

MELANIE KINGSLEY



LOVE  
AFTER  
DARKNESS

EMPIRE BAY BOOK 2

*love after darkness*

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About the Author

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## *love after darkness*

### **Is love even real unless someone dies?**

Life can make a man cold and vicious, make you question every shadow. And it's no secret that losing my partner changed something inside of me.

That's not why I'm obsessed with the mistress of the dark web, Aria Darklyn.

For the first time in too damn long, there's light at the end of the tunnel and a way out of my misery. I've got to work my way through the twists and turns of the job to figure out if I can trust my heart...

And whether love can truly exist in a world where death is always lurking. But the closer I get to answers in this case, the more danger we face.

Will Aria be just another casualty in a war against crime and corruption? I'll have to decide where my loyalties lie and whether I'm willing to pay the ultimate price for love.

*18+ Romance. Love After Darkness is book 2 in the Empire Bay series with enemies-to-lovers themes, featuring a tormented detective hero and a queen of the underworld. Contains darker themes, forced proximity romance, and lots of steamy scenes.*

## *a note to readers*

The following story contains mature themes, strong language, and sexual situations intended for adult readers. Those with triggers are encouraged to proceed with caution. Triggers may include: extreme violence, strong language, dubious consent, and sexual situations.



*For the real Big Daddy, who looks nothing like Daddy Thor,  
but is the inspiration behind the mastervation. Half the  
disgusting sh\*t in my books and in my head comes from you.  
Okay, more than half.*

*May you one day find your own Aria, a woman who orally  
knows her way around a pole.*

ONE

*devan*

SOME PEOPLE STICK WITH YOU. They burrow so deep inside that you have no choice but to integrate them. Make them a part of you.

That was Layla Sinclair. My old partner's life complemented mine and made me a better cop. Her death left me carved out and hollow.

I lean back in the passenger seat of the cruiser, listening to some bullshit Britney Spears because music is always the driver's choice. That doesn't change, at least. Only the song. Sometimes life just flips on you, though. The coin twists faster than you can imagine, and nothing is the same.

"Cheer up!" the driver tells me in bubblegum pink tones. "Was it the coffee, Dev? Did I not get the order right again? You've got to tell me!" Detective Naomi Ellison slaps herself on the forehead hard enough that her head hits the back of the seat, and the car takes a sharp jerk to the left. "I'm sorry."

"Watch the road," I tell her with a grimace. "And it's not the coffee, Detective Ellison."

She glances sideways at me, and I hear her humming along to the chorus. *Hit me baby one more time*. "What is it, then? You've been so quiet. Did I do something wrong? I'm really trying hard to find my stride with the department, with you, but it's been a little hard. I admit it."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. "Stop talking. Focus on the details of the case."

Another case, another crime, another bloody murder for me to solve.

As far as partners go, Naomi is not the worst I've ever had. But she's also not the best. And right now, on our way to a crime scene, I'd rather not talk to her. Especially not when Naomi has a serious issue buttoning her fucking lips. I've never had to struggle against pistol-whipping someone until now, right this minute, especially since Britney has been playing nonstop for the entirety of the fifteen-minute ride. With traffic.

"And take a right here." I point at the angled street sign, tilting toward the grubby sidewalk littered with autumn leaves because someone must have hit it. "Ellison, a right!"

She's so focused on whatever problem she's made up in her head that she nearly misses the turn and ends up cutting off someone trying to turn from the opposite direction. The angry old woman behind the other wheel flips Naomi the bird.

My stomach dips down to my damn toes, and the fingers bite into the oh-shit bar above the door. "Christ, you're going to kill us before we get there," I mutter. "Focus, please."

Naomi stares straight ahead with a worried expression, and her large front teeth firmly embedded along her bottom lip. "I'm sorry."

I say nothing else.

Britney and the constant hum of tires slicking over decayed leaves on wet asphalt are white noise as I line up the details of the case. Twenty-one-year-old Hispanic male, bludgeoned, left in front of a vape shop, missing his shoes. Preliminary evidence suggests this case is connected with the deaths of two other young men.

Another five minutes of thick silence pass before the crime scene tape in the distance marks the edge of our crime scene. I dig my finger into the button on the door, the window rolling down slowly, and the noise of the city somehow deafening the closer we get.

There's death here, but also more life than any other place I go.

The only time I feel alive is within the boundaries of the yellow-and-black police tape. Naomi, with boundless energy that hasn't been eradicated by bitter jadedness yet, pulls the car to a stop in an empty space at the end of a line of cars.

"Wow, who called the media?" she mutters under her breath. "Our last one wasn't this busy."

"Seems like it's always this way anymore. Whenever there's murder, the crows come."

She groans, shakes her head, turns the key and kills Britney, bitch. Naomi needs to get used to it because it's another fact of life in Empire Bay, New Jersey. The city never sleeps, but they do like to stare death in the face.

Her vanilla and cinnamon body lotion makes me feel like the inside of the car is a Bath and Body Works, my nose hairs singed, and the stink embedding itself in the fabric of my clothes.

With the car engine clicking and cooling, my new partner and I push open the doors, ready to join the chaos, the fresh air burning my lungs clean. The three men guarding the perimeter look ready to drop, and I don't blame them. The sun has barely risen above the horizon on a blustery autumn day too gray to be charming, and the call for the body came in quickly enough that it only left two options: no caffeine or station coffee.

Neither one of those is favorable.

"Eyes ahead," I warn my new partner. "Focus on the scene instead of getting bogged down in the details. Okay?"

"Sure, sure. You positive it wasn't the coffee, Dev?"

I give in to the urge to roll my eyes.

Naomi keeps one hand on the gun in her holster and her focus ahead when I fail to answer, sobering up the closer we get to the tape and our overworked officers. I stride ahead and flash my badge, cutting my way through the gathered wall of bodies, desperate for a glimpse of murder to feel alive.

Layla had been right when she complained, often and bitterly, about the crowds. It can be worse than any sporting event. Sometimes, we even have to bring people in for traffic control.

Bystanders on foot *and* two wheels.

Detective Jerry McGee stands at the helm of our dawn disaster, no longer on crowd control but overseeing the scene nonetheless. He flashes me the barest bob of his head, a nod of acknowledgment, and I do the same for him.

Ever since the disaster with *his* partner two years ago, the same one in which I lost mine—

We've never been able to see eye to eye. Jerry can be a douche on a good day and a racist prick on his worst. I never fucking wanted to be on the same page. But something about the experience of losing Clint sobered Jerry and knocked a little bit of the douche out of him. His mustache still bristles when he sees me, but his attitude has improved as much as it can.

Now, he's only *slightly* racist.

"Get out of the way! Get out of the way. Empire Bay PD." Naomi repeats the phrase, solemn yet still chipper and kind.

The crime techs lift their heads at our arrival, their gazes shifting unerringly to me as the senior detective assigned to this case.

"What do we have?" I ask.

"Stabbed in the carotid before someone took a blunt instrument and bashed his skull in," Jasleen Phillips remarks, her distinctive Texas twang evident even with the mask she's wearing. "Looks like he's been killed somewhere else, dumped here. Hard to say time of death without more analysis, but it seems this sucker lost a whole lot of blood, definitely not in this area."

Clinical detachment marks my quick perusal of the body. The gaping wound at the side of his neck puckers around the edges, where the knife split through skin and tendons and arteries.

“You find anything of interest?” I ask Jasleen.

Even the questions are nothing but rote at this point.

Too long. I’ve been doing this too long. I try to muster some kind of empathy for the dead man and find nothing but emptiness in a place where feelings ought to be.

Jasleen gives her preliminary analysis to Naomi, who has her notepad out and pen whirring across the page like a good girl. I scan the crowd.

The bystanders are closer this time, pressing into the tape until they’re nose-to-nose with our officers. All around. They all wear the same face, too. They’re not horrified by the display. They don’t listen when the officers urge them backward, only watch to see what we are going to do. To see if we will be able to get this solved or if this young man’s death will join the towering tacks of unsolved cases our precinct has to deal with.

Layla always talked about getting too down in the spiral of depression to get up again. So beaten by the constant drone of death and depravity that you can’t muster up the courage to keep caring. Oh, you’ll go on. You’ll put one foot in front of the other every single day, but there will be no joy in the steps. No joy in life.

Which is part of the reason why my fiancée left me.

A flash of red in the crowd stands out from the droll neutrals and shades of black, and I turn back, first noticing the cut of the woman’s blazer. The red comes from the deep auburn of her hair, nearly blood-colored against the paleness of her skin, the black jacket showing a hint of lace at the bust from the shirt underneath.

She’s shorter than the others and stands out like a beacon regardless.

Not only the hair but her presence.

I arch a brow and stare at her, surprised when she turns ever so slightly to meet my eyes and her pert lips tilt up in a rowdy smile.

She's dressed better than this part of town warrants.

Laundromats and delis, fast cash places, and vape shops, like the one flashing a sign for Lost Vape and Uwell.

This woman looks more suited to a job behind the teller window of a bank somewhere in historic downtown. Even her shoes are expensive and well made, her black pants shapely and showing off rounded hips.

Not a cop.

Not a mere civilian, either. My brows furrow down as I watch her watching me.

But the eye contact she makes, without blinking, marks her as someone of interest. My instincts nudge at me, and for the briefest moment, a tingle starts low in my abdomen.

Who is she?

There's no way in fuck the stranger should be able to tell what's going on in my body, yet her brow lifts at some invisible shift and marks some sort of observation she's made. About me.

Suspicious. And curious.

"I'd like to have the ME take a look at the blood pattern if you don't mind," Naomi is telling Jasleen in an overloud tone. "I know you're telling me the object that killed him is blunt edged, but the slices would suggest otherwise."

I know the volume increases when she's close to losing her cookies. When something bothers Naomi to the point that her body is rejecting every mental barrier she tries to put up between her and the fear. Jasleen, on the other hand, doesn't understand anything about my new partner, and the glance I toss over my shoulder at the scene shows the tech bristling.

"If you're not satisfied with my initial analysis, then by all means," Jasleen snaps. "Do whatever you have to do, Detective Ellison."

"I think you've done a fine job of the scene, Jasleen, but it seems to me there are more questions in need of answering,



and I'd prefer to have a second opinion. The other bodies we recovered were killed with box cutters. Not this one."

By the time I turn back to the woman in the crowd, she's strutting down the sidewalk away from the scene, the distinctive sway of her hips captivating.

I'm not one to ignore nudges, and this woman is nudging hard. It's a risk to take myself away from the scene and leave Naomi in charge.

"Detective Bishop? Where are you going?" Naomi calls out after me.

"Following a lead," I call back. I follow after the woman with the red hair and hope my gamble won't fuck this investigation before it starts.

TWO

THE DETECTIVE IS fine as *fuck*.

Tall and broad-shouldered, he's got the figure of a man who knows his way around the streets and uses his fists to solve problems. Judging from the look in his eyes, though, the chocolate brown depths simmering with just enough life to make sure he doesn't look like a walking corpse, he's stuck solidly to the right side of the law.

As most people see it, anyway.

His hair is black and curly, shaved short on the sides and a little longer on the top. The black T-shirt brings out the deliciously dark tone of his skin, and the camel-colored coat gives him a suave charm.

He's length, muscle, and wiry strength.

Much as I hate to admit it, he's got this air about him. This spark. A charisma that naturally draws people to him and forces them to look twice.

Damn, yeah. He's fine.

Something about the look on his face makes me want to get to know him, to dig beneath his truly beautiful exterior, and find the juicy goodness underneath. I make a mental note to check out his online footprint the second I get back home.

But the man walks like a fucking Clydesdale as he trails me. He was good-looking enough to divide my attention between him and the corpse on the ground, the entire reason I came out today.

Poor Everett.

He didn't deserve what happened to him. None of my guys did, and somehow, losing this one stings more than the other two. A life cut short. Except this life belonged to me. The first two guys were losses, for sure, but Everett was like my baby, the four years separating us more like four decades.

I hustle away from the scene, leading the detective toward a spot where I know we'll have some privacy since he clearly marked me. There's no getting out of it now.

And it's my own damn fault, too. Like Everett, I get curious, and bad things happen. To me mostly, and I've gotten to the point in my life where I've had to stop calling it bad luck and start taking a more introspective approach.

"Hey, wait. Stop!" the detective calls out, his hands shoved into fists in the pocket of his jacket when I steal a look at him over my shoulder. "Ma'am, stop."

*Ooh, doggy.*

That voice...

It's made for phone sex. For being told what a good girl you are or to shut the fuck up and take that dick. Told to lay on your back and open your legs.

His rich baritone is as smooth as melted dark chocolate, and of course, it would belong to him. Of course it would send a shockwave through my system. I shake my head to clear it.  
*Focus, Aria.*

Hustling forward, I pretend to ignore him, wondering if it makes his dark jaw clench or not.

"Ma'am, I'm talking to you," he continues. "What were you doing at the crime scene?"

There are far fewer people on the sidewalk here. The kind of place where the normal person doesn't walk unaccompanied no matter the time of day, and I've been navigating for years. I turn the corner into the space between buildings, knowing the fine AF detective will follow me. And when he thinks he's blocked off my exit and cornered me, when the large rectangle of the garbage bin hides us from the street, I stop and face him.

My arms cross over my chest. “I might have been there, but what are you doing following me?” I ask, getting the jump on him.

The detective is even finer up close, marked for his status by the square bulge in his pocket and the badge hidden underneath. Not to mention, I’ve looked up every law enforcement agent in the city, from tenured to rookie, at one point or another.

His name is on the tip of my tongue, and I can’t for the life of me remember anything but the D. I also can’t stop myself from glancing down at the juncture between his legs. I’m sure he’s got a fine D as well.

The man blinks, pulling up short. What does he see when he looks at me?

“You walked away from a crime scene wearing clothes better suited to downtown. You don’t belong here, so who are you?” he wants to know in return.

“Am I a person of interest to you, Officer?” I use the term to prod an answer out of him, secretly delighted when he falls into my trap.

“It’s Detective Bishop,” he corrects me.

His attitude marks him as a cop even if the coat says he should be on a runway somewhere. No, I tell myself. He’s too rough for a runway. But the coat is good quality. A girl can appreciate a man who knows quality.

I smile at him, flashing teeth. “I’m new to this part of the neighborhood, and I got worried when I heard the sirens. I decided to come over, check it out,” I say easily, keeping my tone light and airy. “Nothing else.”

Except Detective Bishop takes a step forward. “You’re lying.”

“How would you know?”

He opens his mouth to answer, then snaps his lips closed.

“You don’t believe I’m just a concerned citizen?” I press.

He shakes his head. “Honey, I’m sorry, there is nothing about you that speaks to you being a concerned citizen. You’re not one of the crows, either. I’m willing to bet actual money you knew the vic in some capacity. Ah.” He breaks off. “I’m right, aren’t I? Were you scoping out the crime scene because of it?”

Shit. Not good. Maybe I really am a terrible actor. He’s made me in less than ten minutes.

“Detective Bishop...I’m glad there are men like you protecting the city. It’s not right when young men are cut down in the prime of their lives. And in such a gruesome manner,” I say to divert his attention.

*Devan.*

His name comes to me in a flash. *That’s it.* I knew I recognized him. There are files on Devan on Broderick’s laptop detailing the other man’s involvement in a situation from several years back. They’re not supposed to be accessible to the rest of the members of the Black Market Syndicate, but I have ways around firewalls and protections that others do not.

I’m very good at my job.

Devan seems like a man who is good at his job, too. Maybe that’s why I stayed at the scene this morning for a little longer than prudent. Rather than checking on Everett to make sure there wasn’t a hint of life, or evidence, left for the cops to find, maybe I stayed because Devan is just so fucking sexy. And it’s been a long time since I’ve seen a man who gets the girls tingling the way he does.

A long time? Fuck. Try never.

Tingles are rare in life and rarer in my line of work.

“You seriously trying to blow smoke up my ass?” His voice takes on the haughty tone of someone who sees straight through the lies and is a little insulted you even tried.

I try not to feel properly chastised. “There wasn’t much blood, but the way his neck gaped open the way it did...” I play up the shudder for the detective’s benefit. “I hope you catch this killer soon.”

He's not buying it. Any of it.

"You have nothing to worry about, ma'am." He's not moving, either. "My partner and I are on the case, and we have an excellent record of closure. Now, why don't you tell me about your connection to the stiff?"

"I don't think you're going to be able to close this one," I murmur.

His gaze sharpens. "Why not?"

"It just seems to me there isn't a whole lot of evidence."

"If you know something, then you need to tell me," he says, smiling without showing teeth. "We can chat here or, if you'd feel more comfortable, head down to the station and talk there."

Well, since he's not buying my act fully, I slip back into the old tried and true. The one thing that has gotten me out of as many scrapes as it's gotten me into. I let my coat slip slightly, revealing the top of the lacy black tank underneath. It's a subtle gesture, natural, my neck stretching to the side delicately.

There's no hesitation in the movement, only a calm resolve I'm used to once my mind latches on to an idea. The resolve is always accompanied by a dogged tenacity. My mentor always said it would get me into trouble one day.

The trouble he's never been able to beat or fuck out of me, much to his eternal disappointment.

Devan is the same kind of trouble. I understand it without having to get to know him on anything deeper than a physical level. I saw his face in the reports I shouldn't have looked at, and I liked it. The angular planes of his face, those soulful dark eyes, now staring at me with a combination of suspicion and, dare I say it? Desire.

He wants me.

I knew it the second we locked eyes over Everett. Which isn't the sexiest way to meet someone you've fantasized about in a face-to-face setting, as I may or may not have done when I

accessed his files a year ago, but death doesn't faze me. It hasn't for a long time.

"You're agitated, Detective."

Devan blinks at my observation.

"I'm sure what you saw today is normal but still upsetting for you. I'd love to be able to show my appreciation to a man in uniform." I lace my fingers together in front of me.

I've got to be careful of going too fast, too soon, or I'll spook him. Still, I know when a man is showing interest in a woman. And the detective is doing his damndest not to look at my cleavage. Too bad for him he doesn't understand who he is up against.

I take a tentative step closer, maintaining eye contact the entire time as I reach between us and press my palm to his cock. Already, he's half hard, and his erection bobs against my hand.

"Stop."

The word is a single warning, a blast. His eyes harden as he looks at me.

"Why would I stop? You want your answers. I want to taste you."

For me, this is a transaction, something where we are both getting what we want out of it. He's getting a little release, and I'm getting a distracted man who isn't going to follow me. Win, win.

A smile flickers across my lips. "Trust me," I tell him in a low purr. "Let me show you how good it can be. Let me show you my appreciation for all you do."

"You're evading my questions," he says.

There's a moment where he thinks about it. I see the change on his face, the mental justification for letting a random stranger suck him off. I up the wattage on my smile and arch my back slightly to push the girls higher against the lace of my tank top.



Devan opens his mouth to say no, I'm sure of it, and in the split second he starts to form the word, I lift on the tips of my toes to kiss him, stealing the word and swallowing it down. His dick thickens underneath my hand. It's a small press of my mouth to his, not even a full kiss, but it's enough.

"Trust me," I murmur again, this time against his lips. "Relax. I'm not going to fuck you. Really."

There are people on the street, and just a few feet away, someone laughs. The world is waking up.

So close. So close, and Devan clenches his hands into fists at his sides. I bet those hands are rough and calloused from handling his gun. Or his knuckles are swollen from throwing a punch into someone's face.

He's doing everything he can to not touch me, not kiss me back. But he doesn't stop me, either. He says nothing else when I break the kiss to step back and drop to my knees in front of him.

I meet his hard look with a cheeky grin.

Those liquid chocolate eyes bore into mine with an intensity I'm not sure I've ever seen, and I hold them, my breath catching at the snick of his zipper. Overload in the hush of the alley. I slowly pull it all the way down and flick open the top of his pants. Push his boxers down just enough to have his cock bounce free from the confines.

Thick and girthy, his erection juts out right my nose. Perfectly straight and not at all like—

I shove those thoughts so far down into my psyche I'm not sure they'll remain in one piece.

Precum dots the tip of Devan's cock as I bend forward to take him into my mouth. Every inch of salty goodness I can fit before the head of him hits the back of my throat.

I didn't start the day thinking I'd be blowing a police officer. But with my head spinning and my pussy throbbing and growing wet, I squeeze his cock in my hand. Working the shaft in time with my head. Lips wrapped around, sucking him

down. His hips stutter, a strangled groan dying before he allows it to release.

His cock is a thing of beauty, though. They're not all built with the length and girth the detective packs.

He keeps his hands at his side without touching me.

I drag my tongue over his slit, lapping at his precum before pulling back to look at him. Pausing the movement of my hand around the base.

“Thank you for all you do, Detective. I'm sure every citizen in the Bay is appreciative.”

The growl I've been waiting for finally erupts, and when his dark eyes meet mine, he finally pushes me down onto his cock, and I swallow him. Taking him all the way before he pulls back and slams in again.

Devan grunts and thrusts his cock into my mouth to the point where I'm forced to reach out to grab his hips to stabilize myself. I lap my tongue along the underside of him while he fucks my mouth. My pussy has soaked all the way through my panties at this point.

No, not where I thought the day would take me. Not by a long shot. Still, I moan loudly, his movements frantic and jerky until his balls spasm, and he shoots hot cum all the way down my throat.

I latch my lips around him and swallow compulsively, taking everything he gives me down to the last drop. When he's finished coming, I pull my mouth from him and slick my thumb along my bottom lip.

“So tasty.”

I stand on shaky legs, disguising the movement with a smug smile as I readjust my tits in my shirt. Leaving his half-mast cock out in the open and reaching for me.

“Continue to serve and protect, Detective Bishop,” I tease breathlessly, saluting him before I take off. “It's been a pleasure.”

THREE

*devan*

WHAT THE FUCK is wrong with me?

Walking back toward the crime scene, I still feel the rush. The way the strange redhead's lips wrapped around the head of my cock while she sucked the life out of me. Christ, I don't even know her name. She answered none of my questions before I let her...

I've *never* let anything like this happen to me in my life, and there have been plenty of one-night stands in my past. Before I met Kimmy. How could I let some strange woman suck me off in the middle of the city? In the middle of the morning?

My badge gains twenty pounds in my jacket pocket, weighing everything in me down clear past the cracked sidewalk. I don't deserve to still carry it. Not when I'm standing in the alley with my dick hanging out, just letting the person of interest saunter away.

What's worse is how much I liked the blowjob. And the woman. She is a goddess. Something about her draws my attention and makes me turn around, stand up a little straighter.

But I still have no business leaving a crime scene, number one. No business letting her manipulate me, number two. Not to mention I don't buy her story for a city second. I'll have to do a little digging, see what I can find, see if she's in the system at all.

I sigh, straightening my jacket before I tuck my dick back into my pants and zip up.

The checkpoints of my life aren't anything to be proud of, I think on my march back to chaos.

I'm still with the force, but the grind is taking years off of my goddamn life. I lift a hand to the swirled scar on my shoulder, the size of a quarter where a bullet ripped clean through everything.

I want out of Empire Bay.

I'm tired of the force and tired of fighting so damn hard for no headway.

The Black Market Syndicate and Broderick Stevens have been quiet, at least. Quiet enough to make the Ninth Precinct believe Broderick might have stepped down or been killed.

I know we are wrong. I know life looks vastly different from autumn two years ago, and even the weather is a stark contrast. Gloomy, biting cold, the leaves dropping off of trees already dried and brown rather than gifting us with a riot of color.

Kimmy is long gone, and to be fair, it never would have worked out between us anyway. She's too normal. Too good. A school teacher molding young minds, and I'm too damaged for her kind of life. There's no coming back from the things I've seen, and worse, the things I've done.

I always thought Layla was kidding when she spoke about it in passing or looking at the worst instead of the best. But now? I get it.

"Yo, Bishop," Jerry calls out the second I came back into view. "Saw you going after the woman. You want to chase pussy, you do it on your own time. Don't waste mine."

Something in his mannerisms hitches, and I wonder if, even now, Jerry misses having Clint at his side to high-five. He's never been able to find another partner to stomach his brand of humor.

"If I had a jar for you, I'd be a wealthy man..." I mutter under my breath. To his face, I say, "Get wrecked, McGee. I know jealousy when I see it, and if she'd looked your way for half a second, you'd be popping a tent right here."

Thinking about the redhead's pussy has my spent cock twitching anew. Much to my surprise, Jerry huffs out a laugh rather than going for red-faced, all-American hatred.

"Maybe I just need a mastervation," he says.

"When a regular vacation won't do," I reply, picking up the thread of his joke.

Today might just be a fucking twist of reality for everyone, then.

Naomi perks up as my footsteps grow louder and gestures over her shoulder for me to look at something. "We found a clue," she says in a hush. "Something we didn't find in any of the other scenes."

"Didn't realize you were quite so discontent to let the ME's do their job, Blue. You've been hunting for clues all on your own."

She misses the reference entirely and holds out a slightly bent business card with one of the corners torn off. Her smile is back in place, her front teeth larger for the way she pulls her lips back from them. "There's no name on it, but there's a number. Might be an IP address. Contains the right number of digits."

I pull on a pair of latex gloves and pluck the card from her. "We'll have to have our guys trace it and see if they can get a hit."

Fuck, I can't even muster enough energy to be excited about a potential break in the case. The blowjob helped a bit, make no mistake. Watching those tits bounce while the stranger's head bobbed up, down, the flick of her tongue and the grip on my—

"Dev? Are you okay?" Naomi is looking at me sideways.

I might need my own mastervation soon. Not that I want to admit to Jerry that he has a pretty sweet phrase to coin. All I can think about is slamming into the redhead, pressing my cock to her core again and again, and feeling her tighten around me.

Which isn't going to help the family of the dead man get any closure. Any of the dead men, really.

It's not going to help me bring down the entire Black Market Syndicate and avenge Layla's death.

*Nothing.*

Even getting sucked off barely makes me feel any better.

"I think I need to take a walk. Get out of my head a little bit." I slide my hands into the pockets of my coat. "You've got this well in hand."

"Are you sure you're going to be okay? You look a little pale," Naomi replies. She's got her hair pulled back in a tight bun away from her face, her almond-shaped eyes even narrower somehow. "It's the coffee, isn't it? You can tell me. I won't get offended."

I huff out a laugh. "I never look pale, Detective." I turn to Jasleen. "Keep an eye on things here for me, will you?"

Naomi bristles at being looked over while Jasleen shoots me a salute. "I've got it covered, Dev," Jasleen says. "Don't you worry 'bout a thing."

Today's blowie felt like punishment and present wrapped into one. And having the woman swallow...it hasn't been my experience finding ladies who actually like doing it. Who likes the taste of cum.

I've also never done it during work hours. *Ever.*

There is something wrong with me that several months of therapy after losing my partner hasn't been able to isolate or heal.

Dragging the cell from my coat pocket, I snap a picture of the number on the card before glancing over at Naomi.

"You're going to be all right if I leave you, right?" I ask in a low tone.

She tilts her head to the side like an adorable kitten, her eyes narrowing. "What do you mean, am I going to be all

right? I'm clearly fine. You're the one who's been losing his marbles all morning. Where are you going, Dev?"

"Home." It's way too fucking early in the day, and my shift is nowhere near done, but...

Hopefully, Ashcroft will understand.

Naomi squeaks and her hands go to her hips. "Are you kidding me right now? You can't leave me in the middle of an active crime scene investigation. This isn't like you!"

*You don't know me.*

"Between you and Jasleen, things will get handled." I refuse to feel guilty about it. "I just need a minute. We'll blame it on lack of sleep."

"Then take the car around the block and take your minute. Grab a coffee, a donut, whatever you need. I—"

"You can do this alone," I interrupt. "I'm not going to be any help on the case if I don't settle myself." The little bit of vulnerability leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and I try to picture how this conversation would go if I were speaking to Layla instead of Naomi.

Layla would laugh her ass off and tell me to pull my head out of mine. To get my shit together. She never suffered fools, lightly or otherwise.

I missed her with every fucking breath for someone I'd never been romantically involved with.

"You've still got the car keys anyway," I say, flashing my new partner a lopsided smile. "You got this. I'll catch up with you later in the afternoon, and I'm always available to be reached by text. Okay?"

A beat. It's all I need, and it better do the trick.

It's the only thing that will get my head on straight. Both heads.

I leave Naomi behind, still scrambling to get me to stay, pulling out any kind of excuse she can think of and some that lead me to believe she had them loaded up already.



My place is only a few blocks over from here. Always the bad part of town, I think, hunching my shoulders against the chilly breeze. I used to think it was a better way to connect with the people I served.

Now it's punishment.

I don't deserve better.

I'm not a decorated detective anymore, in my mind—I'm the scum who lets a stranger blow him in an alley during work.

In the end, the walk does nothing to clear my head, and I throw open the front door to my apartment, feeling heavier than I've been in months. Despite the truly fantastic blowjob from the gorgeous stranger I had no business following.

I shrug out of my coat and let it drop in a pool on the floor. A second thought has me picking it up and hanging it in the wardrobe near the door, on the hanger, with the rest of my jackets.

Crossing the living room takes approximately two seconds, and I dodge a small love seat and a dying cactus.

Somehow, even with the simple needs of the plant, I've managed to kill it.

My laptop is buried under a pile of paperwork from all the cases I have open at the moment. It's small in comparison to the caseload I used to tackle and the burdens I told myself I needed to shoulder to prove I was the best.

My old partner's hunt for justice didn't help matters.

I hope she found what she was looking for in the end. Or at least something close to peace in the afterlife. She deserved it.

Knowing I'd never really be able to rest, to take that beat, I drop on the couch, flipping open the laptop. My work computer might have most of the information I need, but I can still do some preliminary research. Look for clues, the way I do every day from home.

I don't have the skills of the tech guys, but I've got a VPN and a complex. That sort of combination goes a long way.

A quick search of some backend websites.

Someone there will know if the number relates to a site or not.

The hours bleed into each other, and the sky outside darkens. My cell is somewhere, forgotten, as I dig a chasmic hole into the mystery of the number on the card.

The search leads to a chat room I haven't been to yet. Member searches, names, aliases.

Another hour, and I've still got nothing.

The chat room has some shady shit for sale, though. The type disguised as anything else in order to disabuse suspicion. If you know where to look, though, it's all right there in the open.

Dark web shit.

I shake my head, marveling at how there is no part of me that gets upset about this anymore. Those days are long gone, beaten out of me at the academy. Any lingering feelings, even most of my empathy, disappeared over the years I've been on the force. The sick shit I've had to deal with and the messes I've cleaned up.

After searching around, even this chat seems like it's all tied up in a fucking bow. There are no ends to unravel; at least none my meager probing skills are able to uncover.

My hand curls into a fist on the laptop touchpad.

A headache brews, and distantly, I remember the forgotten coffee from this morning.

There's a layer of sludge in my personal coffeemaker, the product of too many evenings spent at the precinct rather than at home in my own bed.

When was the last time I changed the sheets? Shit, I can't even remember. I've been on autopilot, dragging my ass through each day with my focus a million miles away and holes in my brain. Pertinent details slip through those holes. At least I managed a shower before I got called out on duty this morning.

A small win.

A notification dings, and with my next glance at the computer, a giant chat icon takes up the majority of the screen.

Darkling: *You're new.*

Hmm. Maybe there's a new thread to unravel after all. If someone is taking the time to reach out to me, they're more than likely a regular. Someone who knows the ins and outs of the website and who will have a better chance of offering me a connection to my dead guy. A ghost of a smile flickers over my face.

Hopefully, *Darkling* will be my goldmine.

I stretch my arms overhead, my stomach rumbling painfully and reminding me that I haven't had anything to eat since a bowl of brown sugar oatmeal at five this morning.

Darkling: *Cat got your tongue? Or are you making me wait because you think you're clever?*

I arch a brow at the chat. Apparently, five seconds of formulating an answer isn't acceptable.

EnemySquare: *I didn't realize attendance was being taken, I type back, a little annoyed.*

Darkling: *Ooh, a feisty one, too. Maybe you needed the extra time to try and come up with a flirtatious line.*

They're typing so fast my head spins.

Darkling: *Not knowing the rules here can get you in trouble, though. And the last person who caused this room trouble didn't live long enough to be properly punished. Would you like me to spell things out for you?*

I lift my brow.

EnemySquare: *Is that a threat?*

I receive my response seconds later, a winky smiley face accompanied by:

Darkling: *I guess it depends on what kind of punishment gets you off. Come on. You can tell me. I promise I'm great at*

*keeping secrets.*

Okay. This one seems ready to play. *Please let it be a woman.* I'd be able to handle a little light flirtation with a woman, and no matter how dark the overtones of this Darkling character, I'm aware enough to know when someone is flirting with me.

Mental fingers crossed.

EnemySquare: *Seems to me like you're interested in what gets me off.*

Darkling: *Someone has a big head. I wonder if that counts for both of them or the empty box on top of your neck.*

Alright, so I'm not wrong. Whoever is on the other end of this chat is definitely fucking with me. Or flirting.

EnemySquare: *It counts for both, I promise you.*

Darkling: *Abide by the rules of the chat and you won't force me to find out how to punish both those massive heads.*

EnemySquare: *What if I like the punishment?*

Darkling: *There are some who do. Others who think they know how to handle themselves until they poke the beast and then balk at what they awaken.*

EnemySquare: *Are you the dungeon master?*

Darkling: *...Ha! I've been called worse.*

EnemySquare: *But what do you like to be called?*

Darkling: *Mistress of the Dark Web works well for me. I also respond to Mistress Extraordinaire or Hey You.*

EnemySquare: *Now who has a big head?*

Darkling: *I never claimed otherwise. So what are you doing here? Lurking? Playing by dipping your foot into blacker pools?*

EnemySquare: *Depends, because you never told me what the punishment will be.*

Darkling: *Do not let anyone tell you I'm easily manipulated. You're in my world now, sweet thing, and I'm*

*perfectly free to tell you what I want, or not.*

EnemySquare: *Well, a friend of mine used to come on here and play but he never mentioned anything about a Mistress. I think his wife might have objected.*

Let's see what this woman knows. If it's not a catfish situation. This is my chance to establish an intro, see what kind of information I might be able to get regarding our stiff.

Darkling: *Seems to me you're getting a little ahead of yourself. Trying to get information out of me when I know nothing about you.*

EnemySquare: *You're not a very good mistress if you don't know at least a few things about me by now. Go ahead and surprise me. What have you learned?*

Darkling: *Ha! I'm also not one to rise to bait, no matter how tempting it looks dangling in front of me. You're going to have to give me a little bit more if you want something. A real quid pro quo situation, you understand?*

EnemySquare: *What do you want from me, then?*

Darkling: *Probably something more than you'd be willing to give me. Want to lasso the moon?*

EnemySquare: *Sorry, I'm not George Bailey.*

Darkling: *And I'm impressed with a man who knows I'm referencing a movie from 1946. (raindrop emoji)*

I find myself smiling at the screen, impressed with the quick and easy banter. Catching my reflection in the laptop screen is enough to have me slamming it shut.

Fuck, no. This is exactly the kind of behavior I came home to escape. Why I'm not still out on the street with my ass prickled and cold, helping Naomi put the pieces of our cases together and making them fit.

I haul my ass into the shower and flip the switch on, cold water blasting out of the shower head. First, blowjobs in an alley, and now acting as if I'm in a teen drama in a chat room, getting giddy from the attention.

I've got to get a handle on the situation ASAP.

Or else I'll get too deep over my head to ever resurface.

FOUR

MY HEELS TAP a line across the wooden floor. I'll be expected to leave them at the office door, something about germs and shit like that. It's a risk to wear them in the hallway in the first place.

The building is pristine. Neat. Obsessively clean. Just the way Broderick expects for his house and for all of his jobs. There isn't a speck of dust where one doesn't belong, and even the baseboards are able to pass the white glove test.

My boss is the type of person who needs order and control over every aspect of his life and has the money to make sure it happens. The cleaning service he keeps on retainer has probably made a fortune. Good thing they know how to keep their mouths shut, too. There are certain things you undertake for Broderick that mean death if you blab.

Such as my job.

Even when I take a few minutes to play online, my personal project has made millions for him already and gives me the sort of satisfaction a woman only gets from two places: a great piece of chocolate or an orgasm.

Leaning against the doorjamb, I kick off the right heel and then the left before sliding into the office with more guts than a barefoot woman should have when approaching a den of cobras.

The first thing I see is Blake sitting behind the desk with a Bluetooth earpiece on. I send him a grin, and he glances up in time to hold up a finger to tell me to hold on. He murmurs



something to whoever is on the other end of his call, and I nod in understanding.

He's always so serious.

Part of *the family*, Blake works as the big bad's assistant, so it's not exactly a job designed to inspire a lot of laughs and giggles. I'm going to crack him one day. Mark my words. The poor kid needs a little joy in his life. Don't we all?

I drop a donut on his desk, and he slowly peels his eyes from the dessert to me.

"Yes, we'll chat later. Yes, thank you. It's all in hand," he says before he ends the call. "Aria..." He trails off, looking beleaguered.

I wink. "Chocolate frosted?" I ask. "It's such a simple flavor I'm not sure why I didn't think about it until now."

He eyes me and takes a bite, chewing slowly.

"I'm going to find out your favorite. I don't think this is it, though. You're giving me the same kind of reaction, the same vibe, as the glazed." It was a small matter to stop on the way from my place to headquarters, grab a couple of donuts, and set one aside for Blake. I'd shoved the other into my mouth on the drive over as if it would somehow do what the quick bean flick had not.

Alas. I'm stuck feeling too aroused for my own good.

Blake stays stoic. "You'd never know you were Broderick Stevens's right-hand woman by the way you behave," he says at last.

Now, most people who don't know Blake would take those words as an insult. Not me.

"That's the point, my dear friend," I tell him gleefully. "I'm the sunshine in this place. Where would you be without the little levity I bring?"

I've got my own setup in the corner, away from Blake's desk and separated by an expensive imported silk screen so no one has to see what they call "my mess." The space I was given to bring the Black Market Syndicate's dark web

operations up and running is basically nothing, not compared to the rest of the opulence of this building.

Still, it's mine. All mine and decorated with junk and Funko Pop figures.

Even the opulence in this room, from the artfully chiseled designs of the marble fireplace to the velvet drapes and solid gold curtain rods.

I mean, it's chic and over the top.

Totally too much.

I've got a tiny corner of it. And I've grown a sharp underground group from the ground up, both key hackers and wealthy clients looking for new avenues to make money. The mess is my muse, I like to say when people complain. I've got to have little trinkets around me to fill the space; otherwise, I'll go out of my mind.

Blake, on the other hand, is just as tidy as Broderick. The two of them are like peas in a pod if the pod had nothing inside of it.

Blake doesn't finish the donut. "Were you seen?" he wants to know. "When you went out today?"

When I went out...and sucked off a detective. Partially to quell his suspicions and partially because, well, damn it, I wanted to. I wanted to step outside the lines, do something a little crazy. And Detective Bishop is crazy hot.

I drop down in my seat and twirl, craning my head to look at Blake. "You know, some days I forget who is the assistant and who is the master." I point to myself, mouthing the words *it's me*. "Of course I wasn't seen. Are you crazy, Blake? I know how to keep a low profile."

"You were the one who insisted you had to go see what happened to Everett," he replies with a sniff, as though he can't be bothered to engage in any kind of verbal sparring. "You can't just take my word on it. The man is dead. As dead as anyone else."

“I know, I know. But he was one of mine, and I’m like a momma bird. I needed to see him.”

Blake is about as pleased with my excuse as a person who just discovered they have hemorrhoids would be.

I catch a glance at the clock on the wall and curse. *Shit.*

I’m supposed to sit in on a board meeting, and I haven’t had a chance to do...anything. Not change, not wash my mouth out, nothing.

“Quick. Toss me the donut.” I gesture for Blake to hand it off as I scramble for a hairbrush, a scrunchie, something to get my hair in order.

“You’re going to get chocolate all over your face,” he warns. “I’m sure you already had one, too.”

Better than dick breath, I think to myself, taking a giant bite and chewing as fast as my jaw is able to work.

I force myself to swallow before I speak again. “Look, I’m going to the board meeting. If you see anything about Everett’s death online, I want to hear about it. Even the mundane chatter in the rooms. I’ve got AI monitoring, but it’s better if your eyes are there, too. I don’t know who is hunting down my guys... three deaths in five months is one too many to be a coincidence.”

Blake understands.

At least, he better understand.

He’s been in this game longer than I have, practically a legacy with the Black Market Syndicate, even though he’s only a few years older than me. His hair is a light shade of gold, almost too light to be described as any one color, and his eyes green with a hazel star around the center.

Right now, he’s watching me, only a shade from *aghast*, with his hands steepled above his desk. If I wait too long, he’ll start to say how worried he is about me and how I’m focusing on the wrong things.

The usual.

I grab a folder from my desk and hustle toward the elevator, hitting my code for the top floor. The boardroom where Broderick prefers to meet with partner and competitor. The elevator ride takes less than ten seconds, and I use the chance to wipe my face, my mouth, beneath my eyes. I smooth a hand over my hair just in time for the doors to open, bringing me face-to-face with Broderick himself.

A wicked smile splits his face and adds wrinkles to the ones he already boasts. My stomach takes a dive at the expression.

“Well. You look like my own personal dessert today, darling.” He bends to kiss my cheek.

Sometimes, it’s hard for me to reconcile the reputation he’s clawed out of the mud of this city with the actual man in front of me. He’s older, yes, by a long stretch, but when we’re alone, the man is sensational. Sexy. Dominant.

I love feeling like I’ve pleased him. And in the past ten years, I haven’t stepped a foot out of line or even looked at another man. Until today.

*What if he finds out?*

Shit!

His arm slides around my waist, and he squeezes me into a terse hug. “Trouble?”

The smooth voice slicks through my system, and I shiver, every part of me electrified. This is the god who rules our little slice of underworld heaven, except he’s not the traditional kind of good-looking. Despite his reputation, he’s a fit, middle-aged man with a slender build and masculine features.

He looks great in his three-piece suit and coal-black button-up shirt.

“Never anything I can’t handle.” I lean into him, licking my lips. “You know I’ll make you proud.”

“See that you do.” He brushes his finger along the ridge of my nose. “See that you do.”

He steps away from me a second later, leaving me off balance. Then leaving me altogether as Broderick strides ahead toward the meeting room. He wasn't the kind of man anyone with half a brain messed with—he'd evaded law enforcement for years as he carved out an unbreakable toehold in the underbelly of Empire Bay.

“Come with me. I've been waiting for you.”

The gravelly timber, combined with that single word I'd heard so often, has me hustling into motion behind him.

He'd told me once about his start, holding these meetings in a warehouse he owned down by the bay. Humble beginnings where he saw an opening in the market for his particular brand of sadism, and it paid off.

Now we are in his private residence, and he has only to snap his fingers to have the others hustling like rats toward a primo piece of cheese. The foyer of the penthouse is seamless marble and all white walls. Monochromatic and opulent. It takes people off guard, which is probably one of the reasons Broderick chose such starkness for the entry.

His personal office, the one he uses more than the room where he sticks me and Blake, is directly across the hall from the boardroom.

The doors to the boardroom are wide open, and I walk in, taking a seat against the wall like I always do.

A few men higher up in the Syndicate like to joke and mock that I'm in the whore's corner. But what they don't know is this: I've got the best fucking vantage point in the room. I see, I watch, I gather any tells and memorize them to report back to Broderick later.

His second in command, Antoni, is already leering at me before I have a chance to settle. Antoni is a roach in human form. The dirty-blond hair, beard, and three-piece suit do nothing to hide his carapace.

It doesn't matter what Antoni thinks or any of the others. Let them call me a whore.

Broderick might be the biggest crime boss in the city, but he damn well makes sure I have what I need because he understands I bring a lot to the table. And I'll never go back to being on the streets again.

I shift in my seat, crossing one leg over the other. The electricity from earlier today morphs into something uncomfortable, almost painful, tearing through my ears to elbows and everything in between. The past always comes knocking in those moments when my guards go down. Even a little bit.

Those images from my past I have to block out and ignore.

I'm stronger than they are.

Stronger now than I'd been before, and I'd never look in the mirror and see the weak, pathetic teenager on the side of the road again. I haven't seen her, in fact, since the man commanding the room knelt in front of me in the rain, took off his jacket to lay it across my shoulders, and guided me from the streets without ever threatening to put me back there.

Fingers snap, and when I come out of my memories, Broderick is glaring at me. Urging me with his dark look to pay fucking attention.

I sit up straighter and struggle to listen to what Dougherty has to say. He's newer and replaced the very dead Gabriel Blackwell as head reaper for the Black Market Syndicate.

Dougherty isn't nearly as good as Blackwell.

A fact that Antoni has never failed to remind the man about.

"You didn't leave the lighter on the last hit." Antoni smirks. "Are you stupid or just a pain in my ass? Why should I have to go behind you and clean up? It's ridiculous. This is why you're paid the big bucks."

"I don't need to take advice from a man who hates getting blood on his shoes," Dougherty fires back, "I know for a fact you've got your dry cleaners on speed dial in case you get a little messy. It's ridiculous."

“Focus a little more on doing your goddamn job and less on my dry cleaners,” Antoni snaps.

The tension in the room grows, thickens, and Broderick’s shoulders go straight. He eyes me, giving me our signal, a silent urge to handle this shit. He likes to test me sometimes, to see what I’m made of, and as much as it makes me nervous to have his eyes on me, it’s gotten me here.

It’s moved me up the ladder considerably.

I clear my throat to grab the room’s attention. “Perhaps we can stop this dick-measuring contest and get back to the point of why we’ve gathered today. Hmm?”

“If I wanted a bitch’s opinion, I would have brought my dog,” Dougherty quips. “At least she does what she’s told.”

“*This* dog will have a fabulous time chopping off your dick, the same one that so clearly lost you this contest, and roasting it over the open flame.” I point over my shoulder to the fireplace with the black stone hearth perfect for driving away the chill in the air. Broderick has one in almost every room. “It’s easy to replace you, Big D. Remember that. Especially if you keep fucking up.”

I know Broderick doesn’t want to have to speak up in these meetings. He demands perfection even from those around him, even when they don’t realize they’re falling short.

And him always having to talk over someone else at a meeting is a flawed system. I’d learned that fast from the beginning.

Hence, the signal.

The rest of the meeting isn’t anything exciting, either. Dougherty flashes me a look loaded with rage and a threat for later. He’s one we’ll have to watch out for in the future, I’m sure. It’s good for our reapers to have a bit of fire, to execute their targets with practicality and, yeah, maybe a little bit of flair.

But this is the second time Dougherty has forgotten to leave the signature lighter to mark the kills as ours, and it’s going to make us look weak in front of our competitors. The

little men always rise and fall, but Broderick is large enough to block out the sun. The others don't survive long in this game.

Which is exactly the way we like it.

The Syndicate is established. We've made our mark, and for the past ten years, I've been part of it. Time for me to shine, too.

Antoni takes up more time than not updating the core group on hits, merchandise, and expansion. He's looking into establishing more trade routes through territories belonging to families outside of our influence. I make a note to look into some of those routes later.

The meeting finally ends, and my knees are starting to get achy from sitting for too long. Damn these heels. They don't make things easy. I'd much rather have left them downstairs, but bare feet will just incite pregnancy jokes up here.

"Aria?"

The sound of my name has me stopping dead in my tracks.

I turn to Broderick in question, the file folder still clutched in my hand and absolutely forgotten during the meeting. Fuck.

"Yes?"

Broderick crooks a finger. "I need to see you in my office. Now."

It seems the only thing that can unite a couple of assholes is the prospect of bullying someone else. Antoni and Dougherty snicker to each other, and I straighten my back, determined to ignore them. The way I always have to ignore them.

Dutifully, I trail after Broderick while the rest of the men in the operation trail back toward the elevator. Two men in black suits with earpieces ducked into the cavities of their heads usher them out and make sure they actually leave the premises.

Something solid settles in my stomach when the door closes softly behind me. Broderick keeps a hand against it, maintaining eye contact even as he flicks the lock closed.



“I think it went well.” I flash him a smile loaded with teeth. “Although we’re still no closer to figuring out who is targeting our men.”

He clucks his tongue. “A small matter in the grand scheme. Settle down, Aria.” His voice is a low croon. “It’s time to put certain businesses to bed and raise others.”

Despite the sensations in my stomach, despite the long day I’ve had, and the desperate desire to seek my bed, there’s no way out of this. Not without appeasing the head of the monster.

Both literally and figuratively.

I let the folder drop and move to the straps of my shirt, pushing them down my arms. Broderick watches me undress, his gaze dark and inscrutable.

“What a good girl,” he murmurs as I push my pants down to the floor. The thong follows, and I kick it all aside, standing in front of him naked and shivering despite the merry crackle of the fire at my back.

He’s on me seconds later, turning me around and kneading at my breasts, my pussy. His gnarled knuckles caress my clit, and sensation shocks through me before he pushes a finger inside me roughly.

“That’s such a good girl, Aria.” Broderick kicks my legs open and bends me over the desk. “Very good indeed. Are you hot for Daddy?”

The snick of a zipper is the only warning I receive before he notches the head of his cock at my entrance.

I’m wet enough from anticipation but not nearly enough to stop the friction from causing pain. His cock surges inside of me as Broderick buries to the hilt, his hands tightening on my hips before they shift to my breasts and up to my neck.

The sex is always rough, and it always hurts.

It’s what gives me the release I need.

I’ve never been able to come any other way. His intrusion forces my body to accommodate him, to adjust and stretch

around his cock.

“Who owns you, baby?”

His grip around my neck tightens, threatening to cut off my air supply. He grinds his hips against my ass before he pulls out and slams home.

When I don't answer right away, when my lips form the words but his hold on my neck prevents them from erupting, he squeezes more, slapping the side of my ass with his opposite hand, palm open.

“Who owns you?”

He's on my windpipe. He's dangerously close to crossing a line he's never crossed before, and—

Broderick forces me down on the desk harder, and black spots dance in front of my eyes.

“You do, Master. You do.”

I somehow manage to get the words out, and Broderick is satisfied enough that he releases me, slapping me across the side of the face. I gasp, filling my lungs with air, and the harsh slam of his flesh against mine has me coming in an instant.

Broderick follows seconds later and fills my pussy with his cum.

His.

I belong to him, and I have since he found me on the streets.

He pulls out with a grunt and tucks himself back into his pants. “That's right. You remember.”

He leaves me holding on to the desk for dear life. His seed drips down my leg. Something...shifted tonight. Something changed. Hopefully, it's more from him being hot and cold lately than anything else because I need this. I need him and the pain he brings.

I need the power I have in making a man like him want me. It's what's made me the best at what I do, and I won't lose it.

Even when my legs shake, and a part of me screams that being left like this is nothing short of degrading, I don't dare move. Not when I've learned better.

My power, but on his terms.

“Clean yourself up,” Broderick demands from the door.  
“And don't drip on the floor.”



*devan*

FINGERS SNAP in front of my face, and I blink at Adam, our IT wizard.

“Devan, what the heck, my dude?” Adam is the type who wants to be cooler than he actually is, so he tries out different slang when the mood suits him. Poor guy.

At least he and the other goons in the basement are damn good at their jobs. I’m not sure where anyone at the Ninth Precinct would be without them, although no one wants to admit we’ve got them. They are our boogeymen. Not feared in the traditional sense but the source of much pride and embarrassment.

“Are you overloaded with cases again?” he asks. “You’re about a million miles away and not paying attention to anything I’m saying. You look like you’re on Mars.”

“I probably am.”

I used to walk right by our geek squad and pay them no mind. With all the changes in the precinct over the past two years, with the changes in the person who shared space with me at the desk, I’d become a little more open with the geeks.

Go figure.

“I’m sorry,” I reply. “I’ve got no excuses.”

Adam gestures toward the back of the room in an exaggerated gesture. Ah, perfect. He’s got something to report, then. My mind, scattered to the four corners of the fucking earth this morning, slowly starts to pull itself together.

A cold shower, jerking myself off, and about five straight hours of sleep were supposed to set me right today. I woke up to a baker's dozen texts from Naomi, including a link to a song she always listens to when she needs to be cheered up (surprisingly, not the talented Miss Spears).

Adam is still wrenching his head toward the stairwell, his eyes rolling back into his head to show me nothing but white, the gesture large enough to give him a headache if he doesn't already have one.

Sadly, the IT guys don't come up to this level of the building often, and his mere presence is enough to have some of the veteran *good old boys* I work with eyeing the two of us strangely.

I grab a stack of papers and lead the way toward the rear stairwell of the warehouse building the precinct occupies. The one that always smells like mold and burnt toast no matter what, so no one uses it anymore.

The door closes behind us, and Adam lets out a breath of air once it's just the two of us alone.

"What do you have for me?" I ask him, on edge and a little excited. "Were you able to put a trace on the owner of the chat room?"

He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, his complexion almost fishily pale in the watery yellow light from overhead. "I wasn't able to find anything on Darkling," he begins.

"Are you serious?" I groan, scrubbing a hand through my hair. "Come on, Adam. You and Bill are the best guys we've got. You had to have found something out."

The duo really are the best at their job and trustworthy, which counts for a lot in my book. They aren't owned by anyone, and although I wouldn't put them above reproach, so far, they've shown their loyalty to the force and to me. I scouted them out myself for months before I started investigating any online activity in relation to the Black Market Syndicate, my own side project. Adam has been with

me every step of the way and the first person I called when it came to figuring out Darkling's identity.

"I'm sorry, buddy, but it's impossible. Whoever it is... they're king. You get what I'm saying?" Even Adam looks impressed, and it takes a whole lot to do that. "They are a mystery wrapped in an enigma...you do get what I'm saying, right? I can't find anything on Darkling. Whoever it is, they are a master at covering their trail. Their programming erases their moves directly after they're made."

"Nothing?" I find it hard to believe. "Male? Female?"

Adam shakes his head. "None of it. I mean, judging from what you've said about your chat last night, I'm hoping for your sake you were flirting with a human woman, but it's impossible to say. Even the chat records are gone."

Frustration eats at my insides. I rub my hand down the sides of my head, my temples, and across my cheeks, digging my nails into my skin and hoping a little discomfort will sharpen me up. Get me back into the mindset I need to take down these assholes.

I forgot to shave in all the confusion.

There is something very wrong with me, mentally.

I struggle to focus, with Adam standing there, waiting for me to reply. To make some kind of comment to let him know I'm okay with what he's been doing and the lack of information, even when I'm definitely not.

There are those at the station firmly embedded in the Black Market Syndicate's pockets. It's the same at every station house, an unfortunate reality of the place and time in which we live.

The Syndicate is a disease infecting Empire Bay and the surrounding areas.

And they've gotten so big that no one is really capable of taking them down. We can only deal with the repercussions of them.

“This person is good, whoever they are. What I can do,” Adam continues when I’ve been silent for too long, “is get you info on where a few of the other idiots logged on recently. The IP address in our dead guy’s pocket definitely matches the chat room, and I hope to be able to crack things soon. I’ve got several programs running. Darkling is good, but not good enough to stop me. I already managed to find out where one of the users logged on.”

“Damn, thanks.” I clasp him on the shoulder. “It’s appreciated. I know you’ve been working hard.”

Adam blushes, not used to the praise. “I’m...the man?”

I chuckle and agree. “Yeah. You’re the man. Now, what did you get for me?”

Damn it. I didn’t want to like the dude, but I do. Him and Bill, although Bill is much rougher around the edges. I told myself after Layla died...I wouldn’t get close to anyone I work with. I can’t handle another loss.

Against all my better judgment, I’ve gotten attached to Adam.

Adam and Bill, among the others in the tech department, do a damn fucking good job of boosting our firewalls and protections, too. Especially after our last incident with a mole among us. They went apeshit trying to fix the breaks in our cyber protections. Now, no one can access our records. Not inside, unless you’ve got the right credentials, and definitely not outside.

“Firestone Brewery,” he tells me.

“What?”

He turns to me and sticks his index finger against my collarbone, the kind of bro behavior he’s never displayed before, but he’s smiling. “The last place several of the chat members logged on. It’s not really a known hot spot for any kind of illegal activity, though. Unless it’s been scrubbed.” He considered the option. “Could be.”

“Can you see if it has?”



He nods, eager. “Yeah, of course.”

Now I feel like a fucking idiot. “And...” I lower my voice even though we’re alone. “How about facial recognition? Did the photos taken at the crime scene match anything from your software?”

“The special secret thing you asked me to do, buddy?” Adam clarifies.

Too many damn people saw the blowjob princess at the scene, there and gone. Even Captain Ashcroft took an interest when he saw the initial photographs of the crime scene. People are asking questions based on her proximity and the way I bolted after her.

If I bring her in for questioning, then maybe I can get the higher-ups off my back, grab some answers, and have her out of the way in no time.

I shift, standing there a little uncomfortable because now I’m thinking about her lips around my cock.

“Ah, yeah, interesting.” Adam drags out his phone and types in a few things. “But easy.” He holds the phone out to show me the notes he’d compiled. “Aria is her name. Couldn’t get a definitive last name on her, but her name has popped up on several radars. No follow-through, though. She’s potentially tied to Broderick Stevens, but no one can tie her to anything definitive.”

I freeze. “She’s what?”

Adam shrugs, but his brows furrow together in discomfort. “No one can put a finger on her for sure. She came from nothing, and now she owns a rent-controlled apartment in one of the most lavish apartments in the city. No history on her, nothing except her first name. Her place is a block from Broderick’s offices. Where, you’ll be intrigued to know, she walks daily. In and out of the building. Seems to have some skill with the computer. Hacker, maybe?”

He’s thinking out loud, and I’m following what he’s putting down.

The last three bodies have been found without a lighter to mark the death as one at the hand of the Black Market Syndicate. We've been working on a connection, but so far, we've been coming up blank except to say they were all disposed of in the same way and probably done by the same killer.

Maybe the bodies belonged to the organization, and maybe my blowjob princess had been there on word from her boss. It's a thread to tug, if nothing else, and will give me another chance to talk to her face-to-face.

Aria, a connection to Broderick.

Aria. That's her name.

*Fuck.*

My hand curls into a fist, and I slam it against the wall, making a dent in the old sheetrock. The skin on my knuckles cracks but doesn't bleed.

What the fuck is this really about? Now I *want* to arrest her. I want to bring her in and interrogate her within an inch of her sanity and see how close an association she has with Stevens. And what went down with Layla.

"You okay, buddy?" Adam pushes his glasses higher, a sure sign he's nervous. "You look pissed."

"Don't tell anyone about this yet," I warn. "Keep this close and hold on to it for now, alright? I want to check her out myself before I waste anyone's time. I'm going to her apartment. What's the address?"

"Not a good idea," he replies. "I wouldn't do that. She's not home."

I glare at him, and Adam, with an unprecedented show of bravery, grins at me despite my black mood.

"I heard you getting your ass handed to you in your briefing this morning about taking off after a woman—this particular woman—and then heading home from the crime scene. So, I may have taken it upon myself to attach some tech to ping her phone. You know, right after you texted me to ask.

Once I got the identity down, I started following her virtually. She's at a business complex an hour outside of town. Something called the Galleria."

I've been there before, with Kimmy, when she wanted to go shopping. On my dime. Which I didn't mind, of course. I wanted to give my girl everything she wanted, but it's a pricey place. Where I got the coat, actually.

Makes sense when I think about it because the clothes and the shoes all suggested Aria liked the finer things.

A muscle in my jaw ticks, my eye twitching in tandem, the sensation wholly unpleasant. "So send me the details," I reply, punctuating every word to leave no room for misunderstanding. "Please."

Adam nods hard enough to have his hair flopping and his glasses sliding down to the tip of his nose. "Sure thing, boss. You got it. Anything."

I start to walk back to the bullpen to grab my keys and stop before my hand wraps around the handle. "Adam, one last question?"

He skids to a stop behind me. "What is it?"

"Why have you been so loyal to me? When I'm assigning you all of this under-the-table bullshit? I wouldn't blame you if you told me to shove it up my ass because this is above your pay grade." And a little shady, if I'm being honest.

I've got to know.

Adam's back to looking ill at ease, shifting from foot to foot, and he shrugs one shoulder while simultaneously tucking his phone back into the pockets of his jeans. "I mean...you don't ask me how I get my information. Me, or Bill. You respect my boundaries, and I'll sure as hell respect yours." He grins. "Not to mention, you respect my skills, which is more than a lot of the people here do. They treat us like freaks."

I used to be one of them.

But he's doing a decent thing, and I'm grateful for it. One of the good guys in a world where that's rare.

“You really are the man.” I mutter the last bit under my breath and walk out.

My phone pings on the way back to my desk, and it’s the information I’d requested from Adam. Shit, I don’t want to know how easy it is for those guys to do their job.

I just need more of a life away from this shit.

Off the grid and gone.

Not the kind of life where I go shopping at the Galleria and sit down for high fucking tea, but something, anything, to bring me back to myself. To ignite the spark I used to feel when I was going through the academy to get to the ultimate goal: helping people.

I’d felt so alive, filled with purpose, and somewhere along the line, it all turned to shit.

“Hey. Hey, Dev! Where are you going now?” Naomi stands and pushes away from the desk in one movement, staring at me with the imploring kind of gesture puppies use when they want another biscuit. “Please tell me you’re not taking off on me again.”

I’m vaguely aware of Captain Ashcroft in the periphery of my vision, his arms crossed as he watches our display.

“I’m following a lead.” I grab my keys from the desk drawer and palm them. Pocket them. “Stay here and keep trying to find connections linking our latest body to the Syndicate.”

“Devan, don’t leave me behind. Especially after this morning. I thought you’d be more focused and maybe a little more willing to bring me into the loop.”

Naomi sounds so sad I can’t help but smile at her reassuringly. “The meeting did the trick, and I am focused,” I tell her with uncharacteristic gentleness. Something else I’ve lost along the way. “I won’t be long. A couple of hours. Okay?”

I fold myself down so both elbows are on the desk and I’m eye level with my new partner. She’s cluttered up the space,

for sure. I've got my framed commendation letter, a red stress ball, and a computer.

Naomi has a kitsch, in addition to the pink personality and the obsession with vanilla and cinnamon.

"Trust me," I tell her. "I'm coming right back."

Naomi is ready to say more, to disagree with me, or maybe say she's started to track my cell to keep tabs on my whereabouts, but only nods her head. "Fine, be safe. Come back soon."

She's a good cop and a decent woman, and it's not fair for her to be saddled with me. An unlucky draw of the lottery in which she'd been assigned to stand at my side, and I haven't been letting her do her job properly.

I palm the keys to the car, heading down the elevator to the parking garage.

She's been trying, too, god love her. Trying to get to know me and to step into some very large shoes left behind by the detective who used to own her desk. It's not fair for me to keep punishing Ellison for the past.

It's enough that I'm doing it to myself.

The drive takes a little more than an hour with midday traffic. Businesspeople and friends heading out to grab a bite to eat before returning to their holes, and now they're clogging the lanes in front of me. Areas that used to be farmland are now apartments, all decorated the same, trees downed in favor of parking lots.

Eventually, I turn off the highway onto the busy roads leading to the Galleria and park the car in one of the last available spaces in the lot, my walk to the front doors giving me a great view of the place. There are places like Panera, cafes, fancy clothing stores, and even a Jimmy Choo retailer.

The Galleria is not the Syndicate's usual place. I wonder if she's here on business or pleasure. Which one would be strong enough to get her away from Broderick for even a few hours?

What kind of person looks like her and yet works for the worst kind of person? Broderick Stevens is a monster with no heart. And her lack of history...it suggests a sweep, a deliberate erasing of information.

Have the other officers of the law and I been looking at the Syndicate the wrong way? Turning over rocks while they were building castles?

Thinking about it gives me a headache.

I stash my sunglasses in the pocket of my jacket once I'm inside, hands following as I take in everything. There are tea rooms and fancy purses that cost more than my apartment. Up a level is the Coach store, where Kimmy had wanted a cute little clutch and begged me to get it for her.

I'd been all love eyes and rolling tongue then.

Now, the thought of Kimmy fills me with shame.

Aria's location shows up as a small blue dot on my phone's map. I follow it until I'm standing directly outside a coffee shop and *there*. There she is at a table all alone, her laptop open in front of her and her fingers flying over the keyboard.

My blood starts to boil as I watch her.

Whether she's actually a part of the Syndicate or not, she is beautiful, which makes me angrier for some reason. All auburn hair trailing down the back of her chair, her hands delicate as they move with lightning speed. She reaches behind and scratches her back, and even the ordinary movement has grace.

Her neck cranes to the side, swan-like, her eyes closed, and her lashes dark against her pale cheeks.

I stare at her, waiting until she gets up and pushes away from the table to stretch her arms overhead. She's going to be in for the surprise of her life—

Moving through the crowd, I grab the back of her neck from behind and squeeze to halt her movement. Her arms slowly lower.

Without looking at me, I hear her whisper, "Detective?"

My cock twitches.

“Shut up and come with me if you’d like to avoid making a scene,” I say in a low voice.

“Of course,” she answers smoothly. “Anything for you. Let me grab my stuff, and then I’m all yours.”

She might have agreed with me, I think as I steer her out the front doors and toward the car. But she doesn’t wait long before she yanks away from me in the parking lot and whirls. Glaring, snarling, growing a few inches taller like it will somehow intimidate me. She’s wearing those heels again, and they add a good four inches to her height.

She’s a spitfire, for sure, but she’s still bite-size.

“You want to tell me what this is all about?” she snaps out.

I stare her down. “You were at the scene of a crime, and I’ve got a couple of questions for you. Figured you’d be more likely to talk to me rather than anyone down at the precinct, especially since you seemed disinclined to come with me yesterday. A pair of handcuffs can sometimes zip lips, I’ve found out.”

“Personal experience, I bet.” She laughs. She fucking laughs in my face. The cold air has already brought color to her cheeks. “You couldn’t have just called to tell me?” she asks.

“No.” I grimace. “I didn’t think about grabbing your number after your mediocre blowjob.”

I’ll say this for the woman: whether she actually works for Broderick or not, she has the sort of dogged tenacity that doesn’t allow her to back down from a challenge. Rather than respond to my jab, she licks her lips and approaches me.

I refuse to back away, even when she flattens her body against mine. She waits until she’s on the tips of her toes, her mouth next to my ear before she says, “We both know it was the best blowjob of your life, Detective. If you’re going to question me...at least stop lying to yourself.”





I TAKE real offense to his comment, even when I know logically that Detective Bishop is trying to get under my skin. He's only insulting my oral prowess because he's trying to get a rise out of me, but damn it, I won't let it work. No one works a pole like I do.

*Prick.*

He's got a nice prick.

I'd like to have it in my mouth again, but now really isn't the time. Not when he came all the way out to the Galleria to threaten me. *How did he find me?*

"What makes you think I'm lying?" he asks.

I smirk at him. "Are you serious? You've got a terrible poker face. You're giving me all the classic signs of lying, at least by omission," I take great pleasure in telling him.

Let's see how he likes having a little verbal *ping* sent back to him. Like a pinch, right to the ass. He's got a nice one of those, too.

"I'm a detective." He says it as if he's somehow immune to basic human emoting. "I've been trained."

"Which means absolutely diddly squat in the grand scheme of things. We both know you liked having my lips wrapped around your cock." I take a step toward him, a gamble. I've always been one to risk everything without thought, the cat jumping off the cliff without thought.

Call it a flaw.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Devan growls. “I shouldn’t have let you. It was absolutely wrong.”

“Yet you did let me.” I tap my chin thoughtfully. “I wonder why. Could it be you’re drawn to me?” He’s not pushing me away, either. “Seems we’re attracted to each other.”

Right now, the detective is doing his best to stand still even when he’s shifting his weight slightly from foot to foot. A muscle twitches in his jaw, his back molars clenched together.

Agitated.

Why?

I take a step closer, able to touch him with my chin if I want to, and his nostrils flare. His pupils widen, his eyes narrow. Okay, so this little intimidation sesh doesn’t just have to do with the case, then.

I smile widely at him in an expression I know will only poke the bear a little more. “What?” I press. “Got nothing else to say to me? Come on, I know there are more words in there just dying to get out.”

Suddenly, Devan smirks. “I’ve got a lot of things I’d like to ask you. The station house will be the best place for it, though,” he replies. “Seems to me you know more than you’re willing to say, and we’ve been dancing around the subject of death since I saw you in the crowd.”

“You’re not taking me in, tough guy. I’ve got news for you. You come here and want to take me away from very important work?” I cross my fingers behind my back. *Not*. “Fine. You want to drag me out to the parking lot and act like you’re not bothered when you’re around me? Fucking fine, that’s your prerogative. But you’re not going to drag my happy ass down to your cop den. Especially when you’ve got nothing on me.”

He’s done playing coy with me, it seems. “Want to bet?”

“I only bet when I know I can win,” I tell him in another obvious lie. Which doesn’t matter because he doesn’t know me.

Only partially Biblically. Does it count?

I think it counts.

“Someone swept your record, and I know it. But there’s something out there, something I’ll be able to find to bring you in,” he continues.

“Dogged and determined, which is usually how I like my men.” I press my hands to his chest, and he finally moves, without any prompting. “Good luck with your search. You’re going to need more than my face in a crowd near a stiff to justify what you want to do to me.”

Agitated, yup, and trying to prove he’s a big man. Like he doesn’t have a gigantic chip on his shoulder. Has he always been this way, though, or is it a more recent development with him? His records said nothing about his personality beyond a few perfunctory phrases that might describe any stalwart member of the force.

Dedicated. Hardworking. Responsible.

Might as well be talking about a border collie.

I study him, well aware that he’s studying me, too. Devan’s records with his precinct might not boast anything of interest, but his psych records do.

“If you’re innocent, then you have nothing to hide,” Devan says with a shrug. “And you won’t mind coming in with me. I’d feel more comfortable talking to you there.”

“Maybe you should have tried calling me. Nothing I love more than gabbing on the phone,” I say in an affected tone.

Irritated, he rolls his neck, rubbing at the base of it to work out the kinks. “You’re not making this easy on me.”

“Why should I?”

“I’m an officer of the law,” he replies.

“I think”—I take another step forward, delighted when he jumps—“you came here today by yourself because you know you don’t have anything on me. You can’t take me into the station without a cause, right?” I keep my tone infuriatingly

calm. “Perhaps you have some other ideas for those handcuffs. I might be able to oblige you.”

I’ve caught him off guard. I like that, too. He’s got the look of a man who hasn’t had someone give him shit in far too long.

Especially since I’m not in a position to go any further with him. Physically, mentally, you name it. Toying with the police is one thing. Using him to get information on Everett and the other boys is a second matter.

But fucking him?

Nope. Not a line I can cross. Not without serious repercussions. AKA deadly.

Business can wait a little longer while I tease him, though. I went to the Galleria today—one of the Syndicates’ above-the-ground enterprises—to work alone. To find a little fucking motivation since being in the tiny office of Broderick’s private building was starting to drive me out of my gourd. Not to mention, I brought in lemon curd donuts today, and Blake said nothing. Just turned his nose up at them. Didn’t even try a bite.

I’ve got programs running in the background, looking for links between the three men I’ve lost.

Why not spend a little time teasing the tantalizing Detective Devan Bishop?

“I’ve looked into you, you know,” I tell him for the sheer pleasure of watching his reaction. “Slightly, of course. Nothing too intimate or exploratory. I’ve probably learned more about you than you’ve been able to dig up on me.”

He stares at me for a long while before he bobs his head. “I had a feeling you’d checked me out. Call it a gut instinct, but you seem like the type of woman who likes to know exactly what and who she’s dealing with. And has the means to accomplish it.”

“Aw, you’ll make me blush.”

“Wouldn’t be a good look with your red hair,” he gripes.

I turn away to hide my grin. A low blow, but I should have suspected he'd go there with the blowjob bit. I have a file on my phone on Devan, one my minions pulled at my request for more details since he's the lead detective assigned to Everett's case.

My poor Everett. Rather than antagonizing the detective, I should be focusing on my shit and keeping my business to myself.

The other way around, too. Instead of antagonizing me, Devan needs to get back to fucking work instead of this verbal foreplay.

"Aria, we can do this the easy way or the hard way, and I'm not immune to either. I'm not an easygoing man. And you know more than you're telling me," he continues as he goes back to all business. Probably five seconds away from whipping out his badge to shine it in my face.

It's my turn to shrug. "I know a lot of things. Like why the sky is blue."

"Rayleigh Scattering." He says the phrase like it pisses him off, his teeth gritted hard enough to crack a crown or something.

"Wow. Good for you." I slow-clap just to tick him off further. "Now, are we going to stand out here all day, or are we going to actually reach a solution? Because I'm not talking to you unless you give me a damn good reason, and it's surely not happening on your terms."

Devan grabs my elbow and hauls me toward his car. "Come on. We're going. Reason be damned."

My stomach flips. I'd been taken in by the cops before and released just as quickly when they were unable to pin anything on me. Soliciting. Drug possession. Only one of those things was true, and it's been years since I left my former profession.

If Devan is serious, I'll be able to get out of this, too. I made sure of it. Doesn't stop my body from remembering how it felt or my gut from swirling. My head lightening.

“Your place or mine?” I coo, an attempt to add a little levity to a situation that is anything but.

“I’m driving you to the station house,” he clarifies.

“Even when you know you’ve got nothing to hold me? Wow. You are going to have your ass handed to you for this, Bishop. Your funeral, of course.” I let him drag me along toward a black sedan.

I don’t see any bars separating the front seats from the back, so that’s something. It means whatever monster lurks under his skin is a little civilized. He’s not going to throw me behind bars just yet.

He’s doing his best to pay me no mind, but his grip tightens on my arm. “I’ll think of something. It’s a long drive.”

“I have no intentions of disobeying a man of the law. I’m happy to do as I’m told.” I wink at him even as my mouth goes dry.

Broderick is going to ream me for this. And he’ll find out; he always does.

I’m already going through possible excuses in my head. Why I was at the scene in the first place, why I caught the detective’s eye, why he found me today...

Talk about sticking my finger right into the hole of a hornet’s nest.

“This isn’t a joke, Aria. You were at the scene of a crime.” Devan shoves me, gently, against the side of his car and cages me with his body to make sure I don’t go anywhere. “And you’ve got some known associations with the Black Market Syndicate that could make a stay at the station very difficult for you.”

“Oh really? How do you know?” I ask.

He’s warm and powerfully built. It’s a strange thought to have when the prospect of landing in an interrogation room should put the fear of god into me. But he feels so good against me. I stare up at him, squinting slightly underneath the weak glare of the sun overhead.

“Take me, then, Detective,” I say into the silence. “If you’re man enough to do it.”

For a second, it looks as though he’ll drop his head to mine for a kiss I can’t give him even though I want to. A peck on the lips is nothing. A real kiss...is on another level. It’s something you share with a person you really care about, and for so long, I’ve only been allowed to kiss Broderick. No one else outside of my pillows, a physical reaction to some pretty sexy dreams.

Like last night, when a certain dark-skinned knight showed up on a keyboard instead of a charger and whisked me away to parts unknown.

Devan backs down at the last minute and reaches behind me to open the door. “Get in the car,” he grinds out. “We’ll see how much trouble you can get into on the open road.”

“Oh, wow. If you think four wheels and a highway are going to stop me, then you don’t know me very well.” I arch my chest up to meet his. “Yet.”

SEVEN



*devan*

I SHOULD HAVE HANDCUFFED HER.

It would have been the smarter choice in all of this mess to keep the spitfire at my side bound and contained. It might have stopped her from reaching across to caress my thigh five minutes after I pulled out of the Galleria parking lot.

“Stop.” I shove her hand back toward her lap.

“Stop what?” she asks with a laugh, reaching for me again.

I slap at her. “Aria, I’m serious. Don’t fucking touch me. Keep your hands to yourself, or I’m going to pull over and put you in the back seat.” With bars separating us.

I’ve done nothing but misstep for the past two days. Longer, if I’m honest with myself.

I’m a mess, and if anyone starts sniffing around, then I’ll be sent to the police psychologist faster than I can blink. Not to mention it feels way too damn good when Aria touches me.

“You put me in the passenger seat for a reason. Didn’t you? Otherwise, you *would* have shoved me in the back like a common criminal.” She leans over to nip at my earlobe.

Goose bumps break out along my skin.

Fuck. She’s right, damn it. I refuse to look too closely at my reasons for wanting her close to me. For ignoring every instinct I have in favor of this adorable little redhead with the tenacity of a pit viper. She’s always one step ahead of me, whether it’s verbal sparring or otherwise.

I like it. The way she always throws it back as hard as I give it.

“When are you just going to admit you think I’m sexy, Devan?” she whispers. “We clearly want each other.”

Her hand is back on my leg, my upper thigh, crawling closer to my hardening cock with every passing heartbeat. I grab her wrist, and the car veers sharply to the right, close enough to the other lane for the person in the green Suburban to honk the horn.

“Or do you want to correct me so that I *have* to call you detective?” she adds.

The second her hand comes in contact with my erection, I jerk and almost lose control of the wheel. The two-lane road is busier than shit, and several cars honk at me.

“Don’t.” My demand is half-hearted at best when she starts to work her hand up and down my shaft through my pants. “Please.”

“If you really meant it, I would stop.” She pauses only to flick the button of my jeans open and drag the zipper south. “I’m not the kind of woman who takes advantage of a man sexually. I need you to know.”

I suck in a breath when her fingertips come into contact with the sensitive underside of my dick.

“I know.”

I’m not sure how I do, and I’m probably talking out of my ass because my focus is entirely on Aria. The way she slicks her hand along my shaft before she pulls my dick out of my pants and starts to stroke me. It’s everything I can do to pay attention to the road, my jaw clenched, my eyes blurring slightly.

Rather than taking the highway all the way back to the city, I turn off at the next stop and head for the back roads.

“That’s it,” Aria murmurs. She grasps the head of me, twisting her wrist slightly before she moves her palm down to

the base again. “Watch the road. Let me take care of this for you.”

It’s wrong on every level.

She flexes her fingers, and my dick pulses. She milks me in a steady rhythm, up and down, working the head until I moan out loud.

I’m not a nun, and I’m not celibate, as much as the past few months would suggest. My eyes are on the road, but I look away quickly, wanting to see her face.

Her eyes are on my crotch and focused as she directs me closer to orgasm like a maestro with a symphony. She’s thorough, working me over, and I tighten my lips against the well of disgust. Not for her, but for me. She increases her tempo, and I lick my lips. My eyes go wide as my balls start to tighten, Aria chuckling.

She tightens her grip on me, and just as I’m about to lose it, she bends down. Takes me into her mouth with her dark eyes staying on me. I come inside her mouth, grunting like a fucking animal, her head bobbing up and down as she sucks me through completion.

Once she’s done, she wipes the corners of her lips and straightens, looking back at me.

“Well? I’m waiting,” she says after a beat.

“You want to be praised?” I ask.

“I mean, it would be nice.”

“No.” I know the moment the words leave my mouth that it’s a bad idea to antagonize her. Especially when she runs her tongue along her lips and shifts into a more comfortable position in her seat. Not fast enough for me to miss her hard nipples.

“Fine. Be the kind of man who doesn’t appreciate a good blowjob. Handjob. Whatever.”

It’s nothing against Aria. I have no fucking idea what kind of man I am or how I want to be.

“Here’s how this is going to play out,” I tell her, navigating the less crowded but slower side streets. One hand is on the wheel, and I use the other to tuck my spent dick back into my pants and re-button the top, with considerably less skill than Aria. “Once we get there, I’m going to take you in and book you. We’ll try to do it by the books.”

“Oh, because you’re a real stickler for it,” she snaps, smoothing a loose curl behind her ear.

“I’m trying to be.” It’s as honest an answer as I can give.

We pass the rest of the drive in silence, and I pull into the parking garage beneath the warehouse with my heart pounding.

Once we’re stopped, Aria gets out and slams the car door, but it’s the only instance of childish behavior she allows. Walking around the hood toward her, slapping the cuffs on her, I give myself a temporary moment to calm my nerves. It’s a victory to talk to anyone with connections to Broderick, I tell myself. Even loose ones.

Hauling Aria into the warehouse used by the Ninth Precinct is lackluster, though. She goes along too easily, smiling and waving at every person she passes and staying a step ahead of me like she’s the one in charge here.

She is.

Holy shit, but she’s got me wrapped around her finger, and the handjob in the car proved it. I keep my gaze ahead, the front of my jacket zipped close to hide the stain in my pants and my aim on the prize—getting closer to solving my case and taking down the Black Market Syndicate.

You know, the tiny matter of clearing the city of the biggest pile of filth we’ve got.

I hadn’t realized just how desperately I wanted the Syndicate gone until now, and it’s a tangible taste in my mouth.

“This way.” I guide Aria toward the interrogation rooms on the second floor, where most of the private offices are located. The majority of the space on the first floor of the

converted space is taken up by a gym and workout space for officers to spar together. “We’ll get you processed and then begin our chat.”

“Whatever you say. *Detective.*”

Her belligerence gets under my skin as well.

Alone in the elevator, I make sure to keep my distance from her but not far enough to have her bolt the second the doors open.

Much to my surprise, Naomi and Captain Ashcroft stand on the other side of the doors once they slide open. One of them is glaring, and the other looks close to tears.

“You don’t answer your phone?” Naomi blurts out. She does her best to stop talking before she gets going, and yet even with her teeth gnashing down on her lip, the words spill out. “Christ, Dev, I thought something happened to you. You told me you’d be back soon, and it’s been like three hours.”

Her gaze flicks between me and Aria before recognition styles on her features, and she frowns.

I straighten, squaring my shoulders, unwilling to explain myself. “I’m taking in Miss...Aria for booking.”

“Darklyn,” she supplies cheerfully. “Not that he asked me for my surname. He came barging in with his handcuffs dangling and told me he’s bringing me in. I haven’t even been read my rights.”

Ah, fuck. She’s correct.

“Am I really under arrest?” Aria continues.

Ashcroft’s face doesn’t change. “Get her settled in a room, and then I want you to come to my office. It’s not a request.”

At least he’s not snapping his fingers this time. Usually, when Cap wants something, he becomes the ringmaster, and we dance to the merry clap of his index finger and thumb together. This isn’t a summons I ignore.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Naomi hisses out before I sidestep her and the captain, taking Aria toward an

empty room.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell her without breaking my stride.

This time, I’m the one flashing her a grin instead of a glare.

That used to be Layla’s job. She was always the one with a comment prepared to fire off. I just had to smooth things over whenever she crossed a line. I’d gotten damn used to the dynamic, too.

“Don’t be long, Tough Guy,” Aria says once she’s inside the room and situated in one of the wildly uncomfortable metal chairs. “I’m not a patient lady. I’ll be angry if you keep me waiting.”

The glare goes to her instead of Naomi. “I won’t,” I reply.

In a matter of minutes, I’m in Ashcroft’s office with him standing in the entry, the door closed behind him. This isn’t the merry face of the potato sack race champion, where he always seems to beat everyone out at the interdepartmental summer picnic games.

This is a man who has been pushed too far.

“Your little disappearing act ends today,” he tells me without preface. “Do you understand, Bishop? Not to mention the way you dragged a woman in without reading her rights. You’re out of your goddamn gourd, and I won’t tolerate it.”

A million things I want to say tumble together in my face. All that comes out is a muttered, “Yes, Cap.” I slide my hand into my pockets, showing nothing but ease on the outside. My shoulder is cocked and ready in case Ashcroft decides to land the verbal tirade he’s been promising me for the past year.

“You’re trying to tell me you left your partner at the station to go off on a wild goose hunt, and you brought back a woman. For what? On what charge?” Ashcroft begins.

Oh yeah, he’s sick of my shit.

The lines around his eyes are deeper with the passing years, his hair a little thinner, and his patience nonexistent. He

won't let anyone see how tired he is, but he's gotten much better at letting us know when we've disappointed him.

At least with the others who work under him.

Naomi stands at my side, wringing her hands and waiting for the bomb to drop. Hunched and prepared for a hit. At least with Layla, she would have cracked a joke or something to ease the tension.

Guess it's up to me now.

"She's a suspect, sir," I explained. "She was present at the last crime scene and has been marked as a person of interest. She agreed to come in with me today." In a manner of speaking.

"You're telling me she came down with you of her own free will?" Ashcroft's eyes bug. "You're shitting me."

"Um..."

He groans and strides around behind his desk, dropping hard into his seat. "Dammit, Bishop. You don't have anything to hold her. This is going to look very bad on us if she decides to press charges. It's not like the police are above scrutiny. We're the goddamn law."

"I've got several of the IT guys looking into her records —" I start.

Naomi opens her mouth to answer, but Ashcroft beats her to it. "Her record is clean," he tells me. "I ran her right after you brought her in. A few parking tickets, a few speeding tickets, nothing out of the ordinary. Just another face in a crowd who happened to stick out for us, but she's a dead end."

My insides still.

"She has ties to Broderick Stevens.

"She's got *nothing* tying her to that piece of filth," Ashcroft continues.

"She's been seen entering and exiting a residential property known to be owned by him," I argue. "You're telling me it's nothing?"

“Circumstantial at best.”

*Fuck.*

Of course they weren't going to find anything on her. Aria is a hacker. She can clear her things.

“If she's not willing to stay and talk, then you need to let her go before *she* presses charges against us,” Ashcroft replies. He pinches the bridge of his nose before reaching into his desk drawer for a bottle of Tums. The kind any man or woman at the station knows to keep on hand at all times. Stress is a killer, but so is heartburn.

My knuckles crack, and only at the sharp twinge do I realize I've clenched my fists in my pockets.

Out loud, I show a different mask. “Yes sir.”

“You're on thin ice. One more foot out of line, Bishop, and as much as it pains me, I'll put you on desk duty and reassign all your open cases. Think about someone other than yourself, for once.” His gaze shutters, and Ashcroft is done with this conversation.

“Dev, what's going on? Why won't you talk to me?” Naomi presses once we're out the door. She dogs me toward the interrogation room. A glance at the clock shows that only five minutes have passed.

How is it possible? Feels like an eternity.

“I'm following leads,” I tell her.

“I know you're the head of this case, but I'm not green, either. I've already been through my share of trauma. We're working together for a reason.” Naomi tries to reach for my elbow to stop me, but I quicken my steps to stay just out of her reach. “If you refuse to let me in, then there's no way for me to help you, and we're ineffective.”

“I'll fill you in on everything later.” I stop at the door, definitely not planning on following through. “Right now, I've got to deal with Aria. Miss Darklyn.”

Naomi looks worried when I finally bring my eyes to her face. “What's really going on?” she asks. “It's got something



to do with the woman you brought in. Do you know her?"

I walk into the room without answering, a part of me left out there in the hallway with Naomi and wondering how long she's going to wait for me to exit again.

She's too worried for nothing. She's not wrong, either, because we are one of the most ineffective teams in the unit right now, and I made it so.

My smile is ice cold. "You'll be happy to know that you can go home."

"Oh, can I?" Aria has the chair pushed away from the table with her long legs crossed, and as I watch, she uncrosses them. The movement is slow and deliberate. Designed to capture my attention and make me think about what's between them. "What an interesting turn of events."

"Yes. The captain says we've got nothing to hold you. He doesn't seem to think your proximity to a known drug lord is cause to keep you here and"—This is killing me—"your record is clean."

"Poor Detective. I know you were so hoping for something. Sorry to disappoint you." Her smile crows. "Sorry to make you drive all the way out to the Galleria to get me for nothing. At least you got something good out of it. What did I get?" She lifts her wrist. "Handcuffed."

I took them off of her inside the room, and there isn't a bruise or a scratch marring her perfect pale skin.

"I know you did *something*. You've got skills with a computer. How did you wipe your record clean?"

She blinks guileless, wide eyes at me. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

I could strangle her. "Yes, you do."

She shrugs. "Sorry to disappoint you. I've worked hard to keep my nose above ground and shining, Tough Guy. My record reflects years of struggle." The smile grows. "Only a few speeding tickets. A few parking tickets. Right?"

“I know you have a connection to the Black Market Syndicate.” I drop my voice low. “I’m going to find out what it is, and then you’ll be back in this room.”

“Unless you have something on me, then I suggest you keep your sweet talk confined to the car.” Her meaning is clear. “You shouldn’t have brought me in, as I told you before, but you refused to listen to me. How did it taste to have your superior hand your ass to you and force you to eat it? Humbling?”

It’s infuriating, and I’m pissed off at having to let her go without getting anything. I’ve wasted my time. Everyone’s time.

Aria peels herself out of the chair. “I’d ask you to walk me outside, but I’m sure you have work to do, and I don’t have a car. I was given a ride here,” she replies.

“I can have one of the other officers drive you back to the Galleria,” I reply reluctantly.

“Oh, no need. I’ve got people.” She pats me on the cheek on her way past me. “Try not to get too worked up, will you? You’ll give yourself a heart attack.” Her hand slips down my shoulder, and I shrug her off. “Maybe not. You seem like you keep yourself in excellent physical shape. From what I’ve felt, anyway. So many delicious and hard parts of you.”

She’s driving me out of my goddamn mind.

And her damn little arrogant wave on her way to the elevator is the punctuation at the end of a pointless sentence.

EIGHT

I DON'T LET out a breath until I'm several blocks away from the police station. Alone with the oddly comforting stench of hot garbage coming out of one of the sewer grates mixed with a clearer and pungent decay from the dead leaves, I bend at the waist. Hands on my knees. Fighting against the beating of my heart that has yet to slow since Devan showed up at the Galleria.

I played it well.

I made sure to have everything about my fake online persona in place and ready to go live if necessary. The real Aria is nothing but a mystery. Anyone searching for my face would come up with zilch, and I like it that way.

Except, letting the detective see me at the crime scene was a misstep, and I'd had to take steps to rectify things. Now, when people search for my face, they come up against a profile as strong as it is fake. A few changes, a press of a button, and Aria Darklyn is born. Complete with a birthday—not my real one—and a social security number.

The old me is dead and buried.

The new me is impenetrable.

Doesn't stop me from losing my shit.

“Fuck!” I blurt out the word, lifting my face to the now overcast sky overhead. The clouds moved in somewhere on the drive to Empire Bay and took up residence in the entire expanse of blue.

That was close.

Too close for comfort and not an experience I plan to repeat. Well, the car handjob can definitely be repeated if the good old detective is willing to play with me again. But right now, I'm mad at him. Mad and worried he'll dig his own grave by acting like a stupid dumbass. Making mistakes. Looking in places he has no business looking and calling it justice.

I shouldn't worry about him. He's a grown-ass adult capable of making his own decisions, as moronic as they are, and he's a cop.

Rule number one to surviving in the underground—steer clear of the pigs.

I've violated that rule and my personal one, which is not to get involved sexually with other men. Or women. Or anyone except my handy vibrator. I'm sure Broderick would take offense to my playing around with the toy, too, considering how possessive he is of me.

Part of me hopes for another round with Devan, no matter the consequences.

I enjoy our verbal sparring too much for my own good.

The other part of me knows it's safer, smarter, you name it, to keep my distance. Let Devan work in tandem with me while I figure out what's happening to my guys, and one of us is bound to get to the answer. Sooner, later, whatever, as long as we get there.

My phone pings from my pocket, and I know, without a doubt, it's Broderick. Probably asking what the hell I'm doing at the precinct since he's got tracking software on my phone, and I allow it.

Except *that* will be a whole-ass conversation, and I'm not ready for it yet. I'll handle it eventually, but not now.

I might have to snag a ride into the office. Since my vehicle is at the fucking Galleria.

*Damn detective.*

I'm not about to tell him how pissed it makes me to be an hour away from my personal mode of transportation, but

damn, it irks me.

It's a longer walk than I bargain for, and a few blocks further, I head down to the subway, opting for public transit instead. The stop is only a few streets away from Broderick's private residence building in one of the more upscale parts of Empire Bay. Old money.

The heels I wear because they make my legs and ass look fabulous are killer. My toes burn, and my pinkies are numb by the time I make it to the building.

I used to walk these streets sometimes as a teen to remind myself of what I wanted one day. To have one of those stone or brick mansions for myself, the trees too large for a grown man to wrap his arms around and touch fingers.

Now I work here. I'm a part of the lifeblood of this community, or so I tell myself. The dream is still there, and now I've gotten a better look at the area and these houses.

It will all be mine someday, I think with a smile, nodding at the guards manning the doors at the front of the residence. Two more stand in front of the elevator and pointedly stare ahead while I slide my keycard out of my wallet to access the higher floors.

"Blake!" I call out the second I reach the right floor and kick off the dreaded beast heels. They clatter together with the toe close enough to the wall to leave a smudge. "Blake, I need you."

He pops his head out of the office. "What's the matter?" He stares me up and down.

"Okay, please don't kill me," I say right away. I scrub a hand over the back of my neck and head, but it doesn't matter; my chest is tight, too, bound by invisible threads. I give up scrubbing and turn to Blake with his lips tight.

"Why would I kill you?" he asks.

"Can you please find someone to go pick up my car at the Galleria? Circumstances conspired against me today, and my car is there, but I'm here."

He always accuses me of talking too much, as though keeping your story plausible by overloading it with details is a bad thing.

I keep it short, sweet, to the point. And try not to think about my hands on Devan or his hands on me, anywhere on my body. I'm a fucking idiot.

Blake's confusion shows. "Fine," he replies. "I'll take care of it."

No questions, thank the good lord.

I flop down in my office chair and turn in a circle, my feet aching and the rest of me feeling like I've been taken for one wild ride after another. I'm just happy I made it back to Empire Bay in time. Broderick has another meeting scheduled for this afternoon, and if I didn't show up, I might have hurt my chances at another high climb.

Kitty has to make sure the claws come out, and I'm not in a good mental space to focus on my growth within the company.

I've made it this far, sure, but the five-year plan is always the same: go higher, get better, smarter, and one day take over the Syndicate.

Talk about control.

Broderick has it, and I want it.

Something I've wanted for as long as I can remember, all the way back to a childhood where children were seen and not heard. Background noise, but not too much of it, or else you got the belt snapped across your ass or your belly. Anywhere other people won't be able to see the red welts.

Thirty minutes is all the time I have to get myself cleaned up and presentable. Maybe change into the other outfit I keep in my desk at all times. I'd allowed myself a little panic cry in the subway and scrub at my eyes and the makeup I'm surely smearing.

"Hey, what is your car doing all the way at the Galleria?" Blake asks, hanging up on a phone call in words too soft for

me to make out.

I shake my head. “Don’t ask, please. It’s too long a story. I’ll have to tell you about it later when I finally manage to get my shit together.” I smile at him. “You have any coffee left?”

“You’ve missed a lot in the office, too. The coffee is long gone. I drank it all, got jittery, and then had more.” Blake shakes his fingers out to prove his point.

“Well fuck.” I knew it was too much to ask, but a girl has to have some hope. “I’m not mentally prepared for this meeting today.”

The laptop in my bag is a dead weight, dragging me down, and I feel lopsided as I walk to the desk to scrounge. I’ve got to have something in there to give me a little jolt, a sugar rush. Anything. Because there’s no way in hell I’m missing this meeting, and I need to be totally up on my shit to deal with what’s bound to happen *after*.

Blake’s eyes go steely. “Then get prepared,” he replies. “Don’t go in there half-cocked. It’s good to be confident, but if you get ahead of yourself, then you’re going to aggravate people.”

“Yeah, great advice. I’ll go do that.” Hopefully, he’ll choke on the sarcasm. It’s too much to bear having no coffee, no sugar and listening to his less-than-sage advice.

My fingers skip over a bevy of candy and gum wrappers, but nothing I haven’t already dug into.

Looks like I’m going into this completely unprepared.

Twenty-five minutes and counting.

*Time to escape.*

It’s what I always do when things get a little too suffocating or more than I can bear. I pop in earbuds and open the laptop, logging in to my online lair for some gameplay and letting my favorite tunes drown out whatever Blake is trying to say to me.

Pass on it.



He's the kind of person who likes things done by the book, in a certain way, but gives nothing to anyone else. The type of person who expects everyone else to do exactly what he does, think the same way, and then gets insulted when you don't. Which keeps us at odds a lot of the time.

A tough nut to crack, of course. The longer the music seeps into me, the better I feel, though, and soon Blake is nothing but a stray thought in the rear of my head where all stray thoughts go.

My online lair is the literal only place I'm actually free and powerful, and I don't have to worry about anyone but myself. The online forum is about a step from the entrance to the entire dark web. Dark web adjacent, as I like to call it. I've created a place where people can dip their toe into things they really have no business sampling, or buying, or talking about and determine if they like what they see or not.

Like how they feel.

If I'd had a place like this growing up, things might have gone a little differently, I like to think. Who knows. Maybe I was always meant to end up in this place, being the person I am today.

I'm the admin of the site, and the guys under me, the hackers I employ for Broderick, use this as a free space to talk without fear of repercussions.

And who knows.

Maybe that one newbie dude will be on, too, for some banter before I have to put my game face on again.

I check the status of EnemySquare only to find him idle. It's been about ten hours since he logged on last. Aw, too bad. I tap my fingers against my knee, biting the inside of my cheek. My stomach gives a half-hearted growl, whether for food or for coffee, and is ignored. To my detriment, of course, because I'll pay for it later.

The strange newcomer to the chat room the other night got the same rigamarole I put everyone else through, except his answers tickled me.

The more I think about him, the more I want to know.

The finger tap transfers from my knee to my chin. I should have already checked on the new guy because I've checked out every single user who joined my underground dungeon. Who lurks behind the screen name? Who wants a taste of the hunt I offer as the gatekeeper of the dark web?

Another layer of power, I think. It's a way for me to control the environment. Anyone who acts like a complete piece of shit gets booted by me and blocked.

And because I realize I can't have any side of me relax at any point in time, I type in a few strings of code to delve deeper into EnemySquare. I need to know who I'm talking to.

I glance up at Blake only to have him point to his watch as a reminder. I shake my cell, showing him the alarm I set to make sure I don't escape for too long.

*I've got this.*

The initial start of the dig is the best part for me. It's the curiosity of the unknown, of uncovering layer after layer until you come to the gem at the center. The truth. If you want it badly enough, in this business, you can always find the truth. Whether or not it's something you can live with is another story entirely.

It's almost stupidly easy to track the IP address of the user. Stupidly easy to figure out that EnemySquare is—

My stomach flips, not unpleasantly, and a smile splits my face. "Ha!" My cackle of surprise is louder than a gunshot going off in this place, and Blake jolts in his chair, glaring at me.

"What is your problem, Aria?" His mouth forms the words I can't hear.

How in the world...is EnemySquare Detective Bishop?

It's another twist of fate, a cosmic joke. I've always thought the universe has a truly sick sense of humor.

Plus, come on. He's not even *trying* to be careful. If he's going to dabble in the dark web, then he at least needs to use a

VPN or something. This is ridiculous.

*Sigh.*

The poor man has no idea what he's doing, which is shocking considering how long he's been on the force. At this point, he's either dense—highly unlikely—or he's deliberately taking risks and going places he has no business going.

On the other hand, his obvious naivete aside, this might be something I can use. I'm back to tapping on my knee.

Getting closer to him as Darkling makes sense, not only for a purely information exchange standpoint but future leverage.

I'll be able to hold this over his head for a long time.

And honestly, how could he not know he was talking to me? He already knows I'm a hacker, and the username is pretty on the nose. Not one of my finest moments, but hey, a girl sometimes likes a little on-the-nose humor sometimes.

The alarm goes off, vibrating against my hand and sending a cheerful little melody through my earbuds.

“Okay, I'm ready.” I tear the earbuds out and toss them into the drawer with the rest of the wrappers.

“Your clothes leave little to be desired, Aria.” Blake gives a sniff, whether in disgust or disappointment, I'm not sure. “You're positive you want to go in there like this? Maybe you should change into something a little more suitable.”

There is literally nothing wrong with my outfit except for a few wrinkles on my pencil skirt. The heels are high, the black strap going around the ankle, and my shirt is embellished with a line of pearl buttons down the front.

The hair, well, I've never been able to do anything with it.

“I don't really have a choice,” I say.

I've got deodorant in my desk as well as a small bottle of perfume, and I use both. Not too liberally, or Broderick will be upset.

“Is my hair decent?” I shake it out in front of Blake. “How are my teeth?”

I haven’t eaten anything, so it’s not like there’s something stuck between my canines.

Blake doesn’t look up from his computer as he replies, “You’re going to have to be fine, Aria. You wasted all your time playing around online instead of preparing yourself.” He snorts as if to say *typical*.

“I’m going to be fine.” I close the lid on my laptop and head out the door with my shoulders thrown back.

There’s more to life than wearing skirts and putting on a fresh coat of lipstick.

This time, on the floor above, Broderick and I are alone in the boardroom for only a scant thirty seconds before Antoni joins us, and the rest of the higher-ups take their seats moments later. Broderick flashes me a warning look to move to my usual corner before he addresses the others.

“It’s come to my attention that there are certain parties amidst the organizations who will benefit from promotions and others who will be forced to get on their knees,” he says. “It’s prudent to make a few adjustments down the ladder as well. Today, we’re here to sort out a few housekeeping issues before we pick up the thread from yesterday’s meeting.”

The venom in his voice has Dougherty flinching.

*Good.*

Just as the hitman waits for news of the ax, I wait as well. Patiently, the way I have for years. Ready to go from the right-hand woman...to a single step below the leader. Until, at last, the top spot will be mine.



## WHEN DID I LOSE IT?

When did I lose the edge that makes me good at my job? The cases close, eventually, but mostly due to sheer stubborn will. My city, my cases, my responsibility. When did I start to forget every hour of my training until I bumble along like a newborn deer on weak legs. Knocking into everything and hurting the people around me.

I'm uncomfortable in my chair, at my desk. The wheels squeak, the fabric is worn in all the wrong places, and the desk somehow shrank three inches. Now, the wood top knocks against my knees when they bob.

Has it ever happened before?

The details of all three cases are spread out in front of me, the pictures at the rear of the stack of information and the typed black text blurring together.

“Why did you really bring her in, Devan?” Naomi asks. “It doesn't make sense to me. You didn't read her her rights.”

She throws her hands up in the air, and not a hair of her tightly gelled black ponytail moves. It's still pulled tightly enough to make her eyes narrow, eyes she's trained on me without blinking.

She's dogged me since I let Aria walk out of the building thirty minutes ago. Walk, *hell*. The woman didn't walk anywhere. She strutted. She flowed like water, and every tick-tocking movement of her hips drew me in a little deeper into a pool I had no business looking at, let alone treading inside.

“I thought we’d get somewhere in the investigation,” I repeat. What other excuses do I have?

I’m so desperate to topple Broderick Stevens that I’m forgetting protocol. Or perhaps I’m so desperate to feel something besides shame, guilt, and loneliness.

“You mean you think she’s got a stronger connection to our stiff from yesterday?” Naomi questions.

I groan. “Of course, that’s what I mean.” I don’t want to bring her in on my side project yet. She’ll laugh in my face, tell me I’m nothing but a fool for trying to bring down the Syndicate. Or worse—

She’ll tell me I’m doing it for revenge, for what happened to my partner.

And she won’t be wrong.

“I remember seeing her face in the crowd. She kind of stands out; it’s all her hair. She’s the one you followed, isn’t she?”

Does Naomi ever stop to think before she talks? Not in my experience. We’ve worked together for six months now, and she’s lasted longer than any of the others the department tried to stick with me.

The mouth on her, though. She’s a free-flowing fountain of cheer and goodwill, and most days, I approach her with hesitation and a little rueful curiosity. Today, I want to staple her lips shut.

“Please, Ellison, let it go,” I say.

Which brings to mind memories of another mouth, another hand, and my agitation is back with a vengeance. The whole situation this afternoon went from shit to worse, and it was my fault. My fault entirely. Which didn’t help my bad mood.

Since when did I go from being a good cop to having a chip on my shoulder?

“Tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it,” she replies. “But for the love of life, you need to keep your head on the case. There are other people involved in this, the

victim's family and friends. We're the ones who can bring some kind of justice for them."

"I know." I blow out a sharp breath. "Trust me, I know. You're following through on the connections linking our vics?" I ask, struggling to focus on the things I can control rather than the ones I can't, things like Aria.

"Of course I am." Naomi nods and starts spouting off the strings linking our three dead computer hackers. "I've been working on it nonstop. Jasleen was right about the murder weapon, but the angle and force are the same for all three killing wounds."

"I believe all three of them worked for the same independent online contractor. You said they worked from home, something online," I say, trying hard to be part of this conversation and do my fucking job.

I hate myself for letting things get out of control, especially considering Aria's ties. She's potentially connected to the man I'm desperate to bring down. The man I want to make pay for everything he's done.

The type of revenge guaranteed to land me behind bars on the opposite side than I'm used to.

Naomi pushes her chair away from the desk and somehow manages to make the wheels screech against the floor. "Oops!" That's all she says, and that with a smile. She runs a hand through her hair, and it doesn't move. "Yes, it seems they all worked online for an independent contractor. We haven't been able to trace it yet. I've got someone working on it, though. How about I run down the street and grab us some good coffee, and we can steal one of the empty offices. A little talk-it-out session, you know what I'm saying? I think it will be good to freeform brainstorm and see where we land."

This far away from the windows, and with the grime caking the class, it's impossible to tell time. I used to get so swept away in my cases, all those damn extra cases Layla and I took on trying to find her father's killer, that time never made a difference for me.



Now?

The years of pushing have caught up to me. I'm older than my age, ancient instead of almost thirty.

"Look," I say. "It's late. I'm done for the day. We can reconvene tomorrow and go through whatever you want." Not to mention the damn headache brewing right behind my eyes.

It's not fair for my partner to have to deal with me. I let her see my exhaustion, a little bit of vulnerability I never let anyone see. Least of all, Naomi Ellison.

She blinks those dark eyes at me, surprised. "Are you kidding? Dev, you've barely been here today, and when you're here...I don't need to tell you it's basically like talking to a brick wall. Help a girl out a little bit. We're never going to make a dent in things if we don't work together."

"Trust me." I pause to grab my coat and swing it over my shoulders, shrugging into the warm material in anticipation of the chill outside. "I've got people working on it. The IT guys are running their programs for me as well. We're going to get to the bottom of this case, and when we do, the Syn—the perp is going to be brought to justice."

"You never told me." She shakes her head. "Come on—"

"I'm done," I interrupt.

She hurries after me. "You can't be done." Her voice is loud enough to draw eyes and snickers from the rest of the guys working desk duties, especially Jerry, who no doubt has a quip loaded and ready to go in poor, douchebag taste.

I leave without saying anything else to Naomi. The entire ride down the elevator and out to the street, my phone rings. One call, two, three. I send the last one to voicemail and turn off notifications.

I'm a shit partner.

Better off for her, though, because I don't need to get personally involved with a partner again and form a friendship. An attachment.

My own family has gotten the point. My mother used to call incessantly, at least once a day after I broke things off with Kimmy. Partly to rag on me for making a mess of the best thing that had ever happened in my life and partly to get me to see sense and go after her. When I failed to take the hint, she slowed the calls. Until finally, I stopped answering, and she stopped calling.

My father sent a strongly worded letter once, instead of a call or a text, and I crumpled it and threw it out. A shit son on top of everything else.

Instead of driving, I walk it off, taking the cold evening air and drawing it into my lungs. Nothing helps the spiraling thoughts inside of my skull or the paths my mind takes back to memory lane. I reach up to press my hand against my shoulder, the wound there buried under layers of clothing.

The scar will always be there, just like the memories. A quick stop at a corner store lands me with a microwave burrito in a plastic bag, and the dinner situation solved.

My keys jingle in my hand all the way up the stairs, sliding easily into the lock. Except the inside of the apartment isn't dark, and it's not silent.

*I'm not alone.*

The lights are on, and the stereo is blaring nineties dance music. There's Naomi on my couch with her feet up on the coffee table, toes bobbing along with the beat. She's got her socks off, and her toes painted a bright and chipper neon green.

Funny. I would have gone with pink if I had to guess.

"What in the good fuck is going on?" I blurt out.

I'm not sure how she hears me above the blasting of the music, but she slowly turns to face me and smiles. She's in her clothes from the office and must have driven pretty fucking fast to get here, break in, and make herself comfortable. The ponytail is still in place, but there are a few stray hairs around her ears now, and I wonder if she'd gone full-on headbanging to a song before my arrival.

“There you are.” She sounds just as chipper as ever. “You needed an extra-long walk home, huh, Dev? I thought you’d never get here.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” My keys bite into the skin of my palm, and I stand there like an asshole, staring at the mess Naomi has already made. How long has she been here?

How the hell did she get in?

She shrugs and shifts on the couch, pushing forward even though she doesn’t take her feet off the coffee table. Not even socks. I shudder. “Kinda puts us back on even footing then, huh? Since you haven’t been answering any of my questions, either,” she replies. “Turnabout is fair play. It’s a saying, isn’t it? I knew I’d have to go to drastic measures to get through to you.”

She lifts a brow at me, waiting for me to erupt. Waiting for me to do something other than standing there and struggling to keep up.

“At least my evasion didn’t lead to breaking and entering.”

“Oh, that little thing?” Naomi scoffs, and my eyes bug. “Nothing.”

“You’re a cop! What are you talking about?” I ask.

“I had a key made. I actually ran it by Ashcroft before I did, and he signed off on the idea because he’s worried about you. Said someone needs to have access to your place in case...you know.” She pauses, shifts uncomfortably, then slowly drags her thumb across her neck. “I guess he wanted someone to be able to get in the apartment in case you offed yourself and your body was left to rot.”

My keys drop out of my suddenly numb fingers. “Great. Thanks so much for the visual,” I manage to say. Never in my life had I considered suicide. Not even in my darkest moments. My coworkers, however, must think me close enough to the edge to consider something I can’t take back.

“Anyway, I’m using my key to stage an intervention. You’re not going to outrun me now,” she continues. “We need

to talk, and I refuse to let you walk away again.”

“Look, I’ve had a long day, and I’m too tired for this bullshit. Get out.” I gesture toward the door, exhausted. “Not to mention you can’t stage an intervention with one person.”

Naomi laughs loudly and presses the screen on her phone to lower the volume of the music. “Who says I’m alone?”

Something breaks in the kitchen as if on cue. A rumble of pots and pans clanging together, accompanied by the tinkle of broken glass.

“Sorry, sorry! I got it. I promise I’ll clean it up.” Something else clanks together, and I wince. “Is there a broom somewhere? Gosh, a dustpan will do.”

I slowly shift my gaze back to Naomi, who looks anything but apologetic.

“Please,” I say. “Please tell me that’s not who I think it is.”

She shrugs again. “Depends on who you think it is.”

Bill, the IT wizard, comes around the corner gut first and stops when he sees me. His eyes light up. His ponytail is a little lower on his head than Naomi’s but slicked back as well, with something I’m willing to bet isn’t gel or mouse but good old-fashioned grease. “Please don’t be mad,” he starts.

“Why would I be mad?” I stress every syllable.

Adam is a few steps behind Bill. “Because this one is basically a blue whale on two legs, and he broke your Tweedy Bird glass. I’ll replace it. I’m sorry.”

Christ, deliver me. This is ridiculous.

“You called in the geek squad?” I direct that toward Naomi, and she flinches at my sarcasm.

“Yeah, well, no matter how covert you try to be, I’ve seen you and Adam talking. And let’s face it, Dev, you need friends. And you need help.” It’s the bluntest I’ve ever heard her be. “We need help if we’re going to make it work on our cases. Your mind isn’t in the right spot. We’re all worried.”

“This isn’t some game. We’re not a crew of fucking superheroes, and I don’t need friends.” I stiffen, muttering a string of less-than-pleasant curses under my breath.

“We’re doing this for Pocahontas,” Bill puts in as though it will help me change my mind.

*Damnit.*

If he’d said anything else, if some other stupid crap came out of his lips, I might have actually gone off the way I wanted to and burned some bridges I should not. But Bill’s not-so-politically correct nickname for Layla...it hits me right where it counts.

It hits me exactly the way Naomi had surely hoped.

“What are we doing?” The air goes right out of my sails, and without looking at the three of them, I shrug out of my coat and go through the same ritual of hanging it up near the door and kicking off my shoes.

“We’re waiting for pizza,” Adam tells me. “I ordered it before we left, so it should be here any minute now.”

I stare around at the three of them. “You guys really thought through this whole intervention thing.”

“We’re Empire Bay’s version of the Scooby Gang, and right now, we’re going to help you take down Broderick Stevens,” Naomi says, leaning back on the couch with her arms angled behind her head.

“Excuse me?” I ask gruffly.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it? What you work so hard to accomplish? You want to bring down the entire Black Market Syndicate, and our current case ties directly back to the operation. You know it does. That’s why you brought the woman in earlier. Right?” Naomi finally pushes up from the couch and stands, turning her neck in circles to crack it, working out the same area I kneaded earlier on myself.

Hazard of the trade and those uncomfortable chairs.

“You...” I’m at a loss.

Saved by the bell, thankfully. The buzzer rings, and Adam and Bill spring into motion to greet the pizza man.

“You want to take him down. We want to take him down. We’re never going to get anywhere unless we work together. Even the four of us aren’t going to get anywhere unless we find an in with the operation. But!” Naomi holds up a finger. “I’m working on that. I’ve got a few irons in the fire.”

This is insanity at its finest.

I saw her at the crime scene yesterday, sensed how unnerved she was by the body. I hear the tremble in her voice now. The protective instincts I thought were gone start to kick in, and I have to physically root myself and bite my tongue to prevent myself from moving or saying something silly, like assuring her everything will be okay.

The smart thing to do would be to throw all their asses out. To tell them I’m not working on anything and isolate.

But Naomi talked to Ashcroft about me. They’re worried about me offing myself or dying alone to the point that no one finds me.

When did I get to this point?

Why had I let myself, and when had I lost even the meager ability I used to have to make friends?

In the academy, I’d done well enough. With Layla, I’d done well enough. I had a life and a fiancée, and I went to meet a few people for coffee once a week.

Now?

Bill kicks the door closed, and he’s got five large pies in his hands. “Who’s hungry?”

I sigh, shaking my head and lifting a hand in the air. My microwave burrito is thawed in the bag and halfway forgotten. “Avengers, assemble.”

TEN

I SQUIRM IN MY SEAT, wiggling like an excited kid told to sit still who physically cannot. This is it. This is what I've worked for all these years, what I've been hyperfocused on.

*Promotion.*

The Black Market Syndicate is going to be *mine*. Well, when Broderick decides to step down. Which probably won't be for a while, but just to know I'll be next in line to inherit it, to be assured of the control brought by the position...

It means everything to me.

I'll know I've made it, then. That all of my time on the streets and on my back has actually meant something because I'll be powerful in a way no one can underestimate or take from me.

Never again.

No one is ever going to have power over me unless I will it, and after everything, I seriously doubt I'll ever be willing to bend.

I smile at Broderick, unsurprised when he scowls back at me. He's scowling at everyone and waiting until the room is quiet enough to hear our hearts beating before he makes any kind of announcement.

Yes, this man rescued me. He's been my mentor, my protector, and my lover despite the age difference. He's groomed me into what I am today. And his subtle gestures, even subtler looks, tell me to bite my tongue until he's through.



Ten years.

Ten years brought me to this point. Hopefully, I've made him proud.

Broderick studies his nails. "Dougherty, you've displeased me. Your handling of the last hit was sloppy at best and endangers us at worst. One forgotten lighter is a mistake and tolerated only because of your reputation. Two is ludicrous and stupid."

Today, to add insult to injury, the man in question is wearing suspenders over a white shirt. What is this, band camp? He flinches, pulling a face there and gone in a blink before Broderick sees.

"You've gone as far as you can go, and we are grateful for what you've done for us thus far. Antoni? Take care of things."

The ax comes swiftly down, judgment passed, and I settle slightly as Antoni rises and brushes the front of his suit like he's about to get down to work. "My pleasure," he says with a sneer.

Dougherty shakes his head, smart enough not to make a run for the door. "No, come on! Mr. Stevens, please. I messed up. I get it. I'll do better next time. I'll never forget to leave the lighters on our marks."

Broderick stares straight ahead, dead-eyed as a shark. "There isn't going to be a next time for you, you rat fuck. You're done."

Right there in the conference room, in front of everyone, Antoni draws his gun out and fires three shots, two in the chest and one clean through the eyes. Dougherty drops, blood seeping into the floor immediately, and his face tilted toward the ceiling, empty.

Antoni doesn't need to be told what to do. He snaps his finger, and several of the guards from the door move into position, two dragging the corpse out of the room and another bringing in cleaning supplies.

No one moves. No one speaks. Broderick only stares across at the gathered people with a small hint of disdain

showing through his eyes. “This is what happens,” he explains at last, “when you displease me. Does anyone have any further questions before we continue?”

I wait for anyone to speak or someone to show emotions at the blood currently pooling on the floor. But in reality, no one liked Dougherty. Certainly not me. This is one meeting where Broderick is forced to take the reins. His circus, his monkeys.

And he has yet to get to the good stuff. The stuff where he says, in front of everyone, “Yes, Aria Darklyn is my protege. She will step up and be trained to replace me once I retire. She has earned the right.”

I resume my furtive squirming as Broderick clears his throat.

“I’d like to give credit where it is due,” he says. “Aria? Please stand.”

Every eye in the room turns to me, with most of them narrowing the way they always do.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me over the years. Your prowess on the dark web has opened up multiple avenues for expansion for the Syndicate,” Broderick adds.

I blink at him. He isn’t going to rail me for getting caught at the Galleria today? For being taken downtown to the warehouse of the Ninth?

“She’s *too* powerful, boss.” Antoni wipes his gun on the leg of his pants, as much because he’s an asshole as anything else, before replacing it in the holster. “She’s going to make trouble for us.”

He bares his teeth at me, and I jut out my chin, ready to fight fire with fire. Unless he decides to whip the gun out again. In which case, I’m dead.

“She is one of my greatest assets. Aria, congratulations on all your hard work.” Broderick pauses to clap, and I wait. Tense and ready.

The rest of the room offers up half-heartedly claps, but Broderick says nothing else.

I wait in vain.

“She’s the youngest to set up channels online that move such vast amounts of money so quickly, boss.” This from Kline, Broderick’s third in command. He’s basically useless as a man, in my eyes anyway, but he’s better than any accountant I’ve ever seen.

“Yes, thank you, Kline. I understand what she does for the organization.”

“She moves more money than you do.” Kline finishes his statement in an undertone and winces.

He’s the numbers guy. Nothing moves to the banks without Kline knowing where, when, and how much.

But what he just admitted to Broderick, in front of everyone—

I hold my breath, waiting to see what will happen.

Broderick says nothing for the longest time before he shifts in his seat, tapping his fingers in front of him. “Antoni? How are we doing with expansion into Pennsylvania?” he barks out.

It’s not what I expect him to say, which only makes the ball of lead in my stomach grow heavier. I’m proud of my job, and I’m damn good at what I do. I’ve been tireless in my online expansion in the name of the Black Market Syndicate.

But the look on his face at Kline’s words...it wasn’t good.

Nowhere *near* good.

The kind of look I knew would lead to an extra hard fuck later, where I’d leave with an ache between my legs and multiple orgasms.

Broderick waits until he calls an end to the meeting and everyone is on their way out the door before he snaps his fingers.

“Not you, Aria,” he says in a low tone. “Don’t move.”

He walks to the door and talks to the guards, too soft for me to make out any of his words before he closes the door

behind him. The echo of footsteps in the hallway is barely audible, and then it's only the beat of my heart.

“You didn't think to tell me?” he asks.

My mouth goes dry. “Tell you about what?”

“How much more money you've been pulling in. It seems to me, since the last time we spoke, you've expanded your online empire?”

“For you.” I rush to say before he erupts. “I've done it all for you.”

He refuses to look at me, but when he turns around, he sends one of the chairs flying. The toe of his shoe connects with the back of the chair, and it shoots forward, slamming into the edge of the table hard enough to crack the wood.

“You've done it for yourself. Otherwise, you would have alerted me to every one of your movements,” he growls. “Did you think you could hide from me?”

“I'm not sure what you're talking about.” My voice trembles.

“Your little jaunt with the cops today? You must think I'm stupid. Or blind. Perhaps too old to be in this game, and you were counting on my senility?”

“No, Master.” I gulp over the word, swallowing hard. “I was taken by surprise.”

He does know. Of course, he knows.

He stalks toward me, all feral grace, and wraps his fingers around my neck again. Biting down just hard enough to let me know I'm only breathing because he wants me to. “You are never going to be the head of this family, Aria. I need you to remember this before you go off on your own again. I know every move you make, and those I don't, I find out immediately.”

He shoves me back on the table, tearing at my skirt, ripping the fabric, and leaving marks on my skin from the friction.

“Please,” I whisper. Not sure what I’m begging for. Mercy. An end to him flipping out. An end to the pain his words bring.

“You want leniency and compassion, then you’re looking at the wrong man.” He doesn’t remove his clothes this time, either. Only slams into me before I’m prepared. “Now, who owns you?”

It’s a chat where we both know the lines, and the answer is one I’ve given too many times to count.

I’ll never lead this family, I repeat mentally through his rough, damaging thrusts. But I love him.

And I’ll work harder.

\* \* \*

I flop down on the mattress, the soft cloud of my sheets, comforter, and pillows enveloping me. *Let me stay here.* And never leave. I swipe at my burning eyes, drawing away the last bits of dried tears and gunk. Let me stay here and not go back to work because work and the boss are breaking my heart right now.

I should have expected it.

Broderick doesn’t like anyone getting close to his level of power, not even the people he grooms. He’ll never retire; I’d been right. Or if he does retire, then he’ll never consider me for his replacement. Was I the stupid bitch so in love with him that I was willing to break myself to prove my worth?

Yes, probably.

My headache from earlier only gets worse when I refuse to cry anymore, growing from a dull ache to something I’ll need medication to eradicate.

Good, great. Now would definitely be the time to drink if I actually did. Instead, I roll over, pulling open the drawer of my nightstand and dragging out a bag of peach gummy rings. The shitty kind that tastes like fake peach, but they’re so good you

can eat a whole bag in one sitting. I've been nursing this bag for a couple of days.

Talk about willpower.

Like the willpower it took to not break down until I actually got home, despite a few leaked tears.

The first two gummy rings are attached to each other, which has to be good luck.

I'm working on numbers five and six when a knock sounds at the door, the sound so unexpected I sit up, hair flying in my face. Who in the world is knocking on my door at quarter to midnight?

I stuff the bag, vowing to come back and demolish it, and shuffle on sore feet, pussy just as sore, toward the peephole.

Well.

Well, well.

Color me surprised.

The instant of immediate attraction diminishes the longer I stare at Devan. The detective showing up *at my building* is not a good thing, no matter what kind of flippy flop my heart gives in my chest. What the fuck?

For a second, I'm torn, my hand on the lock to throw them open, and my feet cemented to the floor. Letting him in sends a clear message, doesn't it? It shows that I'm willing and all too able to talk to cops. I hate having Devan even know about my personal sanctuary. He's in my territory.

It gets my back up immediately.

But if I don't open the door, then it looks suspicious, and any reason Devan has to bring me back to the station is one he'll use without hesitation. Even a small inconvenience, such as me not wanting to let a cop into my house at midnight.

"Aria, I know you're in there, and I know you're listening," Devan starts. "Open up, please."

His rough voice sounds even more gravelly through the door. The kind of voice that says *let me in, or I'll huff and I'll*

*puff, and I'll blow your house down.*

*Is it wrong I want to answer with yes, please, give me more?*

“There’s no one home but us chickens,” I reply.

“I won’t take up much of your time, I swear. I only want to talk to you. The two of us.”

I blink, sniffing, scrubbing at my eyes again. “Why do I not believe you?”

“I left my badge at home.”

The statement sends a shiver along my spine. His badge is at home, eh? Then why is he really here?

Going on instincts that may or may not be right, I throw the deadbolt and the chain lock to the side and open the door a crack. Enough to stare at him and gauge his current state of mind. There are bags underneath his eyes, a layer of stubble gracing his strong chin and above his lips.

“This is a bad idea,” I warn. “You should not be here.”

Man, he’s even taller in person. He towers over me, his caramel trench coat dappled with a few dark spots that speak to evening rain.

“You and I have unfinished business. I needed to come and talk to you and apologize.” He offers the last word grudgingly and swallows hard, forcing my attention to his bobbing throat.

“Well, good evening to you, too,” I grumble, closing the door behind him. Forgoing the lock this time, too, in case I need to toss Devan out on his ass.

As if I have the strength for it. I’m barely five feet five, and he’s ...a giant. Compared to me, at least. And he’s in good shape. I’ve felt the lay of muscles even before I watch him move across the apartment, taking in the finishing touches and decor.

“You? And florals.” He shakes his head. “Not what I expected. I thought something modern and classic, with a lot of sharp corners and clean lines.”

I cock a hip to the side, hands going down to the dip of my waist. “You’re interrupting me at midnight to razz on my decor? I thought you said there was going to be an apology for me somewhere in there.”

Devan turns to look at me. “I really wanted to talk to you about Broderick Stevens.”

The air goes right out of me, and my heart clenches to the point where, for a moment, I’m lightheaded. “Broderick Stevens? Why would you want to talk about him? I told you I’m not connected.” Didn’t I?

For some reason, I’m having trouble remembering now.

“Because I’m going to take him down, and I think you’re the key to do it.”

Laughter bubbles out of me and erupts before I can stop it, my head tilting back and my eyes closing. “Oh, wow, sexy and a sense of humor. Not to mention you know your way around a pair of handcuffs. If you weren’t such a complete jackass, I’d call you the total package.”

Devan stands in the middle of my living room, his expression hardening. “I’m not making a joke,” he informs me gruffly.

I might as well get comfortable because I’ll surely grow old and die waiting for him to get on with the apology. Not inviting him to sit or offering him anything to drink because he’s clearly in my house for a personal reason, and it’s not to bring me cookies, I plop down on the couch. My arms are flung out behind me along the back. “Well? Get to the point, then. Otherwise, you’re wasting my time, and I’ve had a long, hard day.”

More than long and more than hard, but Devan doesn’t need to know any of those things. The mask has to slip back into place the way it always does, so the only thing he sees is the cocky and sometimes brash woman who has a firm grip on her reality.

Not the mess underneath.



Not the woman so broken she had to reinvent herself, and now she sobs into bags of fake fruit-flavored gummies.

“You know more than you’re saying in regards to the case, and there might not be an actual trail to follow, but I’m positive.” Devan scratches the side of his head, standing in the middle of my living room, looking at an utter loss.

Does he realize why he’s really here? I wonder. It’s not only because of the case. A big part of it, yes, but there’s another layer to the mystery of his arrival, and fuck, but I’m too tired to try to unravel him.

Plus, he’s doing a bang-up job of unraveling himself.

I shake my head. “It’s funny how you think you can come in here and question me. This is my territory. You’re basically a trespasser for the second time today, and you’re lucky I’m not tossing you out on your ass.”

He starts to pace across the carpet, to the wall and back. “And you’re a piece of this case, one I can’t figure out yet. Plus, it’s after midnight. Seems to me we’re already into tomorrow.”

“Seems like more of a *you* problem and not a *me* problem,” I reply.

“I’m going to make it a *you* problem if you don’t help me.”

“Why, though? I don’t get where you’re coming from, Devan.” Finally, because watching him pace is making my headache worse, I pat the spot on the couch beside me. “Come on. I won’t bite you. Nothing you won’t ask me for, anyway.”

I’m too exhausted to be witty, but he’s definitely hot, no matter how run-down he looks. Flirting with him is natural.

It’s as easy as drawing in my next breath, and damn it but I don’t want to stop.

But also...what if Broderick finds out, determines that Devan is in my apartment, and gets the wrong idea?

“You know the dead man. The one you came to see the other day,” Devan adds.

Is there any point in lying to him? “Yes, I knew him. We were in the same trade.”

He lifts a brow.

“Online business. You know, website building and such,” I clarify with a smile that lets him know I’m only telling the partial truth. “Independent online contractors.”

He scoffs and asks, “You’re really going to feed me that line?”

“What line?” I say innocently. “You mean the truth? I work online. It’s what I do.”

“And your online contracting pays for an apartment like this?” Devan finally drops to my side. “It’s rent-controlled in a very desirable neighborhood. A brownstone of this size doesn’t come up for rent often.”

“I actually don’t have to answer your questions, you know,” I reply, shifting to grab a pillow and squash it against my chest. “Since you aren’t here on official police business.” I cross one ankle over the other. “Come on, Devan. Tell me the truth. You really just missed me. Didn’t you? You wanted to see me and *apologize* for earlier.”

He stares at the window instead of answering, the sheer curtains doing little to block out the dull glow of night and moonlight obscured by clouds. The mist outside has turned into a light drizzle. Perfect sleeping weather. Except suddenly, I’m wide awake.

“I am sorry, Aria. I...yeah, no excuses.” He huffs out a long, deep exhale. “I’m sorry.”

“There you go. It’s not so hard, is it?” I especially like a man who doesn’t feel the need to destroy his apology with his reasoning.

“What got you into your current job?” He forges ahead.

“You mean, did I go through grade school wishing and hoping to do what I now do?” I ask.

He shrugs, his coat swishing with the gesture. “Sure.”

I didn't actually go to high school, not past ninth grade, and forget about college or trade. Well, a certain kind of trade. Not the kind a man like Devan would want to hear about. His records indicate he's a good, upstanding citizen. Not so much as a misdemeanor to his name, even before he joined the force.

Unlike me.

Even now, with all the work I've done on myself, it makes me emotional to think back on what I had to do to survive.

My own fault entirely.

"I mostly played around on a laptop, games and shit," I tell him, stifling a yawn with the pillow. "Turns out there are a lot of skills you can teach yourself if you've got the time and a little bit of inclination."

"You taught yourself your skills? Impressive."

Inside, I'm glowing, and outside, I offer him a grin. "Well, thank you. How sweet of you. In fact, if you've come here to shower me with compliments rather than question me, then you're free to stay as long as you like."

"There are too many questions for me to leave off here. You and I both know that."

"Or you can simply take me at my word. I had nothing to do with Everett's death. He was...a friend. Or as much of a friend as a person like me can have."

Devan is silent, taking a pause, before he says, "I understand. It's something we have in common."

"What?" I question.

"Our friends are dead."

"Awfully morose of you." And because it's somehow ridiculously hard to sit with him and not have something in my hands, whether it be flesh or pottery, I shift to get up.

Devan is quick to move his hands to his thighs, toward his crotch, to protect himself from me like I'm coming at him hard with any and all holes.

“It’s not like I’m about to hang off your dick. I’m just getting something to drink.” I roll my eyes. “I’ll make tea.”

“I don’t drink tea.”

“Well, tonight you’re getting chamomile, Tough Guy.”

I like the way he grumbles, following me into the kitchen and sitting silently at the moveable island. There’s a single seat for a single me, and he watches me prepare the tea. Loose leaves and blooms into a strainer, hot water in the kettle. A little bit of sugar to temper the natural bitterness of the chamomile and black tea I add for a kick.

The weight of his direct eye contact settles inside of me, quieting certain pieces as it wakes others. I’m not sure I’ve ever had a man stare at me the way Devan does. Hungry, but...protective.

It might not be a true cease-fire, but the conversation that allows it is enough to at least put me back on even footing. Or make me feel like we are, even if it’s all a lie. I’m not tired enough to let him stay despite the late hour, and he’s not stubborn enough to force me to answer the majority of his questions.

If Broderick finds out, then I can say with very real authority that nothing happened.

Even when I want it to.

ELEVEN

*devan*

ARIA SENDS me home at quarter to two, and I don't blame her.

What the fuck had I been thinking going over there in the first place? I hadn't been thinking at all, apparently, because if I had, then logic would have kept me home.

A combination of things forced me out of my own home, and using the GPS to get to hers, I think as I pull into the parking garage beneath my apartment and head upstairs. There were simply too many people in my apartment, closing me in. I needed a chance to grab some fresh air and clear my head.

Two...and this one stung...I wanted to talk to Aria.

Not because of the case, although I used it as my way through her door. I wanted to talk to her, to see what makes her tick, to see what kind of things might spill from her lips.

And yes, to apologize.

She deserved one after the way I treated her.

For some strange reason, the woman had lodged in my mind and stayed there. I hadn't been disappointed in the anecdotes she offered nor irrational points she'd made, ones I hoped may lead us in the right direction.

Adam had forwarded her address to my phone, so it was only a small matter for me to send the others packing for the night and get in the car.

A small matter to cut across town, the traffic this time of night negligible, and knock on her door.

Except nothing happened this time around other than the simple comfort of a conversation between friends. It's ridiculous. We don't know one another well enough for the kind of aggressively easy way we operate together. We hadn't touched each other except for a light brush of fingertips when she transferred the mug of tea to me.

A mug of damn tea.

I thought I had her figured out, my mental picture clearer than before. Maybe not one hundred percent accurate, but I've worked wonders on less.

So many years on the force makes a man good at reading people, and I've honed my skill. Then Aria turns my mental picture of her on its head with her floral aesthetic and herbal tea. The heels and the skirt gave me one impression, and the woman in her pajamas with the poppy curtains gave me another.

My apartment is ridiculously quiet when I finally make it back, and for a moment, I stop in my tracks, wondering at the sense of life lingering within the four walls. As though the intrusion earlier had somehow imbued what's been lost—

Which is fucking ridiculous, and I'm losing it. Clearly.

The door is barely closed behind me when a fist falls heavy against the wood, pounding out an incessant rhythm until I turn and wrench it open.

To see a dripping-wet Aria on the other side. I stare her up and down, her expression blank, rainwater trailing along the planes of her face. Her eyes are larger than I've ever seen them. I let my gaze travel over her longer than necessary.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I'm sorry, it's late. I had to make sure I wasn't being tailed. It took me a little longer to get here because of it."

"Being tailed? I literally just left your place." My voice is firm to hide the confusion, my jaw clenched in surprise.

"You took the long route. I took the shorter way. And yet we're here at the same time." She shivers. "Except I'm not

here to talk to you, Tough Guy.”

I shove aside every thought of her beauty because there is no way in hell she’s here for any good reason. Has Aria lost her mind? I already have an inkling there, but say nothing. “Then what do you want?”

Things aren’t adding up. Then my insides still. The moment is loaded and poignant, poised on a knife edge, until she erupts into motion and flings her arms around my neck. Her lips meet mine, and my heart thumps right up into my throat at the kiss. A devastating press of her mouth to mine, quick as a lightning bug in the summer dark before she rears back.

I’m too shocked to do anything, not even kiss her in return. My eyes are open and locked onto her. “What are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She sounds indignant.

I loop my arm around her waist, drawing her into the apartment and kicking the door closed with my foot. I hold her close as I ask, “I mean, yes, but why?”

“You’re seriously complaining.” Now, she’s not just indignant but agitated; her hands fly up. “Wow. If your massive boner wasn’t against my belly button, then I’d have questions, Devan. Some very deep and vulnerable questions.”

She’s right. The second her scent, mingled with the freshness of the rainstorm, wound through my system, I was hooked.

A little bit of mischief lights her eyes, and I chuckle, refusing to let go of her. “I’m not having sex with you tonight.”

Once the words are out of my mouth, I tense. Anxious for her response.

Her smile melts the chunk of ice in my chest, and she reaches between us to brush her hand against my dick. “Again, your massive boner begs to differ.”

“My body’s reaction to you is natural because you’re absolutely gorgeous, and you’ve got the hands of an angel if



an angel gave handjobs.” I continue to back up until we’re in the middle of the living room, just the two of us and the damage and trash left behind by the superheroes I’d kicked out. “And turning you down is going to probably be the biggest regret of my life, but no.”

“No?” Aria questions.

“No. This isn’t right. You’re a suspect, and I’m—”

“Trying to retain a shred of your former dignity?” she supplies.

I chuckle, the sound pained and dry. “Something like that.” My fingers twitch against her, grasping the fabric of her shirt.

“Then it’s too bad I’m not leaving here until you touch me.” She quirks her head to the side.

“I didn’t tell you to get out.” My voice cracks. I clear my throat, my dick begging me to reconsider. There’s a line. However much I want to cross it, it’s a terrible idea. But... there are ways to skirt the line. Apparently, I’m too overwhelmed to have a functioning handle on things in my life. Not my house, my job, or my mental health.

Right now, Aria is in my arms, and I want to do all the things I’ve imagined with her.

Instead, what comes out of me is a proposition. “I said I wasn’t going to fuck you. There are plenty of other things I’m going to do to you before you leave.”

“Oh.” Her smile deepens. “My interest is piqued.”

“I know.” I push back only to glide my hand along her front underneath the waistband of her pajama pants. The further down, along the thin material at her core, where her wetness seeps through the moment I make contact. Aria jumps, then moans at the contact. “I feel it.”

This time, it’s my turn to be the one to call the shots. She came to me for a reason, the first to act on the desire we both feel. But this is my place, and damn it, how good would it feel to dive into pleasure? It’s been such a long time since I felt anything—

My turn, absolutely, to drag her toward the bedroom. My terms, my rules, I'm not ready to go the full length yet, but there are so many other things two people can do to please each other. Aria has already shown me two of them. It's time for me to return the favor.

“So what are you going to do about it?” she asks with a breathless giggle.

I want to do something. I want to do so many *some things* it makes my head spin and the rest of me go steel-hard and molten at the same time. Except I say out loud, “You're bad for me.”

Aria lifts a brow high. “Bad in a good way,” she replies.

I shake my head. “No, bad in a bad way. You should go home. I should send you out the door.”

“Then why aren't you?” She arches back against me, and I stop, groaning, dragging her closer and grinding my dick against the sweet curves of her ass. “Why aren't you showing me those plenty of other things you want to do to me?”

Time for me to shit or get off the pot, as my auntie used to say to me. She never suffered fools. And I hate to admit it, but lately, I've been nothing short of a fucking fool.

I bend to kiss Aria, only to have her push me away at the last minute. “Where's your bedroom?”

Her voice is huskier than I've ever heard it and shoots straight down to my cock.

“Find it yourself. If you do, I'll give you a prize.”

She grabs the front of my shirt and turns, dragging me behind her. “As long as you let me pick the prize.”

I shuffle along behind her, the difference in our height laughable, just like the concept of doing anything with this woman.

She really is bad for me.

There would be no coming back from this. Sleeping with—or getting pretty damn close—to a criminal who is an active

part of an investigation.

Why can't I say no to her? Why can't I keep myself under control and do the right thing?

*I have no clue what the right thing is anymore.*

Aria nudges one of the doors in the hallway open and reveals the bathroom. The next room is the bedroom, and she shoots a fiery smile over her shoulder at me.

*"Bingo."*

The word is so softly muttered I hardly hear it, and then she's hauling me inside the room with more strength than I'd give her credit for. She keeps eye contact as she fiddles behind her with the knob, only releasing me once she's got the door locked.

"Is this how you think it's going to go?" I ask her. "With you calling all the shots?" I reach up and tug my shirt overhead.

"Won't it?" She saunters toward me, her feet bare and making no noise on the plush carpet.

The apartment isn't large by any means, and I've always hated the carpet in the bedrooms. Until now. Until the silence of her footsteps makes her seem like a siren straight out of my dreams.

She's about to push me back to the bed when I sidestep, reaching around to the back of her neck in the same movement and reversing our positions again. Hauling her to me and forcing her to look up at me.

"What are you going to do to me, Devan? Will you tell me?"

I try to kiss her again, only to have her shift her face to the side to avoid my lips. Rather than give into the sliver of curiosity, the equally large sliver of frustration at not being able to claim those lips for mine in the deep way I want, I trail my mouth down the side of her neck. I nip at her chin, her jaw, draw a line toward her ear with my tongue, and feel her shiver.

"Take your clothes off," I demand softly.

I expect her to fight me on it. To have something, anything, to say about me calling the shots. Especially since she came here to try to fuck me, and I'm not having it. Except her head bows, and she starts to peel her shirt over her head. Giving me a tantalizing glimpse of the navy-colored cotton bra keeping her breasts lifted. Her torso is pale, narrow, her ribs showing slightly. Her pajama pants follow later, and she kicks them aside, off into the gray gloom of the unlit bedroom.

There's enough light seeping in from the streetlamps outside to illuminate the side of her face in golden slats.

*Once we do this, there's no going back.* Not physically, not mentally. None of it.

I'm not at all prepared when I step forward and run my arms down the sides of her abdomen, cupping her waist, loving the way she shivers. She's so small compared to me that I can almost touch my fingers together around her. Almost. Her nipples pebble beneath the bra, and I splay my fingers over her ribcage before hooking a thumb into her panties to tease her.

She reaches for my dick, and I stop her, holding her in place with her palm flat on my front.

"You won't let me touch you?"

I shake my head. "Not tonight." My terms, I remind myself. My terms and my house and my time to be bad.

I lift my hand to her clavicle and gently push her so that her knees knock against the mattress, and Aria goes down, still staring at me.

"You want to play like you're good," I tell her, lowering my hand to my crotch and flicking open the zipper. "Well, tonight, you can be a good girl for *me*." Only me.

She licks her lips, glancing down at my hand over my cock.

"You want me to suck you off again?" she wants to know.

I slide one hand through her soft red hair, moving my mouth down along the column of her throat, tasting her. She

moans against me, and the sound sends a jolt of electricity right down to my dick. “No, baby, no.” I see the shock of surprise on her face when I drop down beside her, erection still in my pants. “Ride me.”

She purrs, lifting her leg to sit astride me. “Now *that* I can do.”

I cluck my tongue and keep her in place as I lay back and, once I’m there, tug her up my body.

“Ride my *face*, Aria.” My lips curve in a smile, doing my best to ignore the faint outline of bruises on her neck and hips. “I want to memorize your taste.”

Her eyes have gone from circular to narrow, scrutinizing me, her head tilted to the side in a way that made me wish to be more flexible. Just so that I could nip the area. “I’m not sure what you mean. I thought you wanted to get off.”

“I want *you* to get off.”

I pull at her, insistent, until she finally reaches forward to grab the headboard, positioning herself so that her legs are on either side of my head, bringing my face in direct line with her dripping pussy. She’s soaked through her panties all the way, and moisture tails the curve of her legs.

I peel the material to the side, staring at her before using my hands to angle her, and slide my tongue between her folds, flicking her clit so that she jumps.

“You don’t have to do—” she starts.

I growl against her and suck her folds into my mouth. “Shut up, Aria. Ride my face until you moan and come all over me.”

Something about the statement has her stilling, and I get to work, spearing her entrance gently with the tip of my tongue. She tastes better than anything or anyone else. Musky and sweet and delicious in a way that I have a gut feeling I’ll never tire of. My cock strains against my pants in a bid to bury myself in her sweet heat, but I keep myself back. Working at her until her breath comes in shallow little pants, and she starts to arch.

“Go harder,” I tell her.

She starts to grind herself against my face, the movement of her body threatening to cut off my air, and I love every second of it. I could die a happy man right now. I latch my mouth over her swollen clit and flick my tongue in circles around her, sucking at her until I’m ready to blow myself. A raspy growl burns the back of my throat, and I close my eyes.

My god, it’s good. So damn good to surrender to my desire. To feel alive in a way I haven’t felt in too long to count.

Except—

My house, my terms.

“Are you close?” I ask her, circling her clit, biting down on the swollen nub just hard enough to have her shiver.

“I’m so close,” she whispers. “But I’m going to come. I can’t—” I open my eyes in time to see her biting down on her lip, cutting off whatever else she wants to say.

“Not yet, you’re not. You will, though.”

I push her off, her body falling to the side. Her hair is wild when I manage to get a good look at her, her expression the same and a little indignant. “What the hell, Devan?”

She’s on her back, and I push her legs open, palming her, playing with her with my fingers until she zips her lips again.

“I’m not going to let you come until I say so,” I murmur.

“You’re edging me?” She chuckles and writhes beneath me. Arching, twisting. An undulating goddess. “You really think you can? I’m not easy to get off. I’m not...normal, that way.”

She sounds turned on, and it takes every ounce of willpower I’ve still got left not to unzip my pants and fuck her just like this.

“To within an inch of your life,” I answer.

I toy with her, fingering her first with one digit and then a second one, watching the changes come over her. Aria’s chest heaves, and her eyes roll back, her head tipping. Her moans

grow louder and more frequent, her muscles clenching around my finger. I growl through her moan, every sound she makes drawing me closer to the inevitable release. I'm a patient man, and although my skills are a little rusty, I know how to adjust. How to move with a woman's body and play her the exact way she needs.

"I'll let you come," I continue, "if you tell me your connection to Broderick Stevens and what he has to do with my case."

I pull my finger out and watch her eyes pop open. For a long moment, she stares at me, her mouth working but no words coming out. Finally, she grabs my pillow and smacks me with it.

"You fucking asshole!" she yells.

I laugh, but I'm too late to get out of the way, and the pillow makes contact. "Tell me what I want to know, be a good girl, and I'll let you come. It's not a hard concept to get."

"Fuck you! I can do it myself, then."

"No, you won't." I grasp her wrists and hurl them above her head as she reaches between her legs to complete what I started. "I'm not going to let you."

"You can't stop me," she insists.

"I've got two sets of handcuffs in my bedside table, and only one of them is going to be easy to get out of. Now." I stop, my voice hard. "Which one of them do you want me to use on you?"

TWELVE



WHAT...IN the actual...fuck...just happened?

There is one thing I know with absolute certainty: Blabbing on Broderick will get me killed.

Okay, two things. Because I know that Devan Bishop might be a good cop, but he is an absolute douchebag when it comes to sex. A douchebag and a wizard with his tongue. Shit, does the man tie cherry stems into knots at parties as a trick?

That's how it felt when he used it on me.

Rather than give him what he wants, I storm out of his place, dragging my pajamas up, feet hardly in my shoes, and fume the entire way home. Once I'm in my apartment, I slam the door with reckless abandon behind me and finally flop down on my bed, screeching into a pillow.

There is something seriously wrong with him.

No, scratch that.

There is something wrong with me because I'd gone to him, and he still toyed with me. I'm definitely the problem here. Why do I want him so badly? Why does it matter to me, even on an infinitesimally small level, that Detective Bishop takes an interest in me for something other than his stupid case?

He's not going to win. Whatever he thinks he's up against when it comes to my boss, the reality is much worse than he imagines.

I should just give up. Push him straight out of my mind and go back to Broderick, really focusing on earning his

approval and feeling better about myself. Which I'm sure I will once I'm assured of a better position within the Syndicate.

Not like Devan would be able to get me off, anyway. He might have tried and gotten close, but I need pain to come, and it's not his nature.

I barely slept the rest of the night and somehow managed to carve out an hour or so for myself around sunrise. Much to my surprise, the moment I'd left Devan, stormed out of his house and went back to my place, I still hadn't been able to come. It's like my body betrayed me no matter what I told it. I begged it to do what I wanted it to do, give me release.

Nope nothing. Nothing like I wanted, anyway, and all I did was think about Devan.

His skills.

How he refused to let me come but was so quick to force me to go with his ultimatums.

The alarm goes off at eight, and with a groan, I heave myself to the side of the bed and into the bathroom. I strip off my pajamas and haul my ass into the shower.

Today is a new day.

A new way to accomplish my goals even when I feel like one hundred percent unadulterated shit. I hadn't checked the phone last night, knowing if I took it with me, it would be another way for Broderick to track me and link me to Devan.

My lower extremities feel heavy and a little mad at me.

After an excessively long shower, I let my hair air dry and brush my teeth before going into the kitchen to brew some tea. I change directions at the last second and head for a matcha latte with almond milk, needing a little extra *oomph* to face the day.

The cell sits on the counter next to me, the screen black, and I know once I press my hand to it, there will be messages.

Texts. A ton of them, all demanding me to come into the office ASAP.

Maybe they already know where I'd gone last night and who had his mouth on me.

My milk starts to heat in the electric frother, and I twirl a lock of damp hair around my index finger, worry growing in my gut. I've never done anything like this before, never been given the opportunity to sleep with someone else. Not since Broderick found me.

He's been more than enough. Always more than enough because he's the only one who can give me the roughness, the brutality I need to actually orgasm. Except I'd taken a risk last night, and I'd been close. Too close for comfort, really. How am I going to face Broderick today when I go in?

"Am I an idiot or what?" I ask my cup of matcha.

Finally, my milk has heated, and I add it to the tea, steeling myself and pressing the phone to wake the screen. As I'd suspected, there were about ten missed texts from Blake and one from Broderick himself. A simple word that he knew would bring me into the office.

A glance at the clock at the head of the screen shows it's not even nine. There's going to be hell to pay if I'm late.

I somehow make it into the office only five minutes after my text deadline, pointedly not looking at Blake where he sits behind his desk.

"Where's my donut today?" he asks as I tear through my own stuff and boot up the computer.

"It's not the right time for sweets, I've decided. I'm done trying to figure out what makes you tick," I tell him with an acidic grin.

"Shame. You were getting close," he teases.

I turn, lifting my travel mug to my lips and draining the last sips of matcha. "You're baiting me."

Being back here has a knot forming in my chest and an echo of yesterday's words playing on repeat in my head. How I'll never be the next Broderick Stevens. I'll never take over the Syndicate, no matter how hard I've worked.

I can't believe it's all for nothing.

I can't believe that all the good I've done will be wasted.

Blake is staring at me when I lift my eyes to him at last. "What?" I ask.

"You look different."

Fuck me, is it that obvious? I scowl. "I put in a hard night, okay? Nightmares."

"The meeting yesterday didn't end up how you wanted it to be?" he asks dryly.

Blake is nothing more than a glorified assistant. He's never been able to sit in on any of the meetings, and I've always wondered if he resents me for what I've accomplished, for the position I've been raised to, or if he's content to stay where he is. Never growing, never evolving past his current place.

Then again, I earned my reputation. Through blood, sweat, tears, and too many days with my legs open to feel sorry for Blake, whether he's got a serious lack of ambition or not.

The computer is up and running, and I log on to my chat room, checking in with the rest of my hackers. Getting a feel for what's been going on because it definitely seems as though I've been slacking. At least since Everett's death.

All's well on the western front, at any rate.

Instead of baiting the seriously fine detective with the mouth skills of an ancient sex god, I need to focus on finding out what happened to Everett. And Rahim. And Landon.

The chat streams for the room are blowing up, and when I send out a blanket message to the others, I get fifteen replies in less than five minutes.

*No info.*

*Checking into it now.*

*We won't stop until we find the answer, Mistress.*

I've got a gut feeling that whatever or whoever is behind this won't stop until more of my guys die. And it's funny that

my guys are the only ones suffering, the only ones turning up.

“You look troubled,” Blake says suddenly.

The sound of his voice makes me jump. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, it seems like you’ve got a lot going on. Is it just because of what happened yesterday, or is it more?”

He’s staring at me, pressing me, wanting answers I’m not able to give him.

I scowl at him over the edge of the laptop and slowly close the screen to let him know, without a shadow of a doubt, that he’s bothering me. “Don’t you have work to do? I swear, Blake, there’s always something, and nothing on your list says I’m the one you need to check on. Okay?”

The headache is back, and I wonder why it seemed to disappear only last night. Only with Devan.

Distraction. That’s what it must have been. I was too distracted to remember I’m supposed to be stressed.

Blake throws up his hands. “Fine.” The way he says it? I’ve hurt him. “I thought we were in this together.” He sighs and shakes his head. “I’m sorry for being concerned.”

At once, I feel like a piece of shit.

I open my mouth to apologize when a knock sounds at the door, and Antoni scowls into the room.

“He wants you,” Antoni tells me.

“I thought he was going out of town today?” My insides go cold.

He knows. He knows. It’s the only thing I can think about, and my punishment isn’t going to be good. It won’t be limited to bruises where no one will see them.

“He’s leaving in five. You better hurry your ass.” Having delivered his message, Antoni disappears, and I sit for only a second while my body catches up with my brain’s need to move.

Instead of doing what I'd done, I should have been focusing on working harder. I might never be the next head of the Black Market Syndicate, but it doesn't matter. I love Broderick—I want to work harder.

Except I also wanted to tease Devan.

My priorities are absolutely fucked.

“He's in his office, then?” I ask lightly. But Antoni is already down the hall, too far out of earshot to hear my question.

Broderick isn't in the office or the boardroom when I check, though, which leaves one place. My feet get heavier with each step down the hallway, my heart following. The bedroom.

I knock on the door, stealing my nerve, before I push inside.

There he is, standing in front of the mirror in the entryway to his closet, a towel wrapped around his lower half and his hair still damp.

“Aria.” His voice promises both heaven and hell, and I try not to wince.

“I'm here.” And now I sound too chipper. “What's going on, Broderick?”

He turns to me, pushing a hand along his jaw. “I've had a thought of late, and you are the best person I know to help me hammer out logistics.”

I'm not quite ready to release all of the barely contained panic just yet. This might still be a ploy to get me to spill the beans on my night. “Oh yeah?” I ask.

“Sit.” He snaps his fingers and points to the end of the bed, and I dutifully take a seat, the area between my legs going wet on instinct. Too many years of this, of being told what to do and where to do it. My body knows what to expect.

“What kind of thought did you have, Sir?”

“A way to expand our business and leave too much space between the Syndicate and our competitors,” he starts.

“You know, I’ve actually been thinking of ways to expand as well. I’ve got a notebook I started at my desk.” I swallow over the lump in my throat. “I forgot to bring it.”

Broderick tuts and turns to me with his hands holding the edges of the towel closed. “We’ll get to your ideas later. Right now, I’ve got something I’d like to implement, and it’s not going to take us long to get it done. I need you, Aria.”

I smile, although the edges are strained. “What is it, Sir?” There are so many ideas inside of me, ways to expand and make the Syndicate as big as any other in the area. Not the city, because the city belongs to Broderick, but the East Coast could be ours. The internet is the future, and if I had a way to protect the people beneath me, if I could utilize them and bring more to our side, then the Syndicate would be unstoppable.

But how can I bring in new bodies if I can’t guarantee their safety?

Broderick wastes no time approaching me, and although he’s smiling back, there is nothing warm about the gesture. “There is an overabundance of bodies on the streets here, those without the resources to contribute to us or society.”

I nod along with his words.

“The best thing for everyone is to get them off the street.”

“You’re talking about the homeless?” I question.

“I’m talking about teens. The aimless wanderers who are ours to mold. I’ve found a way to take care of multiple problems at the same time, Aria.”

The lump inside my torso grows larger, harder, and unbearable.

“You were once among them. You ran away from home at twelve after your mother’s friends decided to turn your way, and you made your money the only way you knew how.”

I shiver at the memory, at his tongue and the way it slivers underneath my skin.

“If it hadn’t been for me, then you would have been among the masses as well. A scourge on the city and a drain on resources. I turned it around for you.”

“And I owe you everything,” I agree without hesitation. “You know that.”

“Which is why I know you are the only one who can help me now. I have several buyers standing by.”

“What do you mean, buyers?”

“I mean, there are channels I’ve been exploring to help us eradicate the homeless teens on the street. A win-win situation for everyone involved.”

My lips go numb, my throat closing. No. No. There’s no way he’s...he’s talking about...

“Human trafficking.”

The words are barely a whisper, but Broderick catches them, and his smile grows. Heats.

“Exactly,” he confirms. “Our buyers in Saudi Arabia and Thailand are prepared to take the problem off of our hands. It will give Empire Bay a fresh start and the Syndicate enough money to—”

“To what?” I know better than to interrupt. So much better because I’ve learned my lessons the hard way. Except I do, and I can’t hold it back anymore. “Why do you need more money?” I force my grin to stay in place. “If you would just listen to me, then I’m sure we can talk about several of the ideas I have in place. We don’t need to target the teens.”

Anything but that. Anything but human trafficking. He knows exactly what happened to me, where I used to be. This has to be a joke.

“Aria.” My name is a warning, his eyes going steely. “I’ve already started implementing this. Our buyers are waiting, and stock has gone overseas in the last month.”

“Stock? You’re out of your mind! How could you do this to me?” I know better than to make this personal but fuck, it is.



It's so personal I can barely breathe right now, and my skin is crawling.

There are insects inside me, in my blood, and they are eating me.

"How could you?" I continue. "You know they're vulnerable." I wrap my arms around myself.

"Exactly." Broderick straightens. "That is exactly what I need. The vulnerable are the most easily shaped."

"There has to be another way." He's already sent stock... who was it? Who did he grab, and what is going to happen to them?

Nothing good. Nothing but their worst nightmares come to life because they will be slaves. To the system, to a master, and they will have to pay the same way I did. For no other reason than they wanted to escape. Their reasons for being on the street don't matter. All that matters is they're nothing but cattle now for Broderick to round up and export to a place of his choosing.

"You'll come around to my point of view. I'm sure of it." He taps me underneath the chin and forces me to look at him. "Trust me, Aria. It's for the best."

I want to rage at him. The best? He thinks *this* is for the best?

I'm a gutted fish, my mouth still opening and closing, but no sound escaping from it. I want to erupt. The tears are close and scorch the back of my eyes, but Broderick is the one talking to me. He strokes the side of my face once before slapping at me, a quick tap to remind me who the boss is here.

"Now, unless you want to go and make yourself useful, Aria, I've got to get ready to leave town. I'm going to New York for a few days, and while I'm gone, you'll answer to Antoni."

"I know more about this business than Antoni," I mutter, still numb. Still reeling.

“That may be true, but you have to sort through the folder I’ve left on your desk. It details much of the new operation, and I hope I can count on you to iron out the details of this expansion.” He’s back to looking at himself in the mirror and grabs a suit jacket from a velvet hanger. “You’re dismissed.”

This is worse, I think to myself, so much worse than having him choke me the other day. So much worse than anything I’ve had to do to make it ahead in his life.

I blink back tears only to have some of them creep out of the sides of my eyes anyway. Luckily, I’m on my way out the door before Broderick looks at me again.

No, he won’t look at me.

He’s got what he’s wanted, and he knows I’ll be on the case like I am with everything else he’s thrown my way.

Blake doesn’t even get up when I plod back into our office.

Broderick wants to take the Black Market Syndicate in a completely different direction, and for what? To clean up the streets?

There is nothing altruistic about this path. Nothing good about it because he knows this is where I came from. He knows it’s wrong to treat vulnerable men and women like they’re nothing.

How hard did I have to work to realize I had value? And worth? How hard do I still struggle with those things where every day is just a rinse and repeat of me looking in the mirror, trying to see why I deserve anything in my life.

I drop down on the desk like a stone and feel the weight of this new emotional anchor around my neck, dragging me into the pits of hell alongside the man I love.

My mentor, my lover.

The rest of the day passes in a blur, and when I fall asleep that night, I see him again.

I see the scene that’s replayed in my head since it happened.

The streets are mean even when you know how to navigate them, and there are people out there who will cut you open for a warm place to hide as soon as they walk by you. The alleys are only traps unless you're savvy, and I always considered myself savvy since running away at twelve.

By fourteen, I knew what to do. Mostly.

But in the dreams, I'm starving again. I feel every one of my ribs, and my cheekbones are sharp enough to cut glass. Cold, shivering, bleary-eyed, and terrified I won't wake up in the morning to see my next sunrise.

The group of kids I'd traveled with have all dispersed, some of them to homeless shelters and others six feet under, but both places seem equally unreachable.

And there is Broderick, stepping out of a discrete black SUV wearing a pressed suit and a sky blue tie that brings out the kindness of his eyes. He holds out his hand to me and offers me a way to get out of this life.

Except this time, he's got a rope in the other hand.

In my dream, he throws the rope over my head and pulls it tight so that the strands choke me, cutting off my air supply. He drags me into the back of the SUV and throws me in the trunk with the rest of the kids I used to know, assuring us with each passing mile that it's better this way.

This time...he's just like the rest of the men out there instead of my avenging angel.

I wake up covered in sweat with my stomach gnawing a hole through me, and the room weirdly chilled. To the point where I imagine seeing my breath puffing out of my lips in white gusts.

Whatever is going to happen, my mind won't let me wait until morning to figure it out.

THIRTEEN

*devan*

NAOMI AND ADAM and Bill are not going to let me miss work today. They'd made themselves painfully clear before leaving my place last night. Before I managed to shuffle them out of the apartment, all three left me with similar statements of resolve: get my ass into the precinct tomorrow so we can commandeer one of the offices and really get down to work.

Which I'd agreed to at the moment because they were right. Getting my ass in gear is paramount to taking down Stevens. Except the second Aria left, I'd furiously jacked myself off in the shower and went to bed pissed. At myself, mostly, for putting us both in a position that felt worse than a rock and a hard place. At her for choosing to leave rather than give me the answers.

I took a second shower once my alarm went off, my dick bobbing at half-mast already, and got myself off again before I dressed.

I took a gamble, and I lost. It shouldn't be a big deal. Right?

The rain continues all the way to the station, coming down in spits and spats from an angry gray sky. I know the feeling. Coming to work held none of the appeal it used to have for me.

I don't trust most of the people, not after what happened two years ago. But we do need the space, and my apartment isn't the best place to hold meetings for the Scooby Gang, which the others seemed to agree would become a regular thing.

But dragging myself into the building feels herculean.

Naomi greets me with a smile as I step up to the desk, taking off my jacket and gently draping it on the back of the chair.

“You’ve got dark circles under your eyes, Dev, but at least you don’t look like you want to bite my head off anymore,” she says. “I’m going to call it a win. What happened to you once you kicked us out? You couldn’t fall asleep?”

The rest of the room is almost somber in comparison to her, and even her low voice is bullet loud.

“Did you get Bill to open up a secure route to the dark web for us?” I bend close to whisper.

She nods. “The firewalls here are top notch, but he’s found a way for us to exist inside the system in almost complete invisibility. But he told me not to ask him how he did it. Sounds ominous.”

“Adam told me almost the exact same thing the other day.” Still, relief courses through me. “Good. At least we’re getting somewhere.”

“It’s a great start, considering we only put a tentative plan together yesterday.” She breaks off, running a hand along her lower belly. “I don’t know about you, but I definitely went a little overboard on the pizza. Not my normal thing, you know. How are you feeling besides tired?”

I shake my head. “Don’t go there, Ellison. It’s bad enough you encroached on my space without asking me. No inquiries into my well-being, and we’ll get along better. Okay?” I gesture for her to follow me down the hall toward one of the empty rooms.

“Fine, fine. I’ll try to stifle my worry for you. Sooooo...the dark web is a really big place, though, Dev.” Naomi follows me with her arms laden with files related to this case and any marked as connected to the Syndicate from the past six months. “Are you sure this chat room you found is going to give us a break? Like an honest-to-goodness break? Otherwise, we’ll be no better than dogs chasing our own tail.”

“I really believe it. It might not be the big break we’re looking for, but it might help us get enough of a toehold to send the rest of the organization tumbling down. Or so we can hope.” Room six is unoccupied, and walking over the threshold brings me a familiar jolt. The last room Layla and I used before she—

Shaking my head accomplishes nothing and certainly doesn’t help me feel clearer.

“Why?” she presses.

“Beyond the matching IP address to the one we found in the dead man’s pocket?” I’d rather not tell Naomi I have no other reason beyond a gut feeling. It may accomplish a lot, but she’s been too trusting of me lately for me to give her something without substance.

The door closes behind us, and my first thought when I turn to look at her is *age*. We’ve only just been handed this case, and already she’s losing sleep. I know the look.

I’ve *lived* that look.

Over the past two years, I’ve thrown myself into work and taken any and every case that came my way, the way I used to yell at Layla for acting. It’s no way to live. It’s asking for burnout or worse. A trip to the hospital and a few weeks spent on a shit ton of medication.

Might not be a bad way to relax.

“It’s worth a look,” I finish, not ungently. “All I’m saying.”

“I just don’t want you wasting your time on some dead-end avenue,” she replies. “Especially if we’re going to be taking down the Black Market Syndicate. We need to have a broad view of things and not focus on the tiny details. It might actually be a good idea to call in a team.”

I urge her to shut her mouth. “No. None of that,” I warn out loud. We’re not sure if this place is bugged or not. Until we’re sure, we can’t risk anyone else knowing what we know or following our progress. Especially considering the *risk* of having a task force called in. Not just the Empire Bay PD but

the county police, FBI. They'll only muck up the situation beyond repair. Which I normally wouldn't say, considering their resources, but this is Broderick Stevens.

And Aria and the chat room are my keys.

Naomi nods, oddly silent, and moves to the corkboard to start organizing photos and timelines. I sit down at the lone desk and log on to the chat room, waiting for the one familiar name to pop up, the way it always does when I come on.

Except rather than waiting, with my gut swirling and my head struggling against the same kind of current, I make the first move.

EnemySquare: *I'm thinking you might have an alert set. It doesn't take you more than five seconds to send me a message once I log on. I got you beat today. Didn't I?*

Three dots answer me.

Darkling: *Five seconds? Please. I always wait at least two minutes before reaching out to you.*

The exchange brings a smile to my face, unbidden, almost immediately.

EnemySquare: *Ninety seconds, then. We'll meet closer to the middle.*

Darkling: *You're one to talk. It seems to me you want something, if you're logging on this early in the day. What do you want?*

EnemySquare: *You know what happens when you assume. Not to sound contrite but what gives you the indication?*

Darkling: *Everyone who comes here wants something. It depends on what kind of poison you want to ingest. How badly you want to hurt yourself or the others around you.*

EnemySquare: *Whatever kind of poison is going to give me answers.*

Darkling: *Ah, I was right. You do want something. Information is the most expensive thing on here, you know. Not*



*easy to find, and not always assured of being quality. Or the truth.*

Darkling: *Although ANSWERS is a very broad category. Too broad for me to be of any help. If I even decide to help you.*

EnemySquare: *Answers regarding a few of the guys who frequent this chat room, then. We'll keep it small, contained.*

Darkling: *There are a lot of people here. You're going to have to be more specific.*

The tenor of this back-and-forth game is different from the usual one we play, and the gravity of the responses from Darkling tells me that they recognize it as well.

EnemySquare: *Whoever hasn't been around to interact in the last two days. I think you know exactly who I'm talking about. You seem to be on here every time I log in. The type of user who keeps tabs on other users.*

Darkling: *I've got a better idea for you. How about we meet up and run away?*

EnemySquare: *Got something you're running from?*

Darkling: *The usual. Maybe it's something you're trying to figure out, too. Maybe why you're looking into the disappearances of other members of this chat room.*

EnemySquare: *You definitely seem to know more than you're saying.*

Darkling: *You also haven't said no to meeting up and running away. Might you be considering it?*

EnemySquare: *I haven't been myself lately. The idea of running away is tempting.*

Darkling: *Never been your MO, I'm guessing.*

And because this is a stranger, because it's all too easy to let your guard down around people you don't know, I let a little bit slip.

EnemySquare: *I've always had a future to work toward, until now. Now I've got nothing ahead of me and it feels like*

*everything is behind me.*

EnemySquare: *It's a phase of my life where I'm not sure where to go and every direction looks equally bad.*

Darkling: *I understand the feeling. Too well. More than you know.*

EnemySquare: *Considering I don't know you? Yeah. But I get it.*

Darkling: *...I might be persuaded to help you.*

EnemySquare: *What's the cost?*

Darkling: *If I tell you there is no cost, you won't believe me. I'll tell you that it's minimal, something you'll certainly be able to afford and then some. I'll help you, you help me. One hand washes the other. I believe I have a solution to your problem that can be mutually beneficial if you're willing to aid me, you know?*

EnemySquare: *Explain.*

For the longest moment, I stare at the screen, everything inside of me poised and tense. What is Darkling trying to say? I lean closer without knowing I've even moved, my fingers poised and ready to strike out a response across the keyboard.

Darkling: *It will be better if we meet in person.*

In person? Are they out of their mind?

EnemySquare: *You could be in another country for all I know.*

Darkling: *Stop playing games, Detective Bishop. Meet me at the Galleria tomorrow at noon. I'll explain everything to you then.*

Everything inside of me goes cold when my name pops up on the screen. Not my screen name.

"What the fuck?" I blurt out.

Naomi swivels, timidly. "Do I dare ask?"

Darkling: *Well?*

It's a huge risk. It's a chance I might have to take and go armed. This person clearly knows me, has figured out my identity despite my alias. I might very well be walking into a trap.

EnemySquare: *How do I know you're going to give me what I need and not waste my time? Or kill me.*

Darkling: *You're going to have to take a chance. I promise you, if I wanted you dead, you already would be. Which means you're more help to me alive.*

I've always been a risk-taker at every point in my life. Kimmy used to joke that it was all the fire signs in my astrological chart. It made me impulsive and gave me a lack of control. I had no idea how to say no. But she was wrong. She was wrong, and she was living her best life without me. Proposing hadn't even been the biggest risk I took. Breaking the engagement, now, that was hard. Setting her free when I knew she could do better and I knew equally well I'd drop into a darker, deeper hole of depression.

Jumping in front of a bullet hurt worse than the look on Kimmy's face when I told her I didn't want to marry her anymore. Moreover, I wanted to break up, and it was a better idea for her to move back in with her folks than stay with me.

Meeting a stranger from the dark web who knows my name?

Stupid as fuck.

"I didn't want to disturb you since you looked tranced out, but how was your little conversation? You dig up anything interesting?" Naomi asks. "Seems like you're all worked up now."

I glance up at her, blinking the blur away from my eyes, and see her staring at me with a full-color photograph of our first corpse clasped in her fingers. After a deep breath, I force a small grin. "I think I've got a lead. It's too early to say, but I'm going out tomorrow to investigate." I hold up a hand to stop her before she can automatically say she'll go with me. "Alone. I don't want to spook our source. They want to meet

with me alone, and at this point, if they catch a look at anyone else, they might bolt. You understand.”

She nods gravely. “I don’t like it, but I do understand. Will you at least take your gun with you? And keep me posted this time.”

I set her with a look. “Come on. Seriously?”

“What? I can’t worry about my partner. Things aren’t going to be the same if you get yourself shot out there.”

“Shot again,” I correct.

“Exactly. See?”

I tap my fingers on the laptop lid, wondering when I’d gone from resenting her to respecting her. The way I should have from the start.

“I’ve been a horrible partner, haven’t I?”

Naomi is quiet for a moment, staring out into the empty room. Finally, she sighs. “No, you haven’t. Not always. But you have been a douchebag sometimes and left me floundering behind you and struggling to catch up. Which is okay. I get it. Your past trauma does a lot of the talking for you.” She follows the very astute and correct observation with a small yet warm smile. “From where I’m sitting, you’re a good cop who’s run into some tough times and has an issue trusting people. That’s all.”

She’s got a major point. Right now, things between us feel...tenuously good. I don’t want to ruin it.

“No offense,” she adds.

“None taken. I get it.”

And I do. Except it doesn’t really bother me anymore. Not the way I should be bothered. Numbness does that to a person. It makes even the roughest look at yourself seem like nothing at all.

“So what time are you going to meet this person and where? I want to make sure I know where to send backup if it comes to that. What happens if things go badly?”

“Let’s hope it won’t,” I say with a laugh.

I rattle off the information.

“I like this side of you who is willing to be open and communicate with me. Now, if there is anything about me you don’t like, something that bothers you—” Naomi starts.

“Let’s stop before you get your feelings hurt,” I mutter, shrugging. “The only thing I’ll say is this: your perfume can be a little too much sometimes.”

She snaps her fingers. “I knew there was something. Figured it wasn’t me getting your coffee order wrong all the time.”

Damn it, but I like her. Not in a romantic sway, but as a person. And as a cop. I’ve been a real dick to Naomi, and my head has been messing with my job and our partnership.

*I’ll do better.*

The rest of the day passes uneventfully. Everything feels like it’s ticking down to a singular point. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I might be able to get one step ahead on my case, and once I have, I’ll be able to focus my energy on taking down the Syndicate.

Threading through it all, however, is Aria.

I think about her face, her taste, her wit. I think about the connections she’s got that I need, and I wonder if she is part of the chat room, too. Somewhere lurking in the darkness and watching everything like a spider in a web, waiting for a fly—me—to get stuck.

I’m already halfway there.

Morning comes, and I’m working on about four hours of sleep and two pots of coffee by the time I get in the car to head to the Galleria. Early, too, because traffic is nothing but a bitch on the best of days. Too many people on too-small roads, including the highway.

Naomi sent me off with a text warning me to be careful.

Adam made sure to pull me aside to let me know he put a trace on my phone in case things go south, all this accompanied with a wink and a worried grimace.

Bill...stayed in his hole in the basement.

My gun seems to absorb all of the light from where I've tossed it on the passenger seat, along with my badge. I've got extra clips just in case things go south, but I'm hoping, this time, it works out for me. For this case.

Those dead men deserve justice, just like every other person hurt under the Black Market Syndicate for all the years of its operation. For Layla, the unconquerable tower of a woman who fell as well.

Fuck.

I rub at a knot of tension in my chest, somehow growing bigger and tighter with each passing mile.

My gut is oddly silent today.

I have no idea how this will turn out, and even hoping for the best feels astronomically out of my reach, damn near impossible.

The best isn't part of my reality anymore. I only hope for mediocrity, for things to work out for other people. For the families of the dead men and everyone else associated with the cases who come across my desk.

The sun's rays beat down on my hand on the steering wheel, and by the time I pull into the parking lot of the Galleria, I'm practically sweating.

Darkling said they wanted to meet in the northern parking lot, with a view of the Starbucks underneath large white signage. Makes it easy to find, at least. I'm the first to pull in, and I automatically check my clock. Five minutes after twelve.

The knot in my chest grows.

If this is a waste, then I'm going to be pissed. It happens. Too often it happens, but I really thought—

The knot at once shifts direction and heads south. Right to my dick and lower because the car pulling up in the empty space beside mine is one I don't recognize by sight. I do know the license plate. Just as I know the redheaded woman behind the wheel who looks as though she's about to wave and then thinks better of it at the last moment.

Aria Darklyn.

And I'm the idiot who didn't put the very obvious pieces together in time.

FOURTEEN



“THIS IS A BAD IDEA, this is a bad idea,” I mutter on repeat through the entire drive to the Galleria, checking to make sure there is no one following me. They better not be. I even left my phone at home to make sure there was nothing on me to be traced.

Probably should have met at a different spot, though, but I knew Devan would already be spooked when I came clean. Correction, when *Darkling* came clean.

No sense in freaking him out entirely by choosing a location he’s unfamiliar with. At least he knows the Galleria. It’s kind of a neutral space.

I nibble my bottom lip, squinting against the glare as I flip the blinker unnecessarily and turn into the space beside Devan’s car. Not the same one he’d driven from the station the other day, either. His personal vehicle with scratches and scrapes down the side, and one of his mirrors hanging at a strange angle.

Once again, he doesn’t look happy to see me. He looks fucking pissed. I lift my hand, intending to wave, but tuck it back on my lap at the last minute. No need to antagonize the man too much right off the bat. I need his help.

If...I’m seriously going to go through with this.

How can I not?

The look on Devan’s face makes me jump.

The engine ticks, cooling, as the two of us stare at each other. Separated by an ocean of anger and betrayal and two

panes of glass. It doesn't look like he's about to make the first move, either. Which means it's all up to me.

Shit, this is much harder than I thought. And it took me a good bit of time going back and forth to even decide to contact Devan about it in the first place.

But I need him.

I need the kind of help that only a cop can give me, and since cops are basically the devil...

With one last glance out at him, I groan and hoist myself from my seat, my movement forcing him into motion as well. Our car doors slam at the same time, but he is a dark cloud, glowering and foreboding. After a deep breath, I turn to face him, glancing up higher and higher until I meet his eyes.

Damn, even furious, he's hot.

Deep in my abdomen, things go tight, loose, tight again. My breasts tingle, and I drag my coat tighter across the area to hide it.

"What the fuck is this, Aria?" he begins in a growl.

I cross my arms over my chest. "Are you surprised? I'm honestly shocked you didn't put it together sooner."

Okay, so humor is probably not the best way to go about this. My stomach swirls, and my heart sinks a little bit the longer we stand there, the rain finally abated from yesterday, and the sunlight thin and cold. Devan hasn't budged.

At last, he swipes a hand across his hair, scrubbing it down the side of his face. "Tell me why."

"Ain't nothing but a heartache?" I fill in, swallowing my laughter when his glare turns up a notch. This is no mere scowl. This is a work of art. "Sorry. Um." My throat feels scratchy, and I clear it, coughing a little. Looking up at the sound of his footsteps. "Wow, you're really close to me all of a sudden," I say defensively.

He slams a hand on the hood of my car, caging me. "Start talking, Aria, because I'm out of patience, and I'm done with your bullshit. There won't be any more banter at this point."

I pout. “I thought you enjoyed our back and forth. Sorry!” So much harder than I thought. “I do have information for you, actually.” My core muscles tighten as I suck in a breath because the man is way too close for comfort.

“And they’re things you’ve been absolutely unwilling to share with me up until this point. What’s changed? Something must have happened for you to have a complete change of heart, and I’d like to hear about it. Otherwise, I won’t even consider this meeting. I’ll get back in my car, and I’ll fucking leave.”

Yeah, right. We both know he’s not going anywhere. I inhale sharply, watching his expression. All hard steel and unrelenting stubbornness.

Too many things for me to count have changed. And they are the kind of things that make it difficult for me to voice them out loud, the horrors too great, and the trauma they bring up is even greater yet.

“I, ah, knew the guy. The other day.” I swallow over a rock in the back of my throat.

Devan lifts an eyebrow.

“The dead guy, I mean. He was one of mine. He worked for me. They all worked for me, the three you’re working on. And I...” I clear my throat again. “Are you really going to make me say it out loud?”

Devan chuckles, and the sound goes straight through my bones to the marrow. “*Absolutely.*”

I jut out my chin and plaster a shit-eating grin across my face. “I work for the Black Market Syndicate.”

Even now, talking about Broderick out loud in broad daylight is way too hard.

“Yes, you absolutely do,” Devan agrees.

I wipe my hands on the sides of my pants, my palms clammy. Devan leaves me standing there, doing my best to compose myself.

It's impossible to make out the details of his face even this close. The sunlight distorts his features, and in my imagination, I see him like a living gargoyle. All harsh angles and illuminated fury. With me.

Will there ever be a time when he is not?

Probably not, to be honest.

I'm the type of person who rubs people wrong despite my good intentions.

"I'm not sure how much I'll be able to give you, but my guys are dying, and I have no idea who is behind it. What I do know is that there is serious movement within the Syndicate. And it's a movement I'm not prepared to allow to happen." I gnaw on the inside of my cheek. "The big boss has decided to open up other avenues of revenue, those I'm not comfortable entertaining."

"It's got to be pretty fucking bad if you're here talking to me about it." One of his hands shifts back to his side, his finger twitching and his knuckles cracking. "What's your angle on this? Are you out for revenge against him? Or is this part of a plot against me? Do you have men out here waiting to take me down because I'm standing in your boss's way?"

"You're not standing in his way," I insist. "You're not even a blip on his radar. But what he's about to do, what he's planning, I can't let it happen." I shift and grip his forearms. "Devan, listen to me."

He doesn't break away from me, exactly, but he stiffens. His muscles go harder in my grip. "You've lied to me from the start. You've lied and manipulated and—"

"I know," I interrupt.

"Why should I trust you now?" He tilts his head and stares, silent for a moment. "You're giving me nothing to go on except my feelings for you, which are too messed up to count for anything concrete."

I wince, probably the way he wanted me to wince. "Because like I said, it is going to be mutually beneficial. You've got to help me stop him. In a fucked-up turn of events,

Detective Bishop, you are just about the only person out there I trust. Who...sees me.”

Ouch. Even this small bit of emotional vulnerability hurts.

Still, it’s too late for me to stop now. I spent most of the past twenty-four hours going over and over the entire situation in my head and circling around to the same point: bringing Devan into this is the only option.

As much as my decision might damn us both in the end.

There is something about Devan Bishop I’m not able to walk away from, and if we somehow manage to be successful...I might not have to. Which is a stupid pipe dream for a stupid, desperate woman.

“I might see you, Aria, but who knows what’s real and what’s not with you,” Devan says.

“This is real,” I insist. “I’ve been myself around you, as much as I’m able to be myself. The only thing I’ve done is keep a few things from you.”

He scoffs and says, “A few very large, very pertinent things. We didn’t start off on the right foot.”

“We started off with a blowjob, let’s be honest. Not your finest moment as a cop, I’m sure.” It’s low of me to go there, but it snaps him out of his anger and sends him into a darker emotion—guilt.

Not *my* finest moment right now, but I know how to manipulate guilt.

Anything, I reason, to get him on my side.

“This new venture is something bad. For the city, for the people you swore to protect—” I gulp. “For me, personally. Please, Tough Guy. I need you.”

“If I’m going to stop him, then you’re not going to be involved beyond whatever information you give me.” Devan steps back abruptly. “Talk to me and then go, Aria. Get out before shit goes down.”

I blink at him. Wait a hot second. He's seriously telling me to skip town? "Why?"

"Because you're going to get hurt, and I refuse to let another death lay heavy on my conscience," he answers without hesitation.

"In other words, what you're telling me is that you want me to give you every piece of dirt I can on Broderick and then step back like a good little lamb and let you kill yourself? No." I shake my head. "We work together or no deal."

He's worried about me?

Flip the script because I'm worried about him. I know the risk going into this. I've already considered every angle. He has no clue.

"Trust me, Aria, this is not a battle you want to wage. You're cozy right now in the organization, but when it goes down, and it's going down, then you'll be collateral. You're the one whose neck is going to be on the chopping block because you're the whistleblower."

I gulp in a deep breath. "That's my problem, not yours. I need you to help. Your partner was murdered by them, and you won't help me?"

He winces.

I know all about his partner. The first thing I did when I looked into Devan's background was scope out the records from his session with the psychologist. The guilt he carries around for letting Sinclair die weighed heavily on him when he first went to the sessions two years ago. He's carrying the burden now, too, and letting it affect everything he does.

"You know there are moles. In my department and in yours," he's saying. "What happens when someone figures you out?"

Internally, I applaud him for thinking on his feet and, more specifically, thinking about me.

"There are always going to be moles, which is why you need me," I reason out loud. "To sniff them out for you and

eliminate the threats before they become too big.” I didn’t want to play this card, but really. “Do you know who I am? What I do?”

Devan isn’t paying attention anymore. Not one hundred percent. He’s lost somewhere in his head, his gaze distant. He isn’t even too shocked that I know about his partner. “Is it so wrong for me to want you to be safe?” he asks. “I have no idea why, but for some reason, the thought of you in trouble makes me itchy. If you get hurt, I’ll never forgive myself.”

My breath catches. He’s standing there, gorgeous and masculine, and all I want to do is reach out for him and hold him. Let myself be held in return.

“Great, thanks, I got it,” I reply almost peevishly. “But my innocent guys don’t deserve to die. And unless you help me take down Broderick, then they are going to keep dying, along with a lot of other people.” I work my hands and fingers together, pulling until my knuckles stretch and crack. Unable to stand still.

It’s just the two of us this far out in the parking lot, but I still feel eyes on every part of me. Except for Devan’s, which are trained on his feet.

“They’re hardly innocent,” he says. “They’re criminals.”

“They’re just hacking and helping me. Half of the time, some of them don’t even know what they’re doing. And it’s all on my word. If you want to be pissed at someone, then be pissed at me.”

“You think I’m not?” His brows furrow. “You’re fucking out of your mind.”

“Hey, now, you came into my chat and talked to me. It’s not like you had a gun to your head or anything. Now, I happen to believe that everything happens for a reason, and we were meant to meet each other.”

Devan is shaking his head. “No. It’s bullshit, Aria. Nothing happens for a reason because if it does, then the only reason is the sick joy a distant creator gets from our suffering.”

We’ve both been hurt, and I know it.

Asking him to meet me here today isn't a rash decision, though. My resolve built its case over years of turning the other way, pointedly not looking too closely at anything in the Black Market Syndicate outside of my control. Outside of Broderick.

I'd even gone so far as to jot down the pros and cons of bringing Devan on board. I burned the evidence almost as soon as I'd finished writing, but still.

"I'm not here to talk about God with you. You have no idea what I've been through, and I'm not going to tell you, not right now." I wrap my arms around my torso, the happy face I'd plastered on immediately falling away. "But Broderick is about to do something unforgivable, and I refuse to let any other girl or boy on the streets suffer the way I did. Absolutely not."

Devan plucks my hand from my elbow, and I hadn't realized I'd dug my fingernails deep enough to cause a hangnail to bleed.

Every part of me was freezing, and I just wanted to get this over with, to have the big explosion I knew would come and be on the other side of it. The side where Devan agrees to help me, and we take down the human trafficking portion of the empire without any casualties.

A part of me knows that's a lie, though.

And I know I want the entire operation to go down, to burn.

"What are you talking about? What boys and girls on the street?"

I freeze, not wanting to look at Devan. "I'm sorry, but I won't talk about it here with you," I reply.

"You're going to have to start talking eventually. Otherwise, I came up here for nothing," he says.

Silence greets him even though it's uncomfortable. He's right. We hadn't come this far only to stare at each other, and it's not like I'm chickening out, either.



“Just know that it isn’t going to be drugs and murder anymore. It’s going to be human trafficking, and no one is safe.” My voice drops to a whisper, my mind struggling to stay with Devan rather than bolting down the rabbit hole after the children the Syndicate shipped off. “He’s already started.”

Holy hell.

The change came over Devan in an instant, his eyes clear.

“We need to be absolutely real with each other,” he begins, “and it’s not going to be out in the open. We’re too visible right now. You’re going to tell me everything, from beginning to end. I expect the truth, and if you give it to me, then I’ll be honest with you.”

“I want to.” Much as it surprised me, I did want to tell him everything. I wanted to spill the beans in a way I never had with anyone else before and see what happened. Eventually, I do give in and reach for him.

*I wanted.*

FIFTEEN

*devan*

THE FIRST BITE of pain barely registers as a trail of fire along my bicep. The indent in the metal of the car door, inches away from Aria's ear, also takes a second for me to hone in on, to implicate.

Another shot follows the first until the side of the car is littered with silver holes the size of nickels.

My plea for her to get down dies before it's birthed from my throat, and I throw her to the ground as a second round fires off right where we'd been standing. The bullets decorate the hood of the car, a line of notes on the first page of a symphony.

The breath leaves Aria in a rush, my body crushing her to the pavement hard enough to send the gravel into her skin.

A low scream builds in her throat.

In an instant, I switch off a part of me, the stone-cold cop switching on. I reach for the gun in my holster and rise long enough to follow the trail of the shot, ignoring the nick on my arm.

*There.*

Across the parking lot, from a white SUV with the windows tinted too black for me to see inside. The window is rolled down a crack. Enough for the shooter to train their gaze on us and fire again.

I duck just in time, and the mirror of the car cracks. Plastic and glass shower down, and I push Aria lower so that her head is level with the tires.

We've got to get the hell out of here immediately.

Someone was sent—either side, it doesn't matter—and we're out in the open.

My car is a better bet, but requires her to hustle across to the passenger seat.

The slight break in between fire gives us the opportunity we need.

“Go!”

I shove at her, angling my body to fire off several rounds of fire toward the van. Three shots fire back at me, and Aria shrieks, ducking down with her arms overhead and the driver's door open.

I reach for my keys with my opposite hand. My body shields hers, and I half wish I'd remembered to wear my bulletproof vest. It would have been smart.

Meeting her in a secure location would have been smarter still.

The fucking Galleria...I'm an idiot.

But hopefully, I'll be a live idiot in the next five minutes.

“Move your ass!” I'm yelling at her, and from behind me, I hear her scrambling, hear her calling for me to *come on*.

One last shot, and I'm in the car, shoving her head down in the seat and shoving the key into the ignition. A line of bullets hit the door but never reach the glass. I press my foot to the accelerator. We peel out of the parking lot, the metallic ping of metal on metal following us all the way out onto the main road.

The SUV is in motion behind us and still too far back for me to make out the license plate. My heart lodges in my chest and thuds madly as though my awareness of it makes it beat faster.

Sweat drips down my spine, the product of adrenaline, even when I know how to handle myself in a shootout. It never

gets any easier, especially not with the burning line of pain from the graze on the upper side of my right bicep.

Hazard of the trade, yet it doesn't keep my chest from nearly exploding. And it doesn't stop me from sweating like I've just finished running a 5k.

Aria is oddly silent as well, with her hands clutched between her breasts and her back curved forward.

"You can scream now if you want." My voice comes out shaky.

She doesn't lift her head from between her legs. "Is screaming going to do us any good?" she asks.

Her voice is muffled, garbled.

"Not one damn bit."

"Then there's no sense in screaming. I've been around violence before."

I risk a glance over at her. "You're not hit, are you?"

She slowly lifts herself up and shoves heavy red hair out of her face. "No. I-I don't think so."

"Good." I nod and tighten my grip on the steering wheel. "That's good."

"How about you?"

"Don't worry about me,"

Where can we go? A glance in the rearview mirror shows a row of unfamiliar cars behind us. The SUV is no longer in sight, probably trailing behind at a respectable distance, just waiting for us to move.

Going back to the city isn't safe right now. Clearly, despite our best efforts, someone found out about our meeting today. Someone with revenge on the mind and more bullets than I thought to pack with me. Thank god no one else had been around to get hit in the melee.

"Keep driving, Devan." Aria buckles herself into the seat but grips the fabric, white-knuckled. "I don't care where you

go, but keep driving because I sure don't want to go through anything like this again."

"It's entirely possible." My brain is already working, the wheels turning.

The Empire Bay PD keeps several safe houses within the city limits, but all of them are in use right now. At least, I'm pretty sure they're all in use, and I can't risk calling Naomi to let her know the situation. Not until we get to a secure location.

Even then, what will happen to her if she knows where I am?

Is it better to have her worry?

No way I'm taking Aria into custody right now, either. I remember too well what happened with Clint. And since I didn't tell anyone but Naomi where I was coming today—what if it was someone on *my* team that sent the shooter?

All of the houses belonging to the PD are logged and monitored except for one. It's the one I'd suggested to Layla before she went off half-cocked to pursue a demon from the underworld. Not literally, of course, but he might as well be. Ashcroft doesn't even know about this place, the location given to me during the investigation into the death of the senator's son.

It might work.

It's *got* to work. We're out of options.

"Do you trust me?" I ask Aria.

She takes a beat before saying, "I already told you the answer. Lead the way. We're out of choices."

This is the absolute definition of off-the-books, but she's right. Neither one of us has a choice right now. Not if she wants to get justice for whatever the fuck it is her boss has decided to do.

I'm not sure I lost the tail if we had one in the first place, but we're only about an hour away from the safe house. I stay

off of the highway except for small spans, sticking to back roads where it will be easier to shake someone loose.

We never did catch the asshole who murdered the senator's son years back, although we know without a doubt it had something to do with the Syndicate. The boy had gone down to the docks to purchase drugs. Might have even been an accident, but the senator went nuts. Rode the PD hard and offered us resources, anything and everything at our disposal as long as we got the fucker responsible.

We failed.

However, I've got the address of the safe house memorized. A party house, rather, out by one of the creeks edging a forest in northern New Jersey where the playboy kid and his buddies used to go out to break the law.

As long as it happened on the Senator's property, no one gave a shit. No one looked into the laundry list of activities whispered about when it came to the boy's reputation.

Today, we have a damn good chance of finding the place empty.

Aria stayed silent through the drive, which took double the time as normal to make sure we weren't being followed. Her lips were zipped until we pulled down the gravel road leading to the cabin. A flag lot, I see as we drive, with the cabin located at the very end of the way.

It's either a lucky turn or it's fate. I'm going out on a limb and believing the latter.

"Are you sure this is going to be safe for us?" she asks.

"No, I'm not sure at all. But it's the only place I know."

What is it about this woman I can't resist? Some kind of forbidden aspect? She's bad for me, and it makes me want more of her?

I slam on the brakes when the driveway takes a sharp turn to the left, gravel skidding beneath the tires. Too fast. Up ahead, the one-story cabin swims into view, shaded by tall pines. The lack of sunlight means most of the roof is covered

in needles, debris, and moss. The pillars keeping the porch roof erect are a little warped with their paint peeling. Certainly not the image I expect when I connect *Senator* to *cabin in the woods*.

“This is a shithole,” Aria adds.

“This is our only option,” I remind her in return, sucking in a sharp inhalation when I move wrong, and my skin pulls around the wound. “So we’re going to have to make the best of it.”

She stares at the cabin door, narrowing her eyes. “Think they have food in there? I mean, what are the chances?”

Food, maybe. Drugs? More than likely. I stay quiet.

“Who does this belong to, Devan?” she presses.

Pocketing the keys again, gun back in my holster and ready for me to access, I walk around the hood of the car and hold open the door for her. Waiting until she’s out before letting it close and offering my hand. “Not something you need to know right now. Needless to say, we’ll be getting cozy until we figure out what the fuck to do.”

“I don’t know how this happened,” she muttered under her breath.

Neither do I.

“The truck wasn’t familiar to me. Did you recognize it?”

“Someone is after us. I didn’t get a good look at the plate number, but I memorized the make. I might be able to get a text to my guy and see if he can run it.”

“Your guy’s got nothing on me.” Her fingers squeeze mine.

The rest of her babble is lost in the slamming of the car door as I stand, staring at the cabin. It doesn’t look like anyone has come out here in a long time. Probably not since the kid died, in all honesty.

It’s impossible to see much beyond the cabin with the trees in a uniform line, most of them pine except for a few oak trees.



Pine needles turn the boards of the porch spongy. The house looks like it's never seen the sun in its life, and I have to reach out and grab Aria's elbow when she loses her balance on one of the steps.

Somewhere out there, a stream babbles loudly enough for us to hear even here.

"You ever wish you could live out in a place like this full-time?" Aria wants to know. "Away from the city, somewhere quiet. Where no one knows your name?"

I keep her close to me, grabbing the doorknob and wiggling. It's locked, but it shouldn't take much to get inside. "Never," I admit. "I'm a city kid, born and bred. Moved from Chicago to Jersey before I could walk."

She watches me work the door before I finally kick at the wood, and it opens with a splintered crack. "I used to live out in Pennsylvania." Her tone is dry, bored, conversational in a way that lets me know it's weighted. "That's where I was born. Out in dairy country. You can imagine how badly I wanted to get out of there."

I step inside ahead of her to scope out the space. The room reeks of dampness, mold, and stale alcohol, which has probably seeped its way into the floor and furniture.

None of the furniture is new, and I'm not sure why it surprises me. Seems as though the Senator could have at least shelled out for a couch that doesn't look like a nineties reject, especially for the kid. But then again, this place is a forgotten relic. A tax write-off, if anything, because it looks like it should be given to charity along with a pat on the head.

"You wanted to come to this shithole?" I ask Aria as an afterthought, remembering what she'd said about Pennsylvania.

"If you mean this cabin, then no. If you mean Empire Bay, then yes. It seemed to me like it was the best possible escape to come to a city where no one knew me, and I'd be able to lose myself."

“It doesn’t always work that way,” I tell her. Once I’m assured the one room is clean, I move to the kitchen, the bathroom, the single bedroom. Sure. This will work. “The city isn’t the best place to go if you want to go for anonymity.”

I pop my head around the corner, and she’s standing in the middle of the living room. She shivers, her arms wrapped tightly around herself and her body small. Delicate. “No, that’s why I turned online. Once I had enough resources to get there. We’re always trying to escape something. Aren’t we? What are you escaping?” she asks.

“...Myself.”

It’s chillier inside the house than outside, but the fireplace is loaded with logs. Most of them look too small to do much except turn to ash, but a trip through the woods might rectify the problem. A small fire for warmth reduces the risk of someone spotting us.

“Oh, yeah, I see now how it wouldn’t work,” Aria replies.

“I don’t have a sob story past. Nothing more than any other person does. Anyway, this is it. And it’s going to do the job. There are some cans in the cupboard. A little past expiration date, nothing too terrible.”

“Think I’ll be able to get on the internet at all?”

“I’d say do your best to stay away from technology, okay?” What are the chances the electricity still runs in this place? I scratch the idea as soon as I have it. “It’s only gotten us in trouble so far. Unless you know of a way to somehow avoid detection.”

“Hasn’t worked for me today,” she mutters.

I’m surprised to watch her standing rock solid, worrying her hands in front of her, paler than before. Our eyes collide together, and she lifts her head, her chin tilted up. “What?”

“Get comfortable,” I order flatly rather than engaging the way she clearly wants me to. “We’re going to be here awhile. See if the water works in the bathroom and wash up. You’ve got dirt on your cheeks.”

It's easier, I decide, to talk into the kitchen and flip the switch on the wall, the plate covering it yellowed with a combination of age and stale smoke I almost feel burning my nose. The overhead lights flicker overhead, a low buzz filling the outdated space before the fluorescent flares to full life.

Staring directly at the bulbs burns, but I feel nothing. Broken. Absent.

Functioning on autopilot.

The fridge was empty when I checked it, but the water in the taps work. A better inspection of the bedroom shows me a linen closet with several sets of clean but moth-eaten sheets for the single mattress. Fine, perfect. Fan-fucking-tastic. The couch in the living room isn't big enough to fit me, even if I stack the two chairs in the room against it.

Aria hasn't moved an inch, but the look on her face says she's miles away regardless.

Feeling like an asshole, the bullet graze on my arm pulsing with every beat of my heart, I snap my fingers inches away from her nose.

"Honey, if you're going to disassociate, do it after we've gotten this place situated." The words come out in a monotone. "Right now, We've got to keep our wits about us. I'm going to go out and look for some logs to burn, see if we can get a fire going."

Boy Scout, I'm not, but I like to think I'm good in an emergency situation. At least until I stare at Aria and realize how helpless I am at helping her.

"You did a good job losing anyone who might want to follow us," she whispers. "I'm sure we'll be fine."

"Then consider wild animals. We're outside of the city."

There, a flicker of emotion. I'm unused to seeing her this way. And quite frankly, I understand Aria well enough at this point to see there are deep things happening inside of her for her to react this way.

Should I hold her? Should I tell her to get it together?  
Harsh or soft?

I'm out of my element, no good at relating to other human beings, especially women I'm attracted to.

There are several cans of beans and fruit in the kitchen cabinets. After grabbing some firewood and getting a small fire going in the fireplace, courtesy of a lighter scrounged from a drawer, Aria eventually pads into the room behind me. She folds herself down on one of the chairs with her legs crisscrossed on the seat and watching me.

Eventually, the sun sinks behind the tall trunks of the pines, and the dappled shade of middle afternoon fades, the countryside embracing the darkness of twilight and the night beyond. The fireplace gives off enough heat to stave off the worst of the autumn cold.

The surfaces of the cabin are all coated with a layer of wooly dust, but neither one of us cares.

We're safe. For now.

Safe enough.

"Devan." The sound of her voice cuts through me, and I set down the can of peaches. "It's not that I don't want to talk to you about everything. There are things about me I'm worried will change the way you see me."

"That's the problem, Aria. You say you want to talk, and then your lips refuse to give up the information. There's no reason for you to worry about what I'll think." I spear through a slice of peach and lift it, syrup dripping from the tines.

"I do worry," she insists. She pushes her can of green beans away.

"Why? I'm the one who should be worried." I go for levity and fail. "I'm not a good man."

"You're a better man than most." Dropping her fork, she exhales, looking torn. "Don't hold your breath for a whole novel at once. It's really damn hard to say, and I halfway feel like I need to start at the beginning." She's staring at the

tabletop instead of me and tracing her index finger through the dust, wiping clean mazes of circles.

She looks so tiny right then, her pants ripped from dropping to the ground and her coat spattered with all manner of stains, some blood, and others dirt and detritus from the parking lot. Her frown is nothing but another accessory and deepens the longer I stare at her.

There's something wrong with me to get *this* obsessed over a woman I don't really know, one who works for, sins with my greatest enemy. Yet a knot inside of me starts to tighten, my breath hitching in my chest as I wait for what she will say. And I wonder if I'll ever be strong enough to walk away from her again.

I deserve this pain. That's the only thing I know for certain.

I deserve whatever torment I feel, and I relish it.

"And where is the beginning?" I ask her.

"Too far back to be anything except a fuzzy, horrible dream," she murmurs. "It almost feels unreal at this point."

I reach for her the same way she reached for me earlier, right before the shootout. A wrong move toward her, one I'm powerless to stop. And then another when I speak, even when the part of me I used to rely on, the part that makes me a good cop and made me a decent man, screams at me to back the hell up.

"*Aria*. Tell me."

Her name is a prayer uttered on my lips for deliverance or death. I'm not sure which one. I only know how my focus narrows until there is only her, and the rest of the world becomes exactly as she said—a fuzzy, horrible dream.

The line between right and wrong...does it matter? Outside of my head, no one else is impacted by the struggle. They're only worried about the consequences of my decision. And right now, the lines are blurring together. This romance has the potential to end in ruin or take a dark turn, and that's the better path.

I realize two things there at the kitchen table. Sometimes the only way to help someone else is to destroy myself in the process. And I've already started the process to work with and save Aria Darklyn from her personal hell.

SIXTEEN

“THE REASON I want you to help me, Devan,” I start, “is because Broderick is branching out.”

“You told me as much.”

I stifle a wave of panic. What if Devan won’t listen to me? “He’s targeting kids on the street and selling them. *Human trafficking*. I’ve helped him with his money laundering and moving online products, but I can’t let him do this because he knows how much it hurts me. I used to be one of those kids.” There. It’s out in the open.

Devan is staring at me as if I’m worth so much more than I am, and as much as I hate to admit it, I don’t deserve it. I’m nothing but chaos even though I haven’t moved from the chair. At last, his face shifts as my words sink in, and he realizes exactly what I’ve said.

“You know I’m going to have to take you into custody for this,” he begins slowly. “For the part you’ve played in his schemes.”

“I’ve sinned in my life. I admit it. But taking me into custody isn’t going to help the kids that Broderick wants to target. *Kids*, Devan. He’s already started, and he took great pleasure in telling me about his new plans. Almost as though he did it because he knew it would hurt me.”

How do I make him understand? There are intricacies to life on the street, levels and textures that sometimes have nothing to do with innocence or sin and everything to do with circumstance. I’m the product of my choices, and some of them led me to a very bad place.



“They’ve done nothing to hurt anyone.” My lower lip trembles, and I bite down on it hard enough to draw blood, if only to get the shaking to stop. “They don’t deserve to be carted off and shipped to god knows where to be used for god knows that purpose?” I shake my head. “I refuse to believe it. Do you want to help these kids or not?”

“Of course, I want to help.” He looks torn. “You have to understand what a tenuous position I’m in. I’m not judging you, baby, never, but I’m bound by the law to take down anyone who breaks it. Which includes *you*.”

I get it. Underneath the numbness and the occasional douchebaggery, he’s a good and decent cop. He’s not shady like some of the others, and once upon a time, he was wholly a force for good. He helped people before his own demons got too loud to ignore anymore.

“I’m not sure where to start in this, and no matter how great my skills, there are things I can’t do alone.” I take a chance, a huge risk in my mind, to reach across and touch the tips of my fingers to his knuckles. “You’re meticulous. You’re the only one I trust to get to the bottom of this and rip open the scab. We’ve got to stop him before he hurts these kids. I’ll tell you everything, and if, at the end, you want to arrest me, then fine. I’ll go. But not before I stop him.”

“It’s important to you.”

“No shit it’s important to me...” My throat goes dry, and I trail off on a laugh. “It’s my entire life, Devan.”

“Then talk to me. Really tell me, Aria,” he replies, and his baritone seeps into my entire being, although it has no business being there, and I have no right to let it. “This place is going to freak me out if you don’t say anything. There are no sounds out here, nothing substantial or concrete. It’s about time we come clean with each other and have a conversation, don’t you think? Whatever you share, there will be no judgment.”

I want to believe him.

What else is there to do, anyway? I'd come this far. I'd gone over the pros and cons and gotten here, to this moment.

"Do you want me to go first?" It's a mechanism, on his part, to coax me into telling him what he wants to know about me and about Broderick Stevens..

"I left home at twelve," I say. "A small little two-bedroom house in Pennsylvania surrounded by cows and the stench of shit and religion. I actually prefer the shit over the religion any day. My sister is still out there, and my brother. Half brother, or so we always suspected, because he doesn't look a thing like Dad, and there's only so much narcissism a woman can take before she gets out on her own and finds god knows what kind of strange out there. I don't blame her, either. Mom."

I stall on the rest of the story by taking a deep breath and prying my eyes open, forcing myself to look at Devan directly.

"I came to Empire Bay with nothing but a fifty in my pocket, stolen from Dad's wallet, and dreams to escape the insular life they laid out for me, made soft and pretty and suffocating with baptism and purity pledges. Except I knew the best way to make a go at a living was on my back."

I feel his attention on every inch of my skin. My nose twitches the longer he looks at me, but there is no judgment in his eyes, only understanding.

I rock up and shift my position so that my feet are flat on the chair and my arms wrapped around my knees. "If my parents sent anyone out looking for me, they never found me. I didn't want them to. Even the cold nights on the street and the strange men who prefer girls with no breasts to grown-ass women were better than what I escaped. I thought. But it got hard, Devan. At fourteen, I'd been used so many times and thrown away like trash. The nights were colder, longer, uncaring, and my dreams of escape had dwindled into a feverish hope of simple survival."

Devan says nothing. I watch him watching me, and although it stings a little, stopping now will be impossible. He doesn't move his hand away from mine.

“Broderick found me on the street after I tweaked out one night. The regulars...started leaving me drugs as well as money on the nightstand, and it helped to keep the worst of the shame away. I was rotting alive from the inside out, and the longer I spent on the streets without friends, without food, without hope, the more it made me realize I was never going to be anything. Just a walking corpse better off dead. Broderick found me.”

I suck on my teeth.

No crying, though. I'd moved past my crying days at what happened, seeing the images so many times in my head through nightmares and daydreams. Relived countless times the pills I'd taken, hoping they would be enough to get me a one-way ticket out of this life, only to wake up the next morning to the sunrise.

Devan has no choice but to see the reality of me instead of the confidence I've let him believe is the whole of me. Exposed, raw, and bloodied, and he still sees me and holds his tongue. I don't care what he says. Once he sees it all, his opinions will inevitably change.

“Aria, stop. Hey, stop.” His voice is soft and soothing. “It's okay. I don't need to hear this right now.”

Except he does have to hear it now. I know he does, no matter how much it scares me.

He turns my hand over and presses his against mine, linking our fingers together. His are so much larger than mine and calloused in all the right ways. His warmth seeps into mine but does nothing against the frost in my veins.

“He found me and asked for nothing in return, although I tried to give it to him. *Everything*. I offered payment for the warm bed and the food in my stomach the only way I knew how. He was my savior,” I say.

“Was.” Devan closes his eyes but latches on the word. His lips are thinned into a severe line. “You say he was your savior.”

“How could I know any better? It was my fault I ended up on the streets and got low enough to think about ending it. Broderick wasn’t a young man then, by any means, but he acted as a father figure toward me. Assuring me I did have merit and worth. He’s the one who encouraged me to get on the computer for the first time. He mentored me.”

It’s harder to look at when I say it out loud this way. When I tell the story less as some kind of tale that’s already passed and more the story of my own survival.

“He groomed you.” Devan holds on to his control by a thin sliver.

“Yes.” I can admit it now. “He waited until I turned sixteen before the relationship became sexual. I never felt as though he abused me sexually. Not until recently. He always made sure I got mine, and because he offered a particular dark brand of pain intermingled with pleasure, he made me believe I needed what he offered to get off. Like I’m so fucked up in the head I need to be punished in order to feel anything.”

My knees will not stop bobbing, and I squeeze my own eyes shut. The feeling of Broderick’s hands wrapped around my neck returns with a fury.

“I begged him not to go through with the human trafficking. I’ve been working tirelessly to grow and expand the Syndicate in my own way. He doesn’t need money. None of them need money, or power, or anything. I had other ways to accomplish his goals if he wanted them. He refused to listen to me.” My head falls onto the top of the table. “I *begged* him, Devan, and he knows my past. He knows just how close I came on too many occasions to being kidnapped off the streets and sold. He’s doing it anyway.”

I always thought trusting anyone besides Broderick was suicide.

Trusting his decision now is something I’m not prepared to do, no matter how sweetly a tale he spins me. It’s wrong. It’s abhorrent.

I know Detective Devon Bishop is strong enough to make it through this, underneath all this Big T trauma. I do trust him.

Which is more terrifying than the thought of going against my mentor to stop him.

“Hey.” Devan squeezes my hand, and his fingers lace with mine. “What do you need me to do? How can I help you?”

“I don’t know anymore,” I say with a shrug. “You probably should have kept your distance while you had the chance.”

I can’t pretend anymore, either, that my fascination with the delicious detective is some kind of passing fancy. It’s here to stay. I’m not sure whether it is a blessing or a curse, but it’s certainly more than lust, I tell you what.

Friendship, perhaps. In time.

“I’m not going to give you sweet words here because we both know we’re too fucked up to believe in platitudes,” he continues.

“You mean we can’t mutually blow sunshine up each other’s asses and say it will be fine?” I snap the fingers on my free hand. “Dammit, Devan.”

A ghost of a smile lights his features for a second before disappearing. “Help me help you, and we’ll take this guy down. I’ve already got a team working on it, but with your insight, we can make sure Broderick Stevens doesn’t see the light of day outside of a jail cell ever again.” He stops, grinds his teeth. “He’s going to pay for what he did to you. He needs to be punished.”

“I agree.”

“What a jump you made from hands off to full-on diabolical, Little Hacker.” Devan breaks up the tension by reaching out and ruffling the hair above my eyes before smoothing a curl behind my ear. His fingers pause on the shell of my ear before he removes his hand from my skin. “From bedfellow to bounty hunter with a taste for torture.”

“And I think alliteration is sexy,” I tell him with a sniff. “I like it rough. It’s not like you’re learning this about me *now*.”

“Then you must love your life.” He drops his hold on me and pushes away from the table, sliding the chair back into place. “I’m going to change the sheets on the bed. We need to rest and then talk about...a plan.”

He looks like he’d rather talk about having all of his teeth yanked out and toothpicks pushed in the holes.

“You’re not worried about leaving evidence behind?” I tease. “Hair, skin cells—”

I know of a few other pieces of evidence I wouldn’t mind leaving behind when it comes to Devan. Not like he’ll let me get any further than a blowie by surprise or his face-riding extravaganza. I’d been hell-bent on fucking him, and he’d held us both back and ate me like I was part of the Last Supper.

I get up and trail Devan into the bedroom I hadn’t looked at until now. “You’d really help me?” I clarify.

“Do I think we’re asking to have our asses handed to us on a silver platter?” He crosses to the closet and pulls open the bifold doors, pointedly not looking at me. “Absolutely. Am I also hell-bent on taking down your fuck buddy? Yes. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

There is nothing but steely resolve in his voice, and I shiver at the gritty tone.

“I’m not sure if you noticed this, Tough Guy, but there’s only one bed in this place,” I remark with forced nonchalance.

Devan rips the sheet off the bed and lands his eyes on me, first on my knees, all the way up my thighs to my breasts, and then higher. “And?”

“I’m not sure if you’re planning to be the big spoon all night or not, but I’m not sleeping on the floor.”

“I’m not sleeping on the floor, and neither are you. I’ll take the chair in the living room if it will make you more comfortable.”

“The one made up of plywood and broken dreams? Are you sure?”

What am I really asking for here?

He drops the sheet and rips the rest of them from the mattress. “Unless you have a better idea,” he says slowly.

“I’m going to shower. Let me think about it a little bit while you finish up here.”

The water works, thank goodness, and there are clean towels stashed in the bathroom that do the trick as long as you don’t care about spiderwebs and silvery dust. Which if it comes down to a little shaky shake or dirt and blood plastered to my skin, I’ll take my chances with the former.

Not clean, exactly, but better. Much better, even with my head swirling in circles faster than water down the drain.

I told Devan my story, and he hasn’t shied away. The shower is for Devan as much as it is for me to come to terms with everything I’ve thrown at him. Takes a person time to process. I’ve had years of processing, and I’m still not even close.

Damn it, though, I want Devan to understand. I want him to see that we might be different, but on a basic level, we are both two broken people. There are some stains I’ll never free myself from, but those living on the inside where no one is willing to see. To look closely at.

What would be the worst thing, I ask myself as I stare down my reflection, to take the last step and really do to Devan what I want to do? What I’ve never allowed myself to want to do with anyone else?

It’s my choice.

So much of my life and all of my lovers have not been my choice, and if I’m really being honest with myself, that includes Broderick Stevens. I fell into his bed the same way I fell into every other part of the life he offered me, and I did so with gratitude spilling from my lips.

He taught me to associate pain with my own pleasure and take back what had been robbed from me. I resigned myself to this fact; I belonged to him. Nothing of my own. No choices, but all the consequences.

Realization strikes me like a slap to the face. I want Devan, and I've been toying with him, unable to fully jump out of misguided loyalty and a sense of shame I've never been able to shake.

What's worse than caring about someone? The grief of knowing how much you hurt them by your inability to make a move in either direction. It's a holding pattern. It's a disservice to everyone involved, and I've been beating my own head against a wall, glued in place for too many years to count.

Before I ran away from home.

Before I sold myself on the streets.

And every day since Broderick found me and shaped me into a person he could use but never respect.

I stare at the woman in the mirror, wondering what she actually wants versus what she's settled for. She likes tea without the niceties of cream or sugar. She likes K-pop albums and Funko dolls, although she's never been allowed to decorate her desk with them.

She has an unhealthy fascination with the TV show *Charmed* and tries overly hard to be nice to people who have no interest in doing the same for her.

She cares.

She nurtures.

She wants the best for the men who work underneath her and blames herself for their deaths. She wants to grow so powerful no one can ever take *anything* away from her again.

I swipe a hand across the fog on the mirror and smear my reflection.

She wants Devan Bishop. That's one point in which she's crystal clear.



The decision is made faster than I would have thought possible a few days ago, one I've been teetering on the edge of for much longer, ready to fall. Ready to plummet to my death in a metaphorical way. I set my shoulders, give myself a look I hope shows confidence rather than the sliver of nerves skittering along my clavicle.

He might reject me tonight.

He might say no, it's not the time, blame it on the trauma of the shootout and the betrayal of going against the Syndicate.

Or...he might say yes.

*Please say yes.*

Mind made up, I step out of the bathroom completely naked, waiting for him to turn around and look at me. Our isolation struck me at once. It's only the two of us here. There is no one else to see, to judge, to admonish. Only our thoughts.

I watch his throat work, Devan swallowing hard. "What are you doing, Aria?"

I mimic his monotone and reply, "I'd think it obvious, Tough Guy."

These are dangerous waters, and I'm not sure if we're about to drown or not. I stand in front of him, waiting for him to make a move, knowing without really knowing how it will feel to fit together.

"This isn't the right time," he replies.

"I can't think of a better time," I toss back at him. "Seems to me we are alone, in a place where no one will find us. There is a single bed, and if I'm forced to be here in this safe palace with you...let's pass the time enjoying each other."

SEVENTEEN

HE'S close enough to touch and reaches for me hesitantly, running his palm along the outside of my thigh. He slides his fingers up to my hip, and I gulp, surprised at the instant heat from his fingertips alone.

“I’m not a person who gives into temptation.” He pushes at me gently as though it will nudge me in the opposite direction.

“Do I tempt you?”

“More than you will ever know.”

I hide my grin. “Then feed your demons. With me. Tonight.”

Our faces are inches away, his breath tangling with my own.

The oxygen disappeared from the room atom by atom, and I’m not sure which one of us actually made the first move. Which one decided to cross the line in the sand first. We stood apart, and then he touched me. Then our bodies pressed together with my naked and damp breasts glued to his chest and nothing on me to tear off.

Something inside of me detonates when he sucks my lower lip into his mouth before biting down, his arms banding around my waist and one of his hands grabbing my naked ass. He tugs me closer, and I feel every hard line of him. Every muscle hidden beneath his clothes and his erection thick and pressing toward me.

A kiss. A simple thing, a dancing of tongues and lips and energy. Simple, yes, and nothing I’ve experienced before

beyond a perfunctory peck or a groping, lashing tongue exploring my tonsils.

It's Devan.

Goose bumps rise on my skin.

It's Devan's hand on my ass, probing and dragging me closer. Devan who rolls his hips against me to make sure I feel every inch of his cock as he maneuvers me toward the bed with our lips fused together.

Our bodies make the decision for us in the end.

He lifts me in his arms and carries me closer to the bed, his hand on my ass and my legs wrapped around his waist. His erection presses to my core through his pants, and I arch against it, my head falling back at the sensation of his lips. He trails fire along my throat, both of us groaning, his tongue on my neck.

"Please."

What am I begging for? I'm panting, clawing at his clothes. Needing the contact of skin on skin more than anything else. I can do what I want outside of Broderick. I can be my own person, and choosing to sleep with Devan tonight is the first step.

He takes us both down to the mattress, one hand pinching my nipple and the other drawing between us. He slides a finger against my core, slipping the tip in easily since I'm already dripping for him.

He crooks it to hit the exact spot that sends sparks up in front of my closed eyelids. I drag my own hands through the short curls of his hair as his mouth presses to mine and turn my head to the side to deepen the kiss, his tongue slipping inside my mouth. My hand is on his chest, all those muscles and a sparse covering of black hair between his pecs. Touching him without breaking the kiss.

He wants me for me, even knowing my past and what I've been through.

He wants this.

And it feels too good to be touched this way by this man. To hear him talk about protecting me and wanting me. For the first time in a long time, I feel worthy for a completely different reason than I used to feel.

His finger is still inside of me, and his scent all around me, spicy and musky. It fills my head.

“I want to fuck you, Aria,” he says breathlessly, his lips only an inch away from mine. “I want to fuck you hard enough for us both to feel it tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

I yank his shirt over his head and send it flying. His pants follow, and then his boxers, my eyes roving all over his naked skin. The press of his forehead to mine is intoxicating, especially when his tongue roves over mine, sending me higher, hotter. He kisses me greedily and works his finger in time with the movement of his mouth.

“I should take the time to do this right,” he says, removing his hand from my core only to grab me by the knees and yank me down to him.

“Fuck that.” I brace my hand on his shoulder, licking my lower lip.

“I think what you mean is *fuck me*.” He bends only to suck one pebbled nipple into his mouth, twirling his tongue greedily around the bud.

“Please, please.”

The scruff of his jaw is a wonderful, powerful contrast to the softness of his mouth, the hard calluses on his palm.

He uses his knees to nudge my legs even further apart before he switches his lips from one nipple to the other.

I quiver, ready for him. Excited and nervous at the same time. Turned on more than I have been before. His hands are on my hips, my thighs, my core.

I don't need him to take his time. He's already gotten me close with his tongue before. Now it's time for a different kind of dance. I writhe against the contact of his fingers on my clit,

my hands pushing into his shoulders. Devan growls, and the sound sends goose bumps over my skin.

The sexiest kind of foreplay.

Have I ever even experienced something this tantalizing before?

Never foreplay to this extent. Where each passing breath takes me higher and higher. I lift one leg to hook it over his shoulder in a clear demand for him to get the hell on with it. Lifting my hips to the rhythm of his finger around my core.

A sweat accompanies the goose bumps, and every part of me hums with desire. A moan builds in the back of my throat, and I have half a second to wonder why it feels like I'm close, without pain or torment, before the orgasm sweeps over me. Energy explodes over me, and my muscles tighten and convulse.

Holy shit.

He's not done with me yet, either. I'm still working my way through the wave when Devan tears away from me, breathing hard. I have enough time to prop myself up on my elbows to watch him fumbling with his pants, his erection bobbing in front of him with the head slicked with precum.

"Where the hell is it?"

He shoves his hand into the back pocket, grabs his wallet, and scours the depths for a condom.

Watching him standing there naked is a true delight. His scrappy but muscular frame, heaving chest. All of him tall and solid and ready to take me.

He's finally got the condom in hand, the foil wrapping torn and on the floor. He works his cock in his hand several times before he rolls the latex down its length.

Watching him watching me, I laugh, a low and sexy sound as I spread my legs wider. Giving him a front-and-center view of the goods, I whisper, "Do you like what you see?"

"You're amazing, Aria." His voice goes deeper than I've heard it before. "You're a gift to me."

He stretches out above me and steals a kiss as he positions between my thighs. The tip of his cock nudges against my core, but he won't slip home yet. I lean into the kiss and the sudden sweetness of it.

Devan reaches between us to position his cock right where we need it, sliding it up and down my core. I feel him pulse there, growing heavier and thicker through the kiss.

"You deserve to be loved," he said.

"Then do it."

I'm almost afraid to air the words out loud as he pushes the swollen crown of him inside my pussy.

Then he's running the show, notching deeper and deeper and working his way into me until he's fully seated. Giving me a little time to calibrate. I gasp at the sensation. The sheer... rightness of the fit. So much more than any of the others. Devan is big, my channel narrow, and somehow, it's a lock sliding into a key for the first time.

He keeps his pace measured for the next few breaths. A slow and steady adjustment period with his eyes closed, and his breathing labored. I bury my head against the crook of his neck and trail my tongue along his collarbone until he thrusts deeper. Harder than before, drawing another gasp from me.

I tremble, tighten, desire for him nudging me to loop my arms around his back and hold him tightly, as though he might suddenly decide to stop. Or disappear on me.

Yet he keeps the pace steady with long, deep strokes.

"I wanted you from the moment I saw you," I mumble, halfway hoping he won't hear me through the thundering of his breath.

"The feeling is mutual."

He pushes himself up on his arms to look me in the eyes as he moves faster. A little rougher but nothing like I'm used to. He grabs my knee again and lifts my leg, one and then the other, until both are over his shoulders, and he's driving into

me. I cling to the sheets now, my fingers clenching the fabric like he might fuck me right off this bed.

Sweat slicks down his chest and along his belly button, and I lift my lips and arch to meet every thrust. Every effortless penetration.

This is different.

So different and so much better than anything I've experienced before. Feelings really do make the difference, along with the way our bodies move together as if we've done this a thousand times before. There's a timelessness to the sex.

And by god, the sex is good.

"Harder," I beg him. "Harder, Devan."

The sound of his name drives him, and his pelvis slaps against mine. Again and again. Harder and harder until his tempo changes and grows jerky. Electricity snaps between us. I tighten around him, a second orgasm ready to crash right through me.

His hips jerk a final time, and he groans, the sound guttural, as his own orgasm takes him. We shudder together, holding each other, and my legs slowly slip from his shoulders to the crooks of his arms. Lower until my knees rest on either side of his hips, and he drops his forehead to mine again.

I feel the thunder of his pulse through his skin, his dick. He's not able to see my smile this close, but it's there.

His arms shake and shudder to keep his weight from me, and I pull him down anyway, wanting to be squished to the bed.

"Well, happy birthday to me."

Devan picks up his head long enough to ask, "It's your birthday?"

"No, but I feel like I just got all the missing years' worth of presents at one time."

This is what I've been missing. For so long, I wondered what it was I lacked in my life when I had almost everything



except the control to write my own destiny. Which, make no mistake, was a big damn part of things. A huge part. But there was another piece of satisfaction I'd never been able to find, no matter how much I convinced myself that I loved Broderick Stevens.

There is a huge difference between these two men.

I jolt when Devan brushes the hair back from my face and curls it behind my ear. "Are you okay?"

My smile grows. "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"Because I basically took advantage of you."

"You were a very gentle lover." I press my hand to his chest and rub circles around his heart.

"Gentle? Well, I've been called worse."

I wrap my legs around him to keep him exactly where he is, unmoving. "You gave me exactly what I needed. Thank you."

I'm positive now—as if I hadn't been all the way there before—I want to burn the entire Syndicate to the ground and dance in the ashes with Devan.

EIGHTEEN

*devan*

IT'S a risk contacting Naomi at this point. A huge risk, considering there are hidden motives everywhere. And she might still fuck me over. Might still be a mole in our midst, ready to fuck us before we even start.

A risk, sure, and I'm taking it. I've got no other choice.

Aria left her phone at her place, which leaves mine, and I don't have encryptions or firewalls or anything to protect us. A risk we've got to take once we leave the cabin and get cell service back.

"I've done what I can, but it's not nearly good enough. A smart hacker will be able to trace your location in an instant." She hands the phone back to me. "You sure about this?"

I shake my head. "Absolutely not."

"I'm not sure about *anything*," she adds. "But I know we need to do something. Sitting around isn't going to get us any closer to our goal."

"Sounds about right." I pause to press a quick kiss to her lips, fully aware of her jerky movement back from me. Just as I'm aware of her instant smile and the adorable blush of pink across her pale cheeks.

"If you don't stop touching me, then I'm going to push you down and fuck you." She finishes with a little laugh that has me arching a brow. Her blush spreads down her neck.

"Would you rather I look and not touch?" I joke. I grip the phone in my fist, swearing when she takes a big step in the opposite direction.

“Do what you’ve got to do, Tough Guy,” she bids.

Things look a little different in the light of day, but one thing hasn’t changed for me. There is still only Aria, this bright light at the end of a nearly impassible tunnel. She’s now standing out by the car in her clothes from yesterday, and I fixate on the view. Staring at her face, her body, everything in between. She’s making this too easy on me.

Easier than I deserve, considering what a selfish prick I’ve been.

I hold the phone against my ear.

I don’t want it to be easy, though. How do I tell her?

*Later.* Another time, another Devan.

Pulling my focus from her with a harsh groan, I press the button to send, and after a few moments of silence and several clicks, the call goes through. It takes several rings before Naomi answers, breathless.

“Who is this?”

“I don’t get a hello?” I return. “I’m using some kind of program so the number won’t show up as mine.”

Her sigh of relief has my guilt flaring like a bad case of gout. “Christ, Dev, I thought you were dead! I heard about the shootout at the Galleria, but they didn’t find any bodies, only a car. What’s going on?”

I wait for her to rush ahead, to get everything out that she wants to say before I speak again.

“Where are you?” Naomi finally finishes. “Do you want me to come get you?”

“I only need to know one thing?” I squeeze my eyes shut. “Can I trust you?”

It’s not the question she’s expecting, and it must come as a shock if I can judge Naomi’s sudden silence. “What do you think?” she asks in a low voice. “I’m not going to waste both our time trying to convince you.”

“I think you’re the only person who knew I’d be at the Galleria yesterday,” I grind out.

Aria shifts closer, huddling against my side against the bite of the wind. I want to hold her close, but with my attention divided between her and Naomi, it’s impossible to make the right choice, so I do nothing.

“Well shit, Dev,” Naomi says with a sigh. “Yeah. I get it. You have every reason not to trust me.”

“I want to.”

“I want that, too. I can only tell you I had nothing to do with the shootout, and I’ve been working with Jasleen on trying to connect the deaths of the three hackers to Broderick Stevens. Adam and Bill can tell you we’ve been at your place since word came in about the shootout. Ashcroft doesn’t want us out there on the streets, says we’re too close to you, and until he talks to you himself, he’s put out an APB for you. I’m not sure if he thinks you had something to do with the shootout, but your blood is at the scene, and they’ve seized your personal computer to comb through.”

Not the news I expected to get if I’m totally honest. I groan, sinking down to a crouch, my knees cracking. I feel rather than hear Aria move closer until her heat seeps into my skin as she folds herself over my back. Her arms go around my neck, the side of her face pressed to mine in silent comfort.

“I didn’t get a good look at the guy. I can only tell you it was a white SUV, windows darkened. The plate has 1143 in it, but I didn’t get a good look at the rest of it.”

“Do you remember the make—” Naomi breaks off. “Or model?”

“It was a Ford,” Aria whispers in my ear.

“Did you catch that?” I ask Naomi.

“Who are you with?” Her voice goes hard. “Dev, talk to me. The car left at the Galleria was registered to the same woman you brought into the station the other day. Are you with her?”

“Yes, and I’m safe. We’re coming back to the city soon. We need a safe place to meet where we won’t be interrupted. If you know of someplace where we can convene, it will go a long way toward building that trust, Ellison.”

“You...want the Scooby Gang?”

It’s a snap of a finger, going from distrust to strange bedfellows, and I know I don’t have a choice.

“Avengers, assemble,” I reply ruefully.

“Then I know a place.” It’s as simple as that for Naomi, it seems. “Is this a secure line?”

“Safe enough.”

Naomi rattles off an address I commit to memory, and I click off without saying anything else and drop the phone, sliding one hand up to cover the ones Aria has clasped around my front. “You heard it all?”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about. All I got out of the conversation is this—Detective Bishop has friends.” The smile in her voice warms my heart.

I scoff and rise, taking her with me. Her body hangs limp against my back before she slides down on her own two feet. “I wouldn’t go so far as to call any of them friends.”

“But you trust your new partner enough to take a risk in meeting her. Even though she knew about our meeting yesterday.”

We both go still, and I’m the first one to break, to exhale long and slow, before saying, “I guess I do. I wish I knew why, though. She’s a real pain in my ass and way too chipper for her own good.”

“It’s called *healing*. Apparently, you’ve beat yourself up enough over the last few years. Time for you to start shaking your guilt. Time to let go.”

I shake my head instead. “Letting go is harder than almost anything,” I tell her.

“Almost as hard as being patient. Except both of those things are necessary. We both have a lot of letting go to do, a lot of patience to master,” she continues, squeezing me once before she steps back.

I say nothing, and we’re both silent as we settle into the car. It starts after a few tries, the air frigid and damp, holding a hint of a threat of early winter weather. The trees rattle ominously, but the sky overhead is clear enough. Aria shivers in the passenger seat while we wait for the engine to warm enough to stop clinking. We’re on the road within fifteen minutes of leaving the cabin, and I have to remind myself to send a message to the senator down the line. To explain the usage of the cabin should anyone come out and find the door broken, the sheets on the bed stained with echoes of our lovemaking.

That part I’ll keep to myself, of course.

The silence between us is heavy and weighted, but neither one of us has anything constructive to say. Not until the city skyline appears in the distance, spearing into the blue sky like spears of ice. Too stubborn to melt despite the sun’s light.

“What are you going to say to your friends?” Aria asks suddenly. “About me? They already know I’m involved because they found my car.”

I take a beat before saying, “What do you want me to say to them?” I’d rather leave it up to her and lessen the risk of saying something wrong. Knowing me, I’ll put my foot in my mouth and ruin any chance of future cooperation on any level.

“I don’t want them to treat me like a freak. And I don’t want to be hidden in the shadows. Never again.” Aria worries her hands. “I just...they’re going to know we’re involved, Devan. I’d rather be open about it, without shame, than make up some excuse everyone sees through and embarrass myself.”

I don’t blame her one bit. And the Scooby Gang is incredibly observant, even Bill. They’re all going to know Aria and I are together.

“I’ll tell them you are an incredible hacker, and this case is about to blow wide open from your help,” I reply.

“...Anything else?”

I glance at her from the corner of my eyes. “I’m not sure what you want me to say. If you’ve got any pointers, I’ll be glad to hear them rather than playing any kind of guessing game. I’m not really operating at one hundred percent right now.”

And it kills me to admit it.

Her eyes sparkle with mischief when I glance over. “Oh, come on. You’re a detective. You can put the pieces together. You know what I’m trying to say.”

“The less anyone knows about you, about us, the better we’ll be. This is about Broderick and his trafficking,” I remind her. “Let’s not plan ahead for answers to questions we haven’t been asked yet.”

“You trust them enough to meet them today.”

“It’s a calculated risk.”

She settles back in her seat. “Fine.”

There’s a world of meaning in the word, and I’m too exhausted to play games right now. “That’s the worst thing to say, and you know it,” I reply. “It can mean so many different things.”

“Once again, it’s up to you to put the pieces together.”

“Which is only going to piss me off.” My fingers tighten around the steering wheel.

Soon, the trees are beaten back by the sprawl of life, and the space between houses diminishes. The city looms up ahead of us, and the traffic on the road increases. Finding the address without GPS is a bit of a struggle.

Eventually, we pull into a small space between alleys, barely large enough for the car to fit without both of the mirrors scratching against the sides of the buildings.



Aria doesn't ask me if I'm sure this is the place, and I don't offer the answer regardless. I've followed Naomi's directions to the best of my abilities, and if I've got it right, then the meeting place will be at the back of the alley through a peeling, red-painted door. I didn't ask my partner how she knew it would be safe, and my skin prickles now, thinking about the gaps in this plan.

The harsh reality is this: it might be an ambush.

Hell, we might knock on the door to be greeted with the PD's best officers and guns trained between our eyes.

It's a calculated risk, as I said to Aria, and both of us will go down if I'm wrong.

Her door slams, and she's squeezing between the wall and the car in the next breath. Cursing, I follow her, hurrying to put my body in front of hers and get to the door first. I'm out of bullets from the shootout, my gun useless even though its weight is a comfort in my holster.

"Let me do the talking first," I urge in an undertone, adding as an afterthought, "Please."

The last word seems to soften her, and she bobs her head in my direction, her lips drawn into a thin piano wire line. The door is tucked into the wall at an angle invisible to the streets, hidden by the curves of the buildings. The red paint is peeling, exactly as Naomi said it would be, and the door handle looks rusted and ancient after having weathered too many years without love or use.

Do I trust her enough to go through with this?

Can I trust anything?

The better question...do I have a choice?

Without pausing to give in to my doubts, I knock against the wood and wait for an answer.

I don't expect Bill to be the one who answers the door, yet his stomach is what's visible first. His hair secondary and his bulging eyes third, the bulge due to Aria and certainly not me. He narrows in on her immediately, and his teeth flash.

“Well, shit.” He slicks a hand through his hair. “Why do you always show up with the most gorgeous women, Dev? I swear to god, you’re keeping them tucked away somewhere, and you only bring them out to make me salivate. Hello, gorgeous. How are you doing?”

He shoots Aria a simpering smile.

I open my mouth to tell him to shut the fuck up and tuck his boner away, but Aria is striding ahead of me with a flirtatious smile pinned to her lips now. She pats Bill on the shoulder. “Probably the same place he’s tucked *you*, sweet thing,” she replies.

I want to slap my forehead but have to content myself to clench my jaw and follow Bill into the building. He closes the door behind us, locking it and engaging a state-of-the-art security system that beeps once he types in a code. The hallway is dim, lit by a single halogen light bulb dangling neglected from the ceiling.

“What the hell is this place, dude?” I ask him.

My voice echoes off the stone walls. Rather than leading anywhere, the hallway appears to dead-end. Another trick of the building, I decide, watching Aria’s head disappear. A staircase leads down to depths unknown, and my fingers itch for my gun even though it’s useless.

Bill chuckles behind me. “What’s the matter? Afraid of the dark, Bishop? Grow a pair and follow the spicy redhead.”

“Just wondering what fascination you seem to have with cramped little caves,” I throw back.

“You’ll be able to tell me once you reach the bottom. Go ahead.” Bill sounds way too amused with himself for his own good.

I don’t like this one bit, but I’ve got no choice. Aria is already halfway down the stairs, her auburn hair almost glowing in the muted yellow.

The staircase is too steep to descend with any kind of speed, but Aria does well enough, moving with the slick grace of a spider. By the time I’ve reached her, I’m a little winded,

which I'm chalking up to nerves and Bill's girth pushing me from behind to go faster.

The door in front of us is reinforced steel, and I have to wait for the man in charge, which is definitely not me in this case, to barrel past, paying extra close attention to Aria as he opens it. "Oh, excuse me, excuse me."

My growl shuts him up, although he licks his lips, shoots me a *how are you so lucky* grin over the top of her head, then pushes the door open and holds out his arm.

"Lead the way, sweet thing. Welcome to my sanctuary!"

Not a cave, I realize in an instant. Unless it's of the man variety.

Warm track lighting overhead illuminates an open room filled with bookshelves filled with comic book memorabilia and magazines in secure plastic sleeves. Flat-screen monitors decorate one entire wall, with several comfortable couches set across the room for viewing. An entire kitchen with a full-sized refrigerator is at the rear of the space, boasting a shiny espresso maker and a microwave the size of a pony.

A nerd's paradise.

"I'm impressed," I manage to get out. "How long have you been hiding out in this place?"

Bill rubs a hand over his belly, sliding it beneath his shirt to rub his skin. "A couple of years. Figured it would be a good place to hide out if the apocalypse hits. Got a few stores nearby, tapped into well water instead of city water...I'm golden."

"It's perfect," Aria adds.

Half a second later, a squeal greets me before a body propels itself out of the corner and into my arms.

"Dev! I'm so glad you're safe. Are you safe? How are you? Oh my gosh!"

*Naomi.* Her signature vanilla and cinnamon body lotion burns the inside of my nostrils.

I catch sight of Aria's pinched and pissed-off face before I manage to peel my partner off of me. She grips my face in both her hands, gaze scouring me from top to bottom and taking in the hole in my jacket almost immediately.

"I was so worried about you. You've been hit?" She punches my other arm. "You told me you were fine!"

Wrapping my hands around her wrists, I push her away and hold her at a distance, her concern appreciated but not necessary. "I am fine," I assure her.

"He loves that word," Aria quips. "One of his favorites."

Naomi turns to Aria with questions written in every line of her posture. "Aria Darkling, right? We found your car at the scene."

"Aria is a little upset with me because I'm a man of few words, and *fine* is one of them. But I learned it from her." I make the introductions, sending Naomi in Aria's direction for the two of them to shake hands. "Bill is the one who met us at the door, and his cohort Adam is somewhere around."

"Jasleen is in the bathroom, too." Naomi and Aria stand front to front, my partner an imposing presence and Aria even more so despite the differences in their height. "You want to talk about trust? You brought in a person who is suspected of close contact with our perp, Dev."

"I didn't know we were going to have a catfight on our hands." Bill stares at us over the back of the couch, smirking and licking his lips. "This could be fun. *Excellent.*"

"Didn't realize we were going to be stuck in an eighties movie, either, despite your fabulous taste in Funko Pops," Aria wisecracks, shifting the focus off of her reputation to the decor.

My need to intervene dissipates as the seconds tick by. She's got this. She can handle herself. Her fingers might tap out a rhythm on an invisible keyboard at her side, but otherwise, she gives no indication of her discomfort.

"Bill and Ted happen to be my heroes, and anyone who can appreciate my collection is a friend of mine." Bill is

completely won over with stars dancing in his eyes, and in a snap, he's Aria's creature to the core.

Naomi deflates at their interaction, looking to me to see where I stand and seeing me immobile, backing down.

Jasleen joins us a second later, Adam right after, and just like that, the Scooby Gang has assembled again. My stomach rumbles, and Jasleen, reading my cues, heads to the kitchen to pour some coffee.

"He's got snacks here, too. Don't let him fool you. Big man thinks he's going to keep them all for himself," she says. "He's got enough to feed an army."

Aria trails her fingers along the edge of the bookshelf. "Is this where you come to jack off to your collection?"

"Exactly." Bill points a finger at Aria's ass. "This one is on it, isn't she?"

"She is. And the more time we waste, the more time people have to pile evidence on us." My knees quake, the weight of holding up me and my guilt too much to handle, and I sink down into one of the reclines. On edge but unable to stand any longer.

Adam joins Bill on the couch. "Naomi tells us you've got the missing piece to our takedown of the Syndicate? What have you brought us, buddy?"

"I've got new information for you. Things this one over here may or may not be willing to tell you. I'm hoping she's comfortable enough with me to trust the rest of you."

My words hold a warning for them not to talk shit.

A stretch, yes, to trust them, as anyone in this room might be reporting back to the precinct or to other sources. Yet here we are, and Aria might be uncomfortable, but she knows her way around a group; I'll give her that. It's a transformation, a mask she slips into place. A performance like anything else.

Rather than shutting her down to save her from any discomfort, I nod to her. "Go ahead."

She starts talking even though she's clutching a Funko doll of Dean Winchester in her hands as if he knows all the answers and comes with an edible slice of pie to calm her nerves.

Her story comes out in spits and spats, not the one she told me but a variation with only the need-to-know tidbits and not a hint of her backstory. She tells the rest of them about Broderick, what she knows, what he's planning to do, and his next target.

She exchanges Dean Winchester only for a cup of coffee handed off by Jasleen, the two women smiling awkwardly at each other.

"If someone has a secure computer, I can show you a few things I've compiled and the programs I've got running in my absence. I haven't really had a chance to go in-depth with my search, considering the circumstances, but I've got a few people working on pulling information for me."

"This is what you were doing on the dark web site," Adam says. Softly enough, I almost miss his words but not the intent look he throws at me. "This is Darkling."

"It took him much longer to put it together," Aria says with a conspirator's smile, pointing at me.

"Dev can be a little behind on those things." Naomi keeps flicking her gaze to me, looking for something I'll never know.

"Go on. It's a waste of time to tease me," I grumble.

Naomi barks out a laugh, settling on the couch with her legs crossed underneath her and a pillow clutched to her chest. "She's got your number."

"She does."

She's got more than my number.

"Someone knew where I would be yesterday," I continue. "Unless there was a tracking device on Aria's car, then we have to assume the intel came from our side."

"We haven't tested the car yet," Jasleen admits.

“The gunman might have been aiming for Aria since she chose to defect,” Bill puts in. “Did anyone else know you’re planning on rolling over on the boss?”

She shakes her head. “No. It’s been a more recent development. And outside of Broderick, I’m...I’m not really close with anyone else. In fact, a lot of them hate my guts. They think I’m too ambitious for a woman in the biz.”

“That sort of thing tends to happen if you out-bark the big dogs. Especially if you were bringing in the amount of money you say you did,” I reassure her.

She hadn’t given us an exact number of the funds she procured for Broderick, but she gave enough information for us to put it together. As she does with everything.

“I’m just not sure what to do in order to bring the ax down with finality to keep Broderick from rising again.” She slaps her palms together for emphasis, her coffee on the table beside her. She’d taken to pacing back and forth in front of the wall of screens, her energy too volatile to be contained. I didn’t blame her.

But I wonder if she knows how well she commands the room. How she seamlessly manages to get two decorated detectives, a medical examiner, and the best IT guys at the EBPD to fall under her spell in a matter of minutes. She has to know what she does to me, the way I’m twisted in her hand already.

She’s an asset I’m not even sure Stevens will miss, and that’s going to be what ultimately brings him down.

Layla would be damn proud.

I’m doing this for her, of course. But also for Aria. For this precious flame taken out of one vulnerable situation and manipulated into another. For the kids like her on the street who will meet a face much worse than anything they’ve experienced so far if we don’t stop the Syndicate.

Aria’s our ticket to victory.

“We’ve got a secure line here. Of course, we do.” Bill scoffs, indignant. “This isn’t kiddie hour. Let me get you

hooked up.”

He’s got enough laptops to make Apple drool and grabs one for Aria to use, his hands brushing against hers too long for my liking. No one else hears me grumble under my breath, but Aria’s attention darts to me regardless.

“I’ve had several of my guys in the chat room looking for avenues to track Broderick’s’ communications with his buyers, see if we can find the outlets he’s using and intercept messages,” she tells the room distractedly, her attention fixated on the screen. The dull blue glow illuminates half of her face and the sharp angles of her cheekbones. “Obviously, it’s almost impossible to break through his walls since I put them up myself. I made them almost impenetrable so no one would be able to follow his movements. Now I want to kick my own ass for doing it.”

“There’s always a hazard of being really good at your job.” Jasleen says it like she knows, which only draws another laugh from Naomi.

“You said it, sister.”

Somewhere along the line, the two of them settled whatever beef I’d first seen at the last murder. Thank fucking god for it, too. We don’t need any more drama.



NINETEEN

ADAM AND BILL hustle to hang over Aria's shoulder while she runs through several programs, muttering to herself under her breath, only to have the latter hook up the computer to show her screen across several of the large monitors at their back. So that the rest of us can follow along.

"You did a good job on those firewalls," Adam comments with a low whistle. "Damn good. But your bots aren't picking up any kind of pattern to this case. I've worked a few human trafficking cases in the past, but nothing as large scale as what you're suggesting now."

"Broderick doesn't do anything small," Aria adds.

"Except for his dick, I'm sure." Jasleen stifles a laugh.

Aria says nothing, but her cheeks do color drastically.

"I'm thinking the lack of a pattern is actually the pattern itself. You notice how sporadic and infrequent the contact between these people? Your potential buyers? You have to tweak the parameters of your search." Bill muscles close, his meaty shoulder nudging Aria. "Do you mind?"

Her smile is amused when she steps aside. "Oh, by all means."

"You do realize you're being an insulting prick to the actual mistress of the dark web, right?" I ask Bill. "Because that's exactly what you're doing."

"She knows she's a goddess. I'll fall to my knees in front of her once I'm done with this." Bill sounds distracted, his fat fingertips flying over the laptop keyboard before he stands

back proudly. “There. Run your program now and see what it brings up.”

Aria takes over, all of them nestled in front of the screen like the three blind mice. The cursor, mirrored on the screens behind them, moves almost too fast for me to follow, and whatever programming they run, it takes off with a string of white text on a black background.

“Whoa! Hold it!”

Aria, Adam, and Bill all talk at once, noises of equal excitement as they move closer to the laptop as a single unit. Whatever they see in the hieroglyphics of computer jargon, the rest of us have no idea, and the girls and I sit like students ready to be taught.

“Right there, do you see it?” Adam points at something. “A snag in the fabric.” He claps his hands together before pumping a fist in the air.

“What *is* it?” Bill leans closer as Adam adjusts his glasses. Somehow, the movement helps him see the code clearer, and he offers the room one of his rare smiles.

“A potential pickup point,” he explains to us, the dummies in the room—all action and no brains. “One of the homeless shelters in the city is going to have a ‘Feed the Streets’ day, and it seems that the event has been targeted.”

“He’s using my programs to try and remain undetected.” Aria sounds sick. “When do you think they’re most likely to make a move?”

“Pretty fucking stupid of them to use a computer for any of this anyway,” Naomi grumbles. “Too easily traced if you know what you’re doing.”

“If you think getting into the system was easy, then you have another think coming,” Aria corrects her.

“You’re telling me it’s not? It took you guys less than ten minutes. I watched you.”

“On a system *this one* designed. And you’ve got three certified geniuses working on the case now.” Adam pushes his

glasses up higher on his nose again. This time, the move reeks of excitement, an almost unconscious gesture.

“If I’m the best in the biz, then these guys are a close second. Let me tell you.” Aria instructs them to keep running the program and approaches me. “We’ve got to stop the grab, Tough Guy. I don’t care what happens to me, if he finds me or not, but I’m not letting him get his hands on any of those kids. Or adults. No one is going to suffer because of him.”

She’s practically trembling, and I stand, uncaring what the others see when I gather her into my arms. Full of more fire than anyone I know, and she’s got the hair to match.

“We’re not going to let him do anything,” I assure her. “We’ll stop his grab, or at the very least, make sure he knows he’s being watched.”

“Then what’s the plan? *Tough Guy*?” Jasleen mimics. Without a hint of malice, thankfully. “And what do you want us to do? We’re ready.”

“Especially when we’re supposed to be out there looking for you, Dev.” Naomi looks worried, going so far as to lift her thumb to her mouth to ravage her cuticle bed. “I mean, we’re supposed to bring you in right away. The APB is no joke.”

“That’s why you’re going to go back to the station for work as usual, and let me handle this. I’ll set up surveillance on site. There’s little chance Broderick will show himself and less chance he’ll have more than a handful of men in place to lure his product.” I swallow hard, hating myself for considering live human beings as a product, even though it adds another layer to distance myself from the horrors of the situation.

Naomi jumps up from the couch at the same time Aria slams her palms into my chest to push me away from her.

“Are you out of your mind?” Naomi snaps.

“There is no way I’m staying here and letting you go alone,” Aria says. “I’m going to help you.”

“There’s no reason to wait. It’s better for us to get out there and put a stop to it while the rest of you work together with

enough evidence to take him down and keep him there.” I’m used to being the voice of reason. I stepped into the role too many times to count when Layla got something stuck in her paw and wanted to go on a rampage. Not like I wanted to be the lion tamer; things sort of naturally evolved to that point. “Ellison will raise suspicion if she’s seen with me, as will you. You want to give away your defection immediately? Bad enough that you took off after the shootout. Someone knows you’re stepping out of line, enough to target you.”

Now, with Aria and Naomi both staring daggers at me with differing levels of intensity, I fall back into my familiar patterns. Speech. Body language. All of it designed to remind them of logic and make me come off as a typical male asshole, I’m sure.

“I’m the only one who knows what to do in this case. The rest of you might work for the PD, but you’re not used to active duty. That includes you.” I point to Aria.

“I don’t work for the PD, but I know Broderick.” Her hands fly to her hips, and I swear lightning crackles around her head. “I’m going with you. Someone get me a gun, and I’ll be fine. I’ll disguise myself so the men he sends won’t recognize me and go from there.”

“No guns,” I rush to say.

“Should we go to Ashcroft with this? It seems like the sort of thing—” Jasleen starts.

“No.” One word, the one I’m hoping will shut down all arguments from this point on.

“I’m coming with you to survey the scene as backup. I won’t make a move unless you’re in danger, but there is no way on god’s green earth I’m staying behind again.” This is Naomi putting her foot down. “I’m not taking no for an answer. You either let me go as backup, or I will call Cap right now and tag your ass so fast that your head spins, Dev.”

“And we’re wasting time,” Aria finishes. She casts a longing glance at the door, then back to me. “Take the deal or leave it, Devan.”

She's right, we are wasting time. And I console myself with the fact that it takes a relatively secure man to understand when he's up against an unbreakable force, a tide he has no hope of parting.

The wind goes out of my sails. "Fine. Fuck it. Bill, you've got so much junk here. Please tell me you've at least got some firearms stashed somewhere. Because I'm all out of bullets."

\* \* \*

The biggest thing is the lack of ammunition, I realize on our way to the Feed the Streets event.

Adam and Bill were about as useless as tits on a bull for anything firearm related, seeing as their weapons of mass destruction are their brains and a keyboard, and Funko toys. Oddly enough, sweet Naomi, who is always so overly concerned with my coffee order and making sure she's cornered the vanilla and cinnamon lotion market, comes to bat to the rescue.

She opens the trunk of her vehicle to pull out several police-issue pistols and enough clips to make my mouth water.

"Is this going to be good enough?" she asks sweetly. "Between the two of us, I'm sure we should be fine. It shouldn't come to any kind of massacre. Right, Dev?"

Let's fucking hope not.

I'm too grateful to do more than nod, even when she swoops in for another hug, seizing a not-often-given opportunity.

"I'm a hugger. You're going to have to get used to it." Her voice is muffled by my ruined jacket.

From isolation to full-on social immersion in less than a week. It's enough to make a man want to lose his mind. I might have if Aria weren't snuggled in the seat next to me, wearing an expression of weirdly combined emotions. Excitement, resignation.

Lust when she looks at me.

“Penny for your thoughts,” she asks in the hush of the car. Her red hair is covered by a hat, and most of the strands are tucked back into a braid and curled at the nape of her neck.

I chuckle and return, “You don’t have a penny on you. And you definitely shouldn’t waste one on me.”

“You’d be surprised at the number of places I can hide things. Currency, secrets, you name it.”

“Would I, though? I’ve seen your nooks and crannies, Miss Darklyn. I know very well what you’re capable of taking inside you.”

She doesn’t blush, which is halfway the response I want out of her. Then again, Aria does nothing if not keep me on my toes and keep me guessing. “If you want to see if it’s a tight fit, Tough Guy, then how about you try my ass instead of my pussy?” she asks.

I choke on my own spit at the response, casting her a glance out of the corner of my eye and finding her eyes squeezed shut in silent laughter.

“Fuck.” It’s the only response I can manage. *Fuck.*

Enough time passed in the cave of wonders for the sun to sink beneath the spearing skyscrapers, disappearing into the yellow-gray haze of evening. According to the information online, the event wouldn’t stop until nearly eight.

We’re cutting it close.

We might already be too late, but what are the odds Broderick Stevens and his goons are bold enough to snatch kids right off the street in broad daylight?

Considering Aria’s situation?

Pretty damn large.

“I’m proud of you for this. For taking a huge leap of faith and standing up against the only life you knew. The man you always thought saved you.”

She jerks at the sound of my voice, her attention out the window on the blur of passing pedestrians. “Don’t be proud,” she says quietly.

“Why not?”

“I’ve done nothing to deserve it. Not yet, anyway. I’m hoping to change things with this. Maybe then I’ll stop hating myself so much.”

I hide my wince from her. I understand the feeling of hatred and shame going hand in hand when you look at the person reflected in the mirror. Except from my point of view, Aria deserves none of the dark emotions she turns inward. Not a single one.

“I’d say you’ve already done plenty. Even taking the step to decide you want to go against your boss is...a big one.”

“Did I have a choice?” she wants to know. “When it really comes down to it, it’s not a question of what kind of man he is, but what kind of woman I am.” She stops. Swallows, her throat working. “What kind of person I want to be.”

It’s a tough conversation to have with yourself, and one I understand. I’ve looked in the mirror, stared at the ceiling, closed my eyes, and had the same thoughts countless times. Not just in the past two years, either, but before. So long ago, the internal rhetoric might as well be part of my genetic makeup.

Who is Devan Bishop?

What kind of person does he want to be?

They’re questions for another day and another me, one who has mounted the highest peak of his career and taken down the big bad. One who wants the woman on the seat beside him with every fiber of his being, obsessed with the one woman who is no good for his health simply because of his obsession.

Well, not simply.

It’s never simple.



We pull into a parking lot, privately owned and charging more than twenty bucks for an hour of privilege, and Aria drags a twenty from her bra and hands it off to the attendant. His eyes go fish bulgy as she struts away, and I bend down close to hiss against her ear.

“So you don’t have a penny, but you have a twenty? How long have you been hiding the big bucks from me?”

“Since Bill slipped it to me along with three of its friends and told me not to get into trouble,” she whispers back.

“Impossible for you not to get in trouble. He’s only just met you.” I have to hurry to catch up with her even though my legs are longer. And how she balances on those toothpicks she calls shoes, I’ll never know. They still don’t give her enough height to come to the bottom of my chin, and I wonder if her feet hurt or if they’ve gone numb. “Hey, slow it down.”

She glares at me over her shoulder. “What?”

“We have to look like we’re pedestrians, Aria, and not draw too much attention to ourselves. This isn’t the time to go in there and try to swoop everybody under your wings.” I glance around toward the observation point we’d decided on ahead of time, where Naomi is hopefully already settled and ready for backup in case things go to shit.

Which they invariably do.

We never make it to the event.

The actual homeless shelter, the banners proclaiming the name of the event and goal of the people gathered, lay a block ahead.

I expect the first shot, somewhere deep in my gut, where my instincts lay waiting to be considered. I shove Aria against the side of the building and shield her body with mine, melting around her as the first bullet buries itself in the mortar of the brick above our heads.

She screams, hastily swallowing the sound, and in the pause between shots, I push her to run down the block.

“We’re out in the open!”

“I fucking know!” I yell back.

The rest of the people on the street duck, scream, run for the hills, and generally erupt into a mass of chaos. The shooter is smart, though. Smart enough not to point and aim directly at the group. A shitty cop would send Aria in that direction to lessen the risk of her getting hurt while endangering everything else.

I haven't lost all of my goodness yet.

I push Aria around the corner and into a slender space between two alleys leading away from Feed the Streets, with the narrow opening protected in part by a large square dumpster.

We immediately slam into the meaty torso of one man as two others step out of the shadows and make a grab for Aria. She yelps, automatically bending down to make herself smaller and trying to avoid those swinging arms.

I've got to make each shot count.

The first man's fist hits the side of my head and sends stars dancing in front of my eyes. I fire a round into his gut. He curls forward, dropping on his side, clutching the wound. The two other guys are close, close enough for me to risk shooting Aria instead of my target and their limbs merging together.

Gritting my teeth, I duck and turn on my heel, pulling the trigger and taking one of the men in the side of the neck. He clasps the area with his eyes going wide before he crumbles to the ground alongside the first. The third man gets off a shot that misses the side of my head by inches, but it's close enough for me to feel the heat of the bullet.

Aria crouches behind my legs to keep herself protected, and I make myself larger than usual, becoming the target yet again. Firing off another shot at the one man and missing him as the other slams his fist into my gut.

Only a few bullets left.

The last one shoves his shoulder into me, and I slam back against the brick, the hit knocking the breath out of me. Aria yelps, and I blink through a haze to see the man with his hands

fisted in the hair at the top of her head, dragging her up from the ground, her hand knocked aside.

“Don’t you fucking touch her!”

Once I’m sure of a shot, I send it into his chest, blood splattering everywhere.

The world is deadly silent in the aftermath of the shot, not even my pulse thundering in my ears when the man goes down. The last of them until it’s only two of us in the alley and the corpses behind us.

I reach down for Aria and stash my gun in my holster in the same smooth movement, chest heaving. “Are you okay?”

“They found us,” she says with a whimper. “They knew we were here, and we almost died.”

“We’re alive, baby.” I run my hands over her white face, down the sides of her neck, and along her shoulders. Checking for what, I’m not sure. The only blood on her comes from the asshole on the ground. “We’re fine.”

“There you go using that word again.” Instead of shaking, she lifts her face to mine, moon pale but her eyes alive.

Her mouth latches on to mine a heartbeat later, and she’s clinging to me. My arms loop around her waist and drag her close, adrenaline coursing through my body. From her into me. Fuck the source.

She breaks away only to reach between us for my fly. “I want you,” she whispers. “Right now. Here. Please. I need you, Devan.”

How am I going to say no to this beautiful creature? With my systems on high alert and the rest of me alive, my willpower is shot. I give in to her almost too easily and turn her around to face the wall. I grab her wrists and press both hands on the bricks ahead of her, glancing at the street only to make sure the dumpster hides us and the bodies from view.

“Quickly,” I urge, dragging her pants down and nudging her legs apart.

I don’t have a condom.

Screw the condom right now.

My chest tightens, the rest of me already hard and aching to be buried inside of her.

The zipper is caught, and I wrench it south before whipping my dick out of the slit in the front of my boxers. I position myself behind her with one hand braced on her hip and the other angling the head of me against her already wet core. One thrust, and I'm inside. Her pussy tightens around me, clenching around me and drawing me deeper still until I'm seated to the hilt.

The blood on my skin is drying in the cold, and I'm a million miles away, lost in her and the sensations, lost in her scent and the keening moans she lets loose.

She arches against me, her ass out and her legs splayed, and the friction just enough to tell me this isn't going to last long.

Life goes on in the streets, the kids safe and the corpses cooling as I fuck Aria in the alleyway. I lose myself between the cars honking and my own grunting, sliding in and out of her pussy as if it's my job.

High on adrenaline, there's only her, this moment, and momentum building. I drive into her until she's forced to use the wall to keep her steady, the two of us pounding away a perfectly rough rhythm.

"You're so tight."

She looks over her shoulder at me, licking her lips, her eyes dark and hooded. "More," she demands. "Give me everything."

I don't hold back and slam into her. Repeatedly until the rest of our words disappear. My dick twitches inside of her, balls tightening with the impending orgasm. Before I have a chance to blow, I reach around her waist and down, the tip of my index finger finding her clit.

Not without her.

I'm not going anywhere without her, not anymore.

TWENTY

I COME DOWN from my surprise orgasm, my body wrapped around Devan and quivering with the aftershocks. He keeps his hands on me until he's sure—I'm sure—that I'm able to keep myself upright without him.

A cool breeze winds through my unmentionable places as I straighten, the rest of reality slamming back down on me like a bucket of cold water. There are voices on the street and three dead bodies cooling around our feet, their blood puddles ready to ice over.

Devan slides himself back into his pants, zipping them closed and shielding me with his body again. "We need to get out of here before someone sees us."

"I think it's a little too late. There are a billion people on the street, and I'm not exactly quiet." One of my many talents and one I hope Devan appreciates.

I'd needed him so desperately that I hadn't been able to think. To logic this out. The men were clearly waiting for us, and the shooter on the streets had herded us into this alley where the others lurked. Who figured me out?

My core throbs from Devan's intrusion, and I have to hustle to set my clothing to rights before he uses his fingers on the small of my back to guide me down the alley. As though we hadn't fucked in the alley like a couple of bloodthirsty teenagers.

"I'll send Naomi a message and let her know what's going on here. Better than her stumbling on our mess by surprise. She already knows something has happened."

“Our DNA is all over the scene.” I bite down on my lip. “Isn’t that a bad thing?”

I’m breathless, chilled, and on fire at the same time.

“It’s goddamn terrible, but without a cleanup crew...even then, I’m not sure anything we do will help. Closing this case is the only way we’ll fix this.” Devan is stern, his gaze fixated on the street ahead.

The look of a man who lets nothing pass him by.

His hands are on me in a completely different way from before. Helping, guiding. Steadying me when it’s hard to do it on my own. He curves his body around me quickly when the noise on the street increases and sneakers skid nearby.

“Hey, mister. You okay?”

A young voice, boy from the sounds of it, but Devan’s body blocks the speaker from sight.

“Go on. Run,” he tells the boy. “Get out of here.”

“We’re not safe,” I whisper. “Broderick is going to make another pick up somewhere. We haven’t even stopped him today, only delayed.”

And I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve botched this beyond repair. Somehow, in my probing, I must have alerted one of the programs I helped create, and Broderick used it to get the jump on me. With the men dead, it’s only a matter of time before he puts the rest of the pieces together.

He might not have known *I* would be here today, but he expected someone.

Devan has already started walking out toward the street, farther away from the dead men. As surely they’d been scoping out the area for their pick up for longer than we had.

“Where are we going?” I murmur.

Devan slides his hand down my blood-covered arm, lacing his fingers with mine to keep me close. “The car, and then back to Bill’s place. It’s the safest space I know for now.”

“I don’t want anyone else to go down with me,” I insist.

He glances at me, his gaze hard and molten, and his scruff adding an air of danger to the entire facade. “They won’t, Aria. We’ve got to do our jobs.”

“Seems to me like your job involves a lot of running around.”

“Right now? Yeah. It’s called leg work.”

“Ah, you mean what I just did with you.”

He swallows over a grin. “Sure. You’re a master with your legs. And the rest of you.”

There is something sweet about the way he keeps me at his side, something that makes me feel protected.

“This wasn’t your first kill? Was it?” I’m not sure what prompts me to ask him, but it’s impossible for me to miss the way Devan twitches at the word. *Kill*. Even in a world like this, where it’s everyone stepping over everyone else and then bathing in blood like we did, it’s hard to reconcile.

I’ve always been behind a computer screen, sometimes ordering deaths that I’ll never see and somehow gives me a sense of removal from the actual deed. Today, there’s no chance at distance. There is no way to make sense of it right now, with my knees burning and my shaking legs trying to hustle to keep up with Devan’s grueling pace in an entirely different way.

We make it back to the car, and he buckles me into the passenger seat before sliding behind the wheel. “Well?” I press. “Is it? You never answered my question.” I already know the answer. I want to hear him say it out loud.

“I’ve shot perps in the line of duty before. There are some instances where you have to make a split-second decision and react, with no time left for considering consequences,” he answers carefully.

“Today seems like one of those days.”

“He was hurting you.” Devan’s voice drops, grim and dark. “I’d do it again. I’m glad he’s dead.”



I turn to him in surprise, but Devan won't look at me. Won't, or can't, I'm not sure which one.

“Nothing we did today follows protocol. My training went out the window in terms of procedure, and I went on gut instinct alone. The way I have since you burst into my life, and the guilt is real, Aria. Not about you. You...I'd do anything for. I'd do anything to keep you safe and protect you, but I've stepped over a line, and I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to reconcile the bad calls I've made.”

“Don't let your guilt consume you.” My body still tingles with pleasure, in direct contrast to the anxiety and worry caterwauling in my brain. “It's a dangerous and slippery slope, and I expect more from you than to give in to the guilt and shame.”

“I've disappointed you.”

“No, not really. But I think, in this case, going outside the boundaries of your protocol is the only thing that will take Broderick down.” I think about it for a long moment, the hum of the car tires on rough asphalt soothing. “It hasn't worked for you so far, has it?”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

I appreciate the ferocity in his voice, the honesty with himself and with me.

“And you know that bringing in a team with the CIA and FBI is only going to complicate matters and probably lead to a mishap somewhere along the line. He's tricky. We're doing what we have to do. We're doing all we can.”

Devan finally turns to look at me full on. “Not all.”

I'm not sure what he means by that, and thinking about it gives me a headache right at the base of my neck. We make the rest of the drive in silence, parking the car far down the street from Bill's hideaway and making the rest of the trip on foot. It's like opening the door to a secret clubhouse, complete with a special knock only members know. Bill answers the door after a few terse seconds of me waiting to see if there are more men with guns waiting in the darkened shadows.

Twilight has fallen, and with it, the gray sky fills with clouds, dampening even the remote light of the sliver of moon.

Bill answers the door, his expression solemn, and waists until we're in the hallway before speaking. "Naomi will be on her way as soon as possible. She heard the gunfire, and she's at the scene calling it in."

"Great." Devan's shoulders slump forward.

A chill runs through me, and I use my hands to rub a little bit of warmth back into my arms. Nothing works. It's inside of me already, too far gone to be eradicated easily.

Adam is still seated in front of the computer, exactly where we'd left him. Part of me wants to join him and fall back into the familiar world of the internet. Where I've always been the one in control rather than this new reality where everything I know is turned upside down.

"You look like hell," he says without looking up.

"Tell me about it. At least it's not my blood. Does it bother you?"

He shrugs. "I've seen worse."

But he has a distinctive green hue to his skin that has nothing to do with the monitors and everything to do with, I suspect, a sour stomach. I drop on the couch, the cushions accepting me as one of their own. So damn soft. Exhaustion presses on me like a tidal wave.

"Sure you have. Who's the real sweet thing here?" My voice is soft, distant. Ready to be carried away in tempting sleep. It feels like years since I got a real, good night's sleep.

I must have dozed off for who knows how long because when my eyes blink open, there's a blanket tucked in around my shoulders, and Naomi and Devan speak in an undertone to each other.

"I'm telling you, he somehow knew where we would be, and he had his men there ready for an attack. It wasn't a jump. They were prepared. They figured out our movements and

reacted accordingly,” Devan hisses out. “I know the difference between kismet and preparation.”

“I’m not saying you don’t know the difference, Dev, but how is it possible? The guys and your girlfriend went through the most secure channels, more secure than the precinct even. Don’t tell me you still think one of us is a mole.”

“I’m not sure, but the channels must not have been secure enough.”

“Well, that’s *shit*, considering how far out on a limb I went to make sure you weren’t implicated in the scene and the three dead bodies we had to cart to the morgue. Thank god Jasleen was there. But we could get in serious trouble for this and sabotage any hint of a promotion in my future.”

Devan groans. “I get it, I do, and I really appreciate everything you’ve been doing. I’m grateful.”

“Express your gratitude in the form of gifts and written recommendations once we eradicate this pest. Okay?” Naomi presses. “Otherwise, stop looking at me like I’m about to fuck you over. I’m good at my job. I know what I’m doing even if this is a tight mess.”

“I know you are.”

“You’re good at your job, too,” she replies, her tone taking on an edge.

“So you’re questioning Aria in this?” Devan asks.

“We wouldn’t even be this far if it weren’t for her, so no. I’m not. I’m just saying Broderick is a fuck, and he might have other channels in place that she’s not even aware of, channels to monitor anytime someone even pokes at the system she’s put together.”

“Have you found anything?”

“Nothing.” That’s from Adam. “I’m sorry, buddy. I’ll keep looking.”

I keep my eyes closed and my breathing even while I pretend to sleep.

“The firewalls are too strong, and someone is going behind and erasing their online footprint, so there is nothing to follow,” Adam continues. “I’m as careful as I can be, but there is always a chance we’re being watched even now. This has got to be part of the reason we haven’t caught Broderick Stevens yet. He’s got too many people around him, protecting him.”

“Look...” Devan trails off. “As much as I want to continue this conversation, I’m fucking beat, and right now, it feels like we’re going around in circles. I can’t think straight.”

“Lay down,” Naomi bids. “I’ve got to go into the precinct to file my report on the scene anyway. Relax and let me handle this. At least for the next few hours. Okay?”

Silence, and then, “Thank you.”

“Yeah, I can stand to hear it a little more, I’ll be totally honest with you,” Naomi says. “And tomorrow, you can greet me with a cup of coffee. Bill has the good stuff down here.”

The two of them slap palm to palm from the sounds of it, and a few beats later, a weight drops next to me on the couch. Devan’s arm slings around my shoulders.

“We’re going to make the bastard pay. Aren’t we, baby?” he asks, clearly speaking to me. Which means my ruse is up. He knows I’m awake.

“Absolutely,” I agree without hesitation and with crystal clarity.

He chuckles. “How much did you hear?”

“Do you want me to lie, or do you want the truth?” Without questioning, I nuzzle close to him, tucking close enough to rest my head against his heart and absorb a little bit of his warmth. Taking it into myself.

“The truth, always. No matter how hard it is to digest.”

“Then all of it,” I answer simply. “You like your partner.”

Devan groans, scrubbing his chin with his free hand. “Never tell her. We haven’t been working together long

enough for me to regard her with any kind of affection. Not to mention, she is worlds apart from my last partner.”

“Yeah, Layla.”

The sound of her name sends another shockwave through him, and he shivers.

“It’s okay to have friends, you know,” I continue. “It’s even okay to like your partner. I’d think it helps you get along and work your cases better.”

“We’ll call it respect,” he eventually concedes. “She’s proven her skills time and again, no matter how annoying certain parts of her personality can be. I’ve kept her at arm’s length for a long time.”

“Sure, we’ll call it whatever you want. It doesn’t negate the truth. She’s not like your old partner, so you have a hard time getting close to her in any capacity. You don’t want to because it’s a risk.”

“Stop it.” Except he doesn’t sound annoyed at my prodding, only tired. “You know about her.”

He’s not talking about Naomi. Or his ex-fiancée, who I also know about from my digging. I wonder if we’d be having this conversation at this point if we were like any other two people, any other budding couple. My insides tighten. Probably not because these are the kinds of things it’s hard to air. As though the light of day and a little attention will scar even worse than letting them sit inside you and rot.

“I know all about you. I know things even your mother doesn’t know,” I quip.

Surprisingly, he chuckles. “I’m pretty sure you’re right about that. There is a lot about me I keep from my parents. It’s better. I don’t want them getting hurt when they realize their only son is actually a steaming pile of crap.”

“It’s isolating, though,” I insist. “And take it from me. I understand isolation.” Except I have a gut feeling both of us have options there. We chose our lives. We chose to operate the way we do. And both of us chose to cut ourselves off from our past in what sometimes feels like an irrevocable way.

“Layla and I met at the academy. She got under people’s skin because she’s brash. Was.” He corrects himself, resigned, running his hand up and down my arm in a comforting gesture. “She spoke her mind, took no shit, and people hated watching a woman half their size kick their dicks into the dirt.”

“You gravitated toward her.”

“Her attitude was fantastic and meshed with mine, even when her brashness shifted to rashness. Drop the b.”

“Maybe she just *became* the B.” I giggle a little at my own joke.

“That too,” he agrees. “She didn’t care about the color of my skin when a few other people did. It wasn’t a big deal to take a bullet for her. I’ll miss her every single day until I die and join her in whatever hell waits for people like us.”

“You do good, Devan. A lot of good for a lot of people. If there’s a hell waiting for anyone, it’s me. Don’t try to tell me otherwise.” I place my hand on his chest, feeling his heart. Wishing I could touch skin instead and wind my fingers through his soft, black hair.

“I’m not here to get into the weight of our souls tonight, Aria. I can only tell you how I see you, and I see a woman who is worth so much more than she thinks. A woman who has no idea how powerful she really is.

The solemnity of his words touch me, somewhere no amount of physical penetration has ever come close to before. Rather than letting him see the way my lips tremble, I button them and turn slightly to hide my expression with a sweep of hair.

“You don’t know how hard it is for me to not go back to Ashcroft and talk to him about all this.”

I stiffen. “Devan—”

“I want to come clean. I want him to know I’m not doing what I do because I’ve defected or any kind of crap like that.”

“If you bring anyone else in, there’s a chance Broderick will come after me.”

Devan stiffens. “He terrifies you.”

“I think he always has, but I’ve never let myself really feel it. I always excused the sensation as something else, something a little bit more palatable. But yes, he scares me. He’s a man with no morals or scruples. No compass to guide him.”

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you, Aria. If he touches you again, then I’ll fucking kill him. It won’t be a slow or easy death, either.”

This time, I tremble for a completely different reason. “As much as I’d love for you to paint me a picture of exactly what you’d do to him, I need you to promise me you won’t go to the precinct with this.”

“Sooner or later, I’m going to have to,” he says. “I’m still a detective. I’ve got this case and a lot of others on my plate.”

“*Devan.*”

“For some reason, I actually hate hearing you call me that.”

“Please.” I’m close to begging. “Wait a little while longer.”

“I’m not sure I have a little while longer.” He cuddles me closer. “I can protect you.”

“I know you can’t. Not against Broderick. And you won’t be fast enough to take him down before he makes me pay. Leave it to me,” I hurry to say. “I know a plan that will bring him down.”

“Why am I worried?”

“We should all be worried. This isn’t kiddie hour where we’re talking about a bully on a playground. This is a madman.”

“Then what’s your plan?” he asks.

“I’ll show him I’m all in.” It’s simple. At least, in my mind. “I’ll tell him I’ve found something, and then we’ll take

him down when his guard is lowered.”

“It’s not safe. Do you understand? I can’t risk losing you. Trust me to take care of you.”

“I...trust you’ll try.” It’s got to be enough for him right now. It has to be because there is nothing else I’m able to give him.

Why would he want me, anyway?

I’m beyond damaged goods. I’ve been turned over and inside and out too many times to count in my life, and I’ve helped a bad man do terrible things. I’ve been a gatekeeper to the dark web for more years than I can count.

It takes me a long time to realize Devan and I cling to each other. It’s not just me holding on too tightly. He’s afraid to let go, too.

For a second, I let my eyes screw shut and imagine how it might be if it were the two of us against the world, for real. If we were any other man and woman in any other situation. I know he has my back to the best of his abilities. Hopefully, he knows that everything I’ve done...is for him.

“Tell me about her.”

“You’ve already asked about Layla—” He breaks off in a yawn.

“I’m not talking about your old partner. I’m talking about the woman who used to hold your heart.” Not like I really want to know about any other person Devan has touched, has kissed, has spoken sweet nothings to. Yet I have to know.

He’s hesitant when he says, “Are you so sure they’re not the same person?”

“Yes.” I hide my smile. “I’m absolutely sure.”

“I forget about how good you are at digging for pieces of information people want to hide.”

“And I didn’t realize you wanted to hide your past relationships.”



He shifts to get more comfortable on the couch but doesn't let go of me. Keeping me tucked beneath the shelter of his arm. "It was a long time ago. She was, is, a teacher. Seemed like she was one of the lucky ones who got to live out of her life's passion and actually enjoy going to work every day. Loved kids, you know. The whole thing."

"She sounds like a good woman."

"She was too good for me. And also...not the right fit. I found myself—even before Layla died—not telling her things, keeping certain parts of me and my life from her. Not only to spare her the ugliness but because I wasn't sure she'd understand me."

"I know what it's like to wonder if the people in your life look at you and see something worth liking or hating. Love is too much to ask for."

"Love is always too much to ask for, and it never fails to get you kicked in the balls."

"Can confirm," I agree.

He's the one who has my back. I know it without a doubt. I've been taken into the inner halls of Devan and made a part of it, and I'm very scared to fall for him in a real way. Which is ridiculous. We barely know each other.

Trauma bonding, I tell myself. *Assure* myself. Even when looking at him makes me feel like I've finally found the home I've always wanted, the same one I've been running toward since I can remember.

He probably doesn't even feel the same.

"Things were bound to fail with my ex. Not because either of us were lacking but because we weren't the right fit for each other. Chemistry isn't a rare thing, but finding chemistry on more than one level, or two? And finding them within one person? Now that's rare."

I touch my palm to his face and turn him in my direction so that we're looking at each other. Holding eye contact, wide open, I pull him until he dips his head to mine. The kiss is my answer to his statement. He is absolutely right. And my terror

of Broderick is only rivaled by the terror I suddenly feel at Devan's eventual rejection.

TWENTY-ONE

*devan*

WE FALL asleep on the couch, latched together and closer than we'd been sharing the single bed in the cabin. The others are there, around us, and it's a comfort in the back of my mind to know we aren't alone. After so long in a solitary confinement of my own choosing, I thought it would be much harder to start leaning on others for support.

Until this firebrand of a woman came into my life.

I'm not sure what time it is when my mind decides it's time to get the hell up, my body groggy but eventually falling into line with the assessment. Aria is already gone by the time I crack one eye open, the spot beside me warm, so she hasn't been up for long.

Adam is asleep behind the laptop. His head droops toward his chest, and his arms are crossed, his glasses nowhere to be seen.

Bill has enough seating in the room to comfortably fit all of us and a few extras. With no windows, it's impossible to tell the time, but my stomach grumbles, and my next move has not only my joints cracking but my skin going tight.

I still hadn't showered all the blood from me and only done a perfunctory hand and dick wash in the bathroom.

I scrub my hands over my face, through my hair.

If I let Aria go through with her plan, which she described last night to me and Naomi in murky detail, then today might be the day we finally topple the Black Market Syndicate. It's always been the sort of pipe dream you work toward when

knowing, logically, it might not be possible. Except now I have to rework everything inside of me. Not simply a possible dream but a tangible victory. Only a few hours, depending on the time, away from this very moment.

“You look pale. Do you want some coffee?” Aria whispers, suddenly beside me.

Without waiting for me to answer, she shoves a mug into one hand and a wet towel in the other.

“There is no possible way for me to look pale,” I hiss back.

“I’m telling you, there is a distinctive tone on your face I’ve never seen before, so you’re as pale as you’re going to get.” She drops down on the coffee table in front of me, our knees touching, a similar cup of coffee gripped between her palms.

“What time is it?” I want to know.

“Past time.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

She glances over her shoulder toward sleeping Adam. “You will soon enough.”

Why do I feel like I’ve missed something important?

“I’m going to go back to Broderick today. It depends on how soon I’ll be able to mobilize him into action, but I believe if we can get him to that secure secondary location we discussed with only a handful of his men, you’ll be able to take him out there.”

“No.”

“I’m not going to argue with you.” Her lips are thin again, but it doesn’t stop me from wanting to kiss her senseless.

“I know because I’ll win. I’m not going to let you put yourself at risk. This is our fight but my battle. Do you understand?” she continues.

“You don’t have a choice. He proved yesterday that he is still a step ahead of us, no matter if we’re using my programs or not. We can’t stop him from stealing kids off the street until

we kill him. I'm offering you a way to kill him." No amount of coffee is going to thaw the ice in my chest.

"Listen to her, Dev." Naomi stretches her arms overhead, yawns. Her hair is a fluffy mess and not at all what I'm used to seeing from her. "We talked about it after you fell asleep. A few points we hadn't made when you were awake, and the plan is about as solid as we're going to get. You were right, you know. Aria is key."

I grimace, shooting black looks between the two of them. "Shit, did you guys gossip about me when I wasn't awake to defend myself?"

"Gossiped about you, painted a dick somewhere on your body, and talked about my part to play," Aria says.

"We've got the research in order. The only thing we need to know now is how soon Aria can get Broderick to—" Naomi starts.

"Where?" I snap, interrupting her. "Where are you planning to take him? He's not going to listen to her."

"Why not?" Aria looks indignant.

"Because how can he trust you at this point? You disappeared for two days, you've been checking into the server from another location..." I trail off. "Do you want me to count the ways why it's too big a chance to take to go back there? And that's not to mention what you'll have to say to convince him to go with you anywhere."

"And you are awfully presumptions to think we are going into this thing half-cocked." Naomi leans forward, her elbows on her knees, taking a beat only to scrub the sleep from her eyes. "We already talked about all of it, Dev."

"Without me." My voice is hard.

"You needed your sleep." Aria sighs, pushing up to her feet, and I'm close enough to see her small wobble before she locks her knees in place. "We'll tell you everything now. Drink your coffee, Tough Guy, and get your listening ears on."

I hate being left out of the loop, unable to find empathy for the fact that I'd put Naomi in a similar position as this. Unable to latch onto any emotion except the cold, hard nugget of dread inside of me.

How am I going to let Aria do this? How am I going to physically let her go back to Broderick Stevens, knowing what he's done to her? Knowing he will probably turn on her?

I'm still shaking my head when she walks past me, patting me on the shoulder.

Like I'm some kind of child.

I finally bring the coffee to my lips and take a long pull of the dark liquid. I'm not sure how Aria found out that I like my coffee this way, but loving the fact regardless. Not like I'm going to say anything to her, though, beyond a murmured *thank you*, which she somehow still catches.

An hour later, with the lights turned up to peak brightness and everyone awake if not happy, we gather and talk.

"I need you to meet me at this address." Aria points down to a sheet of paper with her scribbled cursive. "Be there at nightfall, and I'll do my best to get Broderick in the same space. I can't promise nightfall on the dot, but he will be there."

"What makes you so sure?" I'm grasping at this point because no one else in the room seems willing to listen to me.

They've all managed to get behind Aria and this insane venture of hers.

Bill, I suspect, will follow her to the ends of the earth if she snaps a finger. She's got him on a tight leash already. Naomi is looking down at me like she'd rather I just shut up and play my part than talk about the details for a second time.

"You know you don't have a choice, Dev," she tells me. "It's tonight, or it's you turning in your badge and getting used to some very uncomfortable times ahead."

"Let's not be so drastic," I reply.

“I’m serious. There’s no way the precinct is going to let you off after the mess we cleaned up yesterday, and you’re missing in action. The only way you’re making it out of this without a pair of handcuffs is if you bag Broderick. You got it?” She glares at me, any hint of her usual sweetness gone.

With four against one while Jasleen is gone, there isn’t really much I can do. Especially not when Aria emerges from a shower wearing a clean change of clothes she’d apparently had Naomi pick up from the apartment.

Again, without me knowing.

“I’m going to show him I’m all in,” she repeats for my benefit. “That I’ve got new ways to move his products, and he’s going to love them.”

I grab her hand. “Don’t go,” I urge. “Please, Aria. Don’t do this.”

“I have no choice.” She refuses to meet my gaze no matter how tightly I grip her. “I’m the only one who can. Trust me.”

*Trust her.* It’s not her who is the issue in this situation; it’s the fucking monster whose claws she’s leaping back inside. He’s going to squash her. There’s no way she’ll be able to pull off a facade great enough to fool him. Stevens hasn’t gotten this far in his dirty dealings to be a pushover now.

He’s not like me, ready to fall to the ground and let her do whatever she wants to me.

How can I let her do this alone?

How can I risk losing someone I—

Aria kisses me again, right there in front of everyone. A kiss hot enough to steal my breath and make me groan, my arms wrapping around her automatically and the rest of the room fading away. Her tongue slides across mine. I’m not sure how it’s possible for a woman to taste of coffee and determination, but the combination is uniquely Aria, and my groan turns into something darker and deeper.

“Careful, there,” I tell her as I break away.



“What’s the matter?” She lifts on the tips of her toes to whisper against my ear. “Afraid you’re going to get an erection in front of your friends.”

“Halfway there already.”

She nods at the warning, but I don’t let her go. Not yet.

“Please. Stay safe. Otherwise, I’m not sure what I’ll do.” My fingers grip the back of her dress, clenching the material until it wrinkles. “I will burn the earth down if something happens to you. Understand?”

“Don’t worry so much. You just be in position at the right time and let me handle the rest. I’ve got this.”

She won’t let go of me yet, either, and there’s a small comfort there. Eventually, Bill clears his throat, and the two of us break apart.

Aria casts a bright smile back at the rest of the room before she makes her way up the stairs toward the secured front door. Too soon. She’s gone too soon, and I feel her absence the way I would a phantom limb.

“She’s capable, buddy,” Adam assures me. As if he knows her better than I do.

Shit. None of us *really* know her.

Naomi left a few minutes before Aria to head to the station, and now the only thing left for me to do is wait. Adam and Bill will be gone soon as well, one of them to start their shift and the other to head out and restock the fridge. It’s clear none of them want to leave me alone, though.

“I’m fine,” I assure them. “I’m going to take a shower and go over the information Aria left with us to make sure I’m absolutely prepared.”

Which I certainly will do. Once I make it into position. But my front works better than I bargained for. The others leave me alone with only the barest warning not to do anything stupid. No stupidity here. I’ll be absolutely as careful as possible.

No way am I letting Aria go into the lion's den alone without at least a little backup.

I'll be her eyes and ears on the outside. Tracking her, making sure I'm there, and hoping I wouldn't be too late if they gun her down at the front door.

I shake my head against the thought, my brain taking the dive into the worst-case scenario with ease. I hadn't clutched her to my chest and pleaded with her to stay the way I wanted to. I hadn't repeated my promise to take care of this for her even though I have no damn idea how to do it, alone or with a taskforce. None of those things. I'd stared after her until she bobbed her head, a silent acknowledgment of the silence between syllables. Then she walked off.

Nothing to it.

Right?

She's a competent young woman who has taken care of herself for a long time. Except I want to be the man who stands at her side and helps her. The one who makes her better, the way I smooth out and feel better when I'm with her.

Except I'm not just thinking about how every part of this option hinges on Aria's acting ability. I'm obsessed with the possibility of never seeing her again. Naomi and I know to meet at the warehouse separately tonight. The plan is in place.

Why can't I shake the feeling something is about to explode and not in a way we've anticipated?

The feeling sticks with me, a knife between my ribs, and no matter how many times I go over the details in my head, the sensation refuses to dislodge.

Impetus takes me up the stairs with fog in my ears. Just to watch her, I tell myself, breath thundering in my lungs. To make sure she is okay and through the door and no one is suspicious of her.

The only thing I trust innately is that things will go bad. Things will go wrong.

Even with me there to watch her, the probabilities are high.

Cold air shoots straight down my throat on my first inhalation outside. The initial taste of chill autumn air finally splits into car exhaust, fried peanuts, hot dog water, and stale garbage.

She didn't take the car, preferring to walk, thinking it would somehow make her less visible despite the cameras on the traffic light. I take a left to mimic her most likely trail.

Somewhere along the line, Aria became more than a thorn in my side or a gorgeous nuisance, much more than a temptation who took advantage of me.

Like I had no choice.

I've had a choice this entire journey, and the wrong path has always felt more tantalizing. Except I'm not sure the wrong path is that anymore. How could it be wrong when it brought me to her?

She's the brightness of a sunbeam in a stormy sky.

She's the North Star leading me not toward the man I used to be but the person I've always wanted to become. My thoughts spiral closer and closer with each heavy step along the sidewalk.

A stronger man who is able to stand up to the weight of his own demons. Which is on equally terrifying footing as standing up to the violence of the city. In my opinion.

My focus fuzzy, I accidentally shoulder-check a man on the sidewalk and pause only to offer a half-hearted apology.

"Well, well. The cat's been dragging in all kinds of dead things lately. My luck," the man says.

The voice is one I've heard a thousand times before and most recently bragging about a week booked in the Cayman Islands for a well-deserved and overdue mastervation.

I square my shoulders, my heart giving a single thud as the rest of me went south fast. Anchor to the bottom of the ocean fast. "*Jerry.*"

"*Devan.*" He's close enough for me to see the nose hair he needs to trim, to recognize the angle of his hat as one that only

happens when he's had too much coffee and not enough leads in a case he's working. A vein in the side of his face throbs in time with the beat of his heart, and the edges of his mustache bristle along with the tempo. "Now that we remember each other's names, I'm going to need you to come into the station with me." He flashes a smile. "We've got a lot to talk about."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

Jerry reaches back and swipes a hand at the back of his neck, looking like he'd much rather wrap the hand around my throat because he is sick to death of my shit. "I want to help, you know," he says. "You used to be a pretty damn good cop, for a...you know what I mean."

We both grow a little larger, chests puffed out, every inch of me on high alert. My toes tingle as I exhale sharply. "You want to help me right into a jail cell."

"A jail cell, an interrogation room." He shrugs. "You're going to have to come down to the ninth to prove me wrong if that's what you want. Otherwise, you're looking way too suspicious for me to let you walk away."

And he's about half a second away from taking his itchy fingers to the holster of his gun to threaten me.

"Jerry, turn around," I say slowly. "Turn around and walk away. I promise you, I've got this in hand. Everything is going to be clear once I—"

"Once you what, Bishop?" he interrupts. His eyes go hard and beady. "Once you what?"

This isn't the normal Jerry I'm used to seeing. Not even the douchebag he used to be before his partner turned out to be a mole. This was a new Jerry, one who made direct eye contact even though he looked like it cost him too much to do so. *This* Jerry is afraid of me.

"There are some details of Naomi's report that don't fit," he continues, shifting forward to the balls of his feet. The rest of the world fades away from us until we're the only two in the blur of movement. A stone in the sea of the sidewalk. "She says you're not to blame for the shootout at the Galleria, but

come on, man. You *ran* afterward. You've been fucking up your cases and brought in an innocent woman like some kind of criminal. You've lost the plot. Come in with me, and we'll let Ashcroft figure things out."

"Sorry. I can't do that."

I spring into motion, bolting down the street in the opposite direction, pumping my arms for speed as my heart lodges up in my throat. If Jerry catches me...if he radios for help and I'm intercepted...

Then Aria will be lost. She'll die. And Broderick Steven is going to clean the streets.

TWENTY-TWO

NERVES BITE AT MY ORGANS. It's like being slowly devoured until there is nothing but a hollow cavity where vitality used to be. Each step I take toward the front door of headquarters has my feet going heavier, my blood pumping and sweat pooling in areas where it doesn't belong. Not now, not today.

And all this without a slick of deodorant to my name.

Not as if it will make a difference. Deodorant isn't battle armor.

The smile is permanently tacked in place, and I toss a haughty wave at the guards manning the front door. They don't look at me, and if they do, I'm unable to track their eyes behind the black glasses they wear. Weapons are hidden beneath the sleek coats they wear against the weather, and one of them moves his lips to no doubt let the others in the building know I'm on my way up.

I'm a mess.

But damn, no one is going to be able to see it when they look at me. I swear to god I will take this performance to my grave if I have to.

"Hello, boys," I purr on my way past them. Into the front foyer toward the elevators to take me up, up into the bowels of this den of iniquity. "Damn good to see you."

My finger trembles as I jab it down on the button, and the moment the elevator surges into motion, my stomach does a roller coaster-worthy flip.

*I can do this.*

*...What if I can't do this?*

What if this is just another Aria Darklyn delusion where I convince myself things are going to work out the way I want, only to find out...they never do?

Now, I'm doing it again and expecting a different result, which is the definition of insanity.

I draw in a breath and press a hand against my stomach. One more push and I'll make it out the other side. If I go down, but the other runaway teens of Empire Bay are safe out there, then so be it. I'll have to find Devan somewhere on the other side of Heaven and Hell and apologize to him there.

The elevator glides to a halt, the doors opening with a ding before I have a chance to mentally spiral into a black pit of despair. The hallway in front of me is empty, and with one last steadying breath, I push forward. Forcing myself to whistle one of my favorite K-pop songs the way I would any other day.

I breeze into the office, and Blake is so surprised to see me that he surges to his feet.

"Where have you been?" he blurts out. Overly round eyes take me in, every part of me in between. "You haven't called or texted!"

"Are you disappointed I didn't bring a donut for you today?" I tap my chin, pretending to think before I say, "I thought about grabbing you the purple cookie monster delight, which apparently has real cookie dough inside the donutty goodness, but then I thought, why bother? It's only going to go straight to my hips." I slap my thigh and laugh. "Since I'll be the one eating it."

He doesn't join me in a giggle. In fact, Blake doesn't move a muscle. "You've been gone for days, Aria." His voice drops low. "No one knew where you were."

"That's because someone shot at me." The memory has my chest heaving and the sweat going from a trickle to a waterfall at my armpits and down my spine. "I had to find a place to lay



low for a while, and I got balls-deep in research while I was there. No way I'm sticking around when there are people with literal guns pointed between my eyes." I press a finger to the area for emphasis.

Blake stares at me without blinking as I drop down behind my desk and root around in my drawer for something sweet to eat. "It's not like you, Aria. You always check in."

The hush in his tone is weighted and has goose bumps erupting on the bare skin at the back of my neck.

Purposely, I kick my shoeless feet onto the desktop, a piece of candy in hand. "What's not like me? To go radio silent?" I shrug. "Maybe it's good for you guys to miss me a little bit. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, after all. Seems I'm not as appreciated around here as I liked to believe."

His brows V. "If this is some kind of game you're playing because Broderick passed up promoting you, then think again. It's not going to make him miss you. He's just going to be pissed off," Blake continues.

"Or maybe he'll be happy I escaped the shootout in one piece," I correct him with the same finger held in the air between us.

*Act like nothing's wrong.*

God, my pits are like swamps.

Even when Blake is there looking at me funny, his head tilted to the side while he studies me. "You're going to have to talk to him. Explain yourself," he continues. "He came back into town to find you gone, and I'm sure he'll want to be updated."

"Christ, will you at least let me sit down for a little bit? I literally just got here, Blake." But I keep my smile good-natured. "A girl needs her rest. And her sugar high. Otherwise, I'm going to be ineffectual."

"A girl needs to remember she can't just come and go where she pleases."

I slap my palms down on the top of the desk. “You can just say you missed me,” I tease, my voice only shaking a tiny baby bit.

Blake goes inexplicably quiet, and I settle behind my laptop like nothing is wrong. A glance at the clock shows I’ve wasted enough time being freaked out, hemming and hawing internally about how to play this. Part of me wants to call up to a meeting with Broderick even though that will severely hinder my chances of convincing him of my plan.

The chat room has been busy in my absence, even though I’d glanced in on it for a little bit the other day with Adam and Bill. My hackers have information about Everett, and for a moment, I blink, wondering how I’d gotten so far off the hunt for justice for my dead employees going after bigger prey.

Is this how cops feel all the time? When they have to juggle so many injustices at the same time? Or when they go deep undercover and have to forget their own convictions to be in the moment and get shit accomplished?

If it is, well, thanks. *I hate it.*

It doesn’t take long for the call to come in, and Broderick summons me up to his office. Fifteen minutes and counting, which is actually longer than I’d bargained for. I start to shake like a little chihuahua at the text message.

Gently closing the laptop lid, I smile at Blake and stand to my full height, my calves already aching at the thought of sliding my feet back into my heels.

“Try not to miss me too much this time.” I blow him a fake kiss. “I shouldn’t be long.”

He sighs and shakes his head like he’s expecting me to come back in multiple pieces instead of one. If he thinks this is my funeral, well, he can think again.

The nerves from earlier haven’t dissipated. They haven’t grown stronger, either, which is a mixed-bag blessing. I totter toward the elevator, up one floor, and down the hallway toward the meeting room, the door already open and the fire crackling merrily in the hearth.

“Close the door behind you,” Broderick bids. His voice echoes across the room, rich and deep.

I bow my head and do as he asks, holding on to the knob for dear life before I gather up what’s left of my courage and turn to face him, subdued.

“Where have you been?” He wastes no time in rounding on me, his hand around my neck. Moving faster than I thought, too.

His words came from near the fireplace, but the moment I turn to face the room, he’s in front of me, blocking me. Pushing me against the door and pinning me in place with his massive palm across my windpipe.

The blood rushes away from my face. “I’m alive. I’m safe.”

“So I see.” He growls, flashing teeth. Unlike usual, his hair stands on end around his ears rather than the carefully curated image I’m used to seeing. The only display of his lack of control. “What I fail to see is why you disappeared on me right when I was heading out of town. I needed you *here*. Not god knows where doing whatever you please.”

“Then maybe your second in command should have done a better job of protecting me from our competitors,” I gasp out, his fingers pressing just so. The threat of him cutting off my air entirely is close enough for me to taste on my tongue, and it’s bitter as fuck. “Someone tried to shoot me when I went to the Galleria.”

Broderick’s eyes narrow. “You weren’t alone.”

He feels the way I swallow.

“It’s a big parking lot. Of course, there were other people there.” Tears well at the corner of my eyes, and they’re not an act. “Master, you’re hurting me.”

He relents a little but doesn’t back down. “Tell me why I shouldn’t punish you for being in the company of a police officer.”

“Because I did a lot of research while I was hiding out, and I know a way for you to store your products without having to move them immediately on capture.” I hold his gaze, and although it takes him seconds to realize what I’m talking about, he still doesn’t move. “I also know a way we can open up another avenue of communication into the PD.”

“Explain.” He steps closer, the hard lines of his body melding to mine.

I showered, I assure myself. I washed away the evidence of Devan, so there’s no way in hell Broderick will be able to see, to smell. Not unless he tries to fuck me.

I shudder at the thought, everything in me protesting even this small amount of contact. How things change, and on a dime. So quickly his touch makes me nauseated instead of elated.

*Please, please don't try to have sex with me.*

I’m not sure I’d be able to go through with the act anymore.

This is the biggest lie of my life, and I’ve got to sell it. There’s no other choice.

“Right now, from the information you’ve given me on the trafficking, you’re forced to hand off the product directly to your buyers.” The bitter taste in my mouth gets worse. “You have to move immediately even when it’s not in your best interest to do so. I’ve found a property just outside of town where you will not only be able to store your products, but down the road, it will be the perfect place to host auctions. Not to mention, Detective Bishop is open to being swayed to our cause.”

I wince, tense, wait for him to protest or to shove me down on the floor and take me anyway, as he’s done in the past.

He slides his hand off of my neck, down to the valley between my breasts and lower, but he snags on the fabric of my dress and twists. “You’ve been a busy little girl, haven’t you? Very busy indeed.”

*Jackpot.*

“You wanted me to help you grow your new venture, and that’s exactly what I’ve done.” My next breath explodes out of my chest. “It makes sense to focus on growth and expansion. Right now, you’ve got no time to waste and no room for mistakes. I’m offering a solution on two fronts.”

“And how did you find that property, Aria?” he hisses.

“If you’re questioning my skill now, then I might as well leave.” Sure, like he’d let me. “I’ve made you more money in the last year than anyone else. Trust me when I tell you I know how to look for real estate opportunities. I know a gem when I find one.”

Broderick is too interested in the news to pay attention to my body. All evidence gone, I mentally repeat. Right? There’s no way he can even tell this close.

“I’m not sure you have time right now to go over everything I’ve laid out in terms of growth and expansion, but I’ve got files drawn up, and there’s an opening to go out and view the property this evening.”

He arches a brow. His breath is hot on my face, burning me like acid.

“Why are you pushing for this?”

“Because you passed up on my promotion, and this is the only way I know how to prove to you I mean business.”

His gaze drops to my cleavage. “I can think of several other ways you can prove yourself.”

“It’s true.” I tell myself not to fight. Not to act like I’m disinterested or actually physically sick at the prospect. “But you and I both know it’s important for me to show you what I can do. This property is perfect for you.” I take a beat. “Did your meeting out of town go well?”

Rather than pursuing me, he drops his hand between my legs, squeezes my pussy punishingly, and pushes away. “Well enough,” he grunts out. “How far away did you say this property is located?”

“Only about an hour. It won’t be a long enough drive to deter any future customers,” I assure him. Shaking.

He smiles a wolf’s smile. “Perfect. Who owns you, baby?”

“You do, Master. You do.” The lie spills out easily once I know I’ve got him right where I want him.

“Then we’ll leave tonight, and you can show me what you’ve found.” He rewards me with a cold wink. “*Very good girl.*”

We’re actually doing this. Getting Broderick out of the city where there will be light guards in attendance, and the police will be able to swoop in and take the credit. Otherwise, the entirety of the Black Market Syndicate will come after me.

TWENTY-THREE

THE INSIDE of the stretch limo is as welcoming as a morgue. Broderick perches at my side with one hand clenched over my knee proprietarily, and the other cradling his phone. He barks out orders to Antoni, who is supposed to be in charge of hiring Dougherty's replacement and has yet to find a reaper as good as the one we lost.

I keep the leg Broderick touches as still as possible while the other bobs up and down. There is a guard in the passenger seat up front, beside the driver, and two more opposite us. They're weighed down with guns and extra ammunition.

Will Naomi and Devan have enough bullets to overpower them? Especially without hitting me.

Every brain cell fires off a different possibility of things going wrong. I'm not cut out for this. Never in my life have I wanted the white picket fence and kid route, but right now, the fantasy is looking pretty peachy keen.

Broderick ends his call by throwing the cell across the car. It slams into the glass partition between us and the driver, bouncing to the floor with its screen black and cracked. The partition remains intact.

"What did he say?" I hazard to ask.

"He's not doing his job, so it doesn't matter what the fuck he says." Broderick squeezes my knee hard enough to leave prints for each of his fingers, tattoos of blue and purple. "This better work out, Aria, or else I am going to be sorely displeased. I'm not in the mood to suffer more disappointment, either.



“I understand.” He slides his hand up toward the inside of my thigh, and I shudder, disguising the movement with a smile, turning terror into pleasure. “Trust me, Master,” I reply softly. “This is something you’re going to love.”

*I don't belong to you.*

No matter what else, I have to remind myself of that simple fact: no matter what else happens today.... I belong to myself.

Only myself.

And maybe, if we make it out of this, one day I'll convince Devan to take on a basket case like myself as an acceptable girlfriend. To be a real partner with someone who respects me for me, who knows what I bring to the table.

He didn't have to let me go today. And if the roles had been reversed, then Broderick would have never let me out of the golden cage he kept me in. He'd have forced me to be small and assured me he was the only one who had things handled. Devan, as much as it hurt him, let me go.

Now he's hopefully waiting for me.

“Where is this goddamn place? You said it was close enough to lure potential buyers with its proximity,” Broderick growls. “This is out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yes, and we're almost there.” I caught myself on the verge of snapping, of lashing my teeth at my mentor and demanding he remove his hand from my inner thigh.

The others have watched this kind of behavior from him for long enough they don't bat an eye at the liberties he takes with women. They don't look at me because they know I'm beyond saving.

*Hold on a little longer. It will all be over soon.*

When I manage to glance up from my hands clenched on my lap, I find Broderick staring at me. I force a smile to my face, the one designed to assure him everything is great, and I am beyond reproach.

“You’re acting strangely, Aria. Is it still because you secretly disapprove of my new venture?” He arches a fuzzy brow and dares me to say something. To continue the argument I’d tried to make the other day.

“Yes.” The word slips easily from between my lips, and it isn’t a lie.

“And yet you’re still content to help me. My protege.” He squeezes my inner thigh a little before his grip softens into a caress. “You’ve been well trained. What would I do without you?”

One of the guards offers a snicker we all pretend not to hear.

The driver takes a left, and the limo pills along a gravel road, the small stones crunching under each tire rotation. I’d given him the address beforehand, and with night falling earlier and earlier, only the buttery yellow of the car’s headlights cut through the approaching gloom.

Up ahead, still too far to see properly, the outline of the old abandoned lumber mill slowly swims into view. Something hard with jagged edges clangs its way down my lower intestine and settles in my abdomen, those spikes digging grooves in my uterus. This is it. The make-or-break moment.

Death might not be the worst option. Worse would be what Broderick will do to me if he discovers my duplicity.

He catches sight of the mill and leans forward, scrutinizing the outline through the tinted windows. “Can’t see a goddamn thing,” he mutters.

“You will,” I promise.

*Trust me, you will.*

We pull to a stop in the old lot at the front entrance of the building. The first time I’m seeing it in person, but my digging online unearthed the old plans, and the floor layout has been memorized. The front entrance leads to a small set of offices before a secondary door opens to the large space where the logs used to be processed.

This particular company went under after production slowed, and the building has been let to be reclaimed by the wilderness rather than sold off. Rust blossoms like flowers on the steel exterior and along the frames of empty windows.

Broderick waits only for his three guards to exit the vehicle first and hold the door open for him before he shoves his way out into the chill of full evening. The red oaks and maples quake in a breeze I feel down to my bones.

“This is the place.” His hands slide into the pockets of his jacket as he stares at the rotting facade, giving nothing away.

“Absolutely,” I agree, pushing my own way out of the limo’s back seat. I teeter a little, close to losing my balance on gravel, and finally right myself. “It’s secluded, with only a handful of neighbors on either side and most of them over a mile away. The driveway is a right of way, and the land bordering it is a national park.”

“A rarity in this area.” Broderick sounds skeptical and a little disgusted.

“Not so rare it will raise suspicion should anyone see cars going in and out. I believe if we keep our activity covert, no one will suspect the usage of this place. It’s been out of business for at least twenty years.”

“And the owners?”

“Open to being bought out by one of our umbrella corporations.” I sent them a quick email last night only to receive a ping of response this morning on my way back to Broderick’s place.

Things are falling into place.

They better be. They *have* to be.

Naomi and Devan are nowhere around, and the gravel of the parking lot looks undisturbed in this fading light. Even if the sky weren’t darkening to full black yet, the shadow of the building and the woods does the trick.

But no tire tracks are visible to make Broderick suspicious. He gestures for his men to go ahead of us, and the first

approaches the door. When the rusted handles show no give, the man kicks at the latch until the old wood creaks open.

The scent of age burns the inside of my nostrils. Or maybe it's my imagination. Right now, my senses are on overdrive, and I see ghosts in the corner.

“Come.” Broderick barks the command at me, and I realize I've been standing several feet away from the rest of them.

Come, like I'm some kind of pet for him to snap his fingers, and I quiver or hold out my paw for a shake and a biscuit. The smile is still pinned in place, but I no longer feel my cheeks.

Broderick reaches back for me and grabs me by the wrist, tugging me to his side to keep me close. “How did you find this place again?”

I've already told him the story. Three times, to be exact. Still, I launch into the retelling or, rather, the fantasy I've concocted while the guards search the offices to make sure we're absolutely alone. Once they're satisfied that things are on the up and up, Broderick silently gestures to the door leading to the warehouse space. They open it, the hinges creaking, and the five of us shuffle into the old mill.

Most of the machinery has been hauled out and sold off. If I'd dug a little more, I would have been able to track the sales and see exactly where the old saws and the conveyor belts had been shipped to and where they are today. But I'd done my best with the cover story.

It's the only thing I'm confident about today.

One of the guards covers his mouth, the dust in the air making him cough, and he swallows the sound so as not to disturb Broderick.

I point toward an empty corner, the windows too high for anyone to see in. “I figure you can convert this central area into the main base of operations. The north side of the building is best for...holding product.” Bile rises and scorches a line of pure fire along my throat.

It's never going to make it that far. I'll track down the kids he's already stolen off the street and sold, but after tonight, no one else is going to suffer at his hands.

No one.

Including me.

Somewhere in this building, Naomi and Devan are waiting. I've just got to get Broderick to the center of the room, and then it will all be over.

"You've given this a lot of thought, I see," Broderick murmurs.

"That's why you pay me the big bucks, isn't it?" My voice echoes eerily off the rafters overhead. "You and I both know I'm worth every dime."

With his goons in line behind and beside him, Broderick scopes out the space. He slicks a finger along the wall and comes away with an inch worth of old sawdust and grime. A grimace, a head shake, and one of the men rushes forward with a handkerchief to clean his finger for him.

"I did my research," I go on to say. I wrap my arms around myself and follow along.

Broderick asks me another dozen questions, most of which I only half hear and barely understand. The thumping of my heart blots out all rational thought, but somehow I manage to answer him. Woodenly. By rote. All the answers I'd already gone through before this moment in time.

I press a hand to my throbbing chest, pain spreading from the area and a fist squeezing the organ.

He's almost in place.

Almost time.

Almost—

"Yes, I do believe this will work out nicely for our purposes. With a place to store our product, we will be able to expend more time and energy on opening lines of trade and

communication.” Broderick turns to me, and the wicked smile lighting his face has my heart stalling for a single second.

He’s getting off on this whole thing, and I know in an instant he began the venture not because of the money but to punish me. For existing. For breathing.

A hint of movement catches me from the corner of my eye, and I glance over in time to see the hem of a camel-colored jacket disappearing into shadow. *Devan.*

“I’m not sure if you want a space to separate the girls from the boys, but this room can be easily divided for your needs,” I say loudly, needing Broderick to incriminate himself.

*Say it.*

*Admit what you’re doing.*

I’m in the center of the room, the spot with the best angles for a sniper shot from the upper balconies. And I don’t care. Not when my focus is entirely on Broderick and his slow, predatory steps toward me. I don’t care if I’m hit. It needs to end now.

“Aria, you are a genius.”

“You’re still mad at me for disappearing.”

He grabs me by the back of the neck. “You displeased me by taking off without my permission. This is going a long way toward pleasing me, baby.”

“You never answered my question.” His lips are close, and my voice shakes.

“What? About the kids?”

“The kids you’re taking off the street,” I reply.

He hauls me toward him and smashes his lips to mine in a punishing mockery of a kiss. “This will work nicely,” he says in an undertone against my skin before his tongue pushes between my lips.

*No. Not like this.*

The thought barely has time to form inside my brain before a shot rings out, and the shoulder or Broderick's jacket starts to smoke.

He jumps back from me. Instinct has me reaching forward before he gets too far, toward the holster at his hip and the gun he always keeps there for backup. A big one, too. For a big man. The latch of the holster slides open, and his own moment works against him. I hardly need to tug before I've got the pistol in my hand and pointed—shakily—at his chest.

The guards are in place a moment later, surrounding Broderick and me in a protective circle, too on edge to realize I've trained my sights on him and not the shooter.

“What the hell is going on?” Broderick looks and sounds unperturbed, staring at me as though I've inconvenienced him. The bullet trail on his jacket no longer smokes, but Devan missed him.

He missed.

“It's over, Broderick,” I say out loud. “I'm not going to let you take any more kids.”

The men finally turn, cocking off their safeties.

“You brought me out here to double-cross me?” He clucks his tongue. “I have to say, I'm disappointed in you.”

“I don't give a shit.” Tears burn the corners of my eyes, and I have to bite down on my tongue to keep from screaming. “I'm not going to let you get away with this.”

“And what is your plan to stop me, huh? Especially when you've gone to all the trouble of giving me the perfect setting.” He gestures to the open room toward his men, who will kill me before I get a single shot off. “Do you think you can walk out of here and I'll be a changed man? You know me so much better than that.”

“I don't care if I walk out of here or not,” I tell him. “As long as *you* don't. The police are on their way. You're as good as gone.”

He laughs, tilting his head back. “Oh, my goodness. How adorable you are.” He finally levels me with a glare. “No smarter than you were when I pulled you out of the gutter. No better than a hole to be used for pleasure.”

I click off the safety, but my hands are trembling too greatly for me to be assured of a clean shot, even this close.

“What do you think you’re going to do?” he continues. “You’re not going to shoot me. Baby, you know you’re not going to hurt me.”

“She might not, but I will.” Devan steps out of the shadows, and his hands are steady. His aim true.

And for the first time in a long time, Broderick’s expression gives a hint of what’s going on inside of him. He’s unnerved.

“Welcome, Detective Bishop. It’s good to see you’re still a functioning member of Empire Bay’s finest after what I did to your partner,” Broderick says. “I nearly figured you for the type of person to crumble under such trauma.”

The guards still have their weapons aimed in our direction, but as Devan steps up beside me, his warmth thawing some of the ice in my veins, my stomach settles.

“I don’t care how long it takes me, but I’m going to make you pay for every sin written on your black soul,” Devan says evenly.

Broderick chuckles. “You think you’re the man to do it?”

“I know he is,” I answer for both of us. Right before I fire a bullet right through Broderick’s kneecap and hit true.



TWENTY-FOUR

*devan*

THE HIRED security Broderick brought tonight clearly don't expect Aria to actually shoot their boss.

After so long under his thumb, why would they? She's been the model protégée, employee, and lover. According to her. I saw it for myself, the way he looked at her. The way he grabbed her and kissed her as though he had a goddamn right.

But the bullet shoots through flesh and bone and comes out the other side, and I watch, in slow motion, as Broderick drops. Aria's face is screwed up into a grimace, her lips moving with words I can't make out even from beside her. Blood spews from the wound in an arch across the cement floor.

She rips into him as he goes down, and the others explode into motion. "You're nothing but a monster! A fucking monster."

I pull Aria behind me and fire off a shot at the closest guard before he does the same. The first one falls, but it's not by my hand. My shot goes wide.

Naomi's up in the crow's nest overhead, so to speak, and her aim is impeccable. Damn it if she's not one of the best shots I've seen since leaving the academy.

The guards are good, too, and this close, it's almost impossible for us to make it out of here in one piece without some sort of casualty. As long as Aria is safe, that's all I care about. Aria. *Aria*. She's got to make it out of here. After everything Broderick has put her through, I'll be damned if he gets another piece of her.

My trigger finger is itchy, and I fire off five times, getting the second guard in the chest, the stomach, and the shoulder in quick succession. His body whirls before he goes down hard, managing to fire before his heart stops and his bullet grazes my uninjured arm.

Wincing, I push the pain to a dark part of me I'll examine later when the adrenaline has worn off.

The third guard covers Broderick's body with his own and urges his boss toward the door, although the middle-aged man can't walk. There's no cover in the center of the room. Nowhere for them to hide.

My clip is empty, and I shuck the gun aside. Naomi sends her shot wide to herd Broderick and his man back toward us, cutting off their escape. She keeps sprawling an arc of bullets until they're forced to turn back toward me.

"You bastard!" Aria is screaming from behind me. A clang sounds, and I know she's lost her hold on the gun. "You're selling kids. You know what happened to me, and you're still doing it! You're doing it to hurt me, and I'm not going to let you get away with it."

If he hears, he makes no move to comment, his face ashen and his leg useless.

"Hold your fire!" I call to Naomi.

Her last shot pings into cement, but the two men have stopped.

The guard has his arms around the other man, Broderick sagging, his knees buckling as I watch. Blood drips from a wound in his chest as well.

I want to take him in. I want to make sure Broderick is prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law for his crimes against humanity. He deserves to rot in a jail cell with the other murderers and rapists and have his anal virginity taken in the most horrible way.

Right now, bloodlust overrides everything else. I keep Aria behind me, absorbing her trembles into me, and train my aim on Broderick. Another clip reloaded.

My first step lands firmly on cement. The second one, not so much. My leg won't hold me, and I go down to my knees, lightheaded, my mouth filled with the taste of old pennies. I don't understand.

Aria is still screaming, except this time, it's no longer curses. She's yelling my name. She's everywhere, around me, in me, her scent permeating my senses but not strongly enough to block the pennies. Old copper.

"Hold on! Hold on, Devan. Please, God, you've got to look at me!" Her hands are on my face, and I barely feel the cement at my back.

How did I get on my back?

How did I...wait, no. No. I never even felt the shot.

"Broderick." My lips form the words, although I can't hear my own voice.

Aria's hands are on my cheeks, on the side of my face, my neck. I'm aware of my arms moving before she presses my own hands to my stomach, and agony rips through me, taking any bit of numbness with it.

Ah. *There.*

"There were bullets everywhere. So many bullets. I'm not sure when you got hit, but it's going to be fine, all right? Just fine." Aria is talking to herself, keeping my hands pressed to my stomach. "Devan, hold on. You've got to hold on."

"I'm shot?" The words escape in a hiss of air.

Her face swims into view, pale-skinned and so damn beautiful, with tears trailing down her cheeks. "You have to hold on for me. Okay? I'm not going to let you die on me. Naomi!! Help me get him out of here. We're losing time."

There are footsteps already growing louder by the second, but my world narrows. Draws closer together with edges colored by darkness.

I've been shot before.

I jumped in front of a bullet meant for Layla and stopped it with my body. The scar is there. I remember this kind of pain from before, the unbearable agony where it feels like your body is encased in fire and all systems approaching shutdown. This is somehow worse because I never felt the hit in the first place. Had no idea of the injury until it was too late for me to help myself.

The cold has seeped into my limbs, and half a thought to try to move my hands proves futile.

There's only the pain and Aria.

"Please tell me we got him." It's what I want to say.

But then Naomi looms over me with a phone pressed to her head, calling for backup to secure the scene. She clicks off before too long and turns, weak and worried and nearly undone. "Come on. We have to get him out of here. My car is closer," she tells Aria. "If we can somehow get him into the back seat, then I'll make sure we get to the hospital."

Her voice is distant, hollow, as if she's rolled up a magazine and is speaking through the center.

"Broderick is down. But so is Devan." Naomi, again.

"Is he dead?" I have to know.

Am *I* dead already? There's still pain, so I'd like to think not. Then my world implodes when someone loops their arms underneath mine and drags me off the floor.

"Broderick is breathing. He'll be dead before we leave the building. I got his guard right through the eye. But we don't have a lot of time to waste. We've got to get Dev out of here *now*." Naomi.

"Are the police coming?" Aria.

Their voices swim together into a single monotonous drone just as black overtakes my vision. If this is the way I go out, then maybe it's a good thing. Maybe the world is a better place because Broderick went down with me.

\* \* \*

Each breath is labored, a huge weight pressing down on my chest. The ceiling blurs, sharpens, blurs again, my fingers twitching at my sides.

The end.

After so many years, this is the end, and it's the worst way possible because the one who took me down...the hit I did not see coming. Aria Darklyn will pay if I have to come back from the afterlife to make it so myself. I'll claw my way up from hell because that's surely where I'm going.

Gritting my teeth, I drag my hand along the floor. Drag a hand through my blood pooling and cooling already. The cell is still in my pocket. My fingers brush the corner of the phone. It takes every ounce of strength left in my failing body to grab the phone, open it. Make the call and wait for the man on the other end to answer.

"Broderick?" he asks.

"Execute Protocol Albatross," I grind out.

"...Wait...what? No. That's not possible. No!"

"It's up to you now. Protocol Albatross is essential for the Syndicate to continue."

I don't remember clicking off and ending the call. I don't remember much past the call. A shadow, overhead. The muzzle of a gun points between my eyes, and the flash of a wicked grin is the last thing I see before the lights go out.

Permanently.

\* \* \*

The car ride is nothing but a never-ending story of raw agony.

Each time I return to consciousness, the pain comes with me. The pain and the sensation of the razorblade running over

my nerves.

“That’s it. You’re going to be okay.” Naomi drives like a bat out of fucking hell and manages to hit every pothole on the road. “Hold on a little bit longer for us, Dev. We’ve got you.”

My gaze trains on the curtain-like fall of Aria’s hair, like blinders around my face. I’m sprawled in her lap, her hands over mine over the wound, her heartbeat a steady pressure I feel through my skin.

“It’s going to be okay.” She repeats it like a plea, a prayer, and I wonder who she thinks is going to hear her. “As long as you pull through. Do it for me. Be fine for me.”

I’ve been shot before. Not like it hasn’t happened before.

This time, it’s a serious injury. Nothing I can’t handle. I open my mouth, lips flapping, and no sound coming out. Nothing I can’t—

I come back to, and the car is driving smoothly with flashes of yellow interspersed with red, with gray.

“Where—”

Aria swipes the back of her sleeve across my forehead. “Shh. Don’t talk now. Naomi, can you go any faster?”

“I’m going over a hundred.” The terse reply comes from the front. “How’s our boy doing?”

“He’s sweating and shivering,” Aria says.

“Five more minutes, and we’ll be there. I promise. I’m going as fast as I can without killing us all.”

Time means nothing. There is only the darkness, the pain, the car. Those three things meld together, and I’m swimming, drowning in a sea of it. The next thing I know, someone peels my eyelid open, flashing a brighter than fuck light at me.

There’s a cot underneath me, rolling down a hallway with three nurses manning the ship and Aria at my side. Her fingers are laced with mine.

“You can’t die on me, Devan. I will hunt you down wherever you go, and I will drag you back into this body.” She

lifts my hand to her mouth and kisses my knuckles.

“Ma’am, keep talking to him,” one of the nurses urges. Calmly, professionally. “It seems like he’s coming to again.”

Her eyes are watery pools, and as I watch, a tear drips down her cheek, standing a path through blood and dirt. “It’s supposed to be you and me, Tough Guy. We...we never talked about plans, about after, but I wanted it to be us. I wanted it to be us so damn badly. I could almost taste it. The fantasy. And it was better than anything I’ve ever experienced before. None of it will happen if you die on me.”

I don’t want her to cry. I never want her to cry unless she’s happy, and they’re tears of joy.

“Where are you taking him?” she asks the nurses. “Tell me he’s going to be okay now.”

“We’ve got to get him on the operating table,” a person handling the other side of my cot answers. “The bullet went clean through, but he’s been bleeding out steadily, and if we don’t close the wound, then he’s not going to make it much longer.”

The orderlies are the voice of reason, but I can’t see either one of the speakers. Only Aria, backlit by the harsh fluorescent lighting behind her, like an angel.

“You better survive. Survive so we can figure this out together,” she continues. She’s got my hand pressed to her cheek, and I want to caress her. I want to cup her face and prove to her that I want the fantasy, too.

I swallow, and the lump in the back of my throat is a little smaller than it had been before. The gurney pulls to a stop, and a sharp sting of a needle prick at my elbow sharpens me.

“If I make it out of this,” I get out, “I want you...to be...mine.”

She squeezes my hand, and the hope in her gaze is too much to handle. “Be your what?”

The cot veers around another corner and slaps against a door. “Ma’am, it’s time to let go. We need to get him into



surgery now.”

“What, Devan?” Aria presses anyway.

“*My girlfriend.*”

The sharpness disappears almost as soon as it hits, and soon I’m swimming in a completely different way.

“I’ll not only be your girlfriend, Detective Bishop, but I’ll take care of everything.” Her voice comes to me down a long hallway, distant, but warm. “You just have to pull through. Promise me.”

I reach for her, only to fall short, but the cold is gone, and so is the pain.

TWENTY-FIVE

*devan*

IT'S a slow ascent up to madness and chaos.

The kind that always greets me when I open my eyes except for a single, stolen moment days ago. A moment which is inevitably bound to be unrepeatable.

Or maybe it's the drugs making me loopy.

I lay with my eyes closed, the bandage around my torso and shoulder keeping me bound and secure. Aria is there in my head, flashes of memory where her face is contorted with pure joy and her red hair slicked back from her head with sweat as she rides me.

Does it go further than sex?

Does it cross the line from infatuation to something a little deeper?

Yes, yes.

I shift slightly, just trying to get comfortable, and the small movement sends a flash of pain from my newly closed wound.

“Ah, try not to move too much. They said you're going to risk a chance of tearing your stitches.”

I swallow, my mouth dry and my throat scratchy. “Did we catch him?”

Aria chuckles and peppers my face with dew-soft kisses. “Your partner will be better able to answer you. She got called away, an urgent text from somebody she called Cap, but she'll be back soon.”

Her hands are on either side of my face, still gentle, more so to hold me in place than to check me.

She has no idea how good it feels.

“I need to know if we did it.” Every word is a struggle to form and release.

“If you want to know about Stevens, I’ll tell you his body is cooling on a slab in my morgue.” Jasleen sounds downright cheerful about the fact. Cheerful and a little tired, and when I pry my eyes open, she’s sitting in the visitor’s chair while Aria perches on the side of the bed. “You got him, Dev. You got him good. Right between the eyes.”

Both of them smile at me, and it’s a thing of beauty. Contentment settles in my chest, and a part of me relaxes. Until her words become clear.

Shot through the eyes?

“No...” I struggle to stare at Jasleen, and at once, there are two of her, her hair pulled back away from her face and her skin taut, her mouth a thin line. “No. When we left him, he was alive.”

“Honey...” Aria stops, clears her throat.

“Then I’m not sure what to tell you,” Jasleen says. “The man is deader than those poor schmucks immortalized in Pompeii. Someone must have gotten there after you left and finished the job.”

“Impossible.” I whisper the word, but they catch it anyway.

“Does it matter?” Aria scoots closer. She’s careful not to jostle me in any way. “He’s gone. Which is exactly what we wanted, right? It doesn’t matter whether we killed him or someone else. It’s over now.”

It is what I want, except I’d hoped to be the one to slap the cuffs on Steven’s wrists and take him in. I’d hoped to be the one to absolve myself with the rest of the precinct rather than letting Naomi do the talking for me.

“It seems I missed a lot while I was unconscious,” I say out loud instead.

“Not as much as you’d think. There was an uproar in the office. I heard it even from my basement dwelling.” Jasleen sets me with another grin. “No one could believe that Broderick Stevens had actually gone down.”

“I’ve taken care of everything.” Aria strokes a hand across my forehead, and I lean into the contact. “There’s no chance your cop friends will point the finger at you now, Tough Guy. I had all my guys seize control of Broderick’s online files and forward them to Bill and Adam. You’re free, and the Syndicate is crumbling.” She turns to Jasleen. “Not bad for, what? Two days?”

Jasleen nods and says, “We had to keep busy while we waited for this one to wake up from his nap.”

I try to chuckle, and the movement jostles my wound. “Is Naomi okay?”

“She’s fine. She’s pulling closed a couple of loose ends and told me to watch you until she’s got back,” Jasleen replies. She blinks those wide, dark eyes at me. “We haven’t left you alone since you came out of surgery, Bishop. There’s always been someone here with you to make sure you would be looked after. And to have some friendly faces around when you finally woke up.”

It tickles me, thinking about Aria being my silent savior and my knight with shining red hair. There are female knights, right? I’ve got no clue, but the visual in my head is something special.

“They’ve got every piece of information they need to start tracking down the others. I can only imagine the look on Antoni’s face when Naomi takes him down.” Aria tips her head back and laughs.

“You’re not worried?” I ask, slicking my tongue over my dry lips. “About whoever put a bullet in Broderick’s head?”

I joined the academy for stability. To learn discipline, control. Two of the things that had been sorely lacking in my

upbringing. I found what I needed. Now, something isn't right. There's a missing piece, and I've seen too many things to believe this is all wrapped up with a nice bow.

"No, I'm not," Aria insists with a bit of force to her tone. "And I think, right now, we need to work on getting you home and comfortable. I assured the hospital staff that you would be perfectly cared for if they released you early, and they made me promise to watch you. Every." She boops my nose. "Single. Second."

I close my eyes, breathing in deeply and struggling to make sense of things. On one hand, I'm grateful for this moment to be alive and surrounded by these two fabulous women. One of whom is...well, damn. Yes, Aria agreed to be my girlfriend. And Jasleen has Broderick in the morgue.

The Syndicate is going down, the bottom knocked out from underneath them.

Why do I feel that it's not over yet?

Between the two women and later, Adam, they manage to get me back to my apartment with relative ease and settle me in my bed invalid style.

"I think this is the first break you've taken in two years, buddy," Adam jokes, pushing a cup of soda closer for me and waiting until I lift the straw to my lips for a sip before he relaxes.

"Enforced vacation," I correct him.

Aria shuffles closer and stares me down. "Now, don't think this is going to be a regular occurrence, mister. I'm not the type of person who caters to someone else full-time. Once you're up and running again, we're going to have a serious talk about boundaries and what we can expect out of each other."

The tenacity on her face is enough to have me chuckling. "One tiny victory bringing down a nationally feared crime family, and she's acting like she's got bigger balls than the rest of us," I tease.

"She does," Adam replies solemnly.

Aria smiles at me, the expression so bright and exuberant it lights her from within. Love.

Me...and her. The mistress of the underworld.

Am I a crazy bastard who went head over heels for the first woman to suck him off in an alley? Trying not to let her see how nervous I suddenly feel at the realization. She's the girl for me, no matter how fucked up her past, no matter how far we both have to go to heal our shit.

Dual alerts go off on their phones at the same time, and Adam and Aria look at each other.

"That doesn't sound good," I remark, watching them reach for their cells.

Aria is the first to whip hers out, the first to gasp and bring the screen close enough to have her nose press against it.

"No," she murmurs, shaking her head. "It's not possible."

"I don't understand." Adam drops on the bed hard enough to jostle me, and I swallow over my grimace, watching him tap out an erratic rhythm on the screen like it's a keyboard. "This isn't possible."

Every part of me aches, and the dull pulsing throb at my side tells me any sudden movements will be a terrible idea. What choice do I have? I reach for Adam, as he's closest, and grab the back of his shirt to get his attention. He still doesn't tear his eyes away from the screen.

Suddenly sweaty, I push up to a seated position while Adam finishes typing out a code.

"Right now, the rest of the police are working on releasing an official statement on the downfall of Broderick Stevens, but I've been monitoring Aria's code, trying to find the shortcut taken by whoever hacked into it the first time. Are you still with me?"

He's trying to say it in as much layman's terms as possible. I nod even though he can't see me and delicately reach for Aria, wincing when my side pulls, and pain shoots into my lower back again. Thankfully, she heads over, without a word,

her attention zeroed in on her own phone. I watch her swallow hard, her throat bobbing.

“Yeah, go ahead. What’s going on?”

“There is another layer of code embedded in her underground play area that doesn’t belong to her. It was artfully inserted to look like something she put together, but it’s not hers. There’s a background player there, and I’ve finally managed to break through and retrace their steps. The IP address belongs to someone in the Syndicate headquarters.” The last part is said in a whisper.

“I don’t think there’s any cause to worry. Broderick is dead,” I reply.

“It’s not Broderick,” Aria snaps. “There’s someone else because our player logged on from a different IP address, except the address is pinging from headquarters. Which is absolutely impossible.”

“Wait a minute. They just logged on?”

“Right now. And—” she breaks off, slapping a hand across her mouth.

“Aria.” Her name is a tether to me, to the situation, and I wait for the count of three until she turns to me. Her eyes are glassy, terrified. “Talk to me.”

Adam continues to mutter under his breath, furiously typing on his phone and ignoring us as he works.

“Devan...whoever it is, they just sent me a message.” Aria shakes her head, turning the phone so I can see the bold typeface clearly.

**It’s not over yet. Now, you’re all going to pay.**

**-Broderick Stevens**

“I’ve got to go to headquarters.” Aria is off the bed and across the room in a flash, leaving me scrambling to grab her and falling short. “Something is going on.”



“It’s a trap,” I argue. “You know as well as I do it’s not really Broderick Stevens.”

“Well, it’s someone with enough knowledge and power to access my programming. Hell, they’ve been running their own shit alongside mine. Which means I need to go in there at least to get my laptop.”

“They know you were involved in their boss’s death.” Blind terror flickers through me, and I struggle to move. I bite down on my lower lip to keep from crying out in pain that shoots from my hip all the way down to my toes. All that from trying to swing my legs over the side of the bed, too.

Walking is going to be a bear. An absolute fucking bear.

Aria won’t go in. I know her well enough to understand she’s too smart to walk right into an open, visible trap. And I love her too much to let her go easily.

She opens her mouth to respond, stalled only with the alert from a new incoming text.

**Darkling, it’s you and it’s me. If you don’t obey your Master then your personal records will be sent to the EBPD immediately.**

**-Broderick Stevens**

“Shit!” Aria screams, halfway tempted to throw her phone across the room. I see it on her face. “They know it’s me. And if they have my laptop, then they have my backup drives. Everything they need to completely undo what I’ve already sent to the police.”

“You were supposed to go behind and erase your files,” Adam squeaks out. He sounds strangled.

“Yeah, I was a little distracted.” Aria pushes her hair away from her face, her eyes latched on something on the floor, and her breath coming in short gasps. “I have to go in.”

A stone settles in my stomach.

“Looks like you’re going to have to trust me a little bit longer, Devan,” she says. “Your girl isn’t going to let anything happen to herself. Not when she’s coming home to you.”

It’s my turn to swallow over the boulder in my esophagus. *My girl.* “You’ll get killed if you go.”

I loved the way it felt to hear her say it. I did. Even underneath the pure terror for Aria, I loved the warmth of admitting my feelings for her. They might be out there and far-fetched, given the fact that we are more than likely trauma-bonded. But it’s true. It takes more than a round of questioning to get to know someone.

What’s your favorite color, I think to myself as I drag on a pair of boxer shorts.

What do you like to do for fun?

Where is your favorite place to vacation?

Those are the surface-level things.

To be loved in return by someone like Aria would be a thrilling and dangerous adventure. The type of relationship designed to consume me down to ashes and bones.

I wasn’t sure a man like me knew how to actually love another person. I’m still not sure. But I know I want to try if Aria will have me. If we manage to get through this.

“I’m coming with you. There’s no chance I’m letting you walk into headquarters by yourself. You’re out of your goddamn mind.” I slide my feet across the carpet for my sneakers and almost black out.

I’ve tried to play the tough guy for far too long. Aria’s right with the nickname. No pain meds since I’ve left the hospital, and the ones they’ve given me are on their way toward wearing off.

“Look.” Aria bends down beside me, although she’s still not at eye level. “We got you to the emergency room on time. We got you into surgery, and you pulled through, even though stomach wounds always bleed the worst. The professionals had him, they took care of everything. It’s what I kept telling

myself. That Naomi and I did our parts, and you're alive because we trusted the doctors to get you across the finish line. But really, it wasn't just them. It was you, Devan. You got yourself there because I believe you have the will to live and pull through. And Broderick is dead." She stops, draws in a great lungful of air. "I thought my part was done, and it's not. All the work we've accomplished will unravel if I don't check this out. Whoever it is, this is not Broderick."

"Whoever it is will aim a gun straight at your head. You'll never make it onto the property."

"I'll come up with a plan on the way there. The way I always do." She shrugs complacently. "While I'm driving, Adam will have full access to my programming and will work on getting protocols in place."

Adam bobs his head excitedly, and his glasses droop to the edge of his nose. "You got it, Aria."

"Leave it to the Mistress," she assures me.

"I'm not assured at all."

"Then it's too bad you aren't in a position to follow me. You'll be staying in bed, and I'm going off to save the world again."

She kisses my chin and bolts out of the room faster than I'd be able to follow her on a good day, leaving me bellowing after her.

"You can't let her go." I grab Adam again. "Are you fucking crazy? She's walking to her death."

He's torn, glancing between us. "I'm not sure what to tell you, buddy. She's the one calling the shots now. Whether it's a good idea or not."

"It's the worst fucking idea in the world!" Blood rushing to my head, I force myself off the bed and wobble on my feet. Pissed at myself for being in this position and even angrier at Aria for going off on her own.

"We've got our backs to the wall," Adam insists.

“Then call the girls because we’re not letting her go. Assemble the troops...shit, get Bill to bring everybody we have at the precinct! We’re going after her.”

TWENTY-SIX

I REMEMBER STANDING in the hallway at the hospital covered in drying blood with my teeth chattering even though I was not cold. Shock, the nurses would have said if they bothered to look twice in my direction. Shock and the inevitable crash from an adrenaline rush of the magnitude I experienced.

Everything has changed.

My life has changed, but Broderick has been stopped.

I hustle down the stairs toward the front door of Devan's apartment building with my phone clenched so tightly in my hands that my fingers are numb.

"Fuck." I blow out a breath, shoving suddenly heavy hair out of my face.

This is a disaster. From nearly one to a full-blown one in less than ten seconds. A new world record, if I have to guess. And Devan is right. It's suicide to do whatever it is the mysterious hacker wants me to do.

I've got no choice.

If they release my files, then we're fucked, and all the hard work of the past few days will be for nothing. I knew I should have gone back to the mill to make damn sure Broderick was cooling, to stand over him until I saw rigor mortis set in and watch the breakdown of his body as he rotted.

I'd been content to accept his death and work on unraveling his system from the hospital room and my phone.

Especially when Naomi's people recovered the body, and Jasleen began the arduous process of autopsy.

This is an imposter.

Isn't it?

I jolt into motion, hurrying down the sidewalk, hardly seeing anyone in my way. The buildings here block out most of the natural light, but there, above the crest of one of the apartment spires nearby, I catch a glimpse of the silvery moon in the rapidly darkening sky.

My heart constricts in my chest to the point where I'm light-headed, short of breath, but I still put one foot in front of the other.

What's the plan?

What's the real plan?

No matter how hard I push my brain for a solution and several backup options, I'm coming up blank. My phone rings with an alert, and the message on the chat screen is horrible enough to stop my heart entirely.

**You've got twenty minutes, or our snipers will kill Detective Bishop in his bed. Come alone, Darkling.**

A sob breaks free, and I curl in on myself. Worry for Devan drags behind me like an anchor.

If I flake out and he dies, I'll never be able to forgive myself.

Boyfriend. Have I ever really had a boyfriend? Like, ever in my life? Nothing official for sure. The thought has me giggling. What is it going to be like calling Devan mine? Will we go out on an actual date?

Or do those kinds of cheesy things couples do when they're really in love?

It seems unnatural to be happy right now, and yet a sliver of something I've never really felt before starts to grow inside of me.

The cell buzzes along with the tinkling song of an incoming call, and I jump, screaming out loud to the point where several people on the sidewalk stop and turn in my direction. It takes me way too long to actually answer the call.

I fumble, recognizing the caller and jabbing my finger to the screen to answer.

“Blake.” His name comes out in a rush.

“Aria, it’s a fucking mess here. A real goddamn mess,” he hurries to say. “There’s someone here who says he’s Broderick Stevens, but it’s not my uncle, and he’s making threats. I need you.”

It’s pointless to pretend I have no idea what’s going on. Pointless when the strain in his tone tells me Blake already knows shit has gone down, and he’s calling about the imposter. “I barely got out, Blake. Now they’re trying to reel me back in, and I’m scared.”

It’s the truth.

“You’re the only one who can help me. Please. I need someone because I’m losing it, and I can’t keep myself together to do what I need to do.” He sounds like he’s lost the picture, his voice cracking.

“I don’t know what to do.” Except keep walking. I keep walking in the direction of the subway that will take me to my stop.

“Just get here, and I’ll protect you. I’ll figure it out. I’ll... ha. I’ll tell you my favorite donut flavor if you help me out. Please, anything.”

Is there any way for him to actually protect me? I have no idea. No earthly idea, but I hadn’t thought about Blake calling me, and that part is on me. I thought about everything, or so I assumed, but now one of the loose ends is flapping open in the breeze.

I’ve never heard him beg before. Never heard him sound quite so troubled as he does now.



“This man wants to kill me, Aria,” he continues in an agonized whisper.

My stuff is still at headquarters, all the backup files the imposter is threatening to take to the cops. And now he’s holding Blake hostage. Blake, and the kill order on Devan if I don’t show up.

“I’ll stop in for a second, but then I’m going off-grid,” I warn Blake. I click off and shove the phone back in my pocket.

*Shit.* Shit, fuck, piss, cockstain, balls. The act must continue, and this time, I’m too tired and on edge to make sure I play the part to perfection. Broderick is down, which means the organization is going to be thrown into chaos. There’s a gap, a vacuum, and no doubt Blake is freaking out. He seemed about a second away from going completely unhinged on the phone.

Another few steps and I’ll be home free, I assure myself. I’ll do what the madman wants and have my stuff, I’ll save Blake, and I’ll save Devan.

Only a fool would go back after orchestrating Broderick’s downfall.

I’ve never been a fool.

Ah, who am I kidding?

I’ve lived my life as foolishly as anyone else, and there is no one I can blame for the choices except the woman in the mirror. Even the way I met Devan is on me, and it was absolutely ridiculously odd.

Every part of me goes tight on the subway ride to Broderick’s place. Tight and then oddly calm. Maybe this really is the end for me. It’s been a rough ride, but not all bad. There have been good times, too. Not as many as I’d like there to be, but if I can help the people I care about before it all goes away, then it’s a win.

In my shoes, you learn when to accept the silver linings.

And by the time I'm back standing on the front stoop, staring at a new set of guards who look identical to the last, the blood has returned to my face. They don't pay me any mind. As though it's just another normal day for me to show up to the office, dragging ass and crimson colored. They should.

Everything has changed.

Things are about to go down for them, too.

A large part of me expects them to stop me this time. I'm the only one who made it out of the mill meeting. Not even the limo driver survived, and I made sure of that, personally. They surely know.

"Boys."

I tip my head, letting them see the exhaustion in the lines of my body. The one on the left tenses as though he's going to reach out to stop me, then exhales, and the set of his shoulders relaxes.

"Miss Darklyn," the one on the right mutters.

It's too soon to sigh in relief. Not even when I'm in the elevator grappling with the most intense sensation of déjà vu I've ever experienced in my life.

I halfway expect Broderick to meet me the moment the elevator doors open. Instead, they slide open, and the hall looks exactly the same. It's no darker than any other day. No more foreboding. Goose bumps break out along the back of my arms and neck.

One last hurdle. I don't remove my shoes.

My footsteps echo eerily. Seems like the entire place has emptied out, and I wonder if that's true or if everyone has disappeared into hidey holes in the wake of the power vacuum. Who knows.

I'll have to watch out for Antoni.

He'll be gunning for top spot, sure.

The office is empty when I round the open doorway. "Blake?" My eyes furrow down.

The first thing I recognize is the pressure. The hand over my nose and mouth, the arm banded around my midsection. It all takes a back seat to the stench of acrid chemical burning my insides. The rag in the person's hand is drenched in it. The kind of chemical...

The kind...

\* \* \*

Everything hurts.

It's the first sensation that returns, the pain, as if I've clawed my way out of a cement tomb using nothing but grit and a toothpick. My eyes, even behind closed lids, have been dipped in acid, and my muscles tense to the point of snapping.

A car horn honks somewhere in the distance, followed by the monotonous scream of road rage, coming from two different voices, but both blending together.

I try to rub my eyes and come up short, a line of fire across my wrist keeping me in place.

"Don't even try." Blake's voice is a harsh whip, lashing at me. I slowly drag my eyes open, the blur receding as I focus on a line of white silk dotted with bright red and orange poppies.

I'm...home. In my own apartment.

I'm lying on my stomach, my arms and legs lashed together behind me, and my cheek pressed to the carpet.

"The first thing Uncle Broderick taught me was to tie a knot strong enough to keep a wild animal from breaking loose." Blake's feet swim into view slowly, the soles and leather black. "And I've had years of practice to get it right. The harder you struggle, the tighter the knot will go until it cuts off your circulation."

I try to crane my head to twist around and look up at him, but agony shoots from the bottom of my skull all the way down my spine until I feel the ache in my hips.

“He used to take me into the woods to practice. First on animals. We’d set traps and use whatever we caught. Then on people,” Blake continues. He looks exactly the same as when I last saw him, same hair that is no color, same bland and slightly bored expression. Instead of a Bluetooth headset, he holds a tactical knife with a serrated blade.

The same kind used on my men. The realization hits some distant portion of my mind, and although logically it’s not clicking, my body reacts viscerally.

“Wh—” I try to speak and cough, choking on my own spit.

Whatever drug he’d used on the cloth is still in my system. I’m struggling to move my fingers. And I don’t need to test the knots to know Blake is telling the truth. They’re tight enough to strain my knees and joints without putting too much pressure on me. Yet.

Give it time, and the position will be unbearably uncomfortable.

He reaches for my chin and yanks, turning my neck in an unnatural way to force me to meet his gaze. “Darkling.”

There is only my name, only those two syllables, and no other warning before he presses the tip of the blade in his opposite hand to my shoulder. It slides through my skin, cutting through muscle and tendon before the tip touches my bone, and I scream.

“I know you like pain,” he continues. He drags the knife up, cutting a design through my skin. “My uncle used to tell me about it, what he’d do to you. The things he’d have to do to make you come. I like pain, too.”

“Blake, stop!”

The words drop off into an endless scream. His uncle. The fuckers were related, and I never knew.

I bought this apartment for a reason, years ago. Once I had the money to make something like this for myself. I’ve got the entire top floor of one of the oldest brownstones in the city. There are only two other apartments, and right now, the first floor is unoccupied. The woman in the basement wears

hearing aids, and this time of night, she's got them out and turned off.

There is no one around to hear me.

No one is going to come looking for me. Exactly as Blake must have planned.

He stops the knife at a point above my spine, in the middle of my back.

"It's okay," he croons. He kicks me onto my side, the open, flawed skin on my back screaming when it comes into contact with my rope-bound wrists and ankles. "It's all going to be okay."

"Why are you doing this?" Tears have made their way to my eyes, down my cheeks. "Blake, we've been friends."

"We've been competitors," he corrects. "I always thought the job of Broderick's right hand would be mine until he found you. The position was supposed to be mine, but instead, he kept me underfoot, a glorified assistant, as you've called me so. Many. Times!" He laughs loudly, his mouth wide open.

"I've never done *anything* to you," I sob.

"We've been competing to be the best, to see which one of us could impress Uncle Broderick more. I hate to break it to you, Aria, but the contest...you've never had a chance of winning. So you took him out."

"I had nothing...I didn't..."

The way he's looking at me, there's no chance he'll buy my lies. Not now. He knows. He knows everything, and he's been playing me from the start.

Blake crouches on the floor beside me. Now I've got a direct line of sight to him. So innocent. So innocuous.

Exactly like his uncle in that regard.

The type of man you generally skip over if you see him in the crowd is always the most dangerous. Aren't they? It's what they have in common, and now that I know about their

familial ties, the resemblance is there. The shape of the nose, the arch of their brows.

It's been right in front of my face this entire time.

Blake's glasses are askew, and damn him, but he's still got the boyish charm going on, even with the weapon in his hand dripping my blood everywhere. He brings it down to my thigh and slices it down again.

"This is going to scar," he tells me conversationally. "Not like there's ever a choice when it comes to knife play. You do it for the rush, to feel alive. You live with the scars, and you remember every slice like it's a step on the stairway to paradise."

He closes his eyes, inhaling sharply through his nose until his nostrils flare.

"Or you do it because you're a sadistic fuck." I've got my back teeth clenched hard enough to crack a few crowns. I struggle against the ropes and only manage to send the knife deeper into my skin.

The pain is blinding white, and for a second, I stop breathing.

"You know we'd be great together, Aria. You're too scared to admit it to yourself," Blake says. "We've both had to work hard to get where we are. We're both very good with computers, our skills unmatched. Broderick wanted us separate, wanted to keep his little sex toy all to himself. None of it matters now."

I'm losing it, fast. Black spots dance in front of my vision as Blake works the knife across my hip and thigh.

At his words, I manage to pull it together long enough to spit in his face. "I'm never going to sleep with you."

"I think you will." He doesn't stop with the knife, and there's a smile on his face. He likes hurting me. He's getting off on it.

Without the angle of his knees hiding his dick, I'd surely be able to see his erection.

The spit doesn't bother him, either, decorating the side of his neck and trailing slowly down.

"I think, once I break you, you're going to beg me to suck my cock. The same way you used to beg my uncle." He's more pleased with the blood than he is with the thought of rape.

I shake my head, and he pauses the knife. Waiting for my response.

I won't give him one.

"You loved him the same way I did," Blake continues. As if it makes any bit of difference.

"He's fucked with all of our heads. Maybe we can work together to be something better. Maybe we can take the Syndicate in a different direction."

"If you do decide to work with me, then we're doing it my way. I guess we'll have to see what kind of tune you sing after a few days."

The tears are freefalling now, and Blake stops the descent of the knife toward my knee, wiping the bloodied blade on his pant leg before he rises.

"What do you mean, your way?"

"I mean, the Syndicate is mine to control now that my uncle is dead. No matter what you've done to try and undermine, there have always been systems in place for every eventuality. I'll lead us into the new age. A different city, stronger players... It's Operation Albatross, Aria. It means that *I'm* the new Broderick Stevens, and I'm not going to let you fuck me over the way you did my uncle."

TWENTY-SEVEN



DAYS.

Blake's had me trapped in my apartment for days.

The first few hours, I refused any food or water he tried to give me. Refused even his offer to hold me over the toilet so I could take a piss. Let him clean up the mess since he's got to be the big man.

The next Broderick Stevens.

It's a nightmare and something even my mind, adept at finding pathways where there aren't any, is unable to comprehend. Operation Albatross...

Instead of cleaning me up, Blake lets me sit in my own urine until finally, I accept the help and the water, whatever he might have doused it with. Anything is better than the slow torture. Of hours spent in one horrible position, weakening, losing blood, only to have him shift the ropes to something equally bad.

And worse.

Spread eagle in my own bedroom doorway, hung from hooks he's installed, which are too high for me to hope of reaching. My ankles are hooked fast to the doorjamb as well, with the soles of my feet barely grazing the planks below.

The bleeding has slowed from the slices across my breasts. Those are the newest ones. He likes to switch it up, back to front, waiting until I least expect it before he swoops in and delivers what he calls *my punishment*.

Maybe I do deserve it.

Maybe all those years of trying to survive led me to this moment where I pay for what I've done. And to think I tried to find his favorite donut flavor.

Sociopaths don't eat donuts.

Isn't it a fact of life?

From this position, I'm able to see the sun rise from the window at the end of the hallway. I'm able to mark the passage of time and see Blake whenever he decides to grace me with his attention.

It's always been him. I'd never even been considered to lead the Syndicate. He's been going in behind me for far too long, adding his programming to mine, undermining me in ways I've never considered before, and the entire time, Operation Albatross ran in the background.

I'm too tortured to care.

My thoughts do, however, play on a loop: *Broderick Stevens*. Not a man, per se, but a title.

An inherited title and the man I'd called Master wasn't the first of his name, nor the one who coined it, but the second. He'd earned the position from his mentor and planned, for who knows how long, to bestow the title to Blake upon his death.

I'm too dehydrated to cry anymore, but it doesn't stop my eyes from burning. I've long since lost feeling in my arms and legs.

"How is my precious pet doing today? Is the kitten comfortable? Ready to play some more?"

Blake's voice comes from the direction of the kitchen, and I realize the sun has shifted angles from the last time I opened my eyes.

I'm out of it. Too out of it to stay ahead of him in his mind games.

"I'm not your pet," I reply, exhausted, my head drooping.

He's got a piece of chocolate in hand. He approaches without a care in the world and holds the chocolate out to me before he tosses it back and catches it between his teeth. "Guess I should have told you. I'm not a donut fan. All those months of trying, but it doesn't matter. Chocolate. The darker, the better."

"Do you really think I give a shit at this point? Let's be honest."

He chews the chocolate slowly, thoughtfully, while staring at me from top to bottom and every space in between. Drenched in my own urine, sweat, and blood, with my clothes shredded from his knife. I found out Blake is a fan of fire, too. The second day, he switched out the blade for a lighter and went to town on the bottoms of my feet and my pinky fingers.

The circular marks are the worst of it, though, surrounding my nipples and areolas. The ones red and raw from his teeth.

"I think there hasn't been a lot of honesty between us. That's what I'm trying to change, you know," he says once he swallows. No glasses today, and I wonder if it's a personal choice. To not see anything except the blurry outline of me.

"I'm trying to get us to a point where we're broken down to our basic core, and there is nowhere to go but up from there," he explains. "You understand."

I exhale slowly, waiting for the familiar dull ache that accompanies each rise and fall of my chest. It's there. Always. "There's no point to this conversation or what you're trying to do. Which I suspect is more than just breaking me down." I finally lift my eyes to meet his. "I think you're retaliating for what I did to your uncle."

"Why would I want to do that?" he asks. "What makes you think you know anything about me?"

"Because you've got the look."

I've been studying him since he brought me here. Two days of torture, and I've figured out his secret. I've been holding it inside of me, waiting for the right time to let it drop,

to let it detonate, and hope it's strong enough to destroy us both in the process.

Blake stares at me before barking out a laugh and reaching behind him. I stiffen and go cold on impulse. Instead of his toy, he brings out a bottle of water he must have stuffed into the waistband of his pants. Another ploy to keep me on the edge. To make me question everything.

“What look would that be?” he asks carefully.

“The look of someone who's been sexually abused,” I reply. “Because I've been there too often. You're right, on one hand. We are the same.”

He doesn't slow his movements. Doesn't stop as he unscrews the cap and lifts the bottle to my lips, pressing it closer until I tip my head back and cool water slides down my throat.

I swallowed hard, water trailing down my chin as well. “I wasn't sure about it, although I had my suspicions from the way you reacted a time or two when some of the men got too rowdy in the boardroom. Did Broderick mold you the same way he molded me, or did he pass you on to his friends, Blake?”

He tilts the bottle further, and water drips from my mouth, sliding down my clavicle toward my mutilated chest and pouring onto the floor. Blake isn't laughing anymore. He's not doing much of anything.

“Adorable, how you think it's an insult,” he says at last. “I'm a survivor, Aria. I'm the head of the Syndicate now, and you're still trying to prove you're more than a hole. How does it feel to beat your head against a wall and get nowhere?”

Not too fucking great, if I'm being honest.

“We've both been used. You said it yourself: we'd be good together. So stop trying to keep me beneath you, and let me stand beside you.”

“It's not going to work on me.”

“What isn't going to work on you?”

I've got nothing left to lose. Nothing left to give, either, not even blood. Certainly not pride. I lost that so long ago I can barely remember how it feels. Even domination. The underground only helped slick a sheen of accomplishment over my lack of pride in myself, my work. My existence.

Blake has helped strip down even the thickest sheen from me until I'm left hanging here, a mess.

"Any attempt you make to get under my skin. So what? So what if I've been abused? There's power in it if I want there to be." Blake holds his arms out wide to his sides. "I'm a survivor. Not only surviving, but I'm the head of the Black Market Syndicate."

"Are you repeating it for my benefit or for yours?" I want to know.

His gaze goes to ice-covered steel. "I'm going to take this company to greater heights than my uncle ever imagined."

"You're going to continue with his human trafficking scheme." The thought still makes me clench even when my body has started to fail me.

"Continue? I'm going to grow it. There is too much money to be made moving those kinds of goods. I'm not going to stop until I've cornered the market on the East Coast and into the Midwest," he continues.

I chew on my inner cheek to keep from yelling at him, getting nowhere. "Heaven help us," is all I say.

"There is no heaven. Haven't you learned anything by now?" he asks.

He's unfazed. He's got no emotions, and I realize then with a sinking feeling that everything he showed me while we were pushed together in our cramped little office space is nothing but lies. They were all carefully crafted to get me to lower my guard, and I admit, I suspected nothing.

Even with him pressing the chloroform cloth to my mouth, I suspected nothing.

"Apparently not," I admit.

“It’s all going to work out.” Blake reaches behind him again, and this time, he removes the knife.

I start to shake, a visceral reaction to the clean, sharp edge of the blade.

“You’re starting to really enjoy the pain. I see it.” He repeats the statement from the first day as though to reassure himself of it. “Just like I used to hear you and Uncle Broderick going at it like dogs. He used to talk to me, sometimes, when he let his guard down. About how much you like being hurt while you’re getting fucked. How it’s the only way to get you off.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. In my head, I’m not here. I’m anywhere but. Maybe I’m on some kind of train with those wide glass windows designed to show off the best views of the scenery outside. The fancy kind of train where the seats are plush, and the food is top-notch.

I barely feel the first slice of the blade across my stomach. Blake isn’t pushing down, only dragging the point along my skin in a threat of what’s to come. A promise.

“Strange.” My voice sounds distant. “How you waited until your uncle was out of the way to touch me this way.”

“Can’t poach another man’s toy. You stepped out of line. No, it’s up to me to make sure you fall back into it.”

I hear nothing, not a single solitary thing outside of the pounding of my pulse. But I feel the rush of wind from Blake’s sudden movement. He lurches forward, his shoulder jerked out of joint and breath hissing out between his teeth.

“What the fuck?” he mutters. “Ow!”

When I open my eyes, the knife is against my throat, and there is blood dripping from the smoking hole in his shirt. A hole that extends beneath the fabric.

Blake recovers much quicker than I do. With his next inhale, he’s behind me, the knife biting against my skin and his fingers unsteady.

“Don’t come any closer!” he calls out.

His breath is hot on the side of my face, burning my eyes as if someone flung acid at me.

“Do you really think I’m going to let you out of here? After what you’ve done?”

My heart leaps to attention at those words, at the man speaking them, and a half second later, Devan steps up. His shoulders block the light from the window, casting his harsh features in shadow. He’s half hunched over, but his trigger finger is strong.

Hope flares to life inside of me before dying when the blade presses closer.

“One more step, and I’ll slice her throat,” Blake warns.

*Devan.*

I’m not sure if I say his name out aloud or if it’s only in my head. He gives nothing away, and damn it, but his hand doesn’t shake, either.

“Touch her again,” he says, “and I’m going to show you how much worse life can be than death. You’ll pray for a sweet release.”

“Want to make a bet?” Blake digs the serration into my throat, and I don’t dare swallow.

“Yes, actually. I do.”

My eyes burst open.

The next few seconds are a blur of activity. Blake isn’t a betting man. He growls, drawing his hand back to prepare to slice through me and turn me into the headless horsewoman. He never gets the chance. There’s a sharp buzz of sound, and then he’s jerking, twitching before the knife falls from his limp fingers, and Blake sags to the ground.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you.” Jasleen is there, cutting through the ropes. She stops, stashes the taser, and continues her work as Devan steps up. His eyes bore into mine, and my lower lip trembles.

“I don’t want you to see me like this,” I whisper.

“Are you out of your mind?”

He kicks Blake for good measure, grunting when the movement tears open his stitches, and blood immediately darkens his shirt. The second my arms are free, I fall at Devan. Knowing he’ll catch me, which is exactly what he does before he cups my face and kisses me, both of us on our knees.

Both of us torn down.

“You stupid man. You ripped your stitches. What are you doing out of bed?”

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs against me. “I am so fucking sorry I let this happen.”

Jasleen has got Devan’s cuffs out, and Blake maneuvered into a position to actually use them. He’s out for the count, all those voltages of electricity in his system.

“Mind sharing the taser? I’ve got a little payback I’d like to bestow right against his taint,” I get out.

Devan chuckles. “Sweetheart, the others won’t be here for another five minutes. If you want to play, I won’t blame you one damn bit.” He recoils, flinching and pressing a hand to his side.

But he refuses to let go of me, and when he pulls me closer with his opposite arm, I don’t argue or protest. I wrap my fingers in the fabric of his coat and let him cradle me close.

“I’m a mess.” The words are a sob. “I stink. And we need to get you back to the hospital.”

The warmth of his palms seeps into me. “I don’t care.” He kisses me all over, every inch of my face. “You’re alive. We made it in time. Trust me, when we get him taken care of, he’s rotting in the back of the cruiser while you and I get checked out.”

Hysterical laughter burns to erupt, and I swallow it down. “How did you find me?”

“I’ll always find you. Although, actually, it was Adam. He’s the one who managed to crack the code and figure out where you were and who was holding you.”



“God bless Adam.” My eyes turn toward the ceiling and beyond.

Jasleen stands there, a savior in a leather jacket, doing her best not to stare at Devan and me as we maul each other. “I should have stayed out on the fire escape,” she mutters. “Saved my eyesight.”

I hug him too hard and he jolts, his chuckle dissipating as he says, “Sorry. You’re not the only one who’s a mess. That’s why I couldn’t go out on your fire escape to save the day.”

“Jasleen, how fast can we get to the hospital?” I ask.

“Today, consider me Danika Patrick,” she replies. “I’ll get you there in no time.”

“We’re both two broken people who managed to find each other, Aria. And here we are.” He leans in closer. “I’m going to make this motherfucker pay for everything he put you through. But first, we need to get you to the hospital this time.”

“And surely the doctors are going to kick your ass for being out of bed. I’ll have to help them.” I won’t let go of him. I’ll never let go of him. “He went down so much easier than I expected,” I admit. “A wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

“They always are,” Devan grunts.

Naomi and the rest of the boys arrive right on time, almost exactly five minutes since Devan admitted they were on the way.

No one has been there for me like Devan has.

Through a twist of fate or a stroke of good luck—I’m not about to stop and ask the universe why he’s in my life. Or what I might have done to deserve a calm and steady presence like him.

I step in front of Devan and set one of the officers, a douchebag with a mustache big enough to ride on, with a snarl.

“Relax, Darkling, they’re not going to slap the cuffs on me,” Devan says.

“As much as I’d like to, for what the little shit has put me through,” the officer says. “This one? Nothing but a pain in my goddamn ass, even if he is a hero.” The last part is grumbled almost inaudibly low.

“Detective McGee is joking,” Naomi says as if it will somehow put a stop to whatever beef is brewing between them. “We’ve got it from here, Dev. Jasleen can drive you back to the hospital, and I’ll be along later today to talk to you. Let me handle this.”

He bundles me underneath his arm, Jasleen escorting both of us out of the building with the rest of the team promising to catch up later for official statements. Sure, fine, whatever. Several of the men approached Devan, talking to him as they help us both into another cruiser, and Jasleen makes good on her words.

It isn’t until hours later when we’re tucked away in Devan’s apartment that I let my guard down. “These drugs are great.” I smile up at him, feeling warm and woozy in the best ways. “Aren’t they great? I love them.”

He trails a thumb underneath my chin, finding exactly the right spot, and it feels so good. “You should have stayed in the hospital. You lost a lot of blood. Dehydration is no joke.”

“Says the man who directly violated orders from his surgeon to come and rescue me.” I press a hand to my heart. “Do you have any idea how much it means to me? Even if you saw me covered in my own pee?”

“I meant what I said.” Devan shifts to make himself more comfortable, unable to lay on his side and having to settle for his back. “I’ll never let anything happen to you, Aria. I will always find you, no matter how far you get from me.”

“Sounds a little ominous.”

“I don’t mean it that way.”

I snuggle against his side, the way we’d been at the cabin together. “How would you feel if I said the same thing about you? I’m not one to own other people, but I sure would like to call you mine.”

“It’s the drugs talking, baby,” he answers.

His voice is a purr, better than velvet on skin.

“It’s not the drugs. It’s how I feel. I might not have as much experience with this kind of thing as you do, seeing as I’ve never been engaged or even had a healthy relationship, but...” I trail off. “I want this.”

“What do you want?”

I groan and cover my face. My skin pulls from some of the stitches I had to get, but otherwise, I feel little. “You’re going to make me say it.”

“Oh, yes. If you’re going to beat me to the punch, something you always seem to do, then I’m certainly going to make you spell it out for me in exquisite detail.”

For a long moment, the sound of our breathing is the only audible noise. Has the city decided to sleep, too? To give us this moment of peace and clarity?

As much clarity as one can have with the massive amount of drugs in my system. Yeehaw. “Or I could log in to my chat, and Darkling can have some more banter with EnemySquare,” I say.

“Whatever you want. However you want to say it, as long as you say it. But if you won’t stop wasting time, then I’m going to tell you how I feel first,” Devan says.

“I love how you make even the sweet things like being emotionally vulnerable into a contest.”

He loops our fingers together and holds them against his heart. “I learned a thing or two from you.”

“What I’m trying to say, and it’s not the drugs, is that I want to be with you. Whatever happens and wherever life takes us, I want to be with you on every level. Your partner, your lover, all of it.”

“My girlfriend?” he questions.

“Everything,” I say, my smile growing. “Even if we fail.”

He shakes his head. "Don't bring up failure. Not right now. Not when we're coming down from a win. Yes, it's a win, Aria. We're alive."

"Worse for wear, but alive," I agree. "You're right. It's a win."

"We're together."

I squeeze his fingers. "Always. If you agree."

"I'm a terrible bet as a girlfriend, but I'm a good partner. I'm a good woman."

"You are an amazing woman." He kisses the side of my head. "You are strong and passionate and a survivor. I couldn't be with anyone else. You have to know that."

"I'm starting to."

Tomorrow, the real world is going to crash back down on us. Tomorrow, we're both going to have to go to the Ninth Precinct and give our statements. Naomi managed to barter, along with Jasleen and the boys, to give us tonight to heal and rest.

Tomorrow isn't here, not yet.

The only thing real is this moment, right now, with the two of us in agreement. My heart settles into a slow rhythm that I know matches Devan's, and when sleep finally takes me, there are no bad dreams.

Only love.

TWENTY-EIGHT

*devan*

“ARE you kidding me right now? I said I want to write the code myself, not have an AI program do it for me. Especially since I’m the one in charge of the code for the AI!”

Aria’s yelling at someone through her headphones, a nameless and faceless someone who is there to do her bidding.

I close the door gently behind me so as not to disturb her and cross the apartment toward the kitchen with takeout Chinese in hand.

She’s made herself comfortable on my couch, turning the coffee table into her new workspace. I have no fucking clue why she’s comfortable *there* or how she hasn’t turned into a hunchback from leaning over a screen almost twenty-four hours a day, but she insists she’s fine.

She is. Very, *very* fine. It’s my new favorite word since she tells me I use it too often anyway.

Her assurances don’t stop me from worrying about her.

“If you don’t quit trying to convince me about the program —” she breaks off when she sees me. “Oh! Sorry. I’ll have to plan another meeting to scream at you later, okay, Flix? Talk to you soon. Get it fixed, *or else!*”

I set the package down on the countertop, and seconds later, her arms have wrapped around my midsection, her cheek pressed to my back.

“You shouldn’t have gone out without me,” she murmurs. “And you definitely should have let me know where you were going.”

“Why?” I ask. “You track me anyway. You think I haven’t noticed the little icon on my screen, running your program in the background?”

She giggles. “Is it so wrong I’m worried, and I want to make sure I know where you are at all times?”

“Sounds a little psychotic to me.” I refuse to jump when she pinches me for my joke, turning around to show her what I bought her. “Found this, though, when I went to pick up food. Is it the right stuff?”

Her eyes go wide at the giant package of matcha tea. “That’s going to last me like three years.”

“But you like it. I hope I got the right brand.” I’m not sure why it’s important, but it is.

Aria gingerly takes the package from my hands and brings it up to the edge of her nose to scrutinize.

“Please tell me you’re not trying to smell the tea or something crazy because it’s not possible through all the packaging.” I’ve seen her try crazier things, though. I’ve also seen her eat an entire package of fake peach-flavored gummies in less than three minutes.

The woman can do wonderful things.

“No, you goober. I’m getting a feel for it, and the energy of this tea is *good*.”

I roll my eyes. “Psychotic. Just like I said.”

She doesn’t go to pinch me again, but she does lift on the tips of her toes to bite my lower lip. “You better stop teasing, or else you’re going to make me all fresh, and then you’ll have to punish me.”

“I’m not sure I get how your logic works in this case, but I know what happens when you punish me, and I like it.” I set her with a grin, imbued with all the heat of pent-up sexual frustration. My dick gives a jerk in my boxers.

It’s been a month since my surgery.

A month since I rescued her from the sadistic freak show who'd kidnapped her and stuffed her away in her apartment. We'd both been told to go easy for a long while and take care of our injuries.

A month in which we'd both had to stay away from any strenuous physical activities to let our bodies heal.

I've eaten her out almost every day, though, trying to keep us both off the edge. She's returned the favor with a handjob, a blowjob. All kinds of jobs and a few that have involved other parts of me I've never let another person touch before.

Today marks the last official calendar day of our self-imposed celibacy. Doctor's orders.

It's been nearly impossible to stay away from Aria in that way, and my dick starts to thicken in my pants the longer she looks at me.

"Is that what you want?" she asks, blinking guileless eyes at me. It's an act, and we both know it. "Did you think you were going to bribe me with this matcha tea, Tough Guy?"

"I thought I was doing something nice for you," I insist.

"Or maybe you're just itching to get back out there and catch another killer. I think you secretly have a thing about fucking after a kill. It gets you off, doesn't it?"

She drops the container back on the counter right next to our forgotten food and turns to me, her hands loose on my shoulders. She arches her breasts up, pressing them to my chest, and my half chub turns into a full erection.

"Could be. Either one. I guess it's going to be up to you to figure out which it is," I reply.

The bed rest extended to work, of course. There's no way I'd be able to get back into the field after what happened. Naomi had been instrumental in bringing Ashcroft around, especially once she produced Broderick's body and Adam and Bill gave up all of Aria's information.

The bullet between the dead crime lord's eyes came from an unregistered weapon, and even our best techs had been



unable to trace its origins.

But the guys no longer suspected my involvement. Especially not when the truth came out, coupled with Aria's fantastic skills on the web. She made sure to wipe any connections they'd been trying to build between me and the shootout, me and Broderick, all of it.

My girl.

My *official* girl, too.

She hadn't wanted to go back to her apartment, so while we have a real estate agent working on selling the joint, Aria's been here with me.

A month of having a woman live with me again.

The nightmares...are something we've both had to deal with. And although this tiny pixie of a woman liked to starfish and take up every bit of space on the bed, having her there makes a huge difference.

Aria twists, nudging her uninjured hip against my crotch and grinding away. "Get back here and into your body, Devan. I want to use it. There are a few things I'd like to try."

I chuckle. "Is there? Someone is feeling adventurous today."

"It marks a milestone for both of us, I like to think," she admits as she bites down on her lower lip. The movement draws my attention, and all I want to do is suck her lip into my mouth and ravage her.

Which I plan to do repeatedly.

"What kind of milestone do you want to celebrate, my little redhead?" I ask.

"You're the first boyfriend I've ever really had. And we've been together for a whole month, officially."

"And you want to celebrate with sex."

She turns around but grabs my hand, pulling me behind her toward our bedroom. "Sex, sure, but something else."

She makes it through the door first, and I take a moment to close it behind us. It's something neither one of us really thinks about, but both need, unspoken. The privacy of a closed door after our experience in the alley.

Too much fucked-up shit for me to fully unpack yet, to fully understand.

Rather than going straight for her body the way she halfway expects me to, I cup her chin in my hands to lift her face to mine. And holding eye contact, I dip my lips to hers, capturing them for a kiss. Tasting her and bringing her into me. She sighs. Melts. Sinks into me and slowly lifts her arms to hook them around my neck.

"The things you do to me," she mutters.

"The things I plan to do to you are just as sweet."

"And if I don't want sweet?"

"Then I will give you everything you want and everything you deserve in the best possible way."

She shifts her head to draw my attention to the bed and the pile of silk scarfs nestled near the pillow. "Tie me up."

"No." It's an automatic gut reaction to her request. No. Not after what she's survived, what that sociopathic fuck put her through. I hadn't been the gentlest lover with her before that experience, and now I'll be damned if I bring her anything even remotely resembling chaos.

"Look." She holds my cheeks the same way I did hers a moment ago. "I trust you, Tough Guy. More than I've ever trusted anyone before. I want to replace those bad memories with good ones, and you are the only one who can do it for me. With love."

"We don't have to go the BDSM route just yet. We can work our way up to it, if you want, down the road."

"No, Devan." She blows out a breath, and her lips pout seductively. My dick gives a wiggle to let me know he's still there and he's anxious to get to work.

“I’m sure. I want to do this now. With someone who loves and respects me. Please.”

There is no way to resist her. Anything she asks of me, I’ll deliver, and I have to admit the thought of her wrapped in nothing but silk with her breasts pushed out makes me want to come early.

I kiss her again, absorbing her inhalation inside of me before I maneuver her toward the bed. She stares at me as I push her top down from one shoulder, kissing it, and then the other.

Her scars have healed to the best of her body’s ability, but there are those she’ll carry with her for the rest of her life. Things seen and unseen.

I slowly remove her shirt, kissing my way along her scars. Aria isn’t the type of person to let them define her. It doesn’t take a genius to understand she’s still a little insecure. So once she’s bare for me, her breasts out in the open and her nipples hard, I kiss her. Kiss her like I’ll suffocate without her, like I can’t get enough of her. The kind of kiss you feel with your whole body instead of your lips alone.

She takes the kiss from deep to demanding, ravaging, her tongue twisting along mine in a way that brings my dick fully to attention, entirely uncomfortable. The way it will stay until I bury myself inside of her.

She grabs the back of my head to keep me in place, her other hand stroking a line down my neck, my chest.

I break away to latch onto one of her nipples and suck the bud greedily into my mouth.

“Fuck, Devan.”

“We’re getting there,” I manage.

Once I’ve fully lavished my attention on one nipple, I move to the other breast, tracing my tongue along it before nibbling gently.

She kicks her yoga pants aside, scooting back until she hits the bed and widens her legs, Giving me a full frontal view of

her pussy. I kneel in front of her and push her even further open before I rub my nose against her clit and swipe my tongue against her.

“Shit,” she hisses.

I straighten long enough to grin at her. “If at any point you’re uncomfortable, you have to tell me. Do you understand?”

She nods, biting down on her lower lip as I trail my fingers up the inside of her silky thighs. The first silk scarf isn’t long enough to do much with, and I toss it aside. The second goes around her wrists, secured above her head on the trust system rather than the headboard.

I’m wrapping a second scarf around her abdomen when I finally speak again.

“You are so beautiful. I can’t get enough of you, your skin, your softness. I can’t wait to fuck you with my cock this time, Aria, instead of just my tongue and my fingers. I want to feel you come around me.”

“Sounds like a dream.”

She’s panting at this point, turned on rather than nervous, her toes curling on the edge of the mattress.

I take my time binding her.

Making sure she is completely comfortable every step of the way and leaving her legs loose. The better to maneuver her. Once she’s roped together on the bed, I feast, burying my head between her legs and slicking my tongue inside of her. She writhes against me, arching her back to bring her folds even closer to my tongue. I hook one of her legs over my shoulder as I drive my tongue inside of her, lifting my eyes infrequently to gauge her reaction from sight instead of feeling alone.

Her eyes are closed, and her head thrown back. My cock strains against the inside of my boxers, begging for release.

Not yet.

I want this moment to last.

I bring her to the edge of an orgasm before I seal my lips around her clit. Her first one has her quivering around me, a hum in the back of her throat before her cries grow louder.

One down, a few more to go before I'll be satisfied.

I break away only to rip off my own shirt. The pants follow shortly after, and the boxers beyond, tossed into the darkened recesses of the room, and my dick finally free.

There's enough light from outside to spill over Aria and illuminate the curves of her body in shining silver. Her narrow torso, her perky breasts. The scars are a part of her now, and I wouldn't change a thing.

"You're watching me," I murmur, running a hand down the length of my erection. Working my fist up and down as she takes me in.

Her laughter has me jerking in my own hand. "So what?" She arches up, stretching as much as she's able to stretch with the scarves.

Rather than falling on her now, the way I want to, I release my dick and haul her up by the scarves around her wrists. She's pliable, soft from her first release, and doesn't argue as I position her on her knees in front of me. My dick slides between her legs, and I send my hips forward, sliding the length of me against her wetness.

I've got my arm around her midsection, tightening to keep her in place. "Stop wiggling your ass, Aria, or I'm going to have to stuff my cock in it."

She does wonderful, horrible things to me. I don't know if it's always going to be this way between us, with this heat and passion and all-encompassing need for each other.

"You love it when I wiggle my ass. I wouldn't mind if you wanted to fuck me there." She's panting again, moaning low as she clit fucks my dick. She tightens her legs, increasing the friction.

I angle the wide crown of my cock against her entrance and slick it with her moisture. She opens her mouth, no doubt intending to say something else to entice me when I slip into

her. Notching the first several inches inside her tight channel and pausing to give her a moment to get used to the girth.

“One day I will,” I tell her, sliding steadily toward home until she’s taken all of me inside of her.

She’s on her knees in front of me and turns to flash a wicked, wonton smile over her shoulder. Her freedom, our freedom, and her leisure are my priority.

The look is potent enough to have me forgetting about my restraint and slamming into her pussy, looking down between us to watch her take my cock.

“Christ, Devan.”

I love the sound of my name on her lips.

I take a handful of her hair, looping my fingers through the silken red strands and my cock jerking inside of her. I bend to lick a trail from her neck down her spine, all along her healed scars.

She squeezes me tight with her core muscles, a reminder not to waste time since we’ve both been so long without each other.

Fragile but strong.

Her pulse pounds against my lips.

Then I start to move. Rocking into her pussy repeatedly as I reach around to flick her clit. Holding her hair and yanking her head back just enough for her to feel the pressure. She’s unable to move much with the binding, and the angle of her legs banded together is driving me insane.

My chest heaves, and I drag her closer. Pushing my cock into her, a little rougher each time. Aria gasps and arches back against me. Just as greedy for me as I am for her. I release her hair to grip her highs and press her legs even tighter together. She meets each one of my thrusts until she whimpers, clenching around me.

Panting, I want to last longer for her. Even as her own orgasm has her twitching, I follow her over the edge, slamming into her and filling her.

My darling, my mistress of the web, dark and light. There's nothing she can't do, including bring a man like me to his knees.

"I love you." I brush her hair away from her neck and kiss her skin. Wanting to see her face but unwilling to pull out of her just yet. "I want you to know. I love you." She turns to me, and her eyes are only half open, her body twitching in aftershocks.

"About damn time you said it," she murmurs. "Hell if I was going to be the first one."

She laughs, groaning when I finally do pull out of her and cradle her close. A few tugs and the knots keeping the silk scarves in place fall apart and release her from the bind. Aria searches my face before she presses a sweet kiss to my lips, just shy of hard and hungry.

I gather her closer to my chest, my wound pulling but not unbearable. I feel...refreshed. Reborn. This woman gave me the strength to save myself, even if she had to prod me into doing so. I can only hope a lifetime of making her happy will be enough repayment.

## *epilogue*

“*WHEW!*” Gabriel swipes a hand through his hair, looking like a fucking pirate who just came off a raid and should have jewels instead of nuts in his pants. I halfway expect him to grab his crotch and pop his stiffy right out, maybe even mark his territory. “What a rush. What a goddamn rush! Come here, you gorgeous woman.”

Before I have a chance to open my mouth to warn him to shut the hell up, he’ll give us away, he’s got said mouth on me. The kiss rips through every one of my warnings, every last defense I’ve ever possessed, and our tongues dance together.

My system overloads on adrenaline the longer the kiss goes on, and I wrap my body around his greedily. His kiss is expert, hot, and all mine.

Every inch of him belongs to me.

Gabriel sucks my tongue into his mouth, and a feral moan burns the back of my throat.

I’m just as greedy for him, desperate to get closer, even when the hands I grab him with are covered in gunshot residue. His weapon clatters to the ground, and he backs me up into the wall to cage me between his arms and the cold sheetrock.

“Come on. Admit you like it.” The smirk in his voice is the kicker for me. I love it, and I’m done hating him for his moods. “You get off on this kind of shit. My dirty girl.”

He tilts my head to the side with a finger on my jaw and deepens the kiss, stroking me with the intent to do so much



more. When he presses his body to mine, he's already hard, and so many parts of me water in response. I arch to him and nearly lose my grip on my own smoking gun.

"Baby, you get me so hot," he murmurs through our kiss.

I smile against him. "You get a hard-on *anytime* you kill someone. I'm not sure how you managed without me."

"Oh, I've buried my cock in some less-than-savory women before I met you. Daddy Thor does not discriminate."

"Daddy Thor is long gone, left on the stage at the Velvet Underground."

"Now I have sex with the best pussy in the entire continent." His voice goes low and husky. He grabs my ass and pulls me up to him, trying to get me to ride him right there. "Maybe even the world."

It's not time to think about sex. Especially not when my old partner might be dying on his way to the hospital as we speak.

I plant my feet and refuse to move. "We've got a body to handle, mister. This really isn't the time to fuck on top of your old boss's corpse."

Gabriel drops his head to mine, and it's a long way down. "Layla, baby, please. Let the fucker rot there. I don't want to bother with him."

"Devan is going to ask a lot of questions." *If he makes it.*

He has to make it. There's no other choice. And he's got two good women there looking out for him. Both of them love him in different ways. They'll make sure he's fine. He doesn't need me anymore.

"He'll ask even more if you move the body. Won't it look a little bit suspicious?"

Gabriel has a point, and I barely suppress a laugh at the look on his face. The sexy, raven-haired bad boy who used to run the underworld of this town, and right now, he's got eyes as big as a puppy's and just as innocent.

As though it's not the biggest pleasure of his life to kill Broderick Stevens.

He steals another kiss from me, a kiss melding of our lips. "Too quick a death for that piece of shit. He should have suffered more. We both know it."

"True," I agree, "but we should go. Before we fuck up and someone sees us. The police are going to swarm this place as soon as possible, and I want to be long gone by the time they do."

Gabriel nods. "Fine. You're right. Let's get the fucker dismembered and go home."

It's not the direction I thought for my life, by a long shot. A million miles away, and yet I've never been happier.

Except for one thing...

With Gabriel's taste in my mouth and death hanging in the air around us, an almost visible cloud of ecstasy and truth, I turn toward the door. Devan will be fine. I've got to believe it. Struggling to handle his shit without me, sure, but he's on his way toward healing. Struggling to do anything except exist in the bleakness of his reality, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. It's not my place.

But this—I stare down at the cooling body— this I did for him. This moment, this death.

He'll never know it's me or Gabriel, and that's how it has to stay, but *I* will know. Devan has been tormented for too long. Maybe, with Broderick out of the way...he'll finally be able to live the way he deserves to live.

To be happy.

It's asking a whole fucking lot, and I know it. Trust me, I know it better than anyone else.

"You know what? Dismembering him will take too long." I narrowly resist kicking Broderick's corpse with my shoe. More for my sake than for his. I can't risk leaving DNA at the scene, not when we've been careful. "Leave him here to rot."

“His men are going to find him,” Gabriel argues. “Or the police, and they’ll have questions.”

I shake my head. “Devan and his new crew will get it handled. But I’m still a little surprised he hasn’t figured it out.”

Gabriel blinked. “Figured what out?”

“That I’m really alive.”

I stare into the direction the redhead and his new partner had dragged him. Not his usual type, the redhead, I think to myself. She gave me the impression of something raw, untapped, rather than the put-together and polished princesses he’d gone for before. Things really do change.

This time, it’s my old partner who has done the changing, and he’s morphed into his real self. About fucking time, too. He’s wasted far too much of it mourning me. Lord knows I don’t deserve that kind of dedication.

Gabriel clicks the safety on his gun, and I turn in time to watch him tuck it into his pants. “Because I’m too fucking good at my job. I already told you that. There’s no way he’ll ever figure it out, Layla.”

I sighed, scratched the side of my head. “Sure.” Better that way.

“I wish I had a lighter to drop on this fucker,” Gabriel says, staring at the corpse.

“At least he’s going to be found with his pants full of shit.” It’s a small victory in the face of a much broader one.

Broderick Stevens is dead.

“Since you’ve made up your mind, can we please go home and fuck? My dick is starting to hurt.” Gabriel grabs his crotch and laughs when I roll my eyes.

“Daddy Thor always has a hard-on. Let’s get you out of here and take care of things.”

Our lives might be determined by the paths we’ve chosen, those outside of our control. But Devan is free after this. *I*

*hope.*

Free to do whatever he wants with that redhead and, hopefully, find the mercy he's been searching for when he looks in the mirror.

*I miss you, D.*

Freedom, love. He deserves it all. As long as he survives.

*more books by melanie  
kingsley*

**The Balestra Family**

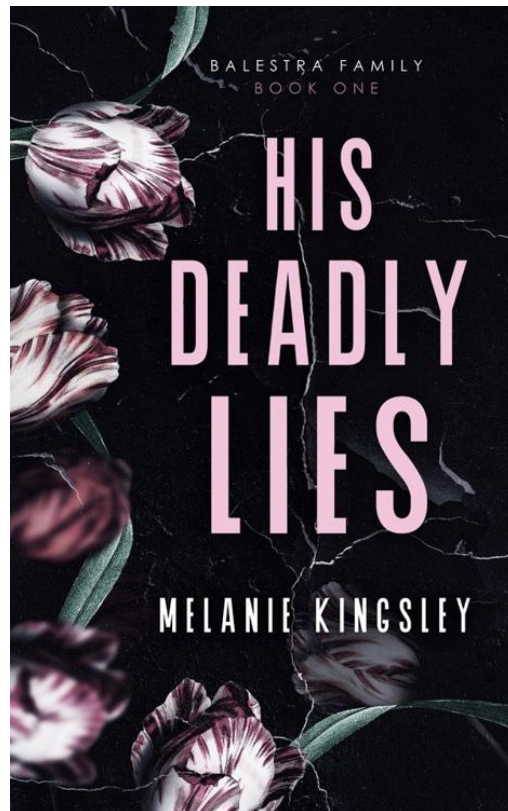
[His Deadly Lies](#)

**Empire Bay**

[Love After Never](#)

[Love After Darkness](#)

*first look at his deadly  
lies (balestra family  
book 1)*



\* \* \*

**I'm marked for a life that will doom me to lead.**

I know all about duty because I've been trained since birth. To play my part. To rule. Marriage to a rival family will only ensure our success.

Except someone is hunting me, and Carter is the only thing standing in their way, making sure I survive.

He's lethal, determined, and obsessed with loyalty. He'll sacrifice my happiness for his family. This cat-and-mouse game between us has no rules and leads to only one inevitable end.

I'm on my own.

I know one thing for sure: falling for his deadly lies will get me killed, but I don't have a choice.

*If you like the sensuous bite of Kresley Cole, Holly Renee, C.R. Jane, and K.R. Knight, then you'll devour this start to Melanie Kingsley's dark, brilliant new mafia series.*

# *chapter one*



There are plenty of places for a woman to hide a weapon in a skin-tight, low-cut dress. If she's dedicated enough.

It always surprises me how many men don't realize this simple fact.

The dress might leave little to the imagination, but that means nothing if she's packing with intent.

"What do you say, baby?" The man sidles closer to me, his dark eyes lit with an inner fire that means one thing. *He thinks he's going to get some pussy tonight.* "How about you and I go back to my yacht, and I'll show you all the secret places?" He leans in closer, inches away from sliding his nose along my cheekbones, his hand creeping closer to my inner thigh.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. His yacht is a lie.

Everything about the picture he presents is a fucking fallacy.

Around us, the rest of the room is gilded in gold. Even the plants have been specially picked out to accentuate the lush fabrics, the ludicrously expensive decor. The chandeliers overhead are kept low, the light just enough to see the drink in front of you and your partner's features without noticing the glaringly obvious details.

Like the weak chin.

Or the plugs along his hairline to match.

The man who grabbed the stool at my side is a guest I've never seen before, and he blows right past the line of propriety and respect and lands in my personal bubble as if he has a

right to be there. “We can drink champagne and enjoy the night,” he cajoles. “Together.”

Two more lies.

Well, the second part won't be a lie. He'll enjoy the night, surely, if I agree to leave with him.

I stare him down, expression neutral, even though I'm on high alert. Hyper-vigilant and doing my best to keep my hand from itching toward the dagger stashed on my person.

The champagne he offers would no doubt be stale, though, if he even has a bottle stashed away in whatever place he's planning to take me. Plus, his micropenis barely shows an outline from where we sit on the barstool at my uncle's club. He's got it on full display, regardless.

Who gave this guy an invitation to the Vanguard? Who let him through the door?

My nerves are fucking shot and too raw for me to be bored or amused by the way he's attempting to pick me up. If anything, I've shot straight past bored and amused into disgruntled and a little apprehensive.

Manners keep me from outright looking around the room for any reason to excuse myself.

But no.

Word hasn't come in that the shipment has arrived. Without confirmation, I'm not allowed to leave and go home. I have to physically put eyes on the drugs for my father before the evening comes to an end.

I force a smile for the man in front of me and gain a little bit of distance by lifting my martini glass to my face and taking a long sip.

Waiting for the delivery means sitting at the bar and listening to these men with their stories, men who want to hit on me while I pretend I'm here to enjoy the atmosphere.

A yawn burns the back of my throat.

“I’ve seen yachts, and I’ve had good champagne,” I tell the leech, keeping my smile pinned in place. “I’ll pass. It’s a no from me.”

He presses closer yet before taking a chance, reaching out and twining one of my purposely loose curls around his fingers.

“Come on, Mia,” he coos. And suddenly, we’re on a first-name basis. Because he heard the bartender call me that.

Note to self: staff meeting.

“Say yes. Let’s play. You’ll have fun.”

One more move, one finger where it doesn’t belong, and I’ll take the cool steel strapped to my inner thigh, and I’ll show him how deadly serious I am when I say no.

“I’m not going home with you.” I show him teeth. “End of discussion.”

I raise a perfectly manicured hand to let the bartender know I’m ready for my second martini. If I have to be here, then I’m sure as hell going to enjoy another drink while I wait. It all goes on Uncle Henry’s tab anyway.

Rather, he wipes my own tab clean at the end of the night.

Nothing like family.

*Where the hell is the shipment?*

How much time do I have to waste before my father is satisfied?

*Like you have anything better to do?*

The small, cruel voice in my head is still my own, and it’s right.

“Who said anything about going home?” the man says. His fingers twitch, switching from my leg to trace my bare arm. “We’re going to my yacht. Have you ever fucked on open water? It’s fantastic.”

Okay, I’ve had enough.

Lifting my leg, his attention drops to the creamy length of thigh showing from the slit in my black dress. He's distracted enough that I can reach for the holster and slide the blade free, bringing the tip to his balls in his next breath without him noticing.

The dots have not connected for him yet.

They sure do when I dig the tip into the soft meat of those danglers, and his eyes go wide.

"Whoa, whoa! Psycho b-bitch," he stammers, suddenly scared shitless. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"No means no." I say it slowly for his benefit, and my smile warms. "Repeat it for me."

He's silent for a moment before I dig the knife deeper yet, and he lets out a strangled groan of pain. "N-no means no."

"Very good," I coo.

Appearances are everything for people in my position. But so is self-defense. I'd be a piss-poor heir if I let scum like this guy manipulate and maneuver me.

"Besides, the grime underneath your fingernails is too thick for you to be wealthy. It's a clear indication you don't take the time to care for yourself." My eyes drop to his hands. "You may work for your boss on *his* yacht, but the champagne you claim to have would not be yours. It would be his. Or it would be old. Not nearly what it would take to woo me." I purposely lower my gaze to his crotch and angle the knife into his sac until he gasps. "And I hardly think the few inches you're packing will do anything for me other than make me angry. And I'm already pissed off."

Losing my cool won't do any good. It will lead to a verbal tongue-lashing in the privacy of Papa's office and a harsh, potentially even painful reminder not to pull these kinds of stunts. Definitely not where people can see me.

*Appearances are everything.*

And there's no escape.

I slice the knife down toward his taint for spite, and tears prick the corners of his eyes. Shit, I haven't even cut through fabric yet. Why is he crying?

"Don't hit on another fucking woman on your way out, or I'll know," I tell him in an undertone. "Trust me."

The man is so surprised by the knife pull and the near castration that he falls backward off the bar stool. All eyes in the room turn in his direction at the noise, the disruption, and the already hushed conversation drops to a silence where the scurrying of a mouse is as loud as a gunshot.

"You're a fucking psycho!" He lands that one departing shot before he scrambles to his feet and sprints toward the front door.

Heartbeats later, the bartender drops a perfectly made martini in a chilled glass in front of me. "That's the second one this month, Miss Balestra," the woman says from behind the bar. "I'm not sure why the scumbags are attracted to you or how you manage to put them in their place so quickly, but man. It's fascinating to watch."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." I tilt back the martini and take a sip.

Yes. Perfection. Shit, she's good. This is almost enough for me to forgive her for the first name slip earlier.

"I don't know how you weed them out so fast. It's a gift."

"It's a skill," I correct Sherry. "It's a lot of practice."

She isn't prying. She was complimenting me. But I make a mental note to be more careful calling out the pricks who hit on me here, at least for a little bit.

"It's a skill I'm going to need you to teach me." Sherry adjusts the jaunty set of the black bowtie Uncle Henry forces his employees to wear at Meridian. "It's hard to know the fakes from the good guys. We don't get a lot of real bad dudes here, but there's always a few in a crowd, you know?"

"Oh, that's easy." I wave her away. "You assume there are no good guys."

I'm a pretty face, which has won me more than the wit inside my skull. The intelligence and practice allow me to monitor body language, look for clues over lies. The inside of my head is a constantly churning machine, and the machine can only work when I'm able to take people by surprise. Otherwise, no one pays me any mind.

Papa's empire benefits from the deadly combination. At least, it does when the lowlifes aren't trying to push my skirt up to my hips.

It's the same one I'll inherit one day if I can keep stomaching dealing with the assholes who want to claw their way up from the bottom. Ones with ambition or money or good, old-fashioned charm.

They want what the Balestra family has, and one way to do it is by getting to me.

The one with the microdick? Hard to say where his motivations really lie.

I raise my finger to Sherry to get her attention and reach into the small clutch on my lap, drawing out a hundred, making sure she sees me slip the bill under my too-soon empty glass. I have a two-drink maximum each time I'm dispatched to the club.

Two, max, like I'm some kind of fucking child.

Sherry nods and starts to make my third after covertly slipping the hundie into her cleavage.

I figure that buying her with tips may gain me a small shred of loyalty, all for my own, and she'll keep her mouth shut. I'll nurse the third drink until I get the text that it's time to check the shipment, quickly, and leave.

Home.

Crawl into comfortable clothes and out of the beyond-impressive dress painted over my body. I drag the dagger back into its holster with a sigh.

My mother's body, I think in distant disgust. It's all thanks to her that I'm built the way I am, and she never lets me forget

it, either.

Nicola Balestra is still a beauty, fifty-two years old, with the blood of old Italy in her veins keeping her skin youthful and mostly wrinkle-free.

She's made me into a mirror of her from her younger days, all long black hair, gold skin, and makeup. Most of the time, when I'm sent to Uncle Henry's club, I don't mind the task. Tonight it irks me. Tonight the sensation of eyes on me is nothing but ants crawling over my skin as I take a sip from my fresh martini.

Sherry sure does know how to make them.

No one here has the skill she has.

Even though she's paid to be kind to me.

To kiss my ass, the same way that everyone here is required to kiss my ass.

I take that one single sip before the phone in my clutch buzzes. I drag it out to a message with a single text.

*SOS. Dead on Arrival.*

I roll my eyes. "Sorry about this." I drink the rest of the martini in two gulps. I'm not sure whether I'm apologizing to Sherry for guzzling the drink like a teen or to myself for having to rush out instead of enjoying it.

So much for nursing the drink.

It's time to get to work.

I flash Sherry an apologetic smile before smoothing my mask back in place, the icy queen who rules over this place. The walk-in cooler in the kitchen disguises a long, well-lit hallway toward the real base of operations here at the Vanguard.

Then it's time to make my mark.

\* \* \*

The two men standing in front of the unmarked wooden crate start to visibly shake at the sound of my sky-high heels tapping against the floor. I see both of them clearly through the small square plexiglass window taking up the top third of the door. My driver Rafel, who has been with me for years, steps ahead of me and holds the door open for me to waltz through into the back room.

He's been waiting for me back here, watching to make sure the shipment arrives and everything is kosher.

The SOS prefacing his text means something's gone fucked where the business *should* have been running smoothly.

There's been a problem for months now, but no one is willing to call it that. Not Papa, not Uncle Henry, or Uncle Paolo, who is really my father's right-hand man and no relation.

The three of them might as well have their heads buried in the sand, or darker, smellier places, for all their willingness to listen to my complaints that our shipments have been light.

A tiny speed bump, nothing that will be repeated, I remember Paolo saying when I first mentioned the missing boxes. Demolished easily enough with words or a gun, depending on how hard the speed bump fights back.

How will tonight play out?

Papa has other business to consider, which is why he sent me out to check the shipment tonight. I had a clear plan in place. Wait for the signal, inspect the merchandise, report back, and go. As simple as pie and just as American.

The third martini is the biggest extent of my rebellion and all that's allowed.

Rafel delicately clears his throat, still holding the door open as I waste time caught in my head, and I square my shoulders. Rather than focus on the men themselves, their faces unfamiliar, I drop my attention to the boxes. It's better not to humanize the workers.

Which sounds shitty, but it's all part of this lifestyle. And for me, there's never been another choice.



The oldest. The oldest in a long line of smugglers and businessmen.

A victim of fate and circumstance, and now those boxes are my priority. I can already tell we're missing more than a few.

"Talk," I demand right off the bat.

Some days, I'm not sure if these clowns are more afraid of me or my father. But they're right to fear both of us. I've seen men chewed up and spit out at the breakfast table before I turned six. It was as much a part of life as learning to tie my shoes or riding a bicycle for the first time.

Serve the family. Protect the empire.

Punish anyone who steps out of line. It's a rinse-and-repeat kind of deal.

"We're sorry, Miss Balestra. It was an accident. It's not like we meant for anything to happen to the boxes," the older one tells me.

I feel rather than sense Rafel step up behind me, no doubt crossing his arms over his chest like he's some kind of Arnold Schwarzenegger even though he's only five ten and built like a toothpick. A strong toothpick, but he wouldn't win a bodybuilding contest.

"I don't want excuses. Tell me what happened."

Pretty face. Bland smile. Hint of violence in the eyes, and all the while assessing. Everything went on the truck the way it was supposed to, heading from San Diego, California, all the way through the western expanses of nothing-but-shit-and-tornados until it reached us tonight, on the edge of Lake Erie.

Mafia in Ohio.

It still surprises me to think about it.

Somewhere along the line, these guys must have stopped outside of their designated route because the Balestras have men at each of the weigh stations to make sure the shipment reaches us intact.

Where did we lose the boxes?

“We did everything we were supposed to do,” the one on the left assures me. Older, yes, with a hint of gray already in his hair, while the one on the right looks to be in his early twenties. And far guiltier.

Ah, so the older man feels protective of the other one. How is this going to play out?

“Oh? So there is nothing wrong, then?” I ask sweetly.

I scan the boxes at the feet of the two men, counting silently in my head. A hint of anger slips through my mask. We’re three packages short.

I send a sharp glance to the first man, the one who mistakenly makes eye contact after gazing leisurely at my legs.

“Where did the truck stop?” I asked, my voice a whip of sound. The man on the left flinches. “Where did we lose three of our crates?”

“We had this one come straight through Fort Wayne. No stops,” the young man stutters. “As we were ordered.”

“Obviously, you’re lying to me. Unless you’re calling my *cousin* a liar.” I stalk forward and lift a leg, stomping on the lid of the first crate. “He personally verified the shipment from his end, and the total count was thirty. This is twenty-seven. Explain.”

Both of the men drop their eyes to their shoes. “We didn’t make any unauthorized stops,” the older one murmurs.

*They’re worker bees.*

And I happen to know that neither one of them has been with our organization for more than six months. It’s one thing to treat subordinates well enough that we gain their loyalty. This is not the case. This is not the first time packages have gone missing in the past few weeks. Not by a long shot.

Which means something is going on. Inside *and* outside of the Balestra organization.

It might not be these two buffoons, but they're the ones I'm looking at right now.

My stomach drops, and the semi-calm of the third martini trickles away. Papa is going to have to listen to me this time. It's happened too often to be an accident at this point.

I snap my fingers before a bit of my exhaustion slips through my mask. I rub my temples and sigh. "Rafel?" I look over my shoulder to my driver. "Assistance?"

He smoothly lifts to attention and pulls out a gun from the holster hidden beneath his coat, cocking it at the two workers.

The one who stared at me gulps, his Adam's apple bobbing like a fishing lure on choppy waters.

Trusting Rafel's aim, I step up to the man and run a hand up his trembling arm. "Where was the *unauthorized* stop?" I need to know. "Where did you go tonight? I'm not fucking stupid. I know what you did."

He knows better than to test me or make up more excuses.

"Okay, I had to take a piss at a rest stop." The guy shrugs even as sweat trickles down toward his chin. "That was it. I locked the truck and everything, and nothing looked off when I got back. So what?"

"What rest stop?"

I enunciate every word, allowing them to drop like bombs.

He deviated from clear plans. Who hired them?

It's taking these jackasses way too long to tell me where they made their stop, so I can get people on the theft as soon as possible.

"Fort Wayne." The other man blurts out the answer. Sweat drips from his hairline. "It was Fort Wayne, Miss Balestra."

This next part is not my favorite, but it's all part of the game. The players usually know their roles from the start of it, though few have a choice. That's my one consolation. These two workers knew better than to stop, and their deviance from the plan allowed someone else to slip in.

To fuck with our inventory.

I smile at both of the men, flashing teeth. “Next time I ask a question, it will be much easier for you if you answer it immediately,” I tell the one closest to me. “Now you’ll have to pay.”

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## *about the author*

Melanie Kingsley is a pen name for a USA Today Bestselling contemporary romance author exploring her dark side. She writes gritty, no-holding-back romances that will keep you on the edge of your seat and your sanity. Happily ever afters may be guaranteed, but getting there will be a ride. She loves her fur babies and coffee (light and sweet, go figure), travel, and tile match games. Putting her lifelong love of reading to good use, she now spends her time giving morally gray characters their redemption.

Explore the dark and dangerous side of romance with Melanie's more sinful reads. Or sit back and let the passion drive you wild with an escape into her steamy and seductive romances.

[www.melaniekingsley.com](http://www.melaniekingsley.com)

