me feel inadequate. Blaming me for his fertility problem was definitely something he would do. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of that possibility.

I mean, why would I? He was young enough and healthy. There were no reasons to believe he couldn’t have kids.

*Fuck.* Cruz and I had never used a condom. When was my last period?

I suddenly felt like someone was choking me because I couldn’t breathe and my vision blurred with tears.

“Hey, hey, hey, breathe beautiful. BREATHE,” Cruz said, grabbing my chin and lifting it so I was looking him in the eyes.

“If you’re pregnant, it’s a damn blessing. I love you so fucking much that I would be thrilled if you were carrying my baby.”

“I can’t believe that he’s dead and still able to manipulate me,” I murmured, but it was more to myself, as a tear ran down my cheek and my bottom lip quivered.

“Do me a favor, Pres. Take this?” Cruz asked, pulling a box out of his back pocket and extending it to me. It was a pregnancy test.

I took the box from him with shaky hands. I would take the test to confirm it, but I already knew what the results would be, and that scared the shit out of me.

Cruz and I first slept together over a month ago, and I had not had a period yet. I couldn't remember when my last one was.

I had also been sick this last week but chalked it up to being stress-related. I hadn't once thought I was pregnant, but now...

*Oh god.*

I stood from the couch with Cruz.

Without saying a word, I walked toward the closest bathroom. I could feel Cruz walking right behind me.

What did he think of all this? Did he mean what he said earlier about it being a blessing if I were pregnant?

I walked into the bathroom, but when I went to close the door, it slammed against something.

Cruz grunted and I turned to see him rubbing his forehead while standing in the door frame.

Why the hell was he following me into the actual bathroom?

“What are you doing?” I asked with a frown.

“I wanna see what the test says.”

“I have to pee on it first, and I don't want you watching me do that.”

“I'll look away.” He shrugged as if it were no big deal.

“No way. I can’t pee under pressure.” I shook my head.

“We’ve had sex, Presley. It’s just peeing,” he argued.

“Still not happening,” I said firmly, making him groan in frustration.

“Fine, but open the door as soon as you’re finished,” he relented, looking stressed.

Did he want the test to be negative? He said it would be a blessing earlier, but maybe he was just saying that for my benefit. The thought made dread pool in my gut because I already knew what the test would say. I just didn’t have the nerve to tell him.

I shut the door and locked it before opening the box. Once I pulled the stick out, I stared at it for over a minute in complete disbelief. How did we get here?

I sat on the toilet and waited for the stream of pee to start flowing before I moved the tip of the stick into it.

Once I was done, I put the cap back on the stick and placed it on the counter while I washed my hands.

A loud knock on the door startled me.

“Presley? You done yet? What’s it say?” Cruz asked eagerly.

“We have to wait a few minutes for the results,” I replied, my voice low and unsure.

“Open the door, beautiful. I want to hold you while we wait,” Cruz added as I dried my hands.

I did as he asked, and he immediately wrapped me in his arms.

“You okay?” he asked gently, running his hands up and down my back.

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully. I hadn’t had enough time to process everything.

“As I said, we’ll deal with whatever happens together. Okay?” Cruz reassured, and I nodded.

Cruz held me in his arms for several minutes before finally asking, “Can we look yet?” He sounded almost excited or maybe I was misreading his nervousness for excitement.

“Yeah. Can you do it? I’m not sure I can,” I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

At least if he looked first, I wouldn’t have to break the news to him.

“Of course,” he said, almost pushing me over to get to the stick sitting on the counter with the screen facing down.

“Sorry,” he muttered apologetically when he realized he had nearly knocked me over.

I chuckled softly because he looked excited again instead of worried. He looked like a kid reaching for a present on Christmas morning instead of a man concerned about becoming a father before he was ready.

Cruz turned the stick over and frowned. The smile that had formed on my lips fell. Maybe I misread his excitement after

all. He didn't look happy anymore.

"I have no clue what this means. Why the fuck can't it just say yes or no? Pregnant or not pregnant. What the fuck do these lines even mean?" he asked frustratedly, showing me the display with the obvious plus sign in the middle.

"It means I'm pregnant," I said softly.

"Are you sure?" Cruz asked, his face lighting up.

I nodded, fidgeting nervously with my hands as I waited for his reaction.

"I'm gonna be a father?" he asked with that same excited glimmer in his eyes.

I nodded again.

"I'm gonna be a father!" He said it as a statement instead of a question, fist-pumping the air.

I chuckled. Cruz seemed to understand what this meant, and he didn't look at all disappointed.

"We're gonna have a baby!" he shouted before picking me up and spinning me around. I squealed at the sudden action while laughing.

"I'm gonna teach him, or her all sorts of ways to piss off their uncles. Oh, this is gonna be so much fun," he said excitedly.

Cruz finally put me down and looked at the plus sign again on the pregnancy test before saying, "*Thank you,*" to the stick.

Then he leaned down and kissed the stick, causing me to burst out laughing.

Cruz grabbed me and tried to kiss me, but I pushed at his chest and leaned away from him. “You realize I peed on that thing, right?”

He scrunched his nose at the realization of what he had done before saying, “Right.”

“Whatever, I’m going to be a dad.” He shrugged, looking unbothered.

Before I could stop him, he leaned down and kissed me. I laughed against his lips but didn’t even try to pull away. His excitement was rubbing off on me.

I always wanted a family but wasn’t in a rush when I first met Conrad. Conrad was the one who had been in a hurry. Then, when I found out I couldn’t have kids, it hit me hard. I thought I never would have my own family and after a while, I accepted that. But now, this...

My brain needed time to process everything, but the more and more I thought about it, the happier it made me.

I guess my fresh start wasn’t only with Cruz but with a baby, too.

“Hey, what’s all the excitement? I heard you guys yelling and laughing from the front door,” Erika asked, walking down the hall toward us with Blaise and Zeus.

“I’m gonna be a father!” Cruz announced excitedly.



I wasn't even the least bit upset that he told them without first asking me. He looked so damn happy it was contagious.

"I thought..." Erika started, but Cruz cut her off.

"Long story short. Conrad paid a fertility doctor to lie to Presley. She's perfectly fertile, and I knocked her up," Cruz said the last part proudly with his usual goofy grin.

"Wow. That's amazing news." Erika said excitedly before wrapping me in a tight embrace.

"Congrats, you two," Blaise added, tapping Cruz on the shoulder before adding in a more serious tone, "I hope you dealt with that doctor."

"Oh yeah. He lost his medical license and won't be able to walk for a while," Cruz replied, sounding as if it was a normal thing to say. No wonder his knuckles were bloody.

"Well fuck, Presley. I guess you're stuck with this asshole now. My condolences." Blaise joked before hugging me.

I tensed hearing his words.

*Fuck.* How did I not think about that?

I pulled away and started to sob. Not just a few lone tears, but I mean a full-blown ugly cry with snot running from my nose. I had been a little more emotional than usual lately and right now was a perfect example of that. I couldn't control my emotions if I tried. I guess the pregnancy hormones were already affecting me.

“Shit, beautiful. That wasn’t exactly the reaction I was hoping for,” Cruz half-joked, looking concerned.

“No, it’s not that. It’s the opposite. I told you I couldn’t have kids, so you didn’t put a condom on because of me. I basically trapped you into being with me. All this is my fault and now you’re stuck in this situation because of me,” I explained between loud sobs.

Cruz looked at me with his mouth hanging open as he blinked a few times, processing my words before the biggest, goofiest grin spread across his face.

“Can I get that tattooed across my chest?” he asked, and I frowned.

“What?”

“*She trapped me first.* I want to wear it like a badge of honor,” he replied, and Blaise and Erika laughed, but I was still confused.

“It’s not trapping someone if that person wants to be with the other person,” Blaise corrected with a shake of his head.

“Whatever, I still want the tattoo.” Cruz shrugged before turning to me. “At least now that you trapped me first, I don’t have to do it. My plan was a little more complicated. It included a trip to Vegas, a shit load of magic mushrooms, and introducing you to an Elvis impersonator, who also happens to be a marriage officiant,” Cruz replied, and I gasped.

“You’re insane,” I said with a chuckle.

Erika handed me a Kleenex so I could wipe my nose.

“Don’t worry, I’m just kidding,” Cruz said before turning to Blaise and exaggerating a wink as if he wasn’t.

We all laughed.

When our laughter died Cruz became serious and added, “In all honesty, though, Pres. I’m fucking thrilled about this. This is the best news I’ve ever gotten. I can’t wait to watch your belly grow big with my baby inside.”

He wrapped his big strong arms around me and pulled me against his hard chest.

“Are you sure you’re not just saying that?” I asked skeptically.

“I swear to you. I’m fucking thrilled. I didn’t realize how much I wanted a family until I saw that plus sign on the pregnancy test,” he replied, holding up the stick.

“Are *you* happy?” he asked with a concerned frown.

I thought about it briefly before nodding and saying, “I am. I love you, Cruz, and I know you’ll be a great father.”

Cruz tensed, looking down at me with an unreadable expression. “Say it again,” he ordered.

“What? You’ll be a great dad?” I asked, frowning.

“No, before that.”

Oh my god, I hadn’t even realized I said that I loved him. The words came out so naturally that I hadn’t noticed.

“I can’t remember,” I teased, unable to help myself. He looked so desperate to hear the words again.

“Say it, or I swear to god, woman...” he growled playfully.

I chuckled before saying, “I love you, Cruz.”

“Fuck, that sounds so fucking good.” Before I knew it, his lips were on mine in a searing kiss.

“Not that we want to steal your guys’ thunder, but we happen to have some news, ourselves,” Blaise said, drawing our attention to him and Erika.

“No way! Your trickery with the doctor’s appointment finally worked, eh? You knocked Fred up?” Cruz stated with a chuckle.

“No, his little stunt didn’t work. I told Blaise if he ever pulled a stunt like that again, he’ll be fucking his right hand for the rest of his life,” Erika said, glaring at Blaise before adding, “But... we talked, and a family is something we both want, so we decided to give it a shot. I didn’t expect it would work the first month, but it did, and now we’re expecting to.”

“Congratulations, you two,” I said, hugging Erika.

“Shit, that’s awesome. Congrats, buddy,” Cruz added, patting Blaise’s shoulder.

Cruz went to hug Erika, but Zeus started growling, making him stop short.

“What the fuck is psycho’s problem?” Cruz asked.

“Oh, uhh...He’s a little...overprotective of me now,” Erika explained.

“A little? The asshole nearly chewed my leg off because I was being playful with you yesterday,” Blaise argued.

“He must sense the change in my body. You should be happy that he wants to protect me and your unborn baby,” Erika replied.

“Not from me,” Blaise grumbled, making us laugh.

We chatted for a few more minutes before Cruz announced, “Well, I better get the mother of my unborn baby to bed. She needs rest.”

“It’s only four,” I protested, not feeling at all tired after all the excitement.

“Shhh... Maybe I can stick another baby in you and we can have a two-for-one,” Cruz whispered next to my ear before nibbling on my earlobe.

I laughed and said, “That’s not exactly how it works, my love.”

“God, I love hearing you call me that.” Cruz groaned.

We said goodbye to Erika and Blaise before Cruz scooped me up in his arms bridal style and carried me away.

I was smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. I couldn’t be happier with how everything played out.

I loved Cruz just as much as I already loved my unborn baby growing inside me.

Finally, I had the life I always wanted.

**The end**



# Epilogue

Presley

## *8 Months Later*

“Cruz, I can walk,” I huffed, but my words fell on deaf ears as Cruz ran from the room to fetch a wheelchair.

I stayed seated on the hospital bed while I waited for him to return, gazing down lovingly at our son, Maverick James Hudson, nestled in my arms. His middle name was the same as his daddy’s.

It was unbelievable how much he already looked like Cruz. They had the same nose, lips, and hair. Maverick was born with a full head of dark hair, just like his father. It was adorable.

Cruz had been amazing to me during the pregnancy. He waited on me hand and foot even when I told him not to.

Every night before bed, he would have me lie down while he lay beside my rounded belly and told our baby a story. It was

the cutest thing ever, especially when he kissed my belly at the end.

We had to stay at the hospital for a few extra days after Maverick was born because of complications, but today, they said we could finally go home.

I was excited to sleep in my own bed after spending so many nights in an uncomfortable hospital room. Cruz was probably excited about that, too, since he had stayed at the hospital with us the entire time, and although they brought in an extra bed for him, he certainly didn't look comfortable in that tiny thing.

"I got one," Cruz announced, rolling the wheelchair into the room.

"I told you I can walk," I argued.

"Do you really think you'll win this battle? Have you learned nothing since you first met me?" he asked with an eyebrow raised.

I chuckled and shook my head before replying, "Fair point."

Cruz helped me into the wheelchair before kissing his son's forehead and then mine. He wheeled us out of the room and down the hall toward the front doors.

I glanced over my shoulder to see the proud smile on his face whenever we passed someone who glanced down at our son. It was the cutest thing.

Once outside, one of Cruz's vehicles awaited us, with a driver already behind the wheel.



Cruz grabbed our son from my arms and secured him in his car seat before helping me into the backseat next to him. Cruz got into the front passenger seat.

“You ready to go home, beautiful?” Cruz asked over his shoulder.

I smiled and exhaled. God, I loved the sound of that.

Once everything had settled down after killing Conrad and Owen, Cruz took it upon himself to start looking for a house for us.

He never said it outright, but I knew he was doing it for me. Even though I had gotten more comfortable around the people living in his mansion, I still got anxious when there were too many people in a room. It was something I was still working on with my counselor.

Cruz found us a house, or more like a mansion, only a few blocks from his old place.

Before moving in, he ensured that security was up to par and let me decorate the place how I wanted.

I loved the house. It took no time for it to feel like a home, something I hadn't felt in a long time.

“I'm ready,” I replied.

Twenty-five minutes later, we were driving through the gates of our house.

Cruz got out first and came to help me out of the backseat before running around to grab Maverick's car seat. Our sweet

baby boy was sound asleep.

Cruz grabbed my hand and walked us to the front door.

As soon as the door opened, I stepped inside and gasped.

“Welcome home,” Everyone in the living room shouted in unison.

Erika, Carla, Georgia, Olivia, Blaise, Dex, and Jared were all there to greet us.

I looked at Cruz, and the smile on his face told me he knew all about this surprise.

“Did we surprise you?” Erika asked, wobbling over with her giant belly to hug me.

She was a few days overdue and looked ready to pop at any moment.

“Yes, I had no idea you guys would be here,” I replied with a smile.

“We wanted to meet your precious boy,” Carla added, hugging me next.

“I am pretty precious,” Cruz joked, earning himself a few eye rolls from the others.

Everyone else hugged me and congratulated us on our son’s birth.

Cruz had taken Maverick out of his car seat, now that he was awake.

“Guys, meet Maverick James Hudson,” I announced as the ladies cooed over our sweet baby.

“He’s perfect,” Olivia said with a smile.

“Poor kid got a lot of his dad’s looks,” Blaise teased, earning him a swat from Erika.

“He’s gonna be a chick magnet just like his dad,” Cruz retorted proudly.

I playfully glared at him before saying, “Chick magnet, eh? Tell me more.”

“Uhh...Umm...I’m talking when I was younger. Now the only woman’s attention I want is yours,” Cruz stuttered.

I rolled my eyes and laughed. I wasn’t stupid. Cruz was a ridiculously good-looking man, and I had no doubt he had his share of ladies before me. I didn’t care, though, as long as I was the only woman in his life *now*.

“Way to put your foot in your mouth, buddy,” Jared chuckled.

“I never was good at thinking before speaking.” Cruz shrugged, making us all laugh.

We chatted with our friends for an hour before Maverick got fussy.

I excused myself from the room so I could feed him in private.

Afterward, he fell asleep in my arms. Laying him down in his crib, I stood there, gazing at our son. I could watch him all day and never get sick of it.

A noise behind me made me look over my shoulder.

Cruz walked into the room and came to stand behind me. He wrapped his arms around my waist and looked down at our sleeping son over my shoulder.

“He’s perfect,” Cruz said.

“He really is.”

“Just a heads up, though. I’m used to being an only child. I’m not sure what will happen if I have to fight for your attention. You can’t get mad at me when Maverick learns to walk, and I suddenly push him over to get to you first,” he warned, sounding dead serious, even though I knew he was joking, or at least I hoped he was.

“Oh my god, Cruz. I can’t believe I even have to say this, but you are not allowed, under *any* circumstances, to push our son over to get to me first,” I replied with a chuckle.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He shrugged.

“You’re insane.” I shook my head but turned in his arms and kissed him.

When we broke the kiss, Cruz held a piece of paper up that I hadn’t noticed until now.

“What’s that?” I asked with a frown.

He handed the drawing to me as he replied, “I asked Carla to design a tattoo for you so you can cover up your scars when your body is fully healed. If you don’t like it, you can always have her design something else. She’s really good.”

I remember Carla telling me how she liked to draw, but I didn't realize just how good she was.

It was beautiful and intricate, with a colorful bird in the middle surrounded by black vines that were trying to entrap the bird. The bird had an old key on a chain dangling from its beak as it looked to be flying straight upward. Some of the vines were snapped in half as if the bird had broken them in its escape. The details were astonishing; the bird appeared feminine and determined, with a rainbow of colors and long curled feathers on its tail and wings.

"It's beautiful, Cruz, but I'm not sure I want a bird..." I started, but Cruz cut me off.

"I won't be offended if you decide to go with something else, Presley, but hear me out first," and Cruz paused before continuing, "First, that's a phoenix, not just any bird. It represents your strength and determination to survive. In the end, you came out on top and not only survived but destroyed those who underestimated you."

"You can get any pretty tattoo, which will cover your scars for anyone who doesn't know they're there, but you'll see right through whatever tattoo you get and always know what lies beneath the pretty ink. That's why I think you should get a tattoo that reminds you of how you broke free from your nightmares and rose above them. This tattoo represents you, Presley, the strong, determined, beautiful creature who never gave up until she was free. Like I said though, if you decide to go with something else, I understand," he added.

Tears pooled in my eyes. God, I loved this man. He knew exactly what to say to make me feel strong and empowered, even when I doubted myself.

He was right, too. No matter what tattoo I covered the scars with, I would forever remember what lay beneath, and suddenly, I liked the idea of getting a tattoo that represented how my nightmare ended.

“I love it, Cruz. I think it’s perfect,” I said softly.

“Really?” he asked excitedly.

“Really. As soon as my body recovers from birthing our son, I’ll get it,” I replied.

“I fucking love you, beautiful,” he said before leaning down and kissing me.

“I love you too,” I said as we broke apart.

“Just curious. At any point, did I make it sound like I wanted you to get a tattoo of a cartoon character?” he asked randomly.

“No. Why?” I chuckled and frowned.

“Uhh... No reason,” he said, adding quickly, “Let’s go back out there. I’m sure Carla’s dying to know what you think of her artwork.”

That was odd, but Cruz was strange sometimes, so I let it go, figuring it was just one of his weird babbling moments.

We left the room and headed into the living room, where everyone was still chatting.

“Hey, Pres. So, did Cruz show you?” Carla asked when she noticed us enter the room.

“He did, and I love it. I’m gonna get it when my body recovers. Thank you,” I told her with a soft smile.

“That’s awesome. If there’s anything you want me to change, just let me know, and I can do it,” Carla added.

“No, I love it the way it is. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“You’re lucky Carla has mad skills because if it were up to Cruz, you’d be getting *Big Bird* from *Sesame Street* tattooed on your stomach,” Erika joked.

“What do you mean?” I frowned. Obviously, there was a story there that I was missing.

Cruz groaned behind me before saying, “Can’t we forget about that and just appreciate Carla’s skills?”

“Nope, I think Presley needs to know about your vision, Cruz,” Erika said with a mischievous smile. She continued to explain, “So I was with Carla when Cruz asked her to design your tattoo. We loved the idea and asked him what he had in mind. Well, Cruz said he wanted a really big bird with fluffy feathers and then added that he wanted it to be yellow to represent the light in a dark time. Carla was a lot more diplomatic as she tried to envision his idea, but all I could picture was *Big Bird*. So, I called him out on it. My sweet sister, who was trying to keep a serious face, burst out laughing with me and said she thought the same thing initially but was trying to be nice. Needless to say, I also coached him

on his speech to make sure he, at no point, compared you to *Big Bird*.”

I burst out laughing and so did everyone else, except for Cruz.

“Now I want the tattoo even more so I can tell people that story whenever anyone asks what it represents,” I joked.

“I hate you, Fred,” Cruz glared at Erika.

“No, you don’t. If it weren’t for me, you would have never met the mamma of your baby,” Erika replied.

“Fuck, you’re right. I’ll get you back for that story someday,” Cruz warned.

“I have no doubt.” Erika grinned.

“Oh, I almost forgot. We opened the doors for the newest women’s shelter today,” Erika said, turning her attention to me.

I had forgotten about that while I was busy giving birth to our son.

I had inherited all of Conrad’s money after the police discovered his deceased body. Given what that money represented, I didn’t want it, so instead, the girls and I used it to open a bunch of resources for survivors of domestic violence.

“That’s great. I wish I could have been there,” I said truthfully.

“There’ll be more. We aren’t done yet,” Erika replied.



“True,” I smiled. We had lots of money left to spend, and I planned on making every dollar count.

“Also, things at your studio have been good. Veronica has been doing a great job teaching in your absence,” Erika added.

“Oh good. I can’t wait to get back into dancing. I should be able to start in a few weeks,” I replied.

Cruz had rented a real studio for me in a better part of town and now that I wasn’t trying to hide from anyone, I applied for a legitimate business license. I had big plans for my studio once I was ready to go back to work.

Our conversation was interrupted when Cruz cleared his throat.

“Not that I’m trying to get rid of you guys,” Cruz said and frowned before adding, “Who am I kidding? I’m totally trying to get rid of all you fuckers. Presley needs to rest, so get out.”

They all chuckled but made their way toward the door. As much as I could have sat all day chatting with them, I was exhausted and couldn’t wait to crawl into bed with Cruz and just relax.

As we reached the door, Erika gasped and grabbed the crotch of her leggings before saying, “My water broke.”

My eyes widened and I looked at Blaise who had gone ghostly pale. “Shit, for real?” he asked.

“Nah, just fucking with ya. Consider it payback for all those times you tried to cancel my doctor’s appointments,” she said with a smirk.

“Evil,” Blaise glared at her.

“Nicely done, Fred,” Cruz chuckled.

“Stop encouraging her, asshole,” Blaise grumbled before adding, “I’ve already started getting gray hair ever since I found out we’re having a girl. If she’s anything like her mother, I’m fucked.”

“You married me so I can’t be that bad,” Erika retorted.

“Yeah, but one of you is a handful already, I’m not sure any man could handle two of you,” Blaise replied, earning him a swat across the chest from Erika.

“Let’s go before I show you just how much of a handful I can be in front of all our friends,” Erika said before walking out.

“Save that feistiness for the bedroom, Hellcat,” Blaise called after her before he followed her out.

We said goodbye to the others as they all left, leaving us alone.

“Let’s go take a nap while we can, beautiful. Who knows when my mini might wake up and fight me for your tits,” Cruz said, making me laugh.

We went upstairs and I stripped out of my clothes before throwing on one of Cruz’s shirts and slipping into bed. Cruz got in behind, wrapped his arms around me, and pulled me flush against his body.

“I love you so fucking much, Presley. You have no idea how happy I am with our little family. When you’re ready, I’m gonna put a ring on that finger and call you my wife,” he said huskily next to my ear, sounding determined.

“You want to marry me?” I asked in disbelief.

We hadn’t talked about getting married yet. After Conrad’s death, I officially changed my name to Presley and went back to my maiden name, Jackson.

“Of course. I just didn’t want to freak you out. You were already moving in with me and having my baby, I figured I’d give you a little time to adjust to all that before bringing it up,” he explained.

Cruz was always conscious of my anxieties and did everything he could not to add more stress. I was extremely appreciative of him doing that. Having said that, I was absolutely head over heels in love with the man and we already had a baby together. The thought of marrying him didn’t scare me at all. If anything, it felt right.

“I would say yes,” I whispered, and Cruz tensed.

“What did you say?” Cruz asked.

My heart started beating faster as I repeated my statement, “If you asked me, I would say yes.”

Suddenly, Cruz pulled away from me and I instantly missed his touch.

*What the fuck?* That wasn’t exactly the response I was hoping for.

I turned around on the bed to face him, only to find him digging through his nightstand drawer.

I frowned wondering what he was doing, but then he pulled out a small velvet, black box, and my eyes went wide, as I covered my mouth.

“Will you marry me, beautiful?” he asked, opening the box to reveal a beautiful princess-cut diamond ring with smaller diamonds lining the band.

“You already bought a ring?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. I got it right after we found out you were pregnant. I knew you would eventually marry me, so I wanted to be ready,” he replied.

“So... Will you marry me?” he asked again.

I nodded my head and a smile spread across my face before I said, “Yes.”

Cruz slipped the ring on my finger and then kissed me.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too.”

We laid back down on the bed just as Cruz’s phone dinged with a message.

He picked it up off the bedside table and looked at the message before laughing and showing it to me.

**Blaise:** Motherfucker. Erika went into labor on the drive home. I thought she was fucking with me again until she nearly broke my hand from squeezing it so hard. Taking her to the hospital now.

**Blaise:** I don't think I'm ready for this.

**Cruz:** A little late for second thoughts, buddy. Good luck.

**Blaise:** I need more than luck. She sounds like she's dying. What do I do?

**Cruz:** First, stop texting me. Second, comfort her, you idiot.

“Idiot? I recall you being just as much of a disaster when I went into labor,” I pointed out with an eyebrow raised as I read their back-and-forth messages.

“Yeah, but he doesn't need to know that,” Cruz replied with a shrug before putting his phone down and snuggling up behind me.

I chuckled and then let out a long exhale as I got comfortable in Cruz's arms.

There was absolutely nothing I would change with my new life. It was everything I ever dreamed of.

Second chances really did happen, and I was proof of that.

# About the Author

S. Lexi is a romance author who prefers darker themes and spicy content.

She's married with boy/girl twins and lives in Western Canada on a hobby farm. She's an avid reader and loves all things furry. She raises emus, chickens, and mini goats on her farm, and that list is likely to grow over time.

She tends to write books with strong female characters and dominant male leads. If you enjoy well-developed plots, lots of unsuspected twists, and steamy scenes, you should try some of her books.

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