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LUST
&
DESTRUCTION

SINS OF THE FATHER
BOOK TWO

JADE MARSHALL
LILA FOX

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DEDICATION

This one is for everyone that works behind the scenes.

Editors, cover designers, formatters, PAs, and more.

Thank you for helping us reach our dreams.

LUST & DESTRUCTION

Sins of the Father, 2

Jade Marshall and Lila Fox

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Content Warning

Lust & Destruction may contain triggers for some. As readers, we find trigger warnings to be spoilers, but as authors, we understand they are sometimes necessary. Although we are not going to list each one (there are many), please feel free to email us with your specific trigger(s), and we will let you know if that trigger is in this book.

Lila Fox: jensen065@gmail.com

Jade Marshall: author.jmarshall@gmail.com

For those of you that wish to go in blind, please remember that this is a work of fiction, and I *do not* condone any of the situations or actions of the characters.

Chapter One

Dutchess

Men are idiots. And yes, that includes all men. I watch a man in an expensive black suit emerge from an equally expensive dark-blue sedan, all the while checking me out. His girlfriend or wife is sitting in the front seat with a frown, watching him.

Yes, I'm probably a little underdressed to be working in the mechanic shop, but I'm comfortable. It's hotter than hell today, and since I own the place, I get to wear whatever the fuck I want. And today, I wanted to wear cutoff jean shorts and a damn tank top. So, sue me.

"Hello, darling," he drawls as he approaches me.

I roll my eyes so hard that I'm sure Rat hears me where he's working in the back. "How can I help you?" I ask a little less professionally than usual.

He frowns at my tone before replacing it with a grin I am sure has charmed him into many women's panties in his life. "I'm looking for the owner. I'm here to pick up a custom rebuild I was told has been completed."

"You must be talking about the cherry-red 1968 Dodge Charger. You can follow me." I lead him through to the office, where I retrieve the paperwork from behind the counter.

He watches me closely as I get everything together and add some last-minute items to the invoice. "So, where is the owner? I would love to talk to him about getting a discount on this deal."

His words stop me cold in my tracks. See, men are idiots.

"I am the owner. You approved the estimate and all other extra costs per email. There won't be a discount."

“Listen, woman.” His charming facade has disappeared, and now I get to see the asshole beneath. “I am not paying you another hundred grand.” He leans over the counter into my space.

I bristle at the fact that this asshole thinks he can intimidate me, my panther already itching for a fight. Leaning forward, I get up in his face. “You can pay me what you owe me or get the fuck out. Those are your options.”

He grabs my wrist in what I would assume is a firm grasp for a human male his size, but I’m not some simpering girl he can push around. My panther growls lowly in my mind for a moment before she starts purring.

Fuck.

I know what that means. A groan escapes me as his scent hits me. An involuntary shiver works its way through my body, my nipples pebble tight through my tank top, and slickness gathers between my legs. Dom is here.

“Is there a reason you have your hands on my woman?” His voice carries across the inner office from where he stands, leaning against the outer door.

He is gorgeous, even if I won’t admit it aloud. Olive-toned skin, with dark tousled hair and tattooed muscles that I want to run my tongue over. The man glares at me before turning to see who would dare interrupt him. He quickly releases my wrist at the sight of Domenico Esposito.

“I’m here to pick up my vehicle,” he tries to keep the bravado in his voice.

“So, get your shit and get out,” Dom replies as he prowls across the room to my side.

It’s easy to see he’s a feline shifter, the way he moves gives him away. I step back from him when he tries to touch me, glaring at the idiot the fates sent to be my mate.

“He isn’t taking shit out of my shop before he pays his bill. This isn’t your business, Dom. You would do well to

remember that.”

We glare at each other for long moments before Dom glares at the man. “Come back when you can pay. Now, get the fuck out.”

The man seems like he may want to push the argument, but the aura of danger that surrounds Dom has him thinking twice. He hightails it out the door without another word, but I’m sure I will be hearing from him again.

“What do you want?” I ask Dom, frustrated with his presence and my reaction to him.

“You can’t keep running from me, Rylee. You’re my mate.”

I snort. “I told you I wouldn’t be your mate. I can’t stand you, and the idea of letting you touch me, much less fuck me, has my skin crawling.” Lies. Every word out of my mouth is a fucking lie. But I won’t let another idiot man break my heart.

“Then we need to end the mating bond.” His words are harsh and final. “I won’t walk around knowing my mate is less than five miles down the road, and I can’t claim her.”

I stare at him in disbelief. I knew this was what needed to be done, but for him to say the words out loud after chasing me relentlessly for the past six months was not what I expected. Memories of my eighteenth birthday flood back, and I close my eyes. The joy of finding my one true mate and the excruciating pain of refusal. My mind is awash with things I thought I had long forgotten, and everything around me disappears.

Minutes or hours later, I really can’t be sure, I find myself sitting on Domenico’s lap, cradled to his chest, while he gently comforts me as I cry.

Domenico

I hold Rylee in my arms for the first time ever, and I can’t believe how perfect she feels. I came to her place of

business because I couldn't stay away. I didn't mean to get angry at her and threaten to end the bond that I continue to fight, but I let my frustration get the best of me.

Although I didn't mean to make her cry, it gives me some sense of perverted satisfaction that I am finally seeing her vulnerability instead of her regular resentment and anger.

I've never gotten an answer from her about why she is so against us being mates. At first, I thought it was due to the constant battle between the families, but I think it goes deeper than that. She finally winds down, and I'm thrilled she doesn't automatically push away from me. I'd hold her forever if that's what she wants.

"Do you want to tell me what that was about?" I ask, keeping my voice low.

She wipes the tears from her face quickly and pushes off my lap. I let her go and watch as she grabs several tissues, wipes at her eyes again, and blows her nose. She turns from me, and I can already feel her trying to pull away and block me again.

I sigh loudly, already fed up with this. I know I won't get anywhere else today, and there is still more work to do before she lets me in.

Standing, I frown at her. "You won't talk to me, and you don't want to be with me. Should we just move on? I won't be able to love anyone as I would you, but I can still find a woman and have a family with her."

I grit my teeth when she just shrugs without looking at me. How can she act like this doesn't mean a damn thing?

I study her for a moment. "So be it," I say. "Take care of yourself."

Turning away from her, I walk out, hoping she'll call me back, but to no avail. I drive away from her, looking in my rearview mirror. When she steps outside and stares as I drive away, it gives me a bit of hope.

She may think I am done, but I am far from it. Seeing her interest at that moment and the fact she let me see her vulnerability makes my resolve even stronger. She won't know it until it's too late. Before she can realize what's happening, I will have her on her back with my cock deep inside of her and my mark on her skin.

Once we are mated, and I have marked her, it will be next to impossible for her to walk away from me. Until then, I will have to find ways of being in her presence and watching her without her knowing I'm still interested. It's going to be hard, I think, and then I laugh at the irony. The moment I sense my mate, my cock hardens to a degree that's beyond painful and extremely obvious, but I crave it anyway.

A person only need look at me to know how I feel because my cock perpetually stands out blatantly and is almost impossible to hide. My arousal darkens my complexion with desire, and my eyes heat with the need to fuck her until every block in the wall she built lays shattered at our feet.

I find myself turning toward the Fallen Legion MC compound. Draven should be there. He is Rylee's younger brother and may be able to offer me some insight into her psyche. Maybe he has some answers about why his sister is so stubborn.

It is as important for Draven and their club, as it is for me to mate with Rylee. Because this is the only thing that would bring the families together. If Rylee doesn't claim me as her mate after everything I've done, it just might destroy what little progress the two families have made coming together.

I drive through the large metal gates and up to the main building. Several of the Fallen Legion MC members stand watching me, ready to take me out if I make a wrong move, which only makes me smile. Cain, Draven's brother, stands on the top step with his arms crossed, glaring down at me.

"Why do you think you're welcome here whenever you want to stop by? Our families have not agreed on a treaty."

I almost snort. “For one thing, it’s your stubborn sister who’s preventing us from proceeding. Secondly, my sister is pregnant with my niece or nephew, and I like to check on her well-being. Thirdly, it’s none of your fucking business.”

Cain’s eyebrows rise. “Really? This is my family and my compound. It’s absolutely my business.”

I sigh. “Do you really think I’m here to cause trouble?”

“You’d be an idiot to try, and although I know you’re an arrogant bastard, I’ve not seen any evidence of you being ignorant or insane. So far.”

“Oh, wow, thanks, Cain. I’m actually here to see your brother.”

“He’s in the back garden, I think. The two lovebirds have barely left each other’s sides since they moved here.”

“Give them a fucking break. They almost lost each other,” I say with a glare.

Cain stiffens at my words.

“Yes, someday you and I are going to talk about that incident. You were the cause of it.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Yes, and you know the circumstances. Besides, I fixed it in time.”

“Barely,” he retorts.

Jesus, fuck. Am I always going to have that thrown in my face? “Listen, we’ll talk another time. I have work to do, and I need to talk to Draven.”

Cain steps aside and throws his arm out, gesturing in the right direction. “Of course. Go straight back and out the double doors.”

“Thank you.”

He stops me as I pass. “Just in case you lose your head, you’ll be watched carefully and with guns pointing in your direction.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I retort with an eye roll.

“Good. Until our families have united, you’re still our enemy,” Cain points out once more.

Shrugging him off, I walk on because I don’t want to hear his thoughts anymore. I need answers and hope to get them from my mate’s brother. Besides, I could also feel my panther fighting for dominance, wanting to tear the man apart, and I knew that wouldn’t end well.

The gardens are beautiful, although not as big as the ones at my house. It still takes me a few minutes to find the couple. I study them before interrupting. They make a beautiful pair, and I can feel the strength of their bond from where I stand. It makes me even more determined to knock down Rylee’s walls and mate with her. I want what they have.

Draven senses me and stiffens before he catches sight of me. He says something to Aryanna, and she turns to me with a wide smile. She stands and races toward me, only to have Draven wrap an arm around her, stopping her.

He whispers something in my sister’s ear that makes her blush before he releases her, and she walks the last steps toward me.

“Hello, brother,” Aryanna says, hugging me tightly.

“Hello, Ary.”

Releasing my sister, I return my attention to Draven.

“Don’t expect me to hug you or call you brother,” Draven says, making me laugh.

“Don’t worry, asshole. Hugging you is the last thing I want to do.”

Draven and I laugh when we see the scowl on my sister’s face. “Will you two ever get along?” she asks.

Draven looks at me with a smirk. “What do you mean? We *are* getting along.”

I laugh at the confusion on Aryanna's face. "Don't worry, little sis. It's a guy thing."

Draven tightens his hold on her and kisses the side of her head before he turns to me. "What brings you here?"

"I need your advice on what to do with your sister," I say, my words clipped and to the point.

Draven sighs. "Oh, hell. Let's go sit down."

I sit in one of the cushioned chairs while they sit back down on the settee.

"What do you want to know about Rylee?"

"I want to know why she's being so stubborn. I know she desires me, but she's fighting it."

Draven shakes his head. "I have no idea. All I know is that she changed a little over a year ago. She went from happy-go-lucky to stone-cold and serious. I thought at first it had to do with her finding out you were her mate and the fact our families were at war, but now I'm not so sure."

I lean forward with my elbows on my knees, contemplating everything Draven says. "Could someone have hurt her?"

"If someone did, I don't know who it could be," Draven says with a frown.

"I saw her earlier, and she pushed me away again. I said if she wanted to ignore our bond, so be it."

Aryanna gasps loudly, her hand pressed to the swell of her stomach. "No, Dom, you can't give up."

I chuckle. "When have you ever seen me give up? I said it to throw her off. She'll be mine eventually, but I'm hoping sooner rather than later because we've already been apart a year."

"She's a stubborn little cat," Draven says, still frowning.

I almost snort. Rylee being stubborn was an understatement. “Yes, she is.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything else to tell you,” Draven says, and he looks like he means it.

“If you find anything, give me a call.”

“I will.” Draven nods.

Aryanna stands and hugs me tightly. “I’ll be able to see you soon, right?”

“You can come home anytime. I know you have a mate now, but where you grew up will always be your home.”

“Her home is with me,” Draven growls as he stands.

I snort. “I know that, buttf ace. But I’ll never take her childhood home away from her. And you are also welcome.”

I can tell Draven still doesn’t like it, but too bad. I will continue to look out for my sister for the rest of our lives. It doesn’t matter if she has a mate or not. But I don’t say the words out loud.

“I’ve got things to do,” I say instead. “I’m still cleaning up our father’s messes. There are more than I anticipated.”

“Isn’t Benny, Father’s assistant, helping you?” Aryanna asks.

“As much as I’ll let him. I’m still not sure of his loyalty,” I say honestly. “I’ll see you soon.”

I walk back through the compound, ignoring the hostile MC members, and get in my car. Pulling out of the driveway, I let my frustration out and hit the steering wheel a few times. I have never been this aggravated, and it is starting to affect my life because she intrudes into my mind several times a day.

Maybe a good long run in my cougar form will make me feel better. If not, I’m afraid I’ll start killing people for the fun of it, which is never a good idea.

Chapter Two

Dutchess

My heart shatters into a million little pieces as I watch Domenico drive away from me. I felt the urge to call him back to me when he walked toward the door, to fall back into his arms and allow him to keep the world away. But I know I can't. I won't open myself up to him or any man. I won't let another person destroy me the way *he* did.

Raymond "Zero" Harris. Vice President to the Fallen Legion MC and my father's best friend.

Before my eighteenth birthday, I had never felt true pain. I had been just like every young girl, with stars in my eyes, dreaming of finding my one true mate. But it was all just a stupid fairy tale. The moment I realized that Zero was my mate, my heart skipped a beat. I had always found him handsome and knew he was a good man, so I was happy with who the mate fate had seen fit to gift me.

Zero was not as pleased. The horrified look on his face when he realized what was happening still haunts me. Thank God we were alone when I felt the mating bond. I don't know if I would ever be able to face my father after being rejected by my mate.

Now, it's happening all over again. I am fully aware that Domenico is not Zero, but the pain still haunts me. I should at least make an effort, if not for myself, then for the club, and for Draven and Aryanna. They deserve to be happy even if I can't be.

Shutting down the computers and switching off the lights, I slowly close the shop before heading toward the compound.

"Hey there, my favorite sister," my older brother Cain says as he wraps an arm around my shoulder.

I chuckle before ducking out beneath his arm. “I better be your favorite sister. I am the only one you have.”

He smiles at me fondly, something he would never do if anyone else were around to see it. He has a reputation to uphold, and smiling at his baby sister isn’t part of that. They gave him the nickname “Doom” once he patched in because you’re doomed once he has you in his sights.

“The old man was looking for you,” he calls out as I walk away.

I was rather hoping to avoid having this conversation today. When Domenico originally came here to broker peace with the Fallen Legion MC, my father made it clear that it was my choice. But he has since made it clear that I need to do what is best for the club. I guess it isn’t really about whether I’m happy or not as long as he gets what he wants. I’m not even allowed to be a member of his precious MC, but I’m supposed to change my entire life to make sure they always come out on top.

This day has been too much for me, and the rage from earlier sparks back to life as I stomp up the stairs to my father’s office. I don’t bother knocking before I enter and instantly regret it. There’s a piece of club ass, butt-naked, bouncing on my father’s cock like her damn life depends on it. I don’t flinch when my father’s gaze collides with mine. It would only show weakness.

“We’ll finish this later,” he says, smacking the tiny blonde on her ass.

She tries to protest, but my father is done. Dumping her on the ground, he tucks away his cock before glaring at her. “Get out. This is club business.”

I wait until she scurries out of the room with her clothing clutched to her chest, before closing the door and taking a seat. I wait patiently as my father types away on his phone before finally turning his attention to me.

“You need to stop being a brat about this, Rylee.” His words cut deep, but I will never let that show.

“What do you want from me, Grimm?” I ask. Calling him Dad is something I stopped doing years ago. He doesn’t deserve the moniker.

The door behind me opens, and I feel Zero as he enters the small office. It doesn’t matter that he rejected me, ended the mating bond, and damn near almost killed me. I am still attuned to him in a way I can’t explain.

“I want you to do your damn duty to the Fallen Legion MC!” my father shouts, slamming his fist on the table.

I fix my father with a glare. “But I’m not part of your precious MC. You smacked a property patch on my back the moment I turned sixteen to keep boys away, but that’s it.”

“You are my daughter. You were raised by this club. That mechanic shop you have was built with our money, and it’s only by our grace that you continue to run it.”

I feel all the blood drain from my face. He knows me so well. It will fucking kill me if he takes that shop from me, it’s all I have. The fight drains out of me, and I know it doesn’t matter how I feel, I will do whatever he decides.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask softly.

“I want you to call him right now and tell him you accept his mating.” His words are firm and final.

“Fine,” I find my voice again. “But I want you to sign the shop over to me before I do this.”

Rustling behind me lets me know that Zero is moving before he deposits a stack of pages on the desk in front of me. “We knew you would say that.”

He hands me a pen as I read through the paperwork before signing. I stare at my father for long moments before pulling my cell phone from the front of my jean shorts. I scroll through the meager contacts and find Domenico’s number.

It barely rings before he answers. “What’s wrong?” His voice carries a note of panic.

“Nothing,” I glare at my father as I speak to Dom. “I’m busy packing, and I will be at the compound by eight.”

“Rylee,” he says lowly on the other end. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“I am accepting the mating.”

I end the phone call before another word can leave his lips. This is what he wanted after all, so he should be happy, no matter how I feel.

“Do you know the only difference between me and all your club whores?” I ask my father, but I don’t wait for his reply. “Your men don’t get to fuck me. I’m still just a piece of ass, someone you can use to get whatever you want.”

For a split-second, a look that may be guilt flits across my father’s face before it’s gone again. Shaking my head, I push my chair back and stand, my gaze landing on Zero. A cruel smile curves my lips. He shakes his head at the sight, but I won’t be stopped.

“You should thank Zero.” I glance at my father over my shoulder. “If he hadn’t rejected me as his mate all those years ago, you wouldn’t have anything to trade to Dom.”

“What. The. Fuck.” My father roars as I calmly walk out of his office.

I hear furniture break and fists hitting flesh as I walk away from the office with the first genuine smile I have had in years.

Domenico

I look at my phone, confused. “What the hell just happened?”

I sit back in my office chair and replay Rylee’s words in my mind. I am getting my wish for her to give in and let the

mating happen, but it sounded like she was being tortured.

I glance at the clock. Within two hours, my mate will finally be in my house, and I don't understand why I'm not more excited. Maybe it was the fact that I wanted her to decide on her own, to come to me of her own free will. It didn't sound like she wanted to be anywhere near me, much less my mate.

I'll get the answers eventually. Right now, I have to decide how to play this. I could act enthusiastic and smug, but I think that would just push her farther away.

What if I ignored her and gave her time to accept it on her own? It would be pure hell for me because my body craves to be deep inside her cunt, to release all the frustrated cum I have stored there, just waiting for her. Then no shifter who comes into contact with her will ever doubt who she belongs to.

I call down to the kitchen to find my housekeeper.

"Kitchen." Someone answers on the second ring.

"It's Dom. Can you find me the housekeeper, Mrs. Wells, please?"

"I'll send her to you," the person replies.

"Thank you."

I end the call without any further chitchat. Within five minutes, there's a knock on my office door.

"Come in," I call out without lifting my head from the paperwork I'm sifting through.

An older woman walks in. Our housekeeper, Mrs. Wells, had been with the family since I was young, and she never seemed to change. Her hair had always been blonde with gray mixed in, and her body was short and round. She was the most cheerful person I'd ever known.

"What can I do for you on this wonderful sunny day, Mr. Esposito?"

“I need the first bedroom on the left made up for a guest.”

“Absolutely. When can we expect them?”

“In about an hour.”

Mrs. Wells laughed. “It will be done.”

“I know. She’ll be living here from now on.”

“Oh. So, she’s a special guest?” The woman smiles, enticed by this tidbit of information.

“She’s my mate.”

Her eyes widen, and she claps cheerfully. “Oh, my. That is wonderful.”

I nod in agreement. “It is, for the most part.”

“Why is that?” she asks.

“She doesn’t want to be.”

I chuckle when the older woman scowls.

“That’s absurd.”

A grin spreads across my face. “It’s a long story. She’ll be mine eventually.”

“Of course she will.”

I love her conviction. It makes me feel better, even if there is still some doubt niggling at the back of my mind.

“How would you like us to act with her, sir?”

“I want you all to make her feel at home here. I want her pampered and to feel safe.”

“I will spread the word.”

“I’d appreciate it. Now, you better go.”

“Yes, sir.”

I felt like I had just gotten back to work when a commotion erupted in the front foyer. I stand and make my

way there, knowing who I'm likely to find. Rylee stands between two of my guards with a scowl on her face.

"Hello, Rylee."

Her scowl doesn't change, but she gives me a curt nod.
"Hi."

"How about I show you your room? I'll have some of the guys bring your suitcases up."

Another shrug before she follows me up the wide stairs.

I stop at the first door and open it. I watch her face closely for any hint of emotion. I am pleased by her surprised reaction, and I can't wait to see her expression when she finds out it's just hers and that she won't be in my room.

"I hope this is all right with you. I thought a bright room with an en suite would be comfortable," I say as she crosses the room, taking in every detail.

She turns back to me when she gets to the window.
"This isn't your room?"

I shake my head. It's hard to keep a neutral look on my face when I see her confusion.

"No, my room is at the end of the hallway."

"Oh, I expected..."

I tilt my head to the side. "You expected what?"

"I thought we'd be sleeping together like most mated pairs do," Rylee says.

I pause when a few guys deliver her bags, setting them just inside the room.

"Thank you, guys." The men nod and leave us alone once more.

"Now, I can answer your question. Yes, I'm sure most mated couples sleep in the same room, but we're not mated."

"That's why I'm here, Dom."

I nod. “Yes, let’s talk about why you’re here. Your father is forcing you, isn’t he?”

Rylee grits her teeth before she nods.

I sigh. “That’s what I thought.” I push down the feeling of disappointment because I was hoping she was here on her own. “So, I guess that doesn’t change what we decided before.”

Her brows snap together. “What did we decide?”

“To ignore the mating bond.”

She doesn’t say anything, and her expression goes blank. “So, what do you expect me to do?”

“You are free to live here as long as you like.”

“You’d let me live here even though we aren’t mated?” she asks in shock.

“Yes. Because of our siblings, we are family whether we want to be or not.”

“But my father expects us to become mates.”

I shrug like she had done earlier at the garage, and I can tell she doesn’t like it. “I don’t care what your father wants. I will not have a mate who loathes me or is here by force. I’m not that much of an asshole.”

“I don’t loathe you,” Rylee says softly, surprising me.

I laugh loudly. “Then I’d hate to see what happens if you really didn’t like me.”

“Dom, this is what you and my father wanted.”

“Yes, I used to, but I’d rather not feel your resentment or dislike as time passes.”

“I…”

“How about you rest? I’ll send someone up to unpack for you.”

“You don’t need to do that. I never had help at home.”

I walk to the door and turn. “Unfortunately for you, this is your home now. I want you to feel comfortable here.”

“What about us?” she asks nervously.

I look away for a moment before facing her once more. “I think if we try hard enough, we can avoid seeing each other except for meals.”

“You won’t care?”

“I don’t have a choice, Rylee. I will come to terms with it and be able to move on eventually. It’s not your problem. Dinner will be ready in an hour. We don’t dress up, so come in comfortable clothing.”

I walk out even though I can tell she wanted to say something. I can’t take it another moment. It is damn hard for me to act like I don’t care and keep my arousal at bay so she doesn’t see what she really does to me.

Entering my office, I close the door behind me and sit in the old dark leather chair behind my desk. The chair that used to be my father’s. I have no remorse about taking the bastard’s life. He was a monster and was determined to destroy his only daughter, my sister. I couldn’t let that happen. As the years have passed, I noticed my father getting a little more unhinged, and it affected the family and the businesses we owned. Sadly, I waited too long to take over, and much of the damage is irreversible. But I am doing my best.

Now, I need to move on with life. I can’t change the past, but the future looks more and more promising. I just have to figure out how to make Rylee mine because if I don’t, I can see this destroying more than just my heart.

Chapter Three

Dutchess

The past twenty-four hours have been the longest and most frustrating in my entire life. If I knew living in the lap of luxury would drive me to tears, I would have told Domenico to come to me instead. Now, I'm stuck here in this monstrous mansion.

My father calls me every hour, on the hour, but I don't answer any of his calls. He is using me to further his own agenda, and the asshole didn't even have the goddamned decency to manipulate me. He doesn't give a shit about me or my happiness, only what he can get out of the deal.

I'm of a good mind to take Dom up on his offer. If he never mates with me, my father will never get the territory or the money from running the Esposito family's drugs. But I also won't get what I want, and I can't stand the thought of my father turning my business into another front for one of his illegal ventures. I worked my ass off to keep the mechanic shop legal and build up a reputation with people driving hundreds of miles to have work done.

I needed to talk to Domenico. Assure him that I agree to the mating and get him to mark me somewhere visible so my father can get off my damn back and stop calling me.

Walking down the stairs, I make my way into the kitchen and find Mrs. Wells unpacking some groceries.

"Hello, Miss West." She smiles at me with fondness that I would think is only reserved for people she knows.

"Please, call me Rylee," I say for the tenth time.

She doesn't say a word, only continues finishing her chore. I wait until she has completed the task before speaking.

"Do you know if Domenico is home?"

“He should be out by the pool. He always takes a swim before lunch,” she says as she walks past me. “If you go through the lounge, there’s a door leading to the pool patio.”

My feet carry me in the right direction as she speaks. I know she is trying to be subtle about her curiosity but failing miserably.

Opening the patio door, I step out into the warm midafternoon sun. I can hear the slosh of the water before I even lay eyes on him. Tipping my head back, I absorb the rays pounding down on me before I face him. My panther stirs in the back of my mind, and I contemplate letting her out for a run, but now is not the time.

I need to take care of business first. My feet carry me to the edge of the pool, where I have a clear view of the man who would be my mate. It definitely won’t be a chore to have to look at Domenico. The man is gorgeous.

His bulky form slices through the water smoothly, his bronze skin on display. Slickness gathers between my thighs as I watch his muscles move with every stroke through the water. I never pretended to be unaffected by him or even that I wasn’t attracted. Domenico is every woman’s wet dream, and if the situation were different, I would happily ride him like a pony.

“Rylee.”

The deep timbre of his voice invades my lust-addled brain. Looking down, I find him resting his elbows on the edge, his dark gaze glued to my face. Shaking myself out of my thoughts, I lean down.

“Do you need something?” he asks, a look of concern on his face.

I haven’t spoken to him since he left me alone in my new room. He doesn’t even join me for meals, although he said he would.

“No. But we do need to talk, Dom.”

“I thought we were done talking,” he says, pulling himself out of the water.

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth at the sight of his bare chest, lightly dusted with dark hair. The damn V beside his hips leads into the green swim trunks that cling to his thick thighs. I stare at him far longer than I should allow.

“My eyes are up here,” Dom chuckles.

“I know,” I reply, giving him one last look over before returning my gaze to his face. “I need this mating,” I admit.

“And I need a mate that can stand me.” He runs a towel over his face and body before continuing. “Although, it seems you don’t find me completely disgusting.”

“Don’t be a prick, Dom,” I say, stepping into his space. “You’re hot as fuck, and you’re well aware of it. It’s not you. I didn’t want any man. I didn’t want a mate.”

A frown furrows his brow, his hands clenching at his side. “Do you care to explain that statement?”

I knew it was going to come down to this. Of course, he wouldn’t be happy with me giving the bare minimum. Domenico is the type of man who wants it all—my secrets, my worries, my heart, everything.

“There was a man before, my first mate...” My words are soft, the remembered pain thrumming through my veins once more. “He rejected me.”

“Jesus,” Dom curses. “Why? Why would he do such a thing?”

“I never bothered to ask.”

“He could have fucking killed you!”

Dom’s voice carries across the patio and into the garden. He paces away from me, visibly irate at my words. His breathing is harsh as he works through his anger before returning to me. Domenico grabs my face and slams his lips against mine, kissing me like he needs to make sure I’m real.

This is my first kiss, and although I am not exactly sure I know what to do, my body does. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I lift on my toes and press my chest against his. His body heat scorches me through my shirt.

The kiss is over too soon, and I want to stomp my foot like a child to show my displeasure. But Dom isn't done. His fingers thread through my hair, and he tilts my head back, keeping me in place. His gaze scans my face before nodding.

"I want you, Rylee. God knows I do." He grinds his erection against my stomach. "But I know you need time. You need to trust me before we can move forward with this."

"Dom..." I groan his name.

"Let me finish." He smiles softly. "Take some time and get to know me. Let me prove I can be a good mate for you, and then you can decide whether you really want to be my mate or not."

"Are you sure?" I ask Dom softly.

"Time isn't going to change how I feel about you," he says calmly. "But it may change how you feel about me."

Domenico

From the way Rylee is trembling as she stands in front of me, I am guessing it's partly from a lack of sexual fulfillment and the rest from anger. I can tell I'm frustrating her, but I want her to be sure she wants to give herself to me because she can never go back to the way it is now. She'll be my mate for the rest of her life.

Fuck, my cock has ached every day since I learned she was my mate. I never imagined I'd have to struggle to get my mate to want me. I've never in my life had a problem with women. All I usually had to do was snap my fingers, but I've never felt this kind of frustration, and I don't know how much longer I can stand it.

I watch her walk away and bite my lip to keep from letting my cougar out and growling my displeasure. After the door closes behind her, I sit down on the edge of an outdoor lounge chair and put my face in my hands. If I had known it would be this hard to keep my hands off her, I might not have let her move in. Fuck. This situation was going to drive me mad.

Goddammit. I stand, slide my robe on, and walk through the house, up the stairs, and into my suite. After a quick shower, I dress and head back down to my office.

I need all the time I can squeeze out of every day to get my work done. Mrs. Wells will have a maid bring my lunch to me. It's a routine I'm trying to get used to. Before Rylee moved in, I made it a point to eat lunch in the family dining room. It helped me to take a break in the day to keep my aggravation and temper to a minimum, and it seemed something came up every fucking day to cause me to want to murder someone.

A swim and the noon meal is the only break I allow myself. But, since Rylee moved in, I'd wanted to give her some space. So, I eat away from the room I used to use and close myself in my office.

I don't resent it because I am able to get more work done, and there is a lot of it to get through. It also gives Rylee more time alone to work through all her issues, which I hope helps push her into coming to me sooner.

Someone knocks loudly. "Enter," I yell.

"Hey, Boss, they need you down at the warehouse."

I look up at one of my trusted men, Tommy, and nod. "I'll go now."

"I'll have the car ready," Tommy replies before leaving me alone once more.

I walk out of the house and slide into one of our secure cars. It will take forty minutes to get where we are going. It

was a lot of time for me to think about the magnitude of the problems I'm facing.

Since the day my father died, or rather when I killed him, I'd been dealing with some fucked-up shit. I found out that my father had started a human trafficking business on the side. The fucker had kept it a secret because he knew how I felt about shit like that, and I would have fought him. Trying to dismantle it is taking longer than I thought it would. Taking out the people in charge and the ones kidnapping the girls was next to impossible because they would scatter like rats if we got close to them.

Helping the women they rescued get back home was harder than I thought. I'd been amazed that a few men hadn't wanted their wives and daughters back because they considered them soiled and dirty, so I felt it was up to me to give them a place to stay and get them back on their feet.

Another problem was the men my father had operating the trafficking. In the beginning, I had a few arrested, but because of some slick lawyer, they were getting out right away and didn't have to spend even one night in jail, which was unacceptable. So, I started taking their punishments into my own hands.

Besides taking time to finish destroying the trafficking and helping the women, I had the lawful but sometimes questionable businesses we owned.

I was anxious to get back to my office. My father had taken so much time for his side business that he neglected the legal or semi-legal ones we already had. We had secret game rooms with high-stakes poker in the basements of our other businesses and clubs. We also laundered money and had a loan shark, Andy, who was good at getting the due money.

Everything illegal could have me arrested but not imprisoned for the rest of my life like the human trafficking would. I knew my cougar would never allow me to go to prison, but the life I had now would change, which was unacceptable.

I turned a few of the warehouses the family owned into makeshift jails where the bad guys waited. I took time when we had to drive there and dispose of the garbage that destroyed people's lives. I wouldn't say I enjoyed torture and murder, but it did give me some satisfaction that I made the world a better place.

Once we reach the warehouse, I look over the seven men tied to chairs waiting for me.

"How is everything?" I ask as I pull off my suit jacket and hand it to another man.

"Boss, we might have a problem."

"What now?" I ask, frustrated.

"One of these men is claiming to be a cop."

My eyebrows rose in surprise. "Which one?"

My man pointed to the cop, and I walked over for a closer look. "My man says you're a cop."

"Yes. I've been undercover for a few years."

What the hell?

"And in all that time, you didn't have a chance to tear the business down?" I ask.

"We got a few guys. We have to be careful of everything because if there's one little mistake, we have to start over. We've taken a few guys out, and they're in protective custody until this goes to trial."

"I have to make a call," I say, walking off. I call my guy at the FBI to check his name and text a picture to make sure the guy is telling the truth and not just trying to cover his ass.

I am bothered by the fact that I almost killed a cop. It was one thing I needed to talk about with my guys. They need to verify if any of these men are undercover cops before they end up killing the wrong people.

“What do you want us to do, Boss?” Tommy asks when I rejoin them.

“Give him the shot, and then untie him,” I say.

“Wait. What the fuck. What shot?” the cop yells, trying to fight the ropes that keep him tied up.

I study the man. “It’s a drug that will make you unconscious, and you’ll forget what happened today. It won’t hurt you except for a mild headache. You might be concerned about the lost time you can’t remember and the fact the men you were trying to catch had disappeared, but otherwise, you’ll be fine.”

“Jesus.” The cop pulls on the bindings once more. “You can’t just take them out, man. It’s murder.”

I stand in front of the cop with my hands behind my back and talk calmly and with conviction. “I tried your way, and the pricks were out in hours, and their cases have been dropped already. Your system is failing the good people who want to live their lives, and you’re letting these monsters back on the street.”

I can tell the cop understands what I’m saying and probably agrees with me, but he is one of the supposed “good guys,” so it’s hard for him to break the law or think of me doing it.

“Are you sure this drug will work?” the cop asks.

“Yes.”

“How long will I be unconscious?”

“Long enough to get you back to town,” I say patiently.

“Good. I don’t want to know or remember what’s going on here. Where will you take me?”

“We’ll put you close to a police department and then call it in.”

The cop nods. “I think I owe you, but I won’t remember, so, oh well.” The guy smirks.

I chuckle at his sense of humor. “You do owe me, and I’ll remind you of it if I need you.”

“Fuck,” the cop growled. “Let’s do this.”

I signal Nicolas, and he produces a syringe. “You’re in charge of him.”

“You got it, Boss.”

I stand to the side and wait for the group with the unconscious cop to leave before returning to work. I want to be home before dinner and maybe talk to Rylee, but time is slipping away.

I know what I’m doing probably makes me look like a monster, which I will admit to on some level. But I will never hurt an innocent, and that’s all that matters.

Chapter Four

Dutchess

I know the moment Domenico is back home. Home? When the fuck did I start referring to this place as home? I should probably start getting used to the idea, especially if Dom finally mates me.

Slowly, I set down the book I was reading and exited my room. I'm not sure where he has been or what he's been doing, but I can feel his energy pulsing through the house, and he is pissed. His anger coats the air, pressing down on me like a physical presence.

First, I seek him out in his office, but he isn't there. I do a cursory sweep of the other rooms, but I know where he is. I have lived with violent criminals all my life, and there is only one place he could be. Taking the stairs two at a time, I rush to his bedroom. A sudden inexplicable need to ensure that he is unharmed has me almost sprinting down the hallway to his room.

I don't bother knocking. Pushing through the door, I am assaulted by his scent. Rich coffee and a musk unique to Dom. His scent is polluted with the coppery tang of blood, and fear claws at my throat as I force my feet to carry me across the room and into his en suite bathroom.

I can hear the shower running and take a small measure of comfort in knowing that he is well enough to do that. Steam assaults me once I open the door. The glass enclosure is steamed over, keeping me from fully seeing Domenico.

"Rylee." His voice is flat, dangerous.

"I..." I clear my suddenly constricted throat. "I heard you get in. Smelled the blood."

"Sorry to disturb you."

My heart races at the way he speaks. "Are you okay?" I ask, looking at the bloody remnants of his clothes in the

corner.

“Just leave.” He sighs loudly. “This isn’t any of your concern.”

His words land like a physical slap. I can’t demand to know everything in his life or be included while I continue to push him away. He doesn’t know me and can’t trust me if I’m not willing to let him in. I don’t want to be trapped in this life, this house, or this mating with a man who constantly hides things from me.

“I deserve to know what you’re bringing into our house.”

The water shuts off, and Domenico opens the shower door, glaring at me. “This is my business, not yours.”

I know his words should have anger rising to the surface, but all I feel is lust. Staring at the perfection that is Domenico Esposito, naked, water still running down his body, my mind is fried. His engorged cock drew my attention and kept me captivated.

“Woman,” he growls. “If you keep staring at my dick like you want to swallow it, I won’t be held liable for my actions.” My gaze snaps back to his. His pupils are blown wide with lust. “I’m trying to be a gentleman and prove that I’m worthy of you, but you are not making it easy.”

Nodding, I walk out of the bathroom, affording him a moment of privacy, but I don’t go far. Instead, I fall into a chair he has close to the balcony doors. The room I like is his office, which is masculine. Dark wood furniture, emerald-green bedding, and this buttery-soft leather chair.

Dom emerges from the bathroom wearing only a pair of grey sweatpants, which do nothing to disguise the impressive erection I can’t stop thinking about.

“Whose blood is covering your clothes?” I know it’s not his because he doesn’t have a mark on him.

“Just let it go.” He doesn’t face me, and my temper is finally starting to rear its head.

“Listen to me,” I say angrily as I stomp toward him. “You claim to want me as a mate. I won’t be kept in the dark again. I won’t live being lied to and used the rest of my life without knowing it.”

Silence descends on us, and I think he won’t answer me, that he will simply be another man that thinks I’m just a pretty face and a nice set of tits.

“My father was running a human trafficking ring,” he says before facing me. “I’ve been trying to dismantle it, but it’s not as simple as I hoped.”

His honesty surprises me. I was willing to bet my last dollar he wouldn’t tell me what was going on. “And the blood?”

“I tried to turn them over to the police, but they have someone higher up that keeps getting them out of prison.” Dom sinks down on the edge of the bed, running his hands through his hair roughly. “Now I have them locked in a warehouse.”

Sinking to my knees before him, I take his face in my hands. “Tell me.”

“My men and I spend hours torturing them, trying to find out who’s in charge. I need to cut the head off the snake. They are hurting innocent people. Children.”

Dom’s voice breaks on the last word, and my heart stutters in my chest. This man, this mobster, with all his charm and ego, is hurting for people he doesn’t know. I’ve learned more about Domenico in the last ten minutes than I have in the past six months.

“Stay here,” I say before getting up and heading to the bathroom. Grabbing the bloody clothes, I bundle them inside a towel before walking out of the room. Outside by the pool, I start a fire in the pit. I wait until it’s roaring into the night before throwing the towel-wrapped bundle into it. Nicolai

watches me from the doorway, interest and confusion marring his features.

“Make sure it all burns away before putting out the fire,” I tell him as I make my way back inside. “But keep the ashes.”

“Why?” he asks, not moving from his spot.

“Because I fucking said so!”

He nods in affirmation, and I head back toward Dom’s room. He hasn’t moved from his spot in the time I was gone, and his stillness scares me a little. He is so used to being the man in charge, the one who has to take care of everyone else. I wonder if anyone has ever taken care of him.

“You need to sleep.”

“There’s too much work to do. My father fucked up everything. He did so many fucking things I wasn’t aware of.” His anger is palpable once more.

“And all those problems will still be there in the morning,” I say, pushing at his shoulder. “But you can’t fix anything if you’re burned out, Dom.”

He stares at me for a long time before speaking again. “Why do you care, Rylee? You don’t even want to be here.”

“You don’t know what I want.”

“I know you don’t want to be mine!”

“I don’t want to get hurt!” I yell, throwing my hands up in the air. “I don’t want to be lied to. I’m tired of people only seeing me as another woman who’s only in the way. I want to matter.”

I find my back flat on the bed, Dom hovering over me.

“You matter to me. I would rather die than have anything happen to you.” His nose runs along the column of my neck. “I see you. The way you treat the people that work for me, the kindness you show to others, the heart you try so hard to hide.”

“Dom,” I whisper.

“Let me take care of you, Rylee. Let me show you how good we can be together. We don’t have to mate immediately, but give me a chance to prove that I can be what you need.”

Domenico

I stare down at her and can see the need to fight against the fear that’s holding her back from mating with me.

My stomach starts to tighten when she continues to remain silent, preparing for the moment she pulls away from me once more. I don’t know how many more times I can take her pseudo rejection.

My head dips before she can say anything, and I use my lips and tongue to taste and nip at her mouth. I don’t penetrate inside of her mouth, giving her time to push me away.

When a minute has passed without a reaction from her, I deepen the kiss, making both of us groan. It seems to go on forever, and my cock gets harder and my body tighter making me more miserable. I lift my head and bite back my guttural moan at the sight of her rising passion. Her eyes are glazed and unfocused, and her complexion is tinged with crimson.

“Baby, if you don’t put a stop to this right now, I am making you mine, and it’s something you can’t go back on. You’ll be by my side and in my bed for the rest of our lives. Decide now.”

Rylee blinks a few times before raising her hand to cup the side of my face. “Make me yours, Dom.”

“Fucking A.” My mouth takes hers again, and I show her how deep my need for her goes. My lips ravish hers as my hand slides up and down her body. At one point, I get discouraged when I can’t feel her skin and tear her clothes off.

Rylee gasps. “Jesus, Dom. You could have just asked.”

“Naw. It would take too long.” Before she says anything more, I return to building her desire to a fever pitch to match mine.

I slide down her body, nipping at her neck and then her nipples before sucking them deep into my mouth, making her gasp and her nails dig into my shoulders.

“Dom...”

“I know, Baby. I’ll make you feel so good, but first, I need a taste of your sweet cunt. I’ve dreamed of it for so long there’s no way I’ll be able to stop now.”

I slide my hand down between her thighs and trace around her clit before thrusting into her cunt. She arches off the mattress with a scream.

“Fuck, you’re so damn tight,” I say. I finger-fucked her for another minute before adding a second finger. I could tell she was enjoying my touch by the copious amount of cum slipping from her body, and her moaning getting louder.

I move her legs apart enough to fit my shoulders. When I am finally where I want to be, I use my thumbs to separate her pussy lips and gently blow on her swollen red clit. A scream tears from her throat, making me smile.

“Dom ... please don’t make me wait,” she begs.

“Just a little bit longer, Mate.” I use my tongue to swipe as much of her cream as I can, moaning at the sweet, musky taste. I could eat her for every meal and be happy.

Her cunt tightens on my tongue as I push it as far into her as I can. She’s at a point where she will start really hurting if I keep at her and don’t give her the orgasm her body desperately needs.

I slide up her body and press my mouth to hers, making her taste herself. I’m a little shocked and grow harder when she moans her delight.

I raise my head. “Now comes the time I make you mine.”

I position my cock at the opening of her cunt, and without pausing, I thrust in, taking her with one brutal drive. I stay still for a moment. I don't sense any pain or fear coming from her, and her body throbs around my cock, telling me she's as desperate to bond with me, as I am with her. I grit my teeth to hold back my impending orgasm because I want her to come a few times before I let myself go.

“You tell me if you feel any discomfort.”

She nods. “I will. Please, move.”

I cup the back of her head with one of my hands and then place my other hand on her hip to keep her from moving.

My first plunge takes me as far into her as I can get, hitting her cervix. I don't stop but continue to hammer into her, pushing her over the first time. The sounds coming from her are so fucking sweet. I know I'll never get tired of hearing them.

I don't let her come down from the first orgasm before I urge her into another one. I let my cock piston inside of her with a force that would have hurt a human, but shifters can take more, and I can tell she needs the pain to help throw her over.

When I feel her tighten on me for the third time, I let myself go and give her every drop of cum I have stored in my balls, ensuring that every other shifter will know she was marked.

I lay on top of her, balancing my weight on my arms as we both fight to get some control over our bodies. My heart feels like it might burst from my chest, and I fight to get my breathing to settle.

When I'm able to, I slide us to the side, keeping my cock inside of her, and hold her tightly against my body. We stay silent for a long time. When I can't take the silence another moment, I tip her head back and study her expression.

Rylee looks tired, but there's a softness about her that hadn't been there before. There's some other emotion

shadowed in her eyes that tells me she might have given me her body, but she was still holding something back from me, and it was unacceptable. I wanted everything and would do whatever I needed to get it.

For some reason, I knew I might have won the fight and not the war, but it didn't matter. I'd be a part of her forever, and she'd just have to get used to it.

Chapter Five

Dutchess

I wake alone in Domenico's bed when the sunlight streams in through the gap in the curtains. Stretching, I feel every delicious twinge in my body from our time in the throes of passion last night. But I know it was nothing more than sex, a way to alleviate the itch we were both feeling. Without his bite and mark marring my skin, we will never be fully mated.

I never wanted Dom to be my mate, and I have been against him claiming me from the beginning. But there is a sadness deep within my soul that I fight with all my might. Regret that I have put up this wall between us that I may never be able to tear down.

But I don't have time to dwell on that right now. I have to get ready for work. My shop isn't going to run itself, and I have already left Rat in charge for too long.

Jumping in the shower, I turn the water up as hot as I can take it before standing beneath the spray. I wash my entire body and lather my hair, humming to myself. I am deep in thought, remembering the feel of Domenico's hands and lips all over my body. I find myself pushed against the cold tile, a hand banded around my throat, keeping me in place. Slowly, I open my eyes already knowing who is holding me captive.

"Did I not fuck you well enough last night?" Dom growls against my lips.

"It was quite satisfactory," I taunt.

"Is that why I can smell your slick cunt all the way on the other side of the house?"

He pushes his erection against my stomach. It's only then I realize that he is also completely naked. His beautifully tanned skin is on display, water wetting his dark hair to the color of coal. Lifting my leg, I hook it around his hip and rub my greedy pussy along his length.

“Do you want to try and do a better job of it?”

“Woman, you test me.” Domenico nips at my shoulder as he thrusts deep into my heat. “But how is a man supposed to say no to this perfection?”

He thrusts harshly, pushing my body up the slick wall.

“Harder,” I moan clawing at his back.

“If I fuck you any harder, Dutchess, I will rip you in half,” he growls.

“Promises, promises.”

His eyes shift from the usual onyx to a burnt orange as his cougar threatens to come to the forefront. Dom glares at me before swiftly withdrawing from me. In a move I was not expecting I find myself out of the shower and bent over the counter beside the wash basin. He thrusts into me again. Our gaze connected in the mirror in front of us.

“We need to stop this,” Dom pants, his voice strained as he harshly grips my hips, not moving an inch.

“If you stop now, I will kill you in your sleep,” I hiss.

“I never want to stop, Rylee.” He thrusts once before continuing. “But I can’t only have half of you. I want more than just your body. I want your heart and soul.”

“Dom...”

He cuts me off before I can speak. “I want all of you. To build a life and a family with you. And only being able to fuck you is driving me insane. Even if it is the best damn sex of my life. So, this is it, I won’t put myself through this again.”

He starts to thrust harshly, his fingers digging into my hips. He snakes a hand around my front, rubbing harsh circles around my clit, forcing my orgasm to the forefront. My knees buckle, pleasure overwhelming me.

“Rylee!” Domenico’s roar can be heard through the entire house as his cock kicks up inside me before releasing his warm cum.

Both of us breathe harshly as we orient ourselves, staring at one another in the mirror.

“The next time I’m inside you, you will be wearing my mark.” His words are final as he leaves me alone in the bathroom to work through my own thoughts and emotions. I know I will have to make a choice and see it through.

Getting dressed, I leave his scent all over me, finding some sort of perverse comfort in knowing that everyone can smell him. I may not be fully committed to the idea of being his mate, but I am finding that I enjoy the idea of being his.

Opening the heavy front door, I step out into the sunlight and smile. It’s a beautiful day outside, I just had an epic orgasm, and this day can only get better.

“Where are you going?” Dom asks from beside me.

“Work.”

“Rylee,” he starts, but I cut him off.

“Don’t even. I’m not some mafia princess that will sit around all day looking pretty, Dom. I have a business to run, and you won’t be stopping me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He chuckles.

“Besides, I think time away from you will clear my head. I have an ultimatum to work through.” I glare at him.

“I don’t know how you do it,” he says seriously. “How can you welcome me into your body, feel the pull of our mating bond, and then push me away?”

I caress his cheek, feeling the light scruff beneath my palm. “It’s harder than you think.”

He kisses my forehead before turning to walk away. “Take Theo with you. He’ll look after you, but stay out of your way.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“I know you don’t. But I would feel better knowing he’s there.” Domenico sighs. “You aren’t a biker princess anymore. In this country, you’re the fated mate of the head of the most powerful mafia family in La Cosa Nostra. Don’t doubt that you’re always in danger, Rylee.”

His words have shivers running down my spine before I nod in acceptance. Rather safe than sorry.

Domenico

I watch the car that my fated mate, and one of my best men, used to leave the estate. I want to bring her back in the worst way and have her beside me to make sure she’s protected, but I know without a doubt that if I tried to clip her wings, I’d lose her for sure.

A throat clearing behind me gets my attention, making me turn. I stiffen when I spot my father’s assistant, Benny, waiting for me.

“What do you need, Benny?” I ask, walking back to my office, knowing he’d follow.

“I got an updated list of the managers of the family’s businesses you wanted. I also had them make a list of their employees.”

I nod and take my usual seat behind my desk. “Good. What were your observations on each business?” I’m still not sure about Benny’s loyalty to me. He seems eager to please, but I always feel a darkness in the man that I can’t explain, and it keeps me on guard around him. Only time would tell if I’d be able to trust him or not.

“A few of the managers seemed suspicious, but I couldn’t get a clear read on them. You’ll have to meet them and see what you think.”

“I will. Can you schedule some meetings with them in the next few days?” I ask.

Benny nods. “Of course.”

I narrow my eyes at him. Instead of getting nervous as most people would, Benny stands silently, waiting to be dismissed.

“I have a question,” I ask.

“All right.”

“How did you feel about my father’s human trafficking business?” I can tell I’ve surprised him, but he answers right away.

“If I may be blunt?” Benny asks.

I nod.

“I was horrified,” Benny says. “I have no idea how he came up with the idea. We were doing fine without it, so he took the chance despite the fact he was hurting innocent people. I can’t remember him ever doing that before until he set up the business.”

I tip my head. “I was also horrified, and that’s why I’m taking it apart,” I say.

“I’m very happy you decided against keeping it.”

“Did you ever say anything to my father about your feelings?”

Benny stiffens. “Yes. Once.”

The room crackles with tension. “What did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything. He had a few men take me down to the basement and whip me.”

I straighten suddenly. “He what?” I barked.

Benny swallowed. “He had me whipped.”

“For fuck’s sake. Why?”

“He needed me to know that I didn’t get an opinion. I was there to do what he said.”

“Why the hell didn’t you leave?” I ask.

Benny looks away and then back at me. “He said he’d kill me if I ever tried to leave, and he’d make it as painful as possible.”

“Jesus. I never understood how truly sick that fucker was.”

Benny nods in agreement.

“I won’t keep you here if you want to leave.”

Benny looks surprised. “I’d like to stay, Sir. I know working with you will be so much better. I don’t fear for my life every day.”

I nod. “That’s good. If you give me your loyalty, you can stay forever. If I find you trying to damage the family in any way, you won’t like the outcome.”

“I’ve been with your family most of my life. I can’t see myself anywhere else, and the last thing I want is to hurt anyone.”

I nod. I feel better about the man, but I’m still not one hundred percent convinced yet.

“That’s good to know. I’m glad I have you. You know a lot about the businesses and the employees. Thank you for staying.”

Benny bows, and I almost laugh at the ridiculous gesture. “You’re welcome. I’ll get to work if you don’t need anything else.”

“No. Go on.” I watch the man leave and exhale a breath I didn’t know I was holding. I feel better about the situation concerning Benny, but I’ll keep my guard up until I’m sure.

I sigh when my phone rings, pulling me from my work once more. “Hello?”

“Sir, this is Matteo. Did you still want me to send some extra men out to keep eyes on your mate?”

“I have Theo with her right now, but I’d feel better if they check on her occasionally.”

“I’ll tell them.”

“Was there anything else?” I ask when Matteo remains on the line instead of ending the call.

“I’m unsure what to do with Isabel, my daughter.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since Aryanna’s been gone, she’s at loose ends and doesn’t know what her place is now.”

I sit back. “She’s part of the family and will always be.”

“She understands that, but she needs something to do, or she’ll drive me crazy.”

I chuckle. “I can’t think of anything off the top of my head. Do you have any ideas?”

Matteo sighs. “No. Could she maybe visit Aryanna a few times a week?”

“I’ll ask. I don’t see a problem with it. I’ll call and talk to Draven.”

“Thank you.”

A frustrated growl bursts from me when my phone rings within a minute of putting it down. At this rate, I’ll never get anything done.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Boss.”

I can hear the tension in Theo’s voice, and I’m immediately on guard. “What’s going on?”

“There was a guy here. He asked Rylee a few questions, and I could tell it pissed her off. She’s been tense and pissy since he left. What do you want me to do?”

“I’ve got a few guys around the area. I’ll have them come to you, and I’ll talk to her when she gets home. She’ll fight me if I try to make her come home right now, and it’s not worth it if I have you guys there to watch over her.”

Theo snorts. “Yeah, I can see that she might get a little testy if you order her to come home.”

I smile. “Get back to me if you see anything else.”

“You got it, Boss.”

I hang up, set my phone on the desk, and sit back. My man, Theo, wasn't one to worry unless he knew there was a reason to, which concerns me.

I'll wait for my men to call if something happens and question my mate when she gets home. That's all I can do at the moment.

Chapter Six

Dutchess

When I get to the shop, the douchebag from the other day is waiting for me. He's dressed similarly and reeks of cheap cologne, like he took a bath in the stuff.

"How can I help you today?" I ask, less friendly than I usually am with customers.

"I'm here to collect my car."

I stare at him without saying a word. I have yet to receive the rest of my payment, and until then, he can kiss my ass.

"And also to make the last payment," he adds after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

His gaze never meets mine as I run his credit card and have Rat bring his car around. He inspects the vehicle with a smile.

"I may be a dickhead, but even I know this is money well spent," he says. "I'll be bringing you more cars and more customers."

With those words, he starts up the engine and spins away. Fucking idiot. I know the work we do is good. It's why I can charge whatever I want. But there's always one motherfucker trying to swim against the current. Hopefully, he's the last one for a while.

I'm at the shop all of forty-five minutes before Zero strides in like he owns the fucking place. It irritates me to no end, and I automatically want to throw the stapler in my hand at his big head. Instead, I take a couple of deep breaths and clear my thoughts before continuing with my paperwork.

Zero glares at me from the doorway of my office, and I do my best to ignore him. The problem with Zero is even as a teenager, I always found him attractive. The mating bond only

made it worse. Even after he refused me, he always had an effect on me.

The realization hits me so hard my entire body jolts, and I press a hand to my chest. I'm irritated that he's invading my space, not because I want what I can't have. Lifting my gaze, I stare at the man who broke my heart and nearly killed me in the process. I take in his cropped hair and hazel eyes. Jeans, a black t-shirt, his leather vest, and black shitkicker boots. He is more than twenty years my senior but still gorgeous, and he takes care of himself. He is in better shape than most of the young men in this town.

But the thing that really catches me off guard is that his scent, the smoky musk I used to love, no longer affects me.

"Was that really necessary?" Zero asks as he falls into the chair in front of my desk. I assume he's talking about outing him to my father, but I don't care enough to confirm. He deserves whatever he got.

"Just say what you came here to say and get out. I have a lot of work to do." I don't want him in my space any longer than necessary.

"You stink."

"Excuse me?" My voice goes up an octave. How dare he say something like that to me, he has no right.

"You have his stench all over you. I can smell it all the way from here." His face is twisted in disgust. I almost laugh at the irony.

"That is none of your business. What do you want?"

"I want to talk about us."

"There is no us. You made sure of that."

I focus my attention back on the paperwork in front of me. My irritation is running at a fucking hundred right now. Between the shit with Domenico and his ultimatum and now this, I'm liable to rip someone's throat out.

“Dutchess,” Zero says softly, and my gaze snaps up to him. “I need you to tell me how to fix this.”

“There is nothing to fix, Zero. Go back to the club.” My words are harsh and final.

“I made a mistake.” He has a look of remorse I have never seen before.

Harsh laughter bursts out of me. “It’s been eight years since you decided I wasn’t good enough to be your mate. And now you suddenly want me? No, Zero, you just don’t like the fact that I have the opportunity to move on with my life.”

“I don’t like the way he looks at you. Or the fact that you are walking around smelling like him. It’s driving me insane thinking about you in his bed.”

“But I had to see you fucking the club ass in front of me for years?”

Zero’s face turns a deep-red color, and that’s the second time he has surprised me with one of his reactions today. “Dutchess, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t. Just don’t come to me with that bullshit. You don’t want me. You just don’t want anyone else to have me.”

“Is that it? You’re not even going to listen to me?”

“No. I have my mate. I don’t need your excuses. It’s too little too late anyway.”

Zero nods before getting up and walking out of my office. He has been hurting me for years, and I am finally able to move on from that. I won’t allow him to get back under my skin. I wonder if my father even knows he was here trying to convince me to leave Dom. I don’t think he would be happy.

Digging into my handbag, I pull out my cell phone and pull up Domenico’s contact number before typing out a message.

Me: We need to talk.

Dom: What time are you going to be home?

Me: Around one. I just need to catch up on this paperwork.

Dom: I'll be waiting.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the bodyguard that Domenico assigned to me when I left the house. He glares at Zero's retreating form while talking on the phone. I can only guess who he is talking to.

Domenico

I try to keep the distractions away so I can get things done, but Rylee's texts have me curious and slightly on guard. She didn't sound angry, but she didn't sound happy either. I'm not too fond of text. You can never judge someone's emotional state.

A few hours pass before someone knocks on my office door. I'm happy I was able to get things done because I hadn't been interrupted until that moment.

"Come in!" I yell.

I stiffen when Rylee walks in and closes the door behind her. One of my brows rise when I hear the click of the lock.

I set my pen down and relax back against the chair. "So, you wanted to talk?" I ask.

She nods and walks toward me in a slow glide. "Yes. I had a visitor today."

"Oh?"

She flattens her hands on my desk across from me, leaning forward with a scowl. "Don't play dumb, Dom. You already knew that."

I tip my head forward. "Yes, I did. But not who?"

She straightens and starts to unbutton her shirt. It slides off her shoulders to pool on the floor, leaving her in her white lacy bra. Next comes her boots, socks, and jeans.

“Oh, fuck,” I curse, making her smile. She wasn’t the most beautiful woman by any other man’s standards, but to me, she was the most gorgeous woman in the world, and she was mine. I clear my throat. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Later,” she says. She walks around the desk before straddling my hips, bringing her hot cunt against the hard ridge of my cock where it strains against my slacks. “Right now, I want to fuck.”

“Oh. What if I said I was busy, and you’d have to wait?” I almost smile at the shock and then the scowl on her face.

Before she says a word, I cup the back of her head and bring her mouth to mine, proceeding to devour her. I can’t get enough of her. And even though I said I wouldn’t allow the situation to continue, I know I will fuck Rylee across my desk because I’m weak when it comes to her. Even if it hurts to see her shut down after.

“Please,” she whimpers after she rips her mouth away from mine.

“Does my mate need to be given a well-fucked romp?”

Her fingers slide through my hair, and her lips trail over every bit of my skin she can get to.

“Yes. God, yes. Fuck me, Dom.”

I bring her mouth back to mine. My fingers tangle in the back of her bra before I lose my patience and simply rip it from her body. Her panties get the same treatment until she is naked and spread wide on my desk. My hands slide over her silky skin from her shoulders to her hips, knees, and back up.

“Don’t tease me, Dom.”

I could hear and feel her desperation since she entered the room, but I thought most of it was because she was hot and needed me. Oh, I’m sure she still does, but there are other reasons besides just being horny.

“What happened today?” I ask.

She whimpers and tries to get my mouth back on hers, but I grab the hair at the back of her head to keep her steady. “Answer me.”

She stares at me for a moment and then nods. “I will. But, right now, I need you.”

I sigh and bring her against my hard chest. “Later then.”

I started kissing her again and letting one of my hands roam over her. I stopped when I got between her legs and feel how hot and wet she is.

“Fuck, woman.”

“Yes, I know.”

I stand between her thighs. “Open the fly of my pants and pull my cock out.”

She eagerly unbuttons and unzips my pants before pushing them down my hips as much as possible. We both groan when her little hands wrap around me and squeeze.

“Sit on my lap. Put my cock inside you, Mate,” I order.

She settles her legs beside my hips, lining my cock up to her cunt, before slowly sinking down.

Now, this was heaven, I think, as her wet-fisted cunt squeezes me as she slides down until she takes every inch of me inside of her.

I am a bit surprised when she grabs hold of the front of my shirt and tears it apart, making the buttons scatter over the desk and floor. Her teeth latch onto my neck and sink in, causing shards of pain to zip down my spine, making my cock even harder.

I start to lift her and bring her back down on my engorged cock. It seems to go on forever, but neither of us is getting the hard fuck we need.

So, I stand with her in one of my arms and my cock embedded inside her before I sweep the papers off my desk and lay her down. Harshly gripping her hips, I start to power

into her. There is no slow, steady build-up. I fuck her with a ruthlessness I've never known, and she begs for more.

Sweat starts to run down my back as I power into her. The sound of slapping flesh and the musky scent of mating fills the room. I know I won't last much longer, and she's been slowly tightening on me, telling me she's close.

I separate her pussy lips and start to press and manipulate her clit. "Come for me, Mate."

Her nails dig into my arms, and her legs slide higher, giving me more space to move.

She stiffens, and a cry tears from her throat as I ram into her like a possessed man. Her cunt clasps onto my cock, making it nearly impossible to move.

I press a hand over her mouth when her screams become louder and bite my own tongue to keep my groan from getting loud enough for people to hear. I mostly don't care if they know I'm fucking Rylee because she is my mate, but right now, I just needed us to be private. At least until we come to terms with how we would continue mating.

She collapses against the wood with her eyes closed and her chest rising and falling rapidly as she fights to gain her breath.

I set my hands on either side of her hips, lean forward, kissing her perfect breasts as I try to slow the beating of my heart and gain enough strength to move and take care of her.

I pull out of her, making both of us groan before tucking my cock away and zipping my pants. I pick her up, sit down in my chair, and allow her to get comfortable on my lap.

I tip her face up to him. "Now, tell me who visited my mate today?"

Chapter Seven

Dutchess

My heart breaks when Dom settles back into his mafia-man demeanor. This mask of nonchalance that he wears instead of showing me who he really is only serves to hurt me more. He said he wouldn't fuck me again except to claim me, and now he has. Can he not keep his word? Not even for something as simple as this?

When I walked into his office, my words failed me. I wanted to show him how much I wanted him, how much I wanted our mating to be real and not just something he and my father brokered a deal for. I fucking marked him, claiming him as mine, but that was it. My eyes burn as tears start to gather, and I slide off his lap to retrieve my clothes.

"Rylee," he says behind me as I dress.

"Zero came to see me."

"Your father's man? Why?"

"He doesn't want me to mate with you." I take a steadying breath before facing him, making sure I'm completely composed, and he can't tell how hurt I am.

I can feel the waves of rage pouring from him as he stares at me. "Why would he have a say in any of this?"

He doesn't know? How is that possible? I was sure by the time I moved in here, he would have had me thoroughly investigated. It's not like it has been a big secret these past months. I know Dom has someone inside my father's club feeding him information, so I assumed he knew the truth.

"Zero was my fated mate."

"Was?" I can see his cougar pushing to the forefront, the acrid smell of his fury coating the air.

"Yes. He refused me. Remember I told you?" My voice is soft as I try to remain calm.

“So, you came home and fucked me to what? Hurt him?” Domenico stands, his chair clattering to the ground, the anger inside him causing him to visibly vibrate.

“No!” His words are like a physical blow, and the tears resurface. This time, I won’t be able to hold them at bay.

“Then you did it to manipulate me in some other way.”

A tear slips down my cheek, and I harshly swipe it away. This man, this dark soul I have slowly but surely been falling for, is just like all the other men in my life. He doesn’t care what I think or feel.

“It was a mistake.” The words leave me with a sob I can’t hold back. “I should have just...”

“What, Rylee?” His voice booms through the office.

“I shouldn’t have taken you by your word.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“You said you wanted me. You called me your mate and pretended to care. Swore that you wouldn’t fuck me again if our mating bond wasn’t completed.” My anger is slowly taking over the pain I was feeling. My words are venomous as I throw them at his feet.

“You wanted me to say no to you when you came in here like a bitch in heat?”

Turning, I unlock and open his office door before replying.

“No, Dom. But you’re not the one that remains unclaimed.”

I watch as his hand goes to his shoulder where I marked him, claiming him as mine for everyone to see. All the color drains from his face before the realization of how badly he fucked this up finally clicks into place. I hear him call after me as I walk through the house and out the patio door.

I don’t even make the effort to undress. I simply allow my panther to push to the forefront and take over, shredding

my clothes in the process. Domenico calls out to me, but I don't look back. Pain, anger, and fear demand that I get as far away from him as I can.

Luckily, the Esposito compound is vast, and I don't have to worry about stumbling across any humans. I just need to let go of my frustrations, and a nice long run will do exactly that. I blame the fact that my mind is clouded by pain—that yet another mate does not want me—for the complete lack of self-preservation. I don't smell or see the other shifters before it's already too late.

The sting in my hind leg has my panther roaring loudly, but the drugs are fast-acting, and my legs give out quickly. My vision goes blurry, and all the sounds around me are distorted.

“Now, I will finally have my revenge.”

Domenico

I wanted to kick myself for fucking up so badly with Rylee. I let my pride blind me to the fact that she needed me as much as I needed her.

I trail behind her, calling her name. When I find her shredded clothing, I shift into my cougar and take off after her. I've got to get her to see how I really feel. She is the mate I've dreamed of most of my life, and there's no way in hell I am going to give her up.

The scent of another shifter hits me a few miles from the house. I stop and concentrate. The scent is familiar, but I can't place it. I take off again. It isn't long before I sense Rylee's distress and fury, and then nothing from her, telling me she was down somehow. That, plus the scent of a stranger, has every mated instinct in my body rushing to the forefront.

I have never experienced this overwhelming feeling of fear and desperation, and I have to fight to keep myself under control. If I lose it now, it will take time away from looking for her, and this might be my only chance to find her.

I take several breaths before concentrating on the scents and sounds around me. I have Rylee's and another shifter I vaguely remember. Two more shifter scents are added to the mix, and I can tell they were the ones that carried Rylee out of the forest.

Rylee's fear was extinguished because of a sedative. The shifter that took her down was delighted, I can smell it in the air, but what scares me the most is the aura of the black, soul-sucking evil that surrounds the man. He has planned this for some reason, and I have no idea if the attack and kidnapping had to do with me or Rylee.

The one thing that helps me cope is the fact that I don't smell blood. It doesn't matter because these people have just signed their death certificates. No one touches what's mine and lives to talk about it.

I follow the scents to one of the old mining roads. I can smell the gas and see the tire tracks of the vehicle they used. I shift and look around with human eyes. I can tell which way they went, but little else. When I've gathered all the information I can in the area, I shift back and race to the house.

At the back door, I once more take my human form and dress in the robe the staff always keeps there. I don't take much time to dress because I know every minute counts.

I call my head of security, Matteo, and my closest friend, Nick, to meet me as I throw on some clothes, and they are waiting when I walk into my office. I close the door and sit at my desk. Both men wait for me to speak, but they know me well enough to know it isn't anything good, and I need a moment to gather my thoughts.

"My mate was kidnapped."

Both men stare in shock.

"How?" Nick asks.

"She was out running, and they sedated her and carried her to one of the old roads."

“This happened in the last hour?” Matteo asks.

“Yes. I was running after her. I fucked up, and she was pissed. I got to a spot in the forest where I could smell her fear and the scent of someone I’ve met before, but I couldn’t remember who it was.”

“The person was a shifter?” Matteo questions.

I nod. “Two more carried her out, but I’ve never met them.”

“So, we don’t know if they’re out to harm you or Rylee?” Nick points out.

I pinch the bridge of my nose where the tension is building. My anger is trying to take over, but I just keep reminding myself that I must keep it together for my mate.

“Should we call her father and brother?” Matteo asked.

Fuck. The last thing I wanted was to deal with her father, but I’d take any help I could get.

“I’ll call them now. I want us to make a list of our enemies, and I’ll have Draven do the same. Please make a list of the people we’ve taken out because of the human trafficking business my father built. We’ve killed a lot of people, so we’re bound to make family and friends pissed.”

“I’d like to know who would be stupid enough to take your mate? They must know you’ll do everything in your power to get her back, and God help them when you do,” Nick muses.

“You’re damn right. I will.”

For the next few hours, we compiled a list of enemies. At two in the morning, my eyes are blurry from all the reading I’ve been doing, and my gut aches from all the coffee I’ve drunk, but I keep going because I won’t stop until I find Rylee.

I go down a list of names, and my heart stops when I recognize one that matches the scent from the forest. Xavier Popa. The bastard was from Romania and one of my father’s

key men in human trafficking. The bastard is a psycho and a sadist.

“That’s not possible,” I murmur.

“What?” Matteo asks from his chair.

“Xavier Popa. That’s the scent I smelled.”

“We killed him,” Nick says in confusion.

“I know. I saw the building explode. How the hell could he have survived that?” Oh, fuck. If that bastard has my mate, there’s no telling what he’s doing to her. “I want every available person out talking to their informants and looking in every corner or hole. I will also put out a million-dollar reward for whoever brings me my woman unharmed, and I’ll throw in an extra two hundred thousand for bringing me Popa alive.”

“That should get every rat in the county and surrounding ones looking. Good idea,” Matteo says before leaving to do what I command.

I have to keep the pictures of what could be happening to her out of my head, or I’ll go mad. My main objective now is to get her back. We’d deal with the repercussions then.

Chapter Eight

Dutchess

It takes me a moment to open my eyes, the lids too heavy to do much for a long time. Sunlight filters in, hurting my eyes, but I continue to force them open. A hand cradles the side of my face, and I lean into the touch. But the scent is strange, unknown, and a little acrid, and I pull away just as quickly.

“Open your eyes, beautiful.” A rich timbre I’ve never heard speaks into my ear, his lips brushing against the shell.

My eyes pop open, and I stare at the man beside the bed. He’s large, about as big as Domenico, with dark hair threaded with grey and the most beautiful green eyes I have ever seen. To put it plainly, the man is gorgeous. My breath catches in my throat as we stare at each other.

“Finally,” he says with a brilliant smile.

“Where am I? Who are you?”

“Take a breath, beautiful. You’re safe.”

It takes me a moment to recompose myself, to basically remember who I am, but only a single moment. I jump from the bed and plaster myself against the opposite wall. I glare at the man before me, dropping into a defensive crouch. My gaze takes in every inch of the room.

A large bed, with a wrought-iron frame, takes up most of the space. The bedding is pure white, as are the drapes that are gently blowing in the breeze. A deep grey carpet covers the floor beneath my feet. The room is stunning, a beautiful, gilded cage.

He shakes his head with a chuckle. “There she is.”

“You don’t know shit about me. Don’t pretend you do.”

“I know that you are unmated and from what I saw earlier, unhappy.” He stays on his side of the room as he

speaks. "I know you reek of Domenico Esposito."

My heart thumps loudly in my chest, beating against my ribs. This man, with his aura of darkness and danger that he wears like a cloak, is dangerous. And he took me to either hurt me and deliver me back to Dom broken, or to draw Dom here and hurt him. Neither of which is an outcome I want.

"Domenico is my mate."

I make sure the words are clear and filled with confidence.

"You were naked when I took you. I dressed you. You don't wear his mark."

The memory of being drugged and taken in the middle of my run hits me. A shiver of revulsion works through me at the thought of this man being able to do what he wanted to me when I was unconscious.

"He. Is. My. Mate."

A dark chuckle leaves the man before he walks to the door.

"I would never treat you the way he has," he says. "My mate wouldn't be running around without my mark on her skin and my cum dripping from her pretty pink cunt. Everyone would know who you belong to."

My heart breaks. I want more than to have Dom feel that way about me. To promise all the things this strange, dangerous man is offering.

"Who are you?" I croak out through my dry throat. "What do you want?"

I grew up in a life of crime, surrounded by criminals. If you want to be technical about it, I am one too. But this? The pure, unadulterated fear flowing through my veins? I've never felt anything like it, and I don't know where to go from here. This man is different from anyone I have ever met. I won't be able to negotiate with him or threaten him. He has his mind set

on what he wants, and I know without having to ask, he will do anything to get it.

“I am your guardian angel. Your avenger. Your biggest dream and your worst nightmare.”

A tear slips down my cheek. This beautiful room may become my tomb. I will never see the man I love—my mate—again. I pray to all that is holy, begging that Domenico will not come looking for me. I want him as far away from this insane man as he can possibly get.

“My name is Xavier Popa. I want what is owed to me, and if I must take that coward’s mate as payment, I will do it. Get used to being here, Rylee. You won’t be leaving.”

With those last words hanging in the air, he leaves me alone. I hear the lock click into place before my knees give out under me. My ass hits the thick pile of the expensive rug. My mind is running a million miles a minute as I try to think of a way out of this shitty situation.

Domenico

I have gone two days without sleeping or eating. My mind won’t shut down long enough to rest, but that’s okay because I won’t let myself weaken or take a break as it would take away time I need to find my mate.

Nick comes through the door with several papers in his hands. “I think I’ve found something.”

I straighten in my chair and wait impatiently to hear what he has to say.

“Xavier Popa has been sighted all over town the last few weeks,” Nick says as he reads from the papers. “It doesn’t sound like he’s doing the human trafficking anymore...”

“He can’t. We shut everything down, and the Feds have all the information we could give them.”

Nick nods. “Right. But a few people have told me he has become obsessed with a woman.”

I feel a wave of nausea hit, and I do my best to fight it back. Fuck. They had to be talking about Rylee, and if that bastard was fixated on her, the danger she was in was even worse than I thought.

“Does anyone have information on his location?” I ask.

“Not yet, but dozens of people are out looking for her. The million-dollar reward is a great motivator.”

“I hope they know I want her unharmed.”

Nick nods. “They do. They’re not about to piss you off. I promise you that.”

I nod and rub my temple, a headache steadily growing. Between the lack of sleep and not eating, I was surprised I was able to function at all. It doesn’t help my peace of mind when visions of the last time I fuck her and how it felt to be in her cunt keep intruding. It was almost like I could still smell her as strongly as I did when I made her come.

“Have you checked with the rat, Dickens?” I ask.

Nick shakes his head. “We haven’t found him yet.”

“Get more men on that. He usually knows all the secrets going around.”

Nick nods, turns, and leaves.

I no sooner picked up my pen when Draven and my sister, Aryanna, walk through the door. Aryanna rushes to me and gives me a hug I desperately need but would never ask for.

“I’m so sorry. Have you found anything?” she asks.

Draven clears his throat, getting my full attention. “Yes, I’d like to know what’s happening with my sister, Dom.”

“Don’t you think I do?” I know my tone is harsher than it needed to be, but I am already at the end of my rope, and I don’t need accusations thrown at me.

Draven runs his fingers through his hair in frustration. I watch my sister go to him, wrap her arms around him tightly, and whisper things that make Draven relax. Draven exhales, pulling her tightly against his chest before closing his eyes, and resting his chin on Aryanna's head. The pose is possessive while at the same time filled with love and devotion. It's a deep emotion I've never witnessed before, and I realize I am starting to feel that way with Rylee.

Fuck. What if I don't get her back? It will kill something inside me, and I will forever be broken.

Draven finally takes a seat in one of the chairs in front of my desk and pulls Aryanna onto his lap. It looks so natural, like they had been doing it for years instead of months.

"What steps are being taken?" Draven asks.

"I've offered a million-dollar prize for anyone that brings her to me unharmed."

Draven's eyebrows rise. "Tell me about the man who has abducted her and what he is to you?"

"His name is Xavier Popa..."

"I've never heard of him," Draven says.

"I hope not. He's..." I want to say a sadist and evil, but that's the last thing Draven needs to hear. "Not a good man. He was one of my father's head men in the human trafficking."

"Fuck," Draven says, looking down. He looks up after a moment. "He kidnapped her to hurt you, right?"

I nod my head. "Yes. It's the only thing I can think of. I didn't believe it initially, but I caught his scent in the forest where Rylee was taken. I thought he'd died in a warehouse they used for the trafficking. I saw him there, and it exploded a minute later. He knew I tried to kill him, and that I'd been closing his business."

"I can see where he'd be angry," Aryanna interjects. "Is he a shifter?"

“Yes. I vaguely remember him as a wolf shifter, but I’m not positive.”

“So, as a shifter, he knows he can’t break a mate’s bond and that Rylee will fight to get back to you.”

“The problem with that is I haven’t marked her, so technically, we are not mated even though we’ve fucked.”

Draven scowls. “Why the fuck not?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “That’s none of your business. This is between me and Rylee.”

“Fuck that. She’s my sister,” Draven yells.

“And she is my fated mate. That trumps the sibling connection.”

Aryanna tries to soothe Draven, but all I can think of is how badly I need someone to soothe me. First, I have to get Rylee back.

“My father and the club are all out looking for her,” Draven says.

“Good. The more, the better,” I reply.

Matteo rushes into the room without knocking. He stops and looks at the two in the chair and then at me. I can tell he has news.

“Go ahead. You can talk in front of them,” I say.

Matteo looks uncomfortable and clears his throat. “Word on the street is a man...”—he looks at Draven—“who’s with your club is involved.”

Draven looks shocked and stiffens. “There’s no way. No one in their right mind would betray us. It’s a death sentence. Do they say who?”

Matteo shrugs. “The man’s club name is Zero.”

I stare at Draven and feel the same fury, but he also has to deal with the fact one of his closest men, the vice president of the club, has taken his sister.

Draven stands and sets Aryanna in the chair before starting to pace the length of my office. He stops abruptly after a moment and turns back to me and Matteo.

“Why would he betray us? He’s family. He’s the third in command after my brother. No, I can’t believe it.”

“Did you know Rylee was first meant to be mated to Zero, but he denied her?”

I can tell the shock is too much as he stares at me in disbelief. I can see him stiffen to the point I think he might shatter. Every muscle in his body swells, and I can tell he was fighting to keep from shifting.

“Does my father know?” Draven asks.

I nod.

Draven starts cursing and yelling.

“Wait,” I bellow. “He just found out.”

“For what purpose would Zero do this?” Draven asks.

“Rylee told me he was acting possessive. I don’t think he wants her mated to me.”

“Why didn’t Rylee tell me?”

“She was embarrassed and hurt,” I tell him.

“Is that why she’s fighting the mating with you?” Aryanna asks, and I nod.

A few seconds go by when I catch Aryanna and Draven glancing at each other.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Aryanna turns to me and sighs. “We were going to tell you, but then this happened, and we don’t feel right...”

I just about roll my eyes. “Sister, just tell me.”

“Draven and I are getting married.”

It takes a moment for it to penetrate, and when it does, I felt elated for them but also despair at the thought that Rylee

and I might not get the chance. I push the thought away, stand, and go to her, hugging her tightly.

“I’m very glad you told me. Congratulations to you both.” I reach out and shake Draven’s hand. “Have you set a date?”

“As soon as possible,” Aryanna says. “This baby is growing quickly, and I don’t want to look like a whale walking down the aisle. I want to be married before the child comes.”

“I’ll do what I can. I’m really happy for you both.”

“Thank you,” Draven says and pulls Aryanna against his side. “We’ll head back home unless you need us here?”

I shake my head. “I think having you at the compound will be better. You’ll get more information there. Are you going to tell your brother and father?”

“Definitely my brother. We’ll decide together if our father needs to know now. It’s going to devastate him, and he’s already going crazy not knowing where his daughter is.”

I can’t imagine. Having your child gone and knowing your best friend had a hand in it.

“We’ll get in touch if we get any information,” Draven says.

“Same goes for us.”

I turn my attention back to my desk when I hear Aryanna.

“We’ll get her back, brother. Of that, I’m certain. I just don’t know when.”

I nod. I believe her. She’s had premonitions before that always come true. I relax a little at her words. “Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome. I love you,” she says.

“I love you, too, sister.”

I watch them leave and turn to Matteo. “Get all the information you can find on Zero.”

“I’ll get on it right now.”

“Good.” I feel an urgency worse than an hour ago to find answers. Although my sister says I will get Rylee back, she doesn’t say in what shape. I know the longer she’s with Popa and Zero, the more would be taken from her.

Chapter Nine

Dutchess

I have no idea how long I've been here. But I do know that my panther is pushing at my mind, howling for me to let her out. I can't do that yet. I need to choose exactly the right moment to allow her free reign. I need to select the perfect opportunity for her to wreak the most havoc.

Being held captive is different than I expected it to be, honestly. I was waiting with bated breath for someone to torture me, but not this. Food is delivered regularly, and delicious meals are prepared by someone who knows exactly what they're doing. No one enters the room or talks to me outside of those deliveries.

Maybe this is some kind of mental warfare tactic. Xavier is trying to drive me insane before pouncing. I try to keep my mind occupied, but all I can think of is Domenico and my brothers. Does my family even know I'm missing, or has Dom kept it from them?

The door swings open, revealing Xavier. He watches me closely as I sit in the middle of the luxurious bed. He doesn't speak a word before turning and leaving the door open. It must be a trap. Letting me roam his home, or whatever this building is, will only allow me a chance to plan my escape. For the longest time, I sit frozen, waiting for something that never happens.

Gingerly, I rise from my spot and walk toward the doorway. Peeking outside, I see a burly man with a shock of red hair and a goatee. His grey eyes survey me carefully, taking in every detail before he speaks.

"I'm Tommy. The boss says you can go wherever you want as long as I'm with you."

He has an Irish brogue that almost has me forgetting where I am. I love a man with an accent. It takes me a moment

to snap out of it, but I do. A frown mars my features as his words finally sink in.

“That can’t be right,” I murmur.

“The boss wants you to be happy and comfortable,” he says as he gestures for me to walk down the hallway. “If you need anything, just let me know.”

Irrational, slightly hysterical laughter, bubbles up and pours out of me. “You do realize I am being held against my will?” I ask.

“I was there when the boss took you,” he replies nonchalantly. “I know you didn’t come here of your own free will. But I also haven’t heard you screaming to be released or trying to escape.”

His words land like a physical punch. I haven’t been trying to escape. But I have been biding my time to find the right opportunity. Or have I?

“Where do you want to go?” the man asks after a long moment of uncomfortable silence.

“Where is Xavier?”

“In his office. Turn here.” He directs me to a heavy wooden door, shut against the outside world.

Tommy doesn’t knock before pushing it open and ushering me inside. Xavier lifts his head from a stack of papers he’s working on, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Come in, Rylee. Take a seat.”

He gestures toward a dark leather chair in front of his desk before dismissing Tommy with a nod of his head. I listen as the heavy door closes behind me before I move toward the chair.

“Why am I here?” I ask calmly.

From what I can tell, the man is clearly a little touched in the head, and I may need to be careful what I say and do

around him. His scent is dark, like burnt wood, and the aura of violence that surrounds him lets me know he is capable of more than just the smiles I have been receiving. His animal is definitely a carnivore, and something dangerous, maybe even malicious, hiding just beneath the surface.

“I wanted to save you.”

His words are cryptic and carry an ominous tone. Fear skitters up my spine and firmly grips my mind.

“I didn’t need saving.”

“I heard you crying. I could feel the pain radiating off not just you, but also your panther.”

Shock and outrage sweep over me. How dare this man, who knows nothing about me, Domenico, or our relationship make judgements without having all the facts.

“Dom and I didn’t get the easiest start,” I explain. “We’re bound to have some issues. But we will work through our problems just like everyone else does. You had no right to kidnap me.”

“Kidnap is such an ugly word. I prefer liberated.”

The voice comes from behind me. My heart stops for a second before beating harder than it ever has in my life. Turning my head, I glare at Zero over my shoulder.

“What the actual fuck?” I cry out. My mind is trying to fit all the pieces together. How the hell does Zero fit into everything? None of this makes any sense.

“I told you, Dutchess,” Zero says with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “You don’t belong with that asshole. You belong to me.”

Domenico

It has been three days since Rylee was taken, and each day, it gets harder, and I go a little more insane. I’ve been able to catch a few hours of sleep. It wasn’t very restful because I

slept in my chair, but it was something. Every hour, some sort of food landed on my desk that I would pick at and take random bites. It helped settle my stomach because of all the coffee I've been drinking.

Nick walks into the room, talking on his phone. I notice he is as sleep-deprived as I am, and I can guess Matteo is, too. I wait patiently for the call to end. Nick wouldn't have been standing there if he didn't have some information.

My friend finally stuck his phone in his pocket. "We've found the location, but they're below ground. It's not going to be possible to sneak up on them. I'm guessing they have cameras everywhere."

"I need to call Draven and his family. They'll want to be there to see Rylee and take care of Zero." I can't imagine if it were me. Having someone that close to me betray me would drive me mad.

I grab my phone. "Get everyone available to meet us there and meet me out front."

Nick nods. "You got it." He turns and runs out of the room while I dial the phone.

"This is Draven."

"Hey, it's me. We got the location, and I thought your family would want to be in on the rescue," I say.

"You're fucking right we do. My dad wants his hands on Zero so much it's hard not to feel bad about what my dad will do to him."

"I wouldn't want to be in his place," I said.

"Text me with the location, but we should meet away from the place to make a plan."

"I'll get right back to you," I say and hang up. I dial Nick.

"Yeah."

“Give me the address. Draven and his people are going to meet us away from the place.”

“Hold on.”

I’m starting to get impatient when Nick finally talks.

“There’s an abandoned grocery store about a mile away from the place.”

“Okay, good. Send me the address, and I’ll contact Draven.”

“I’m sending them now,” Nick says.

My phone beeps, and I quickly glance to see the address, but the phone rings, and there’s a number from an unknown source.

“Hello,” I say.

“Hello, my dear friend. By now, you know that I have taken your precious Rylee. She is quite beautiful.”

“What do you want, Popa? Why the hell would you take my mate? You had to know I would hunt you until I get her back.”

Popa chuckles. “Well, that’s an interesting question. There are a few reasons. One is I owed a friend, and taking Rylee made us even. Two, the fact that I’m driving you insane is delightful. Three, she clearly needed someone to save her from you and your insensitivity.”

I want to rage at his words, but I force myself to remain calm. “How do I get her back?”

“You don’t. She’ll be on her way out of the country very soon.”

My heartbeat accelerates. If that happens, finding her again will be next to impossible. “I never knew you to stay with one woman,” I say, trying to bait him into giving away any information I can use against him.

Popa laughs. “Oh, she’s not for me. It’s my friend who wants her. He won’t even let me play with her.”

I know what that means, and it usually has to do with whips and a lot of blood. The sick fucker likes to bathe in it. He says it keeps him young.

“How the fuck did you get away from the bomb at the warehouse?”

“I have always had several escape options. I was able to drop down into a cavern. The blast threw me, and some fire came through, so I got charred in places. You really didn’t have to go as far as blowing me and my people up.”

I feel my jaw cramp from gritting my teeth. “I will get another chance and won’t miss this time.”

Popa chuckles. “We’ll see about that.”

“Who’s this special friend you keep talking about?” I ask.

“You’ve probably met him before. I’ve promised to keep it a secret until he’s ready. He’s tying up a bunch of loose ends before he and Rylee leave on their trip.”

I already know he’s talking about Zero, but I don’t want him to know I have that information. “You tell your friend that I will never stop looking for her.”

“I will pass that along, but I doubt he’ll worry. The man is a genius and has been building another business behind everyone’s back. He’s gotten away with it for years without being detected.”

“I’m guessing he won’t have much longer to live.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. Call it intuition,” I say. “So, you called me to tell me you had my mate.”

Popa grunts. “Oh, but she’s not yours now, is she? You haven’t marked her, so she could still be mated to someone else.”

The thought of Rylee being mated to another feels like a ball of fury exploding inside of me, but I hold back my growl, refusing to give the bastard the enjoyment of getting to me.

“I really should go. I have some special friends waiting to play with me.”

“So, you’re still kidnapping women for your sadistic games?” I ask.

“It’s so hard these days to get women who like my type of fun, so I have to take them.”

I am going to kill the fucker. I won’t rest until he’s cut to pieces. “You are one sick fuck. You know that, right?”

“What some people see as wrong, doesn’t necessarily make it so.”

“You can get much more fucked up when you torture women and then kill them. Is it because you’re afraid of them?”

Popa snorts. “No. They’re just pathetic people that need to be taken care of a certain way.”

“Was your dad fucked up like you? Did you get that gene from him? Or maybe your parents were siblings, and you’re the byproduct of their incest. I hear that fucks up a lot of kids.”

“Watch yourself, Dom. You don’t want to piss me off,” Popa says.

“Guess what, fuckhead? I’m already pissed at you.” I see Nick at the office door waving at me. “I don’t care where you hide, I will find you,” I say.

“I guess we’ll see who wins the battle.”

“Oh, I plan on winning the war,” I tell him.

“I’ll be sure to tell Rylee hello for you.”

My fist tightens until I think I’ll shatter the phone in my hand. “You do that.” I hang up and stand.

“Everyone is ready. Matteo put some men around the area, so it will be next to impossible for the bastards to get away.”

“I hope so because Popa just told me Zero was going to take Rylee out of the country.”

“Oh, fuck,” Nick says as he scrambles into the back of one of the cars with me.

Nick tells the man where to go while I stare out the window. Failure is not an option. I am not going to let anyone take Rylee from me, ever.

Chapter Ten

Dutchess

Have you ever felt intense relief and pure terror at the same time? I promise it is one of the worst feelings ever. I was happy to be rescued, but each second I spent away from Domenico scared the shit out of me. Xavier and Zero are both insane, and if they get their hands on him, I shudder to think of what would happen.

The moment we stop at the Esposito estate, I want to turn around and go back. How the hell does Dom expect me to stay here?

“Perhaps you could take a shower?” the driver suggests as I pace back and forth in the foyer.

“What?”

“A shower. I bet by the time you get out, the boss will be back.”

I take a moment to consider his words before nodding. I ascend the stairs and head toward the master bedroom I last shared with Dom. It hurts my heart to be here without him. I don't dwell on things I can't change, instead starting up the shower. Domenico will be here soon, and I want to wash the stench of that place and those men off my skin.

Everything happened so quickly. Zero was dragging me to a waiting car when an explosion went off. I can still remember the look of shock on both his and Xavier's faces when they realized they were under attack. The relief I felt when I saw Domenico with Draven and Cain as they killed my captors isn't something I will soon forget.

The spray from the showerhead is battering my upturned face and helping me wash away the memories, when strong arms surround me from behind. Dom's dark scent fills the space and surrounds me, a shudder working its way through my entire being.

“Rylee.” His voice is low as he speaks my name.

“Dom,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

We stand beneath the spray in silence, content to be here. Together. Both of us are safe.

“We need to talk,” Dom says before shutting off the water.

He steps out of the shower and hands me a towel before heading toward the bedroom. I have no idea where this is headed, but I am both fearful and excited. This dual-emotion bullshit is going to drive me insane. I take my time drying off and even comb the tangle out of my wet hair before I approach him.

Domenico sits on the edge of the bed, dressed in nothing but a pair of grey sweatpants, his head resting in his palms, elbows on his knees. His dark olive skin is on display, and it takes everything in me not to touch him when I pass. There’s a moment that I consider sitting beside him, but I don’t know what he wants to talk about, so I take a seat in the chair by the window instead.

Dom’s gaze snaps to mine, the intensity stealing my breath. The room is silent, tension vibrating around us. Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply, steadying myself for whatever is coming. When I reopen them, Domenico is on his knees in front of me. He looks so sad I can’t help but cup his cheek in my palm.

“Dom...”

He cuts me off. “Let me say this. Please.”

I nod, remaining silent.

“I thought I wasn’t ever going to see you again. I was losing my mind,” he says softly. “All I could think about was the fight we had and how I wish I had handled things differently.”

“That doesn’t matter now,” I cut in.

“It matters to me,” he says with a vehemence that has me shutting up once more. “Since the first moment I saw you, the day Draven stole my sister, I have only wanted you. If you let me, I would have taken you as well that day and made you mine.”

“Dom...”

“Will you stop interrupting me, woman?”

“Probably not.” I chuckle.

“Just let me get this out, and then you can say whatever you want.” When I nod, he continues talking. “I knew the moment you slapped me that we would be explosive together. Yes, the mating force was pushing me, but it was you as well. And these past months have proven that I’m right. We belong together.” He takes a shuddering breath. “The truth is, since having you here in my home, in my bed, I have been fighting every urge I have, every impulse my cougar has.”

His words wash over me, and my pussy clenches at the idea that I have that much power over this man.

“The sex is phenomenal, but I have held back each time,” he confesses. “I want to make you mine more than anything else in this world. And then I hurt you, and you were taken. I swore if I ever got you back, I would...”

His words taper off, and I feel like I can’t breathe. What the hell is he talking about?

“I should have told you from the first day. I love you, Dutchess. I don’t want to only fuck you, I want everything from you. I want you to be my mate, my wife, my everything.”

He stares at me for the longest time, not saying anything else. A tear slips down my cheek, and my throat is clogged up with emotion.

While I was being held captive, I struggled to know where we stood. I wanted to believe he wanted me, but our history made that hard. Now I know the truth.

“Are you going to say something?” Dom asks cautiously.

“Dom,” I say softly, and his face falls.

He looks like I just broke his damn heart before he stands and walks away. Anger swamps me, and I angrily wipe at my face. His father really did a number on him. This man is one of the most feared in the country, but he doesn’t believe he is worthy of love.

“Will you give me a damn chance to speak now?” Anger coats every word as I basically yell at his back.

He looks shocked when he turns back to face me. I stand from my seat and march right over to him, tilting my chin up so I can glare at him as I speak.

“I love you too, you idiot. I marked you,” I say, poking the scar on his shoulder.

I still have some things I want to yell about, but Dom silences me with a kiss. My toes curl into the carpet, heat and lust searing me as he kisses me like it may be our last kiss ever. After long moments, he pulls back with a smile.

“Now that we’re on the same page, there are a few things that need to happen.”

“Such as?” I ask huskily.

“I need to tell you about Daven and Aryanna’s wedding next week.”

My eyes widen. “So soon? Why?”

“Because they want to be married before the baby comes, but she also doesn’t want to look like a whale. Those are her words. But today, I am going to fuck you, mark you, and cover you in my scent so everyone knows you belong to me.”

Domenico

I stare down at Rylee. When she told me she loved me, it felt like I was dreaming because I'd thought about her saying that to me so many times. But looking down into her beautiful face and the warmth in her eyes solidified every feeling I had for my mate.

"I need to take you in every way I can and mark your whole body. I think that will be the only way I'll feel comfortable with you out of my sight. You'll never be far. Not for a long time. But, at least you'll be able to breathe without having to be on my lap or plastered to my side."

Rylee snorted. "Yeah, I don't think I'd be able to deal with that very well. I'd end up smothering you within a day."

I smirked. "I guessed that. I'll try to calm down, but I'll be a bit obnoxious until I know there are no threats against you because I want you safe."

"You remember that you're the mafia in the area, and add to that our being shifters. There's no way we'll ever live with one hundred percent certainty that I'll be safe. We'll just do the best we can because I will always worry about you, too."

"At least we don't have to worry about Popa anymore. I made sure to kill him personally this time. He isn't coming back," I say with pride.

Now, I can only do my best to keep her safe while not driving her to murder. I wrap my hand over the back of her head and tilt her face up. I study her for a moment before I lower my head. I press my lips tenderly against hers. I want to take my time just kissing her, but my body is already screaming at me to mark her.

I tear my mouth from hers. "On your knees."

Rylee slid gracefully to her knees and stared up at me. When she licked her lips, I felt drops of cum seep from the slit in my cock. Too much more, and I'd lose what little control I still had.

"Lower my sweats and pull my cock out."

My mate instantly fought to get my cock free, and the look of concentration on her face made my heartbeat accelerate.

“There’s my good girl,” I said when I was finally free. “Now open your mouth and take me inside of you.”

Rylee popped the head of my cock into her mouth and sucked strongly. The air burst from my lungs. “Jesus, woman. You’re going to take the skin off.” I fisted her hair to control her when she continued to go at it.

“Release me,” I demanded.

Fuck. When she looked up at me, the saliva on her lips almost threw me over. Her lips were red, swollen, and glistening. That, mixed with the savage hunger in her expression, was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen.

I raggedly inhaled, grasped her shoulders, and returned her to her feet. I couldn’t go another moment without kissing, touching, and showing her my naked, possessive, and dominant male instincts.

I lifted her in my arms and lay her on the bed. I stripped the towel from her and shed my sweats before coming down on her. I was careful to keep from smothering her as I built her desire to match my own. My fingers, lips, and tongue went over her body, tasting and learning what made her squeal and lose her control.

“God, Dom.”

“Am I making you feel good, baby?”

I smiled when she hummed and continued to fight against my restraining grip on her hands above her head. I started on her again, moving down between her thighs to taste her sweet pussy.

The half-scream, half-moan that slid from her mouth made my heart jolt inside my chest. The blood pounded through my veins, and what felt like molten lava pooled in my groin.

I used one and then two fingers to stretch out her cunt. When I was able to fit three inside of her, I knew I couldn't wait another moment. I slid up her body, cradled her face in my hand as I lined my cock up to her cunt. Just the feel of her wet heat made my savage male hunger rise, and I couldn't hold back another moment, ramming into her and making my penetration hard and stabbing.

Her first orgasm was instantaneous. I rode her through it and pushed for another one. I gritted my teeth to hold onto what little control I had left. I battled with my need to take her like an animal, marking her in every way possible.

I pushed her over one more time before pulling out of her, flipping her to her stomach, and then helping her onto her hands and knees.

My heartbeat slammed against my breastbone, and my breathing was choppy and labored as I lined up my cock to her tight little ass, and then I slowly thrust in and out of her tight ass in a smooth rhythm. I'd sink as far as I could go before slowly pulling out. My body demanded I brutally take her so we could both orgasm, but the smooth rhythm of my fucking was too good to let go of yet.

"Jesus, fuck. Woman. I've never felt anything like this in my life." Little by little, I worked my cock in until I was able to push the last few inches into her making her scream. I kept my movements easy and slow for the first few minutes, but my control was at an end, making me surge into her with deep, controlled, pulsating thrusts.

"I need you to come for me, Mate. Relax and let your tight hole squeeze every drop of cum I have in my balls."

I feel her muscles settle a bit, and then she arches off the mattress. I pound into her repeatedly as I try to control her movements. When I know she's close, I bend forward to cover her back and press my lips to the side of her neck and shoulder before using my teeth and biting into her, marking her for everyone to see.

“Now, you’ll always be mine,” I tell her.

“Oh, God...” she screams.

“Yes, I feel you. Come for your mate.”

The orgasm seems to last forever, and when it finally settles, I am breathing raggedly at the same time I’m trying to keep from collapsing on her. I’ve never had my limbs shake so much or the feeling of completion.

I pull out of her and kiss the back of her head. “I’ll be right back.” I’m surprised my legs can hold my weight, but I can make it into the shower and wash off quickly. I don’t want to spend even a second away from her.

I use a cloth to clean her so she’ll be comfortable before sliding into the bed and tucking her tightly against my body.

“Good night, Mate,” I say. I smile when she murmurs something, letting out a low snore before falling asleep.

I know we have to talk about a lot of things, but we are both exhausted and just need to rest and hold each other for the moment.

Now that I have marked her, the strength of our mating bond solidifies with each passing second and will never be broken. I couldn’t be happier. I have her with me where I can protect her, and no one will ever take her from me again.

I sigh, close my eyes, and allow my body and mind to finally rest.

Epilogue

Dutchess

“You look beautiful.” I smile at Aryanna as we put the final touches to her hair.

We are in the bridal suite, away from everyone else, and I can hear my baby brother prowling up and down the hallway just beyond the door.

“I’m so glad you both agreed to be my bridesmaids,” she says and smiles at us with tears in her eyes.

“No crying,” Ary’s best friend, Isabel Russo, admonishes. “I just retouched your makeup!”

Ary and I stare at her as she stands with her hands on her hips before we both fall into a fit of giggles. For such a tiny thing, she sure is stern. I was worried when Aryanna asked us both to be part of the wedding party. I know that Isabel used to be in love with Domenico, but she is a great person and hasn’t made me feel even the tiniest bit uncomfortable. Actually, I think we could be great friends if given half a chance.

Aryanna chose a soft baby-blue color for our strapless dresses, and I may be the slightest bit jealous of how stunning Isabel looks. Not that I am some shrinking violet, but she really is just that beautiful.

“Can we get this show on the road?” Draven grumbles from the other side of the door. “I don’t like being away from my mate this long.”

His words set us all giggling once more. When I finally catch my breath, I put him out of his misery.

“Go. We’ll be there in two minutes,” I say.

I hear a loud huff before he stomps down the hallway toward the connected chapel.

“Are you ready?” I ask Aryanna.

“I have been ready to do this since the day your brother’s panther pinned me in the forest. I wouldn’t be anywhere else in the world than right here.”

I love that I finally understand how she feels. Because, even with all our drama and my pigheadedness, I have loved Dom since the beginning. I watch as a look of sadness flits over Isabel’s face before she hides it behind a wide smile.

“Let’s do it then!” she says too early, holding the door open for Aryanna.

We make our way down the hallway toward the doors of the chapel, strains of an acoustic version of an older love song floating through the air. Pushing the doors open, I enter first, followed by Isabel. I stare at Domenico as his dark gaze tracks my every move. The moment I reach the podium, he steps down and kisses me passionately before I take my place.

Isabel grabs my hand as she takes her place beside me, and I can feel her trembling. Worried, I turn to face her.

“What’s wrong?”

I am instantly on full alert. I said it to Domenico, and it remains true—we are part of the mafia and part of the MC lifestyle. We will never be truly safe.

“My mate is here,” she whispers.

“That’s great!” I say a little too loudly, drawing the attention of my mate. “Who is it?” I ask in a whisper, ignoring his questioning gaze.

“We’ll talk later,” Isabel says. The song changes, and Aryanna starts her walk down the aisle.

Throughout the service, Isabel clings to my hand like it’s a lifeline and never ceases trembling. I don’t know whether it’s excitement or fear, but I miss when my brother and Aryanna say their vows and their first kiss as a married couple because I’m too busy staring at my older brother, Cain.

He hasn’t taken his eyes off Isabel since he saw her. I know that look.

She is my brother's mate.

The End

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE WOLF

Gypsy Bastards MC, 1

Jade Marshall

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Sample Chapter

Hadley

I hate my job.

It isn't something I say to get people to pity me. I genuinely hate working at Mary's Rib Shack. I hate the mauve one-piece uniform, made of an awful, itchy fabric. I hate that the owner likes us to show off our assets, which means our uniforms are short around the legs and low around the neck. I don't particularly enjoy showing off my barely-there B cups, especially not to *our* clientele. I hate that Mary's is in downtown Gypsy Falls and the people who show up here are

sketchy at best, but most are completely creepy. But Mary pays in cash and I need to stay off the grid.

This isn't something I've done out of choice but more out of necessity. Growing up around an outlaw motorcycle club, which I then managed to piss off—through no fault of my own, might I add—means running and hiding to stay alive. If King were to ever get his hands on me, I wouldn't survive. Knowing that death chases me daily and could catch up with me at any moment ensures I always keep my head down.

The area where the diner is located is far from ideal, with drug dealers on every second corner and a nonexistent police response rate. From the linoleum flooring that's cracked and peeling in places, to the faded leather booth seats, and the god-awful music, there isn't a single thing about Mary's Rib Shack that I don't hate.

I work the evening shift until closing time, from four in the afternoon until around midnight. I want to be able to work my way out of this hellhole and provide a better life for myself. I have aspirations and being a waitress isn't one of them.

One day, I want to be able to open my own tattoo parlor. For as long as I can remember, I've loved drawing and through the years, I've honed my craft. Add to that the fact I did an apprenticeship at a tattoo parlor, learning from one of the best, and you have my dream. The only thing I want to do for the rest of my life.

“Hey, can we get some more coffee over here?” the man with the biker's cut sitting in my section all but yells at me.

Earlier, I saw them enter and a chill ran right down my spine. My first instinct was to run, to get the hell out of here as quickly as my legs could carry me. After catching a glimpse of their patches and not recognizing their club, I was able to calm myself.

My hands shake, and my legs feel weak as I make my way to their table. Bikers terrify me. Not some bikers, but all

bikers.

The three other guys with him seem rather normal-looking although anyone with eyes can tell that's not the case. One blond and two with dark-brown hair, all of them with protruding beer bellies. The fourth man, the one who just spoke and whom I'm assuming is the leader of this merry band of misfits, gives me the straight-up chills.

He's large, burly, and bald, with a snake tattoo running down his arm to his wrist. It's garish and badly done with absolutely no detail. The man looks me over with eyes the color of mud as I refill the cups. There's no depth to his eyes, just a flat deadness, and I try to avoid eye contact at all costs. I refill all four cups and start to move away when a large hand clamps around my wrist and pulls me back. Again, I feel this crawling sensation running over my skin. It takes everything I have within me not to pull away from his grip.

"Why don't you sit down with us for a minute, darling?" the leader drawls at me.

"I can't. I'm on shift and have to get back to my customers," I reply while trying to pull my arm from his grip.

My breathing becomes shallow and a shiver works its way through my body. The need to get his hands off me is almost overwhelming.

"Well, now, Mary won't mind, and the other waitress can see to your customers while you have a seat with us."

He uses a tone that's supposed to be reassuring but simply serves to creep me out even more. He yanks on my arm and I lose my balance, toppling forward and pouring half the remaining coffee down the front of his pants.

"You stupid fucking whore," he bellows.

Before I can react, he backhands me across the face, causing me to fall. My head connects with the counter and then the floor with a resounding thud. Lying on the floor, all I can think is this is it, my last day at Mary's. I would rather live on the fucking street than work here one more day. Regaining

my senses and opening my eyes, I find complete chaos around me. All the guys from the table are on their feet. The two dark-haired men are holding back the guy who just slapped me. He's doing his best to pull away from their grip and has his eyes trained on the front door to the diner.

Storm, my best friend, stands in the doorway. She's a petite Asian woman with long black hair streaked with purple, full sleeve tattoos—courtesy of myself, a small waist, and an awesome set of all-natural C-cup breasts. Storm knows how to defend herself from the time she spent living on the street. She may be a stripper, but she will never let a man get the upper hand again. Apparently, she learned a painful lesson and quickly found someone to teach her how to defend herself.

In three-inch stilettos with her gun pointed straight at him, she stands her ground in front of this monster of a man.

“Viper, why don't you take your little cronies and leave?” She's deadly calm in the face of this man and for a moment, I envy her confidence. I haven't moved from my spot on the floor and simply watch their exchange like the coward I have become.

“You know good and well that your kind isn't welcome around here. Or do I need to make a call?” She appears calm while taking her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans.

Viper tries to charge at her again but the blond man steps between them.

“Time to go,” he says, and the other two men start pulling Viper toward the door on the other side of the diner.

“I'm gonna get you. You and your little waitress friend. You're gonna pay. You hear me, Storm? You and that little cock tease!” he bellows as he's dragged out. “That pussy club ain't gonna save you.”

As soon as they are on the motorcycles and roaring into the distance, Storm puts her gun back in her purse and rushes over to me. “Oh, sweetie. Are you okay?” she inquires while pushing my hair from my face to inspect the damage.

“Hurts like a bitch but I’ll live. Gonna be blue tomorrow and I’ll probably have an egg on my head later, but I’ll be fine,” I assure her as I push up from the floor. “Thanks for the help.”

Storm looks at me with sympathy in her eyes, something I despise more than I can ever explain. I hate being seen for the weak, broken, scared little girl I become once I am faced with something that triggers my past. My past affects me more than I would like to admit, even to myself. So many things can trigger me and have me turning back in on myself. For years, I have secluded myself from people except for a select few. My friendship with Storm often pushes my boundaries and I feel like she is helping me rejoin the world again, one little push at a time.

As she opens her mouth to respond, Mary comes shrieking around the corner.

“You stupid bitches. Do you know what you’ve done?”

Her face is blood red from the lack of oxygen during her rant and her over-styled, bleach-blonde hair flies all over the place.

“Those assholes are gonna burn my place to the fucking ground because of the two of you!”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Storm turns a glare on her. “One of your staff members was just attacked, and all you can worry about is your business? What kind of person are you?”

Mary stares daggers at Storm as I pull myself to my feet.

“What’s wrong with me?” Mary continues shrieking. “Do you know who the fuck those guys were and how bad it can get when you fuck with them?”

“Yes, I do,” Storm says calmly. “Those are the limp-dick Mongrels MC and ain’t shit gonna happen to anyone. Pope is gonna lose his shit when he hears they were in his territory.”

Mary pales when she seems to realize Storm actually knows what she's talking about.

"Now," Storm says, looking back at me over her shoulder, "I am gonna take Hadley home and get some ice on her face. You're gonna cover her tables and still pay her for the hours she's missing. Because that's what a good boss would do."

"Oh, go choke on a dick, Storm. You won't be telling me how to run my goddamn business. Why don't you and Hadley just get her shit and get out because I don't need to draw any more attention."

She calmly turns to me and, looking me in the eyes, says, "You're fired."

Before I can think it through or contemplate my actions, my fist flies out and connects with Mary's nose.

She gives an undignified shriek as she cups her nose. "You cunt! You broke my fucking nose."

I stare at her before regaining my footing. Today may have been my breaking point. I have never—and I mean never—in my life laid hands on another person. "Oh, bite me, Mary. You're a fucking bitch and I quit."

Between hitting Mary, telling her to piss off, and quitting my job, I feel like I'm on top of the world. For the first time I can remember, I stood up for myself.

With what I'm sure is a seriously crazy smile on my face, I turn away from her. I head to the back of the diner where my personal effects are in a locker and change out of my shitty uniform. Taking a deep breath, I realize what I have just done. I stood up for myself but in the process, I've quit the only job I have. How am I going to pay rent, buy food, or pay for my damn car repairs? I am so fucked.

Instead of lingering on that, I square my shoulders and walk out to the front. People are crowded around Mary while Storm is smirking from her spot at the front door. Looking back at Mary, I smile. As I walk out of the diner, I give a

single finger salute in farewell, light up a smoke, and walk home.

End of sample chapter

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

HER MAFIA DESTINY

Macleans Mafia Men, 1

Lila Fox

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Sample Chapter

“Yo, brother, I think you need to go back home and mellow out.”

Alastair turned abruptly to face his brother, Calum, getting in his face and gritting his teeth. “Would you like to say that to me one more time?”

“Jesus Christ.” Calum raised his hands and took a hasty step back. “Man, it’s just that you’re really pissed off....”

“Aren’t you usually like this after talking to your mother?” Alastair asked.

“She’s your stepmother. That counts, nut fuck. But yes, I do. The woman’s a viper. It’s just when you’re pissed like this,

someone usually ends up dead.”

Alastair rolled his eyes, turned, and walked down the long hallway. The woman, Calum’s mother, was his fourth stepmother. Alastair’s mother died a few days after giving birth to him, which ruined his father. From what his family had told him over the years, they had been passionately in love, surprising because of their lifestyle.

Being a part of the mafia was not easy. You had to be cold and vicious to survive. It was especially hard for the women. The wives and mistresses had to deal with a lot.

His father had married four more times, trying to find the love he’d had with Isabella, Alastair’s mother, and it had never happened. This last one, Una, Calum’s mother, was the worst.

The first three stepmothers had died of surprisingly natural causes and not murder like one would expect living with the mafia—one in a car accident, one in an accidental drug overdose, and an accidental fall down the steps.

Alastair had liked that one the most. Nessa had been Logan, Ewen, and Rory’s mother and had been sweet as can be. It had hit his father hard when she passed away. Not as hard as Alastair’s mother, Isabella, but it took a while for him to want to have another woman in the house and in his life.

This last wife was a viper, and Alastair hated her, but he had to get along with her because his father was alive. After the stroke, his father had been unable to lead the Maclean clan, so Alastair had taken over the whole operation then, which was fine because he ran most of it anyway.

He shivered inside. Two minutes with his stepmother was torture. The woman was as mean as they came, and he couldn’t understand what his father saw in her. She might have been attractive if not for the permanent sneer she had on her face.

His brother was probably right, but he couldn’t stand the thought of going home to the same house his stepmother lived

in, knowing she'd probably try to hunt him down to talk some more because he'd walked out on her tirade. The temptation to just kill her was too strong, and he didn't know if his father would ever forgive him.

“What exactly are we looking at?” Calum asked.

“Our strip joint in Newport needs new women, and I sent out some of our guys to find ones who were attractive and loved being a stripper. Most of the ones we have now are getting old and tired, so we'll get them other jobs in the business.”

“Cool. Maybe think about taking one of them home,” Duncan, another brother, said. “It might help your disposition.”

“Fuck off,” Alastair said without turning around.

Alastair opened the door to what could pass as a conference room. It had a long table and chairs and a small bar off to the side. Some meetings went late, and the guys were more pleasant if they had some alcohol in them. But not too much, or they started killing each other.

The women were already there waiting. The ones that noticed him stood as seductively as they could, begging for his or his brothers' attention. Being one of their mistresses was sought after not only for their good looks but mainly for the money.

“Hey,” Stuart, one of his best men who had been with him for years, said and walked over to shake his hand. “I think we did well.”

“You checked for diseases and made sure they had no children?”

“Sure, boss. I know what you like.”

Alastair nodded. “Where's Ross? He was supposed to be helping you.”

“He's coming in with the last one or two.”

Alastair turned to Calum. “Can you get me a bourbon on the rocks?” He wouldn’t admit it to his brothers, but he did need to mellow out, and a nice drink helped every time.

“Sure.”

The first drink went down smoothly and helped calm his anger a bit as he talked to Stuart and ignored the women trying to vie for his notice and interest. He shook his head and snorted when his brothers did give the women their attention and had girls all over them.

“Craig is going to take these women to the club if you’re okay with them,” Stuart said.

Alastair turned and whistled for Duncan. “I’m going to put you in charge of this. Take them to Speedy’s, get the women who will live in our apartments next to the club moved in, and take the rest back to their place but tell them they have to be at work tomorrow. If they are late, they’re fired. There are no second chances.”

“I got it,” Duncan said.

His brother and a couple of the men rounded up the women and took them out a back door to the vans waiting.

“Are you going to wait for the last of them?” Stuart asked.

Alastair looked at his watch and sat down. “I’ll give them a few minutes.”

He hadn’t finished with his second drink when a side door opened and Ross, one of his guys, walked in, dragging a woman. She was crying and fighting to get away from him.

“Shut up, bitch,” Ross said and shook her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Stuart yelled.

Alastair held up a hand, set down his drink, and stood to face Ross. He walked to stand in front of the man and crossed his arms over his chest to keep from strangling the man, trying to ignore the woman’s pleas and cries. “Tell me.”

Ross stuttered. “Oh, well, her uncle owed us some money, and I was supposed to get it, but he didn’t have it, and so I thought we could use her as collateral until he pays up.”

Calum, Stuart, and the rest of his guys cursed, and the tension rose in the room.

Alastair just stared at the woman. She was tiny but had curved hips and larger breasts. She was dressed in a long white nightgown with lace. Her dark hair was tousled like she’d been pulled from bed.

“Who gave you permission to do that?” Alastair asked when he turned back at Ross.

“Well, no one. I just thought...”

“Is it your job to think?” Alastair asked.

“Well, no.”

“Jesus Christ, you dumbshit,” Stuart said.

Alastair walked up, cupped the woman’s chin, and raised her face. His breath stalled in his lungs because her eyes were the most beautiful he’d ever seen, even when they were red and swollen from crying. They were light blue in the middle and green on the other part, and they seemed to look right through him.

“Who is your family?” Alastair asked her.

She sniffed. “I don’t have one besides an uncle I haven’t seen in years.”

“No husband?”

“No. Please, let me go home. I won’t tell anyone. I don’t even know you,” she said.

For once in his life, he made a decision with his heart instead of his head. He pulled out a gun and shot Ross in the forehead in one smooth move.

Everyone in the room stood frozen and in shock until the woman screamed.

Alastair put his gun away and reached for her when it looked like she was going to faint, only to have her flinch in horror away from him. He knew why, but it still pissed him off, which was ridiculous. Of course, she would be terrified of him. He just murdered someone in front of her.

He didn't like the blood that had been sprayed over her from Ross's head, and he wanted her clean as soon as possible.

He kept a few feet away from the woman and waited for her to be calm enough to hear him. "My name is Alastair Maclean. We're the mafia in this part of the city."

Alastair heard his brother curse behind him and ignored him.

The woman was hunched against the wall. Tears mixed with blood and brain matter ran down her face. "Why are you telling me this? Are you going to kill me next?"

Alastair shook his head. "I'm making sure that you won't be able to go anywhere, ever."

"I don't understand. I've never done anything to you or anyone."

"I know. Sometimes your life takes a path you didn't expect." *No kidding*. He never predicted he'd kidnap a woman and plan to keep her forever. "My advice is to make the best of this. I'll treat you like a princess as long as you're loyal to me. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't. I don't understand any of this."

He sighed. "That's okay. We have plenty of time." He held out his hand and waited.

She shook her head.

"You can either take my hand and walk out of here with some dignity, or I can have a few of my men carry you out. Choose."

She studied him for a moment and before she reached for his hand. He could see how much she was trembling, but

he would take care of her as soon as they got home. When her shaking, tiny cold hand slid into his hand, something inside of him settled, and a warmth filled him.

“That’s good, baby.” He pulled her along and looked at one of his men. “Take care of Ross.”

“You got it, boss.”

As he led her out to his car, he felt something shift in his universe, and he knew he’d forever be changed. He just didn’t know if it would be for the good or bad. Only time would tell.

End of sample chapter

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