




A REVERSE HAREM
ROMANCE

Mafia
BOSSSES



STEPHANIE BROTHER

MAFIA BOSSES

A DARK MAFIA REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

STEPHANIE BROTHER

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CESARE

“TWO MINUTES OUT!” LEONARDO’S VOICE RANG OUT OVER THE radio, and I grinned. Freedom. That’s what was two minutes out and heading our way. Fucking freedom. Though others may call it an armored truck, it was far more than that to me.

Static crackled through the device in my hand, and then Matteo’s voice came through. “We’re ready.”

We sure as hell had better be.

The money inside that truck meant that we’d never have to work for anyone else again. Never be under someone else’s thumb. Never have to take orders from an asshole.

If this worked.

Tamping down the adrenaline that spiked my system, I took up my position behind a cedar tree on the side of the road, the feel of cold metal on my fingertips. Across from me, barely visible in the dark, Matteo was already in his spot, his gaze on the timer in his grasp.

At times like these, I admired his nerves of steel. He knew the risks and the stakes, but I bet his pulse hadn’t risen at all. After five years in the Army, he was unshakable. Not that he’d ever been the type to lose his head. He was my cousin, and I’d known him for nearly all of my thirty-three years.

He wanted this just as much as I did. Like me, he wasn’t content to be a henchmen or mob boss’s lapdog. Who wanted to do all the dirty work and stick their neck out for their boss? And for what, shit pay? A pat on the back?

Both of those were fucking worthless. There was a much better way.

To earn respect, to carve out our place in the New York underworld, we didn't have to go out and shoot someone in the head. All we had to do was to have enough money, enough *power*, to hire a pathetic jerk to do that for us. To use them for our own benefit. Then we'd be in charge.

Or, okay, I could admit it, *I'd* be in charge. But Matteo and Leonardo were okay with that. It's how it had always been. Unlike the losers we'd sometimes worked for, I wasn't an asshole.

Usually.

We worked well together, and we each had our own role to play. This heist had taken a lot of planning. I spent the past three months going over every single detail with Matteo and Leonardo.

Matteo, with his military background, was in charge of weapons. He was also the best with strategy. Leonardo wasn't much of a planner, but he could think outside the fucking box, or whatever you called it. He could think on his feet, too. We needed him to do that tonight or we could very well wind up dead. Or in jail. Both were equally shitty outcomes as far as I was concerned.

After months of preparation, we had the exact route the armored truck would take, all the way from Vegas to New York. Yesterday, at random times, I'd quizzed Matteo on where the truck was at that very moment. And every single time, he knew.

In the end, we'd come up with four sweet spots, where the truck was the most vulnerable, and a shit-ton of spots to stay away from. Crowded city centers and the interstate were just two of them. There would just be too many witnesses around, or too many complications. Pick the wrong spot, and instead of a big, fat reward, we'd get a prison sentence.

Fuck that shit.

Of course, there were a few issues along the way. First off, Leonardo practically got a boner whenever he heard the word “Vegas.” Running an illegal business in Sin City had been on his mind for God knew how long. He believed it was untouched territory. The funny thing was, he was right. There were few crews working in Las Vegas. The mob had stayed away from that part of the world for the past thirty years or so, for good reason.

Other people were running the show.

And by “other people,” I meant corporations. Giants who could pretty much buy the whole State of Nevada. Companies that could—and would—mobilize the entire police department if someone was stupid enough to mess with them. The mafia hadn’t dared do that in a long, long time.

But this truck was on our turf—and we were going to take full advantage of that fact.

I gripped my gun, my ears straining for the sound of an engine. Beams of moonlight were peeking through the trees, and all I could hear was some fucking bird, probably an owl. Matteo would probably know, but I wasn’t exactly nature boy. My place was in the city. Hopefully, I’d be returning to it with masses of cash.

A quick glance at my watch revealed it was ten past twelve. The armored truck was less than a mile away. We had seen it drive past this spot three times in the last three weeks, each time looking like a different food delivery truck. Any idiot who’d been in this business longer than a day could clearly see that it was an armored truck, but they’d continued with the lame-ass disguise.

The first time, it purportedly delivered pizza. The second time, it was a taco truck. That had amused Matteo because half the food items on the menu on the side of the truck were misspelled. The third time, they’d gone with Korean. None of us knew enough about that cuisine to know if it was spelled right or not.

It was fucking stupid of them to stick to one route, but it was good for us. A grim smile spread across my face as I heard the

sound I'd been waiting for. The noise of the powerful diesel engine grew louder as the ground began to rumble.

"Showtime," I muttered into the radio, abandoning the cover of the trees. I strode into the middle of the road, the truck's headlights hitting my ski-mask covered head.

Though I couldn't see the driver's face yet, I heard the shift in the engine as he took his foot off the accelerator, probably reflexively. Right now, he was probably trying to decide if it was better to stop or run me over. I was prepared for both options but stood my ground.

The truck slowed, and I knew that the driver had seen the high-powered assault rifle I was aiming directly at him. I could see him through the scope now. Technically, Matteo was a better shot, but I had this asshole covered as surely as if he'd had a target drawn on his forehead. From the bead of sweat I could see through the scope, he knew it, too, and the large vehicle lurched to a halt.

"Out! Now!" I shouted, taking a few steps closer to the front of the truck. The driver stared at me through the windshield. He was too preoccupied to notice Leonardo sprinting along the side of the vehicle. His gun drawn, he halted right outside the driver's door and pointed it up at him. Leaning forward, the driver put on the handbrake, diesel fumes filling my nostrils.

Though there was no sign of him, I knew that Matteo had taken his place behind the truck. My job, at the moment, was to keep the driver's attention. My rifle could pierce through that glass with ease, and he probably knew that. Ignoring my order to exit the truck, he just sat there staring at me, fear written all over his face. Which was fine as long as he didn't cause any trouble for us.

Then I heard Matteo's voice over the sound of the engine. "Three, two, one..."

A loud blast ripped through the stillness of the night. Smoke rose from behind the truck as the driver was thrown sideways, disappearing from view. The little fucker hadn't even been wearing a seatbelt.

“All clear?” I called back to Matteo. Though we’d accounted for every variable we could, we hadn’t been entirely sure that the charge would be enough to blow open the reinforced doors. At the same time, we didn’t want anything so strong that it risked torching the cash. But Matteo knew what to do if the first blast didn’t work. We always had a Plan B.

“Give me a minute,” Matteo called back.

Leonardo and I exchanged glances. Would it have killed him to give us more info?

Movement caught my eye. The chickenshit driver had reappeared, and he had something in his hands. My finger tightened instinctively on the trigger before I saw what he was holding.

It was a fucking shotgun. What kind of an armored truck driver packed a weapon more suited to picking squirrels off of tree branches?

The driver fumbled with his laughable weapon and then he coughed.

Shit.

It took my brain a half second to resolve the alarm spreading through me. The driver had coughed because of the smoke filling the cab of the truck. A quick glance confirmed that the wall separating the front from the back of the truck remained intact. So how was the fuck cab filling up with smoke?

My pulse tripled as I realized the driver had rolled down the window.

Shit, shit, fuck.

I trained my sights on the driver, but my gaze went to Leonardo. He was coughing, too, the ski mask not offering much protection from the acrid smoke. He’d taken a couple of instinctive steps back after the blast, but he was still too close to the truck.

“Look out!” I thundered, and in that split second, I knew I’d fucked up. I should’ve taken out the prick of a driver first. My

shot pierced the glass, taking out the driver, but he'd got his off first, and Leonardo fell to the ground with a cry.

Matteo rounded the corner of the truck, almost tripping over Leonardo. "What happened?"

"Little fucker tried to be a big man," I growled, dropping to my knees.

Leonardo was clutching his chest, and I yanked off my mask in order to see better. Matteo whipped out a flashlight, and we both stared down at the blood darkening Leon's shirt. His breathing was ragged as he gasped in pain. It was obvious he was trying to keep from shouting, but that was the least of my concerns. The driver was dead, and I was determined that Leonardo wouldn't end up that way, too.

"Hospital," Matteo said briefly. Slinging the strap of my rifle over my shoulder, I slid my hands under my wounded friend. With Matteo on his other side, we lifted him off the ground. His cry of pain wrenched at me, but there was another sound behind it I liked even less.

"We've got to get out of here," Matteo said, meeting my eye. He'd heard it too—the sound of another engine coming up the road fast. Somehow, I doubted it was an innocent civilian out for a late-night drive.

All thoughts of the armored truck and the cash inside gone, we moved as quickly as we could through the woods. I was torn between wanting to just grab Leonardo and haul ass to our car and wanting to be gentle because of his wounds. I settled for a fast walk, nearly a jog, and Matteo kept up. He talked to Leonardo as we carried him, reassuring him that he was going to be okay. I wasn't sure how much he heard over the moans and gasps he was trying to stifle.

Matteo pushed Leonardo at me when we got to the SUV and I held him while Matt opened the door and pushed down the seats in the back. Shoving aside our equipment, I laid him in the back, Matteo climbing in next to him. "Hang in there," he said.

I drove without lights, thankful that we'd cased this area so many times that we knew every mile. Still, I was less careful than I should have been as I raced to the hospital.

Leonardo's cries of pain made me favor speed over caution on a night where both were clearly needed.

PIPER

MOST PEOPLE HATED SPENDING ALL NIGHT IN THE EMERGENCY Room. Not me—I loved it. But that was because I wasn't the one waiting in a room full of coughing people. I wasn't sick or injured. I wasn't even required to sit in those god-awful plastic chairs.

Instead, I was the one helping those people. Well, all except for those crappy chairs in the ER. No one, not even a skilled nurse, could save people from that torment.

My long shifts kept me on my feet all night. I crept home at dawn, too exhausted to do anything but fall into bed. Night after night, I saw the best and worst of what humanity had to offer.

And I loved it.

I got to help people. I got to save people. What could be better than that?

Okay, the hours could be better. And the pay. And the doctors could stand to be less arrogant and obnoxious. But there was no getting around that patients needed me. That was all that mattered.

"I'm going on a break," my colleague Ava said as she hurried past me. We'd started our shift together, and so far, neither of us had even had a spare moment to even use the bathroom. I didn't blame Ava for catching a few moments for herself between patients. If I got the chance, I was going to do the same thing.

In the meantime, I could hope she'd bring me back some coffee, but that hope evaporated when she reappeared, her white sneakers smacking against the worn tile as she ran my way. "GSW in the ambulance bay!"

My empty stomach seemed to fold in on itself even as I broke into a run. Gunshot wounds weren't exactly uncommon in New York City, especially at night, but I'd never get used to them. Ever.

Not after what had happened to Colby.

"You okay?" Ava glanced over her shoulder at me. "It's a young man."

"Of course." It wasn't true, but it didn't matter. My job was to help the patient in any way I could, and that's exactly what I was going to do.

We reached the entrance ambulance bay just as two orderlies pushed in a stretcher. There were no flashing lights on the other side of the door, but I didn't have time to worry about where the patient had come from.

Instead, my eyes fell on the writhing young man on the gurney. For a moment, all I could see was a young man with a badly wounded chest. There was dirt in his blond hair and his youthful face contorted in agony.

"Colby," I whispered.

"Piper!" Ava glared at me as she wrestled an oxygen mask on the struggling patient. "Help me."

With a shake of my head, I blinked to clear my vision. It wasn't Colby. The man didn't even have blond hair. Still, it was hard to shake the image of my brother. What I wouldn't give to see him again, even if just for one second.

Even if he was in pain like this patient. Being in pain was better than being dead.

"They said his name is Leonardo Turner, age twenty-nine," a male orderly said, jerking his neck toward two tall men who had been stopped by security. Apparently, they didn't like

being told they couldn't accompany their buddy, but then again, no friends or family liked hearing that.

Those guys weren't my problem—their friend was. We wheeled the stretcher into a curtained off area and started assessing the damage as the man's cries filled the air.

His blue T-shirt was torn and darkened with fresh blood. Grabbing a scissors, I cut it away, revealing a well-muscled chest that was bleeding in at least a dozen spots.

"I'll page Dr. Baines," Ava said as I surveyed the damage. He was scraped up and there were bits of what looked like gravel pressed into smooth, tan skin. But it was the deeper wounds that worried me.

"I think those are pellets," I muttered as I wiped away blood and dirt.

"Better than bullets," Ava said.

"No, it's not," the man said, wincing as I touched his damaged skin.

I nearly jumped at the sound of his voice. Usually patients in this state were in too much pain to make sense. "Mr. Turner, we're going to take good care of you."

"Leon," he corrected, but then his eyes squeezed shut as he groaned.

"Hang in there, Leon," Ava said.

The curtain flew open. "What have we got?" Dr. Baines appeared, and I was grateful that he was on duty tonight. He was a bit less arrogant than most of the doctors who worked here. *Just* a bit, but it was better than nothing. Plus, he was married so he didn't try to hit on Avan and me constantly—not that that stopped some of the other married men around here.

Ava gave him the run-down as Leon's eyes opened again. They were hazel with specks of gold. He raised his hand, pawing at the front of my scrubs. If a guy who wasn't injured had done that, I would've smacked him. But I'd seen many patients do this, and I knew what he wanted. I clasped his hand

in mine and squeezed. I brushed the dark, spiky hair back from his face with the other. “You’re going to be okay, Leon.”

He nodded, staring into my eyes as Dr. Baines worked over him and Ava put a port in his arm. I could see the moment the sedative hit him. He blinked once, then twice. “Just relax, and let us take care of you.”

Though his eyelids were drooping, he stared at me for a long moment. And in that moment, I saw something that filled me with warmth: trust. He trusted me, and by God, I wouldn’t let him down. I squeezed his hand and gave him a smile as his eyes closed and he drifted off.



It was close to four a.m. when I finally got to take a break, but I didn’t spend it in the nurses lounge. Instead, I grabbed a cup of coffee and a granola bar, and located Leon’s room.

He was sleeping peacefully when I entered. Or at least from the neck up he looked peaceful. His dark lashes rested against his cheeks, and his hair stood up in spikes. I got the feeling that it was always spiky and that it hadn’t just happened when he’d been injured.

But from the neck down, well, things didn’t look so peaceful. A blanket covered his lower half, but his chest was bare and covered in gauze and bandages. Dr. Baines had plucked seven shotgun pellets out of him and stitched him up while I cleaned and treated all the scrapes and scratches. The skin on his torso was red and raw. Even worse was the one pellet Dr. Baines hadn’t been able to get out. But that happened. Depending on the location, sometimes it was safer not to try to remove it.

Leon breathed deeply and evenly as I nibbled on the granola bar, my eyes on the rise and fall of his chest. His companions had told us he was twenty-nine, but he looked younger. He had a bit of a boyish face. It didn’t make him look less masculine, but I imagined that he’d be the type of man who’d look like he was thirty well into his forties. Somehow, I doubted the same

could be said about me, but hey, I still had four years before I'd be in my thirties.

Did I stay because he reminded me of Colby? Maybe. It would've been good if someone had been able to comfort my brother after he'd been shot, but he hadn't even made it to the hospital. But if he had, I would've wanted someone to be with him until we could. Maybe Leon's family felt the same way, or they would when they found out he was hurt?

There was a faint knock at the door, and my head swung toward it. It would be ironic if his family showed up right after that thought from me, but when the door opened, it was a huge, dark-haired man whom I'd seen downstairs in the ER before. He'd been one of the ones who brought Leon in.

The man gave me a nod as he eased his large body into the room, keeping the door half closed so as not to disturb his friend. It wasn't easy, though. He was a big man. A really big man—at least six foot four or five, and his body was a veritable wall of muscles. Though his skin was tan like Leonardo's, his eyes and hair were so dark they were nearly black. He didn't look like he was Leonardo's family, or at least not a blood relation.

But I knew better than anyone that you didn't have to share the same blood to be family. Colby would always be my brother even though we hadn't shared any common blood, either.

For a big man, the newcomer moved quietly. I barely heard his footsteps as he walked to the other side of Leon's bed. He gazed at his friend's messed up chest for a long while, not even acknowledging me. When he finally lifted his gaze to me, I jolted slightly. Out of fear? Or surprise? I really couldn't say, but there was something in the intensity of his gaze that shook me.

"How is he?" the man asked softly. He had on a black leather jacket. Under it, he was wearing a gray t-shirt with dried blood on it. The shirt was tight against the broad expanse of his chest and flat abs. I got the sense that he hadn't gone looking for a tight shirt to show off his muscles but rather all shirts looked tight on a man his size.

“He’s stable for now,” I said in a whisper, and then bit my tongue. I hated this part of the job—I wasn’t allowed to tell him anything about his friend’s health, at least not without Leon’s permission.

The man nodded, as if not expecting much of an answer. “They wouldn’t tell us anything downstairs, either.”

“Hospital rules,” I stated, but I couldn’t keep the note of sympathy out of my voice.

He nodded. “Do you have his wallet?”

That took me by surprise, but I glanced over at the white plastic bag on the nightstand next to the bed. “I’m sorry, I can’t give it to you.”

“I didn’t ask you to. But you can look at it, right?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. When the large man just continued to stare at me, I reached into the bag and fished the wallet out of the pocket of Leonardo’s pants.

“Find his license.”

It felt a little surreal to be in a dark room, following low, gruff orders from a perfect stranger, but I didn’t sense any ill will from the man across from me, despite his menacing looks. So I did what he said and pulled out the license.

Then the man proceeded to tell me Leonardo’s full name, date of birth, address, and pretty much every other piece of information on the license.

“I don’t suppose you know when it’s due for renewal?” I asked, an eyebrow raised.

A flash of a smile crossed his stern face and then disappeared just as quickly. “Just wanted you to know that I’m Leonardo’s friend.”

“I believe you.” But then I frowned as I squinted at the license. “It says his name is Leon, not Leonardo.”

The man nodded. “Leonardo sounds more Italian.”

“Is he Italian?” I asked. It was clear the big man was. Though he had no accent, his black hair, dark eyes, and olive skin

spoke to that.

“In an honorary way.”

His response made me smile. He clearly felt that his ancestry was a prize to bestow on worthy candidates.

“I’m Cesare,” he said.

The name rolled off his tongue and was pleasing to my ear. “Nice to meet you. I’m Piper.”

“Piper.” He said my name slowly, as if measuring its worth. “Can you please tell me how my friend is, Piper?”

I sighed. “I can’t, I’m sorry.” I wished I could, though.

Cesare nodded curtly. “Can you at least tell me if he’s going to be okay?”

It would’ve been cruel not to give an inch. “He should be fine.” Not immediately, but eventually.

The big man’s sigh of relief was almost loud enough to wake the patient. “Thank you. We thought—” He stopped abruptly.

When he didn’t say anything else, I spoke up. “We?”

“My buddy and me. Maybe you saw us when we brought him in?”

There had been two men there, but I didn’t remember what the other one looked like. “I didn’t see you in the waiting room after that.”

He shrugged, the muscles of his massive biceps shifting under his jacket. “Security wouldn’t let us see him, and we had some things to take care of.”

His tone was curt and didn’t invite follow-up questions.

He had some, though. “Can you tell me when—” He broke off as the door opened. Startled, his hand snaked inside his jacket as he turned. I expected to see Dr. Baines there, but another man stepped into the room.

The newcomer ignored me and looked straight at Cesare. “We’ve got company.” This man was a few inches shorter than Cesare, but still pretty tall. And his muscles weren’t as big and

bulky, but he moved with an easy confidence, like his bigger friend. His dark hair and eyes showed that he was likely Italian, too. These two looked like they could be related.

Cesare strode to the door as if to take a look down the hall, but his buddy had already shut the door behind him. He spared a brief glance for me and for Leonardo before addressing Cesare.

“He okay?”

“He will be,” Cesare replied. “How many?”

“Two.” The new man said. “There were three.”

They exchanged a look and then Cesare moved over to my side of the bed. “You need to go to the bathroom,” he ordered.

For a moment, I stared at him, utterly confused. “What?”

“It’ll be safer there.”

He gripped my arm, pulling me to my feet.

“What?” I repeated again. Slowly, it dawned on me that he hadn’t meant that he thought I needed to *use* the bathroom. He just wanted me to go in it.

Because it was safer.

Fear flooded through me.

The other man flattened himself against the wall behind the door and he had a gun in his hand. My legs started sharking, and I almost fell back into the chair.

A gun. Inside the hospital.

That should’ve scared, and it did but it also infuriated me. “Listen, you can’t just—”

Cesare’s large palm covered my mouth and he hissed at me to be quiet. What little self-defense training I’d had trickled into my mind, but what was one supposed to do against a man of his size? I had to crane my neck just to look him in the eye, which wasn’t easy to do when he had his hand clamped over my mouth.

Besides, though I might've been crazy, I wasn't scared of his anger. It clearly wasn't directed at me. But I was mad as hell at his friend for bringing a weapon into my workplace.

Cautiously, Cesare removed his hand, watching my face intently, no doubt ready to silence me again if he had to. But his demeanor was getting to me. He and his buddy by the door were clearly worried about whoever was out there.

"Get ready," his friend whispered in a voice so quiet I could barely hear it. Cesare nodded, not taking his eyes off me. But his hand moved. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a handgun of his own.

Okay, now I was scared. Being around guns always did that to me. I hated them with a passion. But it was more than that this time. I was also frightened because of the tension radiating from these two. It couldn't have been more obvious that they thought something big was about to go down.

Something big and bad.

And then there was a sound right outside the door. A footstep. It cracked open as my heart pounded painfully in my chest.

It took effort to remember how to breathe as I looked up at Cesare's dark eyes. His grip was tight on his gun, and he looked ready to whirl around and shoot. And maybe whoever was at the door would also shoot. His buddy certainly looked ready to.

God, someone was going to get hurt. Maybe Leonardo who was still unconscious. Or a patient or staff in the hallway. Or me here in this little room. I didn't want any of those things to happen. Hell, I didn't even want these two men whom I knew nothing about to get hurt. Even though they were armed and ready to fire.

The door opened farther, as if in slow motion. Cesare's muscles tensed as he prepared to turn. His buddy, still hidden by the door, had his pistol ready to take down anyone who entered.

Something snapped inside me, and I knew I couldn't let that happen. I stepped forward, pressing my body against Cesare's,

my hands linking behind his thick neck. His gun got caught between our bodies as I pressed myself against him, but I didn't let myself think about it. Instead, I focused on his face as I went up on my tiptoes. I cupped the back of his neck to pull his head down as I raised my lips to his.

His body was stiff and unyielding for a long moment. I felt the coiling of his muscles and wondered if he'd push me away and continue along the path of violence. But then his freehand wrapped around my waist and he smashed me against his massive chest, his mouth engulfing mine.

My mind raced as I pantomimed being in the throes of passion. Due to Cesare's large body, I couldn't see who had opened the door, but I could sense the surprise coming from that direction, either from Cesare's friend or the intruder. But I didn't let it distract me. This was the only way I knew to avoid people getting hurt.

I raked my fingers across Cesare's short hair, and he responded by running his large hand up my back, tugging at the blonde tendrils that had escaped my messy bun. He deftly found the large bobby pins and plucked them out, causing my hair to cascade down around my shoulders. His large fingers soothed it in place as he pressed his body against me, turning me slightly, possibly to make sure the gun was hidden from sight?

Letting out a moan, I stroked his neck and his back. I was surprised to feel an answering rumble from his chest. Was he faking moaning like I was? Or was he actually moaning. Because there was something he wasn't faking, and that was the hardness pressing against my abdomen. His gun definitely wasn't the only hard thing pressing against my body.

My senses were alert for any sound coming from the doorway, but something strange was happening. Well, everything about this messed up situation was strange, but still... I never expected to feel anything from this kiss. It wasn't real. I didn't know this guy. Sure, he was hot in a body-builder kind of way. And in a talk, dark, and powerful kind of way. But that had never been enough in the past. I needed to know someone—and like them—in order to feel something with them.

So why was there this warmth coursing through me? This urgency in the way my mouth met his? It made no sense. This whole thing was terrifying, not a turn-on.

Except somehow it seemed to be both.

Then I heard a soft chuckle. “My bad,” a voice said from the open doorway, and then I saw the light shift and heard the door click shut.

And still, Cesare kissed me. I’d initiated the kiss, but he’d taken it over, there was no doubt about that. His mouth ravished mine, and I finally let my eyes close as I gave into the sensations. I sank against him, letting him hold me up as the strength left my body.

Even if I could’ve mustered the strength to pull away, I probably wouldn’t have. It was like everything else in the world had melted away except for this powerful man who’d overwhelmed my senses.

Finally, his friend near the door spoke. “He’s gone.”

And still, I let Cesare kiss me. At the moment my thoughts were so muddled that I could barely remember why we were doing this. But then Cesare eased his massive body back an inch or two, and I felt the cold metal of the gun through my scrubs.

That snapped me out of it. I stepped back, looking up at the big man towering over me. He lowered the gun, tucking it back in his jacket. I couldn’t interpret the look he gave me, but that wasn’t all that surprising. Right now, I couldn’t even seem to remember my own damn name.

The man behind the door stepped toward us, his gun lowered. “That was quick thinking,” he said to me.

Cesare arched one thick eyebrow and nodded. “It was. Matteo, this is Piper. Piper, Matteo.”

The man gave me a nod, which I shakily returned.

“Think they’ll be back?” Cesare asked Matteo.

“Doubt it. You two were pretty convincing.” Matteo gave me a small smile. “Funny how the bastard would’ve had no qualms

about shooting an injured man, but drew the line at being a cock-block.”

“What?” I stared at Matteo.

Cesare ignored my confused question. “Don’t worry, he didn’t see your face.”

I hadn’t been worried about that, at least not until he said it. But now I was. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” a voice said. Except it wasn’t Cesare’s low, gruff voice. It was a younger voice.

I turned to the bed to see Leonardo staring up at me. I moved to his side and brushed the hair away from his eyes. “How are you feeling?” I asked. In the midst of all this insanity, asking a patient how he felt made me feel on firmer ground.

But my question was ignored. “He angled your body away from the door,” the injured man continued.

“And that’s why he let down your hair,” Matteo added. There was a faint smile of what looked like appreciation on his face. “It’s like a golden mane.”

A bit self-consciously, I reached up and twirled a finger around a tendril. Then I glanced up at Cesare. I couldn’t quite process the flood of emotions inside me. Fear was right up top. But my increased pulse rate was less from that and more from the way he’d kissed me. Had it all been an act? I mean, sure, I was glad he’d protected my identity in case whoever that was had seen through our act, but... well... he’d seemed like he’d really gotten into it, too.

I sure had, though I didn’t know what it said about me that I could enjoy a kiss with a gun trapped between our bodies.

Cesare’s eyes met mine, and I couldn’t break away from the intensity of his gaze until I felt a hand on my arm. “My chest hurts,” Leon said, which was probably the understatement of the year.

His statement reminded me of my duties. “I can get you something for the pain,” I said. “And I’ll see if Dr. Baines can come check—” A new thought hit, one that would’ve occurred

to me before now if I'd been less flustered. "Do I need to call security?"

"No," all three men said at once. Then Matteo continued. "That would put you—and them—in danger again."

I gulped but nodded. "We'll take care of it," Cesare assured me. He reached out, giving Leon's leg a quick pat. "We'll get out of your hair now." He paused glancing over at Matteo. "Your golden mane, as my poetic friend here said. You won't see us, but we'll be watching. So don't worry, you'll be safe."

In spite of everything, I almost laughed. Worry? About which thing? Men with guns. More men with guns. A patient in pain. A passionate kiss with a complete stranger. And those were just the beginning of the list.

Cesare joined Matteo at the door before turning back to me. "Thanks for taking such good care of Leonardo, Piper. My number's on his emergency contact form. I hope you don't need it, but, if you need any help, go ahead and call me."

His gaze turned to Leonardo, and his eyes softened. It was the look an older brother might give, and that made me miss Colby all the more. It was a shame that it took gun violence to make me remember how great he had been.

Both men left the room, leaving me frazzled in their wake. I still couldn't quite process what had happened, so I stared at the door where a moment ago, two handsome but scary men had stood.

Then fingers brushed against my bare arm and I nearly jumped.

"So, about that pain medicine," Leonardo began.

Right. A patient needed help. It was time to return to doing my job, no matter how crazy this night had been.

LEONARDO

“FACE IT, YOU’RE GOING TO MISS ME,” I SAID TO THE gorgeous blonde in the blue scrubs. It was hard to sound cocky when she towered over the wheelchair they’d insisted I wait in, but I did my best. Getting a chest full of buckshot sucked, but seeing Piper for two days had almost made it worth it.

Almost.

She hadn’t given me the sponge bath I’d asked for, but outside of that, no one could fault her care. She was smart, attentive, funny, and built like a fucking goddess. From the way she’d leaned over me when giving me medicine or straightening my pillows and blankets, I’d gotten a pretty good idea of what kind of body was hidden under those scrubs, and it was hot enough to make a grown man weak at the knees.

Guess it was a good thing I was in a fucking wheelchair.

I almost wanted to get shot again to spend more time with her. And I didn’t think it was just my imagination that she’d spent a lot of time with me. I’d asked her about it once. She was an ER nurse, and after those first few hours, I’d been in a room up on the third floor. So why had she kept showing up?

I had a few theories, including one that made my cock harden. Not that I was in any shape to show a woman like her a good time.

“Of course I’ll miss you,” she said, her voice deep and throaty for a pretty woman. She seemed almost engineered to make a man’s thoughts go in the gutter, but there was more to her than

that. She was a genuinely good person, and I didn't meet many like her. Not in the circles I hung out in, anyway.

She sat down on a bench outside the entrance to the hospital, and it was nice not to have to look up at her. It was even nicer when she crossed one leg over the other, allowing the blue material to stretch over her thighs.

I wondered if they were as creamy and smooth as the skin that showed above the V-neck of her scrubs?

"Is your friend picking you up?" she asked, and I didn't have to wonder who she meant. She'd asked a few times about Cesare though he hadn't been by since that first night they brought me in. I didn't begrudge Piper for wondering about him. The kiss they'd shared had been scorching enough to make me squirm on the bed—even though I'd barely been conscious. I could only imagine how hot it was for them. It had been necessary, to prevent more bloodshed, but still hot as hell. No wonder she wanted to know if Cesare would be making an appearance.

But I didn't bother answering because a dark SUV pulled up and stopped in front of us. Piper's gaze immediately swung to it, but I couldn't tell if she was disappointed when Matteo stepped out of the driver's side.

He sauntered over, and Piper rose when he neared. She was fairly tall for a woman, but she looked short next to his six-foot two frame.

"Did this guy give you any trouble?" Matteo asked in an easy, casual voice. Which was clearly for Piper's benefit, because in general, he wasn't a very causal kind of guy.

"Nothing I couldn't handle."

Her response made my cock twitch. I sure as hell liked the thought of her handling me—or, rather, handling certain parts of me.

I pushed myself out of the chair, taking a moment to get my balance. I waved away the hand that Matteo offered and made my way to the passenger side.

Piper hurried after me. “You’re not supposed to do that on your own.”

I opened the car door and tried not to show that I was hanging onto it for balance. “I do a lot of things I’m not supposed to do.”

She grinned. “So I gather.”

God, her lips were sexy. Perfectly pink and slightly swollen. I could only imagine how swollen they’d be if I kissed her the way Cesare had. “Give me a few days to heal, and then I’ll show you what I can do,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

Piper laughed. She was well used to my come-ons after the past couple of days. As a nurse, she also knew that I wasn’t up for anything more than talk, at least not yet. But I sure as hell wanted to look her up once I was.

She fussed over me, insisting on buckling me in. It made me feel like a fucking baby, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to protest at the way her breasts pressed against my chest as she leaned over me. It gave me something fun to think about while she reiterated the pertinent parts of my recovery plan. After a few moments, she seemed to realize that my mind was elsewhere and directed her words to Matteo, who nodded.

Then she turned back to me, her hand resting lightly on my thigh. “Take care of yourself, Leo.”

Heat radiated outward from her touch. I focused on her vivid green eyes, ignoring the slight scoff from behind me. No, Leo wasn’t my name, any more than Leonardo was. My mom had named me Leon, the plainest name on the planet. But I kind of liked that Piper had settled on calling me Leo. In her voice, it sounded fresh and new—like the kind of man I sometimes wanted to be. “Thank you.”

I said the words as sincerely as I could, and I was pleased that Piper seemed to recognize that. The warmth in her gaze was as searing as the touch of her hand.

Then we took off, and I watched her in the side mirror until we made a turn and she was out of sight.

Dammit.

“Looks like you made a new friend,” Matteo said, his eyes on the road.

“Yep.”

“Just remember, Cesare saw her first.”

What the fuck? “Unless he was the one wheeled in on a stretcher, I doubt that.”

Matteo’s mouth tightened. “He kissed her first, I mean.”

“So what does that mean, that he’s got dibs? We aren’t in grade school. Besides, she kissed him. To trick those assholes into backing off.”

Matteo frowned. “You were awake for that part?”

“Yes,” I said. But just barely. “Who were those guys anyway?”

“Cesare and I have some theories.”

I waited, but he didn’t say anything else. Guess we’d talk about it when Cesare was there. He was our leader, but not an authoritarian motherfucker on a power trip. We were a three-man crew, and we all had our roles. He and Matteo were cousins, but they were as close as brothers. Sometimes, it seemed like they could read each other’s minds.

In middle school, I saw them around, but I was two years younger. It wasn’t until high school that we became friends, hanging out, shooting hoops, and generally causing a lot of trouble. The kind that got us frequently suspended from school and on the radar of the local police.

But after high school, Matteo decided to clean up his act and join the fucking army, for some reason. I’d never understand why someone would volunteer to get screamed at by some asshole drill sergeant in preparation for being shipped someplace where they’d be shot at. Having recently been shot made that idea seem even more fucked up.

Once Matteo had chosen to be all that he could be, Cesare and I became closer since it was just the two of us. Now it felt like both of them were my brothers even there was no shared blood between us.

“You feeling good enough to get some food?” Matteo asked once we were near the neighborhood. “Cesare said he could meet us at Marina’s.” He paused, glancing my way. “Or I could take you home, but don’t expect me to tuck you into bed like Nurse Hottie back there.”

“I could eat.” Especially something that wasn’t hospital food. The doctors and nurses knew their stuff, but the kitchen had clearly never heard of seasoning. And if Cesare had seen what the limp noodles they’d served under the guise of pasta, he’d have shot up the place.

It turned out to be the right choice. Marina’s bar was the complete opposite of the sterile, featureless hospital room. The place was loud. The beer wasn’t cold. The fries were soggy. But it was just what I needed to feel like myself again.

By the time Cesare and Matteo were done with their second beers—they’d made me stop after one since I was still on pain meds—talk turned to our failed mission.

“But why this time?” Cesare asked, clearly frustrated. “There was no backup the other three times the fucking truck passed by.”

“Maybe there was and we just didn’t spot it.” I’d had some time to think about it while at the hospital.

“No fucking way,” Matteo said. “We didn’t screw up.”

“Tell that to the holes in my chest,” I said.

Matteo looked pissed. Strategy was his area, and he didn’t miss much. “Something changed. They must’ve known of our plan.”

“If so, they did a lousy job preparing for us. We almost succeeded. We would have, too, if that dumb fuck behind the wheel hadn’t decided to play John Wayne,” Cesare pointed out.

“Doesn’t that just prove that they knew we were coming?” I asked.

“No,” Cesare said with finality. “Nobody expecting an attack would arm themselves with that joke up a shotgun that

couldn't even pierce armored glass.”

“Agreed,” Matteo said. “But maybe they didn't tell the driver about the threat.”

“Like a pawn,” I said. When the other two stared at me, I elaborated. “In chess. He was expendable.” I'd played chess in middle school before learning about far more lucrative ways to spend my time.

“That might be the case,” Cesare said. “But that doesn't explain why there was backup this time—”

“Or why they were so far behind him,” Matteo added. Sometimes they finished each others' sentences. “Maybe they were as green as the driver. After all, they backed off the moment they saw you feeling up the hot nurse.”

A ghost of a grin crossed Cesare's face, and for some reason, that pissed me off. “Her name is Piper.”

“Doesn't change the fact that she's a looker,” Matteo said.

“She's more than that,” I said. “She took care of me.”

“That's her job,” Matteo said.

“No, it isn't. I mean, yeah, she's a nurse, but she was supposed to be in the ER. Yet she kept coming to visit me.”

That got Cesare's attention. “She did?”

“Yep.” I may have sounded a little smug.

Matteo was unimpressed. “She was probably just using you to escape her workload.”

My fist tightened as I pressed it against the table. Usually, Matteo and I got along, but he was in a pissy mood today. “Piper's not like that. She helps people.”

Matteo held up his hands in mock surrender. “Sorry, I forgot you have a thing for nurses.”

“No, I don't.”

“Yes, you do,” Cesare said and then turned to his cousin. “It's because of his mom.”

Matteo frowned. “She wasn't a nurse, was she?”

“No.” My voice sounded a bit stiff, and I was getting tired. Two days laying flat on my back had killed my stamina, and the wounds in my chest were starting to throb. “But when she was in hospice, the nurses were incredible.” I’d never forget all that they’d done to make her last days as peaceful as possible.

“Shit.” Matteo’s expression softened. “I forgot about that. Sorry, man.”

I nodded. He’d been gallivanting throughout the middle east when that happened, so he wasn’t as familiar with that horrible time in my life as Cesare was. Wincing slightly, I rubbed a hand over my ribcage, feeling the thick bandages underneath.

“We should get you home,” Cesare said.

I wanted to argue, but the thought of my own bed was a good one. Still, we needed to figure out our next move, and I didn’t want to hold the guys up just because I’d gotten hurt. “I’m fine, and we’re not done here.”

Neither of them looked very convinced, but Cesare called the question. “Now that they know they’re onto us, do we want to pick a new target?”

That was also something I’d thought about a lot at the hospital. “What about Vegas? We could go down there and...”

“You’re like a broken record with the Vegas thing,” Cesare grumbled, rolling his eyes at me. “We’d get busted just by thinking about stealing a candy bar. *That’s* how tight things are down there. You want to go there and fuck with corporations? Go ahead, but count me out of it.”

“Me, too,” Matteo agreed, his tone calm. “It’s a big desert around Vegas, Leonardo. Rumor has it there are about five thousand men buried in that desert. Do you want to join them? Because I don’t.”

“Chickens,” I said with a scowl. I’d never been able to convince them that they were turning away a fortune. “And who said we’d be stealing from corporations? Even if we did...”

“If we won’t steal from corporations, who the hell will we steal from?” Matteo asked. “The corner bakery? A nudie bar? Corporations have all the money. And the minute we touch them, every single fucking cop in Vegas will come after us, including the feds. I say we start casing banks.”

The expression on Cesare’s face shut that down. “It’s not like the old days. Their security systems are bulletproof; we need a hacker to disable them. The armored truck is still our best bet.”

“Cesare...” Matteo began.

“Hear me out,” he said. “We were close, man. We would’ve succeeded if the driver hadn’t thought he was a knight instead of a pawn. We almost pulled it off.”

“*Almost* doesn’t pay the bills,” Matteo muttered.

“Second time’s a charm,” Cesare continued. “This time, we take out the driver right away.”

“It would have to be at a point where the truck won’t run off the road or down a hillside once the driver’s out of commission,” Matteo mused. “Plus I doubt they’ll be just one man in the cab next time. Not now that we’ve made a move.”

“And they’ll have more backup,” I said.

“But we know that, and we can prepare for it this time,” Cesare insisted. “I doubt that’ll expect us to try again right away. Not after you got shot.”

“Right away?” I questioned.

“We lose this chance and we have to start from scratch. All those months of planning go right down the drain,” Cesare said.

“They’ll change the route,” Matteo warned. “They’d be idiots not to.”

“So? You’re the brain. You think of all the possibilities and we’ll plan for them, one by one. We’re never going to get this chance again, so we’ll work our asses off.”

“I’m in,” I said.

Cesare barely spared me a glance. “Your job is to get better. Matteo and I will do the heavy lifting.”

Getting sidelined sucked, but maybe there were things I could do that would still help out.

Matteo wasn't convinced. “It's risky.”

“Remember when we came here when we were kids?” He looked his cousin in the eye and then turned to me. I nodded. We'd first started coming here together when I was thirteen or so. At the time, I thought this place had the best pizza in the world. “Remember those guys who came in here? Paulie and Sergio and the other made men?”

Matteo scoffed. “We thought they had everything figured out.”

“They *did*, compared to us. They had power. They had crews. They were respected members of the organization. That's what I want. We're not trying to knock over an armored truck for shits and giggles. We need this.”

Matteo nodded. “Or we'll end up in jail. Or in the Hudson wearing cement shoes.”

“Or full of buckshot,” I added. Then I repeated my position. “I'm in.”

This time, Cesare didn't dismiss me. Instead, he gave me a long look and then we both turned to Matteo. After a long pause, our buddy nodded.

Game on.

PIPER

THE DAY AFTER LEO WAS DISCHARGED WAS MY DAY OFF. Usually, that meant sleeping in. After three twelve-hour workdays in a row, I usually needed it—especially since twelve hours shifts often turned into at least fifteen. But for some reason, I was up bright and early around midday. Energy coursed through me even before my coffee.

But as I caught up on some household tasks around my apartment, I realized it wasn't normal energy. It was more like restless energy, and at first, I couldn't figure out why.

At work, I prided myself for my stamina. But on my days off, I was a lot more low-key. Except today.

Was it because of Leo? I was definitely going to miss him. There was no doubt that he and his friends were involved in some bad things, but he himself was a real charmer. Even when he was in pain, he had a smile ready for me, usually accompanied by a flirty comment. Though he was a few years older than me, he had a kind of boyish look to him. Mischievous like. It wasn't until the third time I'd grabbed a quick snack in the relative quiet of his hospital room, that I realized who he reminded me of: Colby.

Not so much in looks, but in demeanor. Leo was quick-witted and often made me laugh. Colby had been the same way.

So yes, I'd miss him, but that was the nature of my work. The patients—both the nice ones and the crabby ones—left. It was often like having a series of very short-term friendships, at least with the nice ones. But that was what was supposed to

happen. I wanted patients to get better and be released from the hospital. It was far better than the alternative.

Leo was now just one of many former patients I'd think about from time to time and then eventually forget. It was almost like my brain was a hard drive and as I met new patients, some of the older ones would get overwritten in my mind.

Except I didn't think that would happen with Leo. As I carried my coffee over to the window, my gaze fell on the rusted fire escape outside, but in my mind's eye, I could see the gleam in his hazel eyes and the slightly crooked grin that gave him a sexy and carefree look. It wasn't a face I was likely to forget anytime soon.

And yet... that didn't account for the entirety of the connection I felt for the young man. Nor did the fact that he reminded me of Colby.

I sighed as I took a sip of coffee. The hot liquid stung my tongue, and I grimaced. In that moment, a thought that I'd been trying to subdue for the last few days pushed on through.

Part of the reason I was fascinated with Leo was because of his friend. Not the tall, handsome man who'd picked him up at the hospital, but the other one. The huge brute of a man who'd burst into his hospital room that first night.

Cesare.

Though I'd tried not to, thoughts of the big man had flitted around my brain ever since then. Sometimes I'd remember how small I felt standing next to the huge man. Or how dark his tanned skin was next to mine. Or how his nearly black eyes had seemed to gaze right inside of me.

Or how it had felt when he'd kissed me.

And held me.

And made me feel so very many things.

Technically, I'd kissed him. I'd had to—it was the only way to prevent more violence from happening. But that was just the beginning. Cesare had taken over almost immediately, deepening the kiss and ravishing my mouth. He'd made me

feel things I'd never felt before, and fear was only one of them.

Setting the coffee on the peeling white paint of the window sill, I stared down at the dirty alleyway behind the building, shaking my head. I'd never understand how I could possibly have felt anything more than just fear in that moment. A stranger, the strongest and most powerfully built man I'd ever encountered, had held me in his arms. There'd been a gun trapped between our chests. Matteo had also had a gun, and presumably, the man who entered the hospital room had, too.

I should've been terrified, and part of me had been. But then all thoughts except for Cesare had faded. He'd overpowered my senses with his masculine scent. The taste of his mouth. The feel of his powerful muscles as he held me. Somewhere deep inside, I'd felt relief. Someone else was in charge. What happened next wasn't in my hands, it was in Cesare's.

But what did it say about me that I'd wanted to leave that kind of control in the hands of a stranger, and a clearly shady one at that? It made no sense, but I'd felt it. In his arms, with him in charge, I'd felt almost... safe. Which was ridiculous. I didn't know the ins and outs of the situation, but clearly, we were not safe.

Yet Cesare had made me feel like I was.

And he'd made me feel other things that were hard to admit to as well. Like longing. And arousal.

Afterwards, I'd felt like I was losing my mind. Maybe that's why I kept visiting Leo. I did bring up Cesare's name a few times, but Leo hadn't said much about him. And then, quite to my surprise, I found how much I'd enjoyed the younger man's company, so I kept coming back. But I never forgot about his large friend and how he'd made me feel.

Abandoning the coffee, I looked around my small studio apartment. Normally, at the end of the workweek, there was a ton to do. After an all-night shift, I was usually so tired that I barely had time to take my scrubs off before falling into bed. But now, when I needed distracting from my thoughts, there didn't seem to be much to do.

Or maybe my mind was skipping over the pile of laundry in the chair by the bed and the dust bunnies in the corners in order to keep obsessing over Cesare. Well, not obsessing over him, but going over and over our brief encounter in my mind.

And okay, over him as well. He wasn't someone you'd forget easily, that was for sure. He was built like a mountain with hugely broad shoulders and bulging biceps. His stomach was flat, no doubt with chiseled abs to match. But it was his face that stuck with me the most. The dark eyes under thick eyebrows. The smoldering gaze. The sexy goatee.

How was it possible for a man to look both hot as sin and dangerous as hell at the same time?

The question persisted as I started scrubbing the kitchen sink. Who was Cesare, and why had I had such a strong reaction to him?

By the time I'd moved onto scouring the burner on the tiny stovetop, it occurred to me who might know the answer to that—Maggie.

Cesare was Italian. He carried a gun. His friend was shot. It wasn't much of a leap to assume that he was involved in the mafia in some way. And so, unfortunately, was Maggie.

Though she was now blissfully happy with her new life—one that included an adorable baby and three handsome men—our friendship had cooled slightly. I just couldn't understand her fascination with one man like that, let alone three.

Though I didn't know all the details of her new life, I knew she was involved in that world, not just her men. If anyone would know something about Cesare, she would.

But I didn't reach out. Maggie had a whole new life. A new purpose, even. Being a mother to her daughter was part of it, but there was more. She had money and power now, and though it came from dark origins, she was using it for good.

She'd repurposed a property from her late father's estate and had made it into a shelter for abused women and children. It was admirable, but at the same time, it meant that she hardly had any time for herself. Between being a mother and caring

for the people in that shelter, she hadn't had time for much else this year. We exchanged the occasional text, but we didn't see each other very often anymore.

Perhaps if we had, it would've been easier to bridge the rift that had developed between us. I hadn't hidden my disapproval very well when she'd fallen for those mafiosos. While I missed her and loved her, I still couldn't shake my feelings about her situation.

So no, I couldn't reach out to her, at least not yet.

That didn't leave any other obvious choices. This wasn't something I could talk to my coworkers at the hospital about. Perhaps Zoey? But the singer, who I'd known for years, was currently on tour. She was even busier than Maggie, and it had been ages since the three of us had hung out together.

After finishing scrubbing the burners, I intended to go through the half-sized fridge to see if anything needed to be thrown out, but instead I found myself on my phone, flipping through my pictures until I found the one my subconscious clearly wanted me to find.

It was a name, written in rough handwriting. A name and a phone number. Taking a picture of that part of the patient intake form wasn't a privacy violation, I told myself. Cesare himself had told me I could call him if I ever needed anything. That was his way of thanking me for taking care of Leo.

But I didn't need anything. Except maybe answers.

Before I could stop myself, I entered the numbers on the keypad. I'd looked at the photo so often in the last few days that I'd inadvertently memorized his number. I'd typed it in a few times, too, but I'd never pressed send... until now.

My pulse sped up as it rang. And rang. And then a gruff voice answered.

“Yeah?”

It was just one syllable, but it was enough to make me remember how it felt when he'd held me. It was enough to make my skin flush.

“Um, hi. I don’t know if you remember me, but I work at the hospital. My name’s Piper.”

“I remember you,” he said, and for a moment, I felt cheered up by that news. Then he continued on. “Leonardo won’t shut up about you.”

Oh. That made me happy, too, but in a slightly different way. “How’s he feeling?”

“Doing well,” Cesare said. He was a man of few words. “Is that why you called?”

“No, I...” It was impossible to finish that sentence since I didn’t even understand why I’d contacted him.

“Is this about me threatening the doctor?”

“No, it’s—wait, you threatened a doctor?”

“No.” Cesare’s instant denial made me shake my head in confusion. And I made a mental note to check with Dr. Baines to see what had happened. Then Cesare cleared his throat. “Is there something I can help you with, Piper?”

“I just—I just want to understand what happened that night,” I managed, my voice hoarse.

There was silence for a moment. “It’s probably best if you just forget that night. It’s not the kind of situation you want to ask questions about.” There was a note of warning in his voice, but his words didn’t come across as a threat.

“Not about the situation. About... about what I did.”

“You mean kissing me?” Cesare’s deep voice held a note of surprise. “You did what you had to to keep your patient safe. To keep all of us safe.”

“That’s how it started,” I said absently and then wished I could have bit back my words.

Cesare chuckled. “But not how it ended? If that’s what you want to talk about, feel free.”

I bit my lip, trying to gather my thoughts. “I just—I don’t know why I did that. I don’t know you or your friends, and I

hate guns. I can't stand them. But... somehow, for a moment, I kind of forgot."

"Want to forget again?" Cesare asked.

"No." That answer was quick even though the big man had been on my mind quite a bit.

"Fair enough," Cesare said. "You're not really giving me much of a clue as to why you called."

"I'm not even sure I know myself," I said honestly. "I probably shouldn't have."

"Piper, it's okay to—"

"Tell Leo I hope he feels better," I said hastily, and then I pushed the red button on my screen before Cesare could say anything else.

Afterwards, I leaned against the small countertop, wondering if I'd made things worse. The call had certainly been pointless. I hadn't clarified my feelings about that night at all, and I'd wasted Cesare's time.

Worse, now that I'd heard his deep, rumbly voice, I knew he'd be on my mind even more in the next few days.

All in all, I probably should've stuck to cleaning out the fridge.



"I would pay good money for a copy of that X-ray," Will said as we walked through the dark parking lot.

"Pervert," Ava said, and I laughed. We'd all three worked the same shift. It was nice to blow off some steam and enjoy the fresh night air.

Will shook his head. "I just can't believe how far up there he got it."

"I'll certainly never look at carrots the same way again," I said. I'd seen some strange things in my day, but a patient with a vegetable so far up his ass that it got stuck was a new one.

I'd heard about things like that happening before, however. "I can't believe they always claim that they fell on it."

Ava chuckled. "Even Dr. Baines had trouble keeping a straight face at that."

I frowned a little at the mention of the doctor. After Cesare mentioned threatening someone, I'd checked Leo's medical records. According to Dr. Baines, the young man had been accidentally shot in a hunting accident. I was pretty sure that Dr. Baines didn't believe that any more than he did the story about the carrot, but I hadn't asked him directly what happened.

"This is me," Ava said, stopping at a small, gray hatchback. "Have a good night."

Will and I walked on as she climbed into her car. The parking lot was pretty empty at this time of the night. Will turned to face me when we reached his jeep. "Care to get some breakfast? Or whatever meal it is at this time."

I smiled. Will was a fellow nurse and a friend, but nothing more than that. "I'll pass. The last thing I need right now is more coffee—I'll be up all night." I paused, looking around the dark parking lot. "Or all day."

Will's eyes fell, but he nodded. "I never know what time of the day it is anymore. Hopefully we'll get bumped up to day shifts before we all go nuts."

I smiled, but the truth was, I'd always been a bit of a night owl and I didn't mind it so much. "Good night."

"See you, Piper."

I trudged along toward my car, returning the wave Will gave me as he rapidly backed out of the parking space. My keys were in my hand and my car was in sight when I heard a footstep behind me.

"He didn't even walk you to your car?"

Whirling, my heart skipped several beats as I took in the huge figure making his way toward me. When he passed under a

light, I saw Cesare's dark features. My neck craned back so that I could see his face as he stepped closer. "You scared me."

"Sorry." He didn't look sorry, though. Probably, with his size, he was used to scaring people on a regular basis. Hell, for all I knew, that was his job.

My pulse was still elevated, but my muscles relaxed, which was bizarre. Given what I knew of Cesare, I should still be scared.

But I wasn't, not anymore. Which probably proved Will's point that too many night shifts would drive us insane.

Cesare studied me, his eyes sweeping up and down my well-worn scrubs. It wasn't a very impressive outfit, I was well aware. "Is that guy your boyfriend?"

"Will?" Surprise filled my voice. "No."

"Does he want to be?"

I started to object, but then rethought things. "Maybe."

Cesare raised an eyebrow. I had a feeling that he had an opinion on the topic.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, and then an upsetting thought crossed my mind. "Is Leo okay?" Maybe he'd been readmitted when I was working elsewhere on the floor.

"He's fine. That's not why I'm here." He paused, and I studied him. He had on a black leather jacket that matched his dark good looks. His jeans were black, too, as were his work boots. He didn't look like a man who wore much color, but the black suited him. It somehow accentuated his handsome, Italian features. "I'm here about a phone call I got the other day."

Ah. I shifted from one foot to another. "What about it?"

"I can't figure out why you called."

"That makes two of us."

He stepped closer. "Maybe we can figure it out together."

Now I really had to tilt my head up to look him in the eyes. "That's not necessary."

“I’d really like to know,” he said, his voice low. “And I think you’ll feel better if you do, too.”

“You can’t know that.” He didn’t know anything about me at all, really, except that I took good care of his friend. Oh, and he knew how I kissed. There weren’t a whole lot of men lately who could claim to know that.

I, on the other hand, still didn’t know anything about him. Maggie had texted some pictures of the baby yesterday. After cooing over her little girl, I’d casually mentioned Cesare’s name, asking if she knew anything about him. She hadn’t responded yet.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” Cesare said, practically reading my mind. “And I think that bothers you.”

I tried to laugh, but it came out more like a weak cough. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

He shrugged, not taking offense. “I know when a woman’s attracted to me. That’s not what’s happening here.” I kept my face frozen, not sure what to say to that. “Or at least that’s not the only thing happening here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re questioning yourself, about why you kissed me. Right?”

“Right.” My voice was a little shaky, because that wasn’t the only thing I was questioning. The bigger question was why I’d responded to him the way I had.

“You had to, but I think you know that. So my guess is, you’re upset about something else.”

“I’m not upset.”

He cocked his head to the side as he looked down at me. “But it’s on your mind. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have called me.”

I exhaled sharply, looking at a spot on the ground. “I don’t usually do that—kiss men I don’t know. I just—I just can’t quite wrap my head around it.”

Cesare stepped even closer, and my gaze returned to his. “Maybe you’d feel better if you knew more about me.”

I bit my lip. “You said not to ask questions.”

“About some things that happened that night. But we can get to know each other better. In fact, I know of a way to do that.”

“How?”

“It’s an ancient tradition passed down through the generations.”

“I don’t know much about Italian culture,” I said.

“You might have heard of this practice. It’s called a date.” He grinned.

Surprise had me echoing his words. “A date?”

“Have dinner with me, Piper. Maybe if you get to know that I’m not such a bad guy, you’ll feel better about kissing a stranger.”

“Dinner?”

His low laugh made my thighs clench. “Or, you could just keep repeating everything I say. Is that some kind of technique you use with your patients?”

“Dinner when?”

His dark eyes gleamed. “Whenever you want. How about your next day off? Because I’d rather not eat dinner at four in the morning.”

“Okay.” My brain seemed stuck in neutral, but my mouth took over and I told him what day would work best. We agreed on a restaurant and a time, and that was that. Except, unlike Will, he stuck around until I was in my car. He even held the door until I’d climbed in and fastened my seatbelt.

With him standing over me, he looked even bigger than before. And with his arm resting on the edge of the car door, I wondered about what was under his jacket. Besides his impressive muscles, I meant. Was he armed tonight, too?

That, and many other questions, kept me awake well after the sun came up. But despite my misgivings, I couldn't bring myself to regret agreeing to have dinner with him.

MATTEO

I WINCED AS I OPENED MY WALLET AND THREW A TWENTY ON the bar. There were only four more twenties in there. It was enough to last for a day or two, but it was pretty paltry when you considered that we were supposed to be rolling in millions by now.

Not that the heist had been about the money. Or not entirely about the money. It wasn't, not for me and not for Cesare, at least. It was as he'd said—it was about power. If you had enough power, you were in control. That was what it boiled down to for me. I'd spent years in the army following orders. Eating what they told me to. Sleeping where they told me to. Killing who they told me to.

I never wanted anyone to have that kind of control over me again. It was time for me to be the boss. Well, me and Cesare. Somehow, I didn't mind when he took charge. He wasn't just family, he was a good man. And those were rare these days.

Finishing off my nearly empty glass, I surveyed the dark bar. There were a few guys I recognized by sight, but no one I really knew. That was probably a good thing given the foul mood I was in tonight.

Music piped through the creaky overhead system. There were a couple of ancient pool tables on the other side of the room, and I couldn't see past the two corner pockets nearest to me. The purplish light fixtures on the ceiling were well overdue for replacement. Pretty much everything in this place was. The

clientele here wasn't exactly made up of fine, upstanding citizens.

Most of the regulars were bikers and other shady individuals, myself included. Once, the cops had barged in and arrested two men who were afterwards tried for a series of burglaries. But, I wasn't going to go anywhere else. Amanda's was the only place I liked hanging out within walking distance from my apartment. I didn't like to drink my ass off and get back behind the wheel. I didn't drink often, but, tonight, I actually felt the need to do so. Alcohol would numb my senses and take my mind off my recent failure.

I shifted on my stool at the bar, spotting Amanda herself to my left.

The bar's manager came over and frowned at me. "Did someone die or something? Because, I'm telling you, you look like someone died."

I smiled bitterly. "Almost."

The middle-aged woman's smile faded, and she paused her perpetual gum chewing. "I heard your buddy Leonardo got hurt. He's a good kid."

I nodded automatically, but I couldn't help examining her statement. In what world was a nearly thirty-year old guy with a long crime sheet and the impulse control of a squirrel on meth a good kid?

Oh yeah, this world. And as it happened, I agreed with her.

She patted my shoulder and took off, moving on to talk to other customers as she usually did this time in the evening.

I finished my beer and caught a biker over by a pool table staring at something behind me. He muttered something, drawing his friend's attention. The two of them set their cues down on the floor between their feet. My curiosity piqued, I looked back over my shoulder.

The sight that greeted me was bizarre. For a moment, I thought I wasn't in Amanda's, but at a much fancier place. There was a beautiful brunette, just five feet from the gray, steel entrance. Her outfit perplexed me. She had a deep purple dress that

looked way too classy for this joint. It ended above her knees. Her black high heeled boots revealed very shapely legs that warranted a second or third glance. But her purse was out of place, too. The leather bag, I knew from my youthful days of stealing and fleecing, was worth several thousand dollars.

Yet, the stranger's appearance was not the weirdest thing about her.

That would have to be her company.

Her *huge* company to be exact.

She had one bodyguard on either side. Both of them were in gray suits and wore black ties, their fingers interlocked over their flat stomachs. Their muscles and their demeanor clearly spoke of mob involvement.

I looked on in bewilderment. This fine woman didn't belong in this bar. She started off, locking her gaze with mine, for some reason that still eluded me. Her black hair was glossy, flowing to her chest. Her scarlet lipstick made an amazing contrast with her smooth, white skin.

"Mr. Borelli? Mr. Matteo Borelli?" Her silky, feminine voice seemed at odds with the self-assurance that radiated off of her.

I tensed, not exactly on edge, but not relaxed, either. The night had just gotten more interesting.

"You must be lost," I said casually. "The fashion district is miles from here. And I missed the part where you told me how you know my name."

"I'm Maggie Owens-Roselli," she said, smoothly perching on the stool next to mine, her goons just three paces away. "I don't disclose my sources, Mr. Borelli. I consider that highly unprofessional. Please don't ask again."

"Then why should I bother talking to you?" I looked down into her flashing eyes. "I mean, you want to talk to me, right? That's why you sat next to me."

"That's true," she said, giving a series of nods. "I hope your friend Leonardo is recovering nicely."

I took a deep breath, taking a few moments to process what she'd just said, and the expression on her face. It seemed a pretty safe bet that Maggie knew more about what had happened to Leonardo than Amanda had.

That woman was good. *Very* good.

Also, she had dressed up on purpose and had brought her bodyguards with her, just to show me that she had power. A lot more power than me and my friends. That still didn't tell me why she was here, but it let me know more about her.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me why you assume you know anything about us."

"You're right, I won't." Her voice was confident. That made sense considering she had two huge men at her side, but I got the feeling that she would've sounded like that in any case. "In any case, this isn't the question you should be asking me. Tell me something, Matteo." She ceased talking altogether for a brief moment and inched closer to me. "Why do you think that truck had backup?"

I shrugged, willing to talk about it. It's not like I thought she was a copy wearing a wire. No cop would work with two thugs like her large friends. "Maybe it always did and we never noticed."

She leveled a sharp gaze at me. "You don't really believe that."

Maggie was right, but I didn't confirm nor deny it.

"Yours was not the first crew that thought they could pull off something so daring. And you shouldn't attempt anything like that in the future, or else you or one of your men will die. Simple as that."

"That sounded like a threat to me," I pointed out, steel in my voice. "I don't appreciate being threatened, least of all by a rich girl like you."

"This wasn't a threat." She rejected that notion, pulling away from me. "It's a high-probability scenario. Look at what happened to Mr. Turner. It *will* happen again. The question is, who's next?"

I ignored that. “Here’s what I don’t get. Why are you and I having this conversation? What’s your angle here, Ms. Owens? What are you hoping to gain from this?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Her candor took me by surprise. “I’m just trying to help you stay out of trouble. It’s a dangerous path you and your friends are walking down on, Mr. Borelli. Sooner or later, one of you will get killed. In my book, no financial reward is worth dying for.”

“Said the rich girl,” I snapped. “I’m not buying it. You must have an agenda. Where I come from, nobody does things for strangers out of the goodness of their heart. Be honest with me.”

“Enjoy your next beer, Mr. Borelli. It’s on me,” she said with a polite smile as she reached into her fancy purse. Leaving a fifty-dollar bill on the bar, she got off her stool. “Don’t forget our little chat. Goodnight.”

And just like that, Maggie Owens or whatever the hell her hyphenated last name was, turned around and strolled away from me. I was left at a loss for words, staring at her feminine figure, until she disappeared through the entrance, her bodyguards flanking her. More importantly, I was left with about a hundred questions, questions no one was there to answer. I still didn’t believe she was trying to protect me and my guys. I knew better than that, but, frankly, I had no idea what to make of this.

I ordered another beer with the fancy lady’s money, and drank it while I tried to figure it all out.

PIPER

WHAT ON EARTH SHOULD I WEAR?

My friend Zoey could probably hear the desperation in my text, but it had been so long since I'd been out to dinner with a man.

Luckily, Zoey wasn't due to perform until later this evening, so she had time to talk me through this. Or, well, text me through this. Maggie hadn't responded to my last message asking her about Cesare, so I didn't feel comfortable asking her about it. Besides, Zoey was the best dresser I knew.

Wear something you're comfortable with, but look hot in, she responded. *Not scrubs!*

Okay, she also knew me as well. Not that I'd wear scrubs on a date, but still, they were what I felt the most comfortable and confident in.

God, a date. Wait, *was* it actually a date? Cesare had used that word, but in my mind, it was just dinner. Somehow, that seemed a little less intimidating. After all, we both had to eat. Why not do it together?

With a sigh, I texted back to Zoey. *Life would be simpler if I could just wear scrubs all the time.*

So go for the opposite, she responded. Go glamorous.

That was easy for her to say. She wore such pretty dresses when she was on stage. Skimpy, but pretty. I didn't really have anything like that.

You'll find something, she texted after I told her that. *At the very least, go big with your hair and makeup.*

Big hair? Like in the 80s? The thought of it had me shaking my head.

Seriously, Piper, how often do you get a chance to dress up? Have fun with it. Make him eat his heart out. Is he tall enough that you can wear high heels?

He's definitely tall enough, I typed. That was one of the few things I knew about the man—he towered over everybody.

Then why not go all out? If not for him, for yourself. Don't you get tired of having your hair in a bun and wearing the same clothes as everyone else?

She had a point. It would be kind of fun to look nice for a change. When I was working, I usually just put my hair up to get it out of the way, and I rarely used much makeup. Maybe it would be fun to get all glammed up as she suggested.

After we were done texting, I sat on my sofa and pulled my hair out of the ponytail I'd had it in. Running my fingers through it triggered a sensory memory, but it took a moment to identify what it was. Then I recalled how Cesare had loosened my hair and smoothed it down around my shoulders when he kissed me.

His buddy, Matteo, had said that that was part of his effort to keep the bad guy from seeing my face, but it hadn't felt like that. It had made me shiver with pleasure when his strong fingers tugged on my hair. And to feel him stroking my scalp and my shoulders.

Would that happen again tonight? Not in a restaurant, I supposed. Besides, that wasn't why I was meeting with him. I wanted to see him again to reconcile with myself why I'd reacted to him the way I had. The safest way to do that was in a public place with a table between us.

I pushed away from the couch but then froze. *Safe?* Was I worried about him? Clearly, he was a dangerous man. Or was I worried about how I might react to him?

It was unsettling that the answer seemed to be both.



Cesare was waiting for me outside the restaurant. Our reservation was for 8 pm, so there wasn't much natural light leftover, but there were plenty of streetlights and lights on the sidewalk.

My breath caught in my throat as I spotted him, and I very nearly tripped as I placed a high-heeled shoe on the sidewalk.

He looked hot as hell.

Still wearing dark clothes, but this time, he'd pair his black jeans and boots with a button-down dark green shirt. The long sleeves were severely strained by the powerful biceps underneath, and tantalizing tan skin showed between the open buttons at the top of his shirt.

His eyes, dark and gleaming as always, swept up and down my outfit as I finally managed to continue walking forward without falling.

"Fuuuuccckkkk." He drew out the word and gave a low whistle as he looked me over. "I know this is a cliché, but you clean up nice."

"Thanks. Um, you too."

I stopped a few feet short of him, having to look up even though I'd worn my tallest high heeled sandals.

Cesare's dark eyes were wider than usual. "Red is definitely your color."

"Thanks," I said again, a bit self-consciously. The dress fit snugly on me. It hugged my hips and ended with a little flare at mid-thigh. The top was strapless but there was a band that went around my upper arms and draped in front revealing modest, but not slutty cleavage. Or at least that was the mark I'd been aiming for.

His large hand rose, stopping inches from my hair. "I like it when it's down."

To be honest, I did too. The way the honey-blonde strands cascaded around my shoulders made me feel feminine and pretty. Or maybe it was the way Cesare was staring that made me feel pretty. “You’ve only seen it down one other time—and that was because you took it down.”

“That was strictly for your protection.” The note of humor in his voice belied his words.

I gave him a smile—an actual flirtatious smile, something I hadn’t done in a long time. “There was no other reason?”

He grinned. “Are you saying I wanted to touch it?” He did just that, entwining his fingers around a loose strand. Then he plunged his whole hand into my hair, cupping the back of my head.

For a wild moment, I thought he was going to pull me in for a kiss, but it was too soon for that. Or at least that’s what my brain told me. My body was more on board with the idea. I leaned my head back against his large palm, enjoying the way it felt.

“Ready to go inside?” he asked. When I nodded, he smoothly slid his hand down my body, settling it on the small of my back as he guided me forward. He didn’t have to. I was a competent professional. I could manage to enter a building on my own. Again, that was what my brain was telling me. But my body definitely didn’t mind his touch. His hand was warm, and I enjoyed the way it rose and fell slightly as I walked forward. And... there was something more. Something deeper. Having him touch me... having him at my side... it made me feel cherished. It made me feel... *safe*. But that was absurd, given what I knew of the life he led. Then again, those kinds of conflicting feelings were exactly what I was here to figure out tonight.

So in that regard, the evening was already off to a good start.

It got even better when we were at the table and the waitress practically drooled when she caught sight of Cesare. He was a large, intimidating man, so you’d think that most people’s first response would be fear, but he was also extremely hot with his dark Italian features and his incredible body. It was a bit of a

relief to know that I wasn't the only woman who skipped over fear and moved right on into desire.

To his credit, Cesare was polite but distant with the waitress. While I firmly believed that people could be judged by how they treated the wait staff, I also wouldn't have liked him preening under her obvious admiration. He ordered wine and some appetizers. I barely paid attention to the order—I was spending too much time watching him.

After the waitress left, Cesare stilled, cocking his head. Then he said, "I like this song."

I raised my eyebrows, straining to recognize the music. "Carlos Santana?"

He smiled. "He's a kickass guitarist. I've been trying to copy his style for years. It's hard, though. Really hard."

I nodded, like I usually did during small talk, but then I straightened up. "You play the guitar?"

His eyebrow shot up. "You look like you just found out I'd stabbed my own mother to death," he said, the corners of his eyes tightening. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Sort of." Embarrassment filled me due to my reaction, but I couldn't help trying to take in this new information. On impulse, I reached across the table and put my hand over his. Mine looked so small compared to his. "It's kind of hard to believe that the same hands that can wield... you know, a gun, can also strum a guitar."

I'd whispered the word gun, and Cesare raised both eyebrows this time. "The skills aren't mutually exclusive."

"But they're just so different."

I still had my hand on his, and I stroked my thin finger the length of one of his huge ones. "Do your hands even fit on the guitar strings?"

He flipped his hand over, capturing mine. "No, they're too big." He gave me an extra squeeze on the word big. "I have to use one of those things they have in the orchestra. You know, that thing that's bigger than a cello that they have to stand to

play? I just sling that over my lap and start plucking away at the strings.”

I laughed at that, starting to pull back, but he kept hold of my hand.

“I can do a lot of things with these hands,” he said. “Does that bother you?”

Looking up, I stared directly into his intense gaze. “Some of the things you do, yes.”

He nodded, apparently not surprised by that. “So let’s focus on what I can do that you haven’t yet experienced.” He slid his finger along the underside of my palm, and I shivered.

“Like playing the guitar?” I said, my voice a little shaky.

“Among other things.” The look he gave me was very direct, and I was pretty sure he knew that I was imagining what it would be like to have his long, thick fingers stroke my bare skin... and then slip inside me. It wasn’t the kind of thought I normally had about a man I barely knew, but I couldn’t help it. His hands were as large and powerful as every other part of him.

Cesare’s glance fell to the bodice of my dress, and I wondered if he could see that my nipples had hardened.

But then the appetizers came, and he let go of my hand to examine the bottle of red that the waitress had brought.

That gave me a minute to collect my thoughts and to calm the heated blood coursing through my veins. As I watched Cesare confidently discuss the wine with the waitress, one thing was clear. This was definitely a date, not just dinner.

Cesare ordered our food. He didn’t ask me what I wanted or if I had any food allergies—he just told the waitress that we’d both have the filet mignon. At first, it made me bristle. What if I didn’t like red meat? Or if I’d wanted something else? But then... I thought of the men I’d dated in the past. How when I’d ask what they wanted to do, they’d say it was up to me. And yeah, it was nice to be given a choice, but sometimes, I felt like they had no ideas of their own. This one guy, Gary, was the worst at that kind of thing. Whenever I’d ask him

about any plans, his response would always be—whatever you want to do. It got to the point where I'd just wanted to yell at him to just make a damn decision.

Obviously, that wasn't an issue with Cesare. With him, it would probably be harder to get him to stop making the decisions. It was clear he liked to be in control. Or maybe it wasn't even a preference thing. Maybe he just always was the one in charge.

That thought made my skin heat up. At work, when patients were in pain, I was the one making split decisions and figuring out what to do—at least until a doctor showed up. In my personal life, however, it was a bit different. I was usually the one calling the shots, but it wasn't because I wanted to. It was more like most of the men I'd dated refused to take a strand.

Again, not going to be a problem with Cesare, and I didn't quite know how I felt about that. Except from the flush I felt growing on my chest, my body was okay with it.

We talked as we waited for the food. Mostly about neutral things like my work. His past trips to Italy. Things that weren't likely to get us into trouble. And I also probed a bit more about how Leo was doing. To my relief, it sounded like he was recovering nicely.

To my surprise, we didn't run out of topics, at least not until his cell phone buzzed. I couldn't help sneaking a peek as he fished it out of the front pocket of his jeans. His tight jeans. I was more familiar with human anatomy than most people and judging from the way the denim stretched over his hips, all of Cesare was bigger than average.

That thought made me gulp.

But the way Cesare's expression hardened killed the erotic thoughts in my head. He nodded, said a few terse words, and then ended the call. "I have to go."

Damn. Disappointment filled me—more than I would have expected it to. "Is everything okay?"

He shrugged in a noncommittal way. "It will be, but I have to go now. I'm sorry about our dinner." We both looked up as the

waitress appeared with our food. “Why don’t you stay and eat? It’s on me.” He extracted a wallet from another pocket and threw a wad of bills on the table.

I wiped my mouth with my napkin and put it on the table. “No, I’ll go, too.”

Cesare nodded and addressed the waiter. “Wrap up both the steaks and send them with her.” Then he got to his feet, looking impossibly tall. “Can we reschedule?”

Damn it...

What could I have said? What words could come out of my mouth that wouldn’t make me sound like a total bitch? I hadn’t had a nice date in a year, and it had been cut short by something that Cesare wouldn’t disclose to me. But the word that slid past my lips was, “Yes.”

“Tomorrow night?” he asked.

I thought it over. I’d still be off work, so that worked out. “Okay. Where?” I honestly didn’t have any ideas, but then I thought of something. “Maybe someplace quieter?”

Not that it was loud here, but it was very public, and that had made it hard to get past the small talk stage, though that had been enjoyable.

“Do you cook?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” I was surprised into saying.

“Then how about your place?”

I blinked up at him. Damn, he was bold. We barely knew each other, and what I did know about him should’ve sent me running for the hills. Yet I didn’t. “Okay.” Then worry immediately hit. “I mean, I don’t cook all that well. And the place is a mess. And—”

None of those were the real reason I shouldn’t be inviting a tough, powerful man like him into my home, but it didn’t really matter. Cesare ignored them and placed his index finger on my lip, as if shushing me. “Anything you prepare will be great, or text me and I’ll bring takeout.” He removed his finger

but replaced it with his mouth, bending down low to give me a quick reminder of our previous kiss.

It wasn't long, and it definitely wasn't enough, but when he pulled away, I had my eyes closed and my lips felt swollen.

When I felt settled enough to look up, Cesare was already striding away, the other diners pausing to watch the imposing figure go by.

The waitress, too, was watching his exit. Once we could no longer see him, she turned back to me, our plates still in her hands. "Wow," she said with a sigh.

That was my thought exactly.

LEONARDO

A WORRIED MATTEO AND AN ANGRY CESARE.

It was hard to believe, but I missed the relative calm of the hospital as I sat in the recliner in my living room. My chest hurt and I was supposed to be recovering, yet what was I focusing on? A worried Matteo and an angry Cesare.

Wasn't life just fucking great?

The wounds would take care of themselves—eventually. But Matteo and Cesare were a whole different matter. Or rather, two, whole different matters. I needed every bit of patience I could muster, if I had any hope of surviving the evening with them with my sanity intact.

It was Saturday night, the time of the week where people were supposed to be going out and having some fun with friends or girlfriends. Instead, I was going to spend it with a lunatic and a geek.

Yes. It was just a wonderful life.

It was well after dark when Cesare pressed on my apartment buzzer. He came in, his face stormy, but his clothes clean and pressed. That in itself was a bit of a surprise. But at least his presence meant he could deal with Matteo and his incessant pacing and griping instead of me.

“Tell me,” Cesare ordered when he was barely through the door. “Though I can't even imagine what couldn't wait until the morning.” Anger was his default mode, but even

considering that, he looked mad. It made me wonder what he'd been doing when Matteo called.

"Don't look at me, man," I said, throwing my buddy under the bus. "He's the one who came in here all worked up."

Cesare turned to his cousin. "What the hell happened?"

Matteo paused by the window and looked out over the dark street, as if expecting a goon squad to attack. "We've got problems, Cesare. They're onto us."

"So?" Cesare squinted. "We figured they must be, since they had backup."

"It's more than that. They know exactly what our plans are."

"How?" I asked, at the same time Cesare said, "Who?"

"I was at Amanda's, and this hot chick approached me," Matteo began. I wanted to make a joke, like how hot chicks usually chose me over him, but the look on his face kept me silent.

"Who was she?" Cesare demanded.

"Maggie Owens-Roselli. Recognize the name?"

"The Roselli part," Cesare said, and I nodded, because I did, too.

"I asked around this morning," Matteo said. At Cesare's sharp look, he added, "Discreetly. And here's the thing. Maggie's the illegitimate child of Emilio Roselli. When his son fell to his death, she inherited his fortune and changed her name."

"So, she's the head of the Roselli family now," Cesare concluded, running his fingers through his hair. "I hadn't heard."

That didn't surprise me. Well, that Cesare hadn't known that. We kept to ourselves as much as possible because we ran our own organization. We were our own bosses. But yeah, I guess it was a little surprising that a young woman was the head of a crime family now.

"What did she want?" I asked.

“To warn us off. She knew that you had gotten hurt and how. Told us that if we tried again, one of us is going to get killed.”

“So it’s her truck?” I asked. “I mean, that’s clearly a threat, right?”

Cesare shook his head. “Or just a warning. You know how those old families are. Always so concerned about doing things the proper way.” All three of us knew that the way Cesare was referring to was outside of normal societal rules. But still, the mafia had a code. *Usually*.

“It had to be the guy we didn’t take care of,” Matteo said. “After the failed heist. He must’ve told her everything.”

Due to my injuries, I didn’t have all the details of what had gone down that night, but I’d learned that the backup car had had three men in it. Two were no longer a problem.

“There are other ways she could’ve found out,” Cesare mused before addressing Matteo. “You were careful when you looked into her?”

“Of course,” he said, resuming pacing with his long legs. Must be nice to be able to move without wincing in pain. “It wasn’t even hard. That chick’s face all over the internet. She’s told her life story to like a dozen mainstream media. She’s thrown a truckload of fundraisers ever since she took over.”

“Fundraisers?” I echoed. “The mob is holding bake sales now?”

“No, she used some of the Roselli money to open some kind of domestic violence shelter.”

Cesare frowned. “This Maggie clearly doesn’t know how to run a family.”

“Or she does, but she’s doing things her own way anyway,” Matteo countered.

“So was it her truck?” Cesare asked.

“No way,” I interjected. We’d done a shit ton of research before we planned the heist. “It was casino money. It was clean—or as clean as that kind of cash gets.”

“I thought so, too, but maybe we were wrong.” Matteo ran a hand through his dark hair. “Which means that if we try to hit the truck again, we may not know how we’re really targeting. Which is dangerous as fuck.”

“Maybe that’s what Maggie was trying to warn you about,” I said.

Cesare’s eyes were even darker than usual while he thought it over. “If it is mob money, we’re already on their shit list.”

“Yeah, but we’ll be a whole lot higher on that list if we actually succeed next time,” Matteo pointed out, and he wasn’t wrong.

“We knew how risky this was when we decided to do it in the first place,” I said.

“But now there are more players involved,” Cesare said.

Matteo nodded. “Including local ones.”

Cesare was unperturbed. “We’re trying to steal a piece of the pie for ourselves. What the hell did you think was going to happen? That the mob would just welcome us with open arms?”

“No one said that.” Matteo finally sat, sprawling out on the couch. “We were just relying on the element of surprise. We would swoop in, shock them and force them to accept us in. Now, that’s gone, so, I can’t help but wonder just what the *fuck* we’re going to do next.”

This time, Cesare kept his mouth shut. Rather than responding to him with words, he reached behind his back. Tucking his shirt out of his pants, he produced his pistol. He brandished in the air for a moment and then set it firmly on the coffee table.

“This is what they’ll get.” Confidence had returned to his voice. “This is what they’ll all get, if they stand in our way. We didn’t come this far to quit. Okay—we fucked up that heist. That doesn’t mean we’ll stop trying. The mob knows what we’re trying to pull off? Fine. Let those fuckers come. We’ll make them regret it. We’re doing this. It’s not a matter of if, but when.”

“Once we have our own crew, they’ll be the ones afraid of us,” I added.

Matteo was the last to relent. “It’s not quite that simple, but yeah, okay. I’m still in.” He downed at least half a bottle of beer. “But this means we have to be even more careful from here on out.”

“We will be,” I said, lightly running my hand over the bandages on my chest.

“Fuck yeah, we will be,” Cesare confirmed. Damn, that guy was burning with determination.

Nothing was going to deter him. Nothing and no one at all.

Even mafiosos with a hell of a lot more connections and resources than us. It was true; the organization would see us coming from miles away. We wouldn’t shock anybody, but Cesare was right. We had been waiting for our moment for a long time. No fucking way were we giving up now.

PIPER

WHY ON EARTH HAD I VOLUNTEERED TO COOK? OR, RATHER, I'd been volunteered to cook by Cesare. Perhaps a better question was why I'd given my address to a stranger.

Except he was starting to feel like less of a stranger. Plus, Leo seemed to think the world of Cesare, and that made me feel better about the big guy.

I frowned as I vacuumed. Then there was that other man, Matteo. I'd barely exchanged two sentences with him, so he was still a complete mystery to me. But that was okay. Figuring out two men was enough for the moment. Though Leo had been a lot easier. He was a straightforward guy. He'd made his interest in me very clear, but I hadn't taken him seriously, since he was a patient. Plus, he seemed like a bit of a natural flirt. Probably he would've flirted with any woman who'd shown up in his room.

But Cesare was still a mystery—as was what I was going to feed him. I quickly rejected the idea of Italian food. No way was I going to try to make pasta for a genuine Italian. He'd probably expect the pasta to be homemade or something. I'd only ever made pasta from a box.

Then I briefly thought about serving the leftover steaks, but that seemed tacky, since it was supposed to be yesterday's meal. Besides, I'd eaten one when I'd gotten home.

In the end, I took the coward's way out and ordered Chinese food. I tried to make up for it, however, by doing my hair and makeup to the best of my ability again. Zoey was right, it was

nice to wear something other than scrubs. And the way Cesare's dark eyes had gleaned when he'd spotted me yesterday had made it all worthwhile.

For my outfit, I'd thought about keeping it casual, but he seemed to like my dress yesterday, so I dug out another one. This one was a kind of shimmery bronze. It was held up by spaghetti straps and clung to my curves tightly. After I shaved and moisturized my legs, I kept them bare and slid into heels that weren't quite as high as the ones I'd worn to the first date.

My nerves were a jittery mess by the time Cesare knocked on the door to my place. I pulled my door open, my pulse rising as anticipation grew within me.

Good god, he practically filled the entire door frame. Would I ever get used to the sheer bulk of him? It was like inviting a giant into a tiny apartment.

But the giant hadn't come empty handed. He had a bottle of wine in one hand and a bouquet of lilies in the other. And the appreciative expression on his face as he took in my dress made all the pampering and prep worthwhile.

"Hi," I said, my voice practically a squeak. Where the hell was my confidence? Oh yeah, back in the hospital wearing blue scrubs. I didn't have a lot of it out in the real world.

"Hi," he spoke in his deep voice. "Nice to see you again."

"You, too. Come on in."

I stepped aside, and Cesare bent down to give me a kiss on the cheek. Then somehow he squeezed his huge frame past me, leaving the flowers in my arms.

"Thanks," I said. God, my conversation skills were rusty. But they'd been okay—for the most part—last night, so maybe once we got settled in, things would get easier. Or possibly once the wine started flowing.

Cesare came to a halt in the small living room, looking around. "Nice place."

"Small place," I corrected. The top of his head was inches away from the ceiling. "I'm not sure I've ever had someone as

big as you in here.”

His eyes met mine. “Does that bother you? My size?”

“No,” I said quickly. A little too quickly.

“I intimidate some women,” he said.

I had to give a small laugh at that. “You look like you’d intimidate some armies.”

He grinned. “Only when I need to.”

I took a breath and tried to gather my thoughts. “So no, your size doesn’t intimidate me.”

Cesare moved closer. Today he actually had on black trousers, not jeans. They weren’t exactly ready for a board meeting, but they were a step up from yesterday. His shirt was a button-down again, this time navy blue. “Does my size excite you?”

Oh crap. That was a really direct question. But Cesare held my gaze, and I knew I couldn’t lie to him. “Sometimes.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I hope you’ll let me know when those times are.”

“I’ll put the flowers in a vase,” I blurted out in a very clear attempt to change the subject. I hurried to the kitchen sink, putting the small counter between us, but he followed me. If he’d looked oversized in the living room, he looked positively humongous in the tiny kitchenette.

He stepped to my side, watching as I filled a vase with water. Then assisting when my hands shook too badly to slide the rubber band off the stems of the lilies.

“Do your hands shake this badly when you put in an IV?” he asked with a note of humor in his voice.

“No.” On that point, I was certain. “These are really nice.” Most of my attention was on Cesare’s nearness, but in the back of my mind, I couldn’t remember the last time a man had brought me flowers. The guys I’d dated in the last few years, the wishy-washy ones who couldn’t make a decision to save their lives, hadn’t been very good at that kind of thing.

Now that the flowers were in the vase, I made a half-hearted attempt to arrange them. Cesare watched me for a moment and then palmed the vase with one large hand. He reached back and set it on the small refrigerator. I'd been planning to keep them on the counter, but Cesare had other ideas for that space.

He grasped my waist and set me on the counter in front of him, as easily as he'd moved the vase—and I was damn sure that I weighed a whole lot more than the lilies.

Cesare pressed forward, and I swung my knees to the side. The dress was too tight to part them even though some wanton instinct deep inside of me wanted to do just that. He placed a palm on the counter on either side of me. His face was inches above mine.

His *mouth* was inches above mine.

“What are we having for dinner, Piper?” His voice was low and husky.

With him so close, it was hard to think. “I ordered some delivery. It should be here in about ten minutes.”

His eyes were on my lips. “I think I need an appetizer.”

Panic filled me as I thought about the contents of my half-sized fridge. It had been a while since I'd had time to hit up a grocery store. “I think I have some cheese and crackers—”

“That's not what I want to taste.”

His meaning became clear as he dipped his head, nuzzling his nose against mine. My body stayed tense, but I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent. He smelled good. I wasn't an expert on men's colognes or aftershave, but I liked it, whatever it was. And I liked how the heat from his skin radiated against mine.

I linked my wrists around his neck, just like I had at the hospital, and his hands went around my back. Then his mouth was on mine, and this time, I could fully enjoy it. There were no bad men at the door. There was no wounded patient next to us. It was just Cesare and me.

And god, he tasted good. Even better than his masculine scent. He knew how to kiss, and he didn't hesitate. My back arched

as my lips parted, letting him in. Letting him taste me—and tease me.

I moaned as his fingers slid down the back of my dress, cupping my ass. God, his hands were so large. Being touched by him was so different from being felt up by tentative, clumsy dates.

As his mouth devoured mine, I let my hands roam freely over his torso. The muscles under his shirt were so pronounced. Suddenly, it wasn't enough to only feel them through his clothes.

With a groan of anticipation, I tugged the bottom of his shirt out of his pants. My fingers found his buttons and started undoing them, one by one.

When I got them all undone, Cesare stepped back, pulling his shirt off. To my amusement, he hastily folded up his shirt, arranging it into a bundle and setting it on top of the fridge next to the flowers. But when he turned back to me, all humor was forgotten, and all I could do was to stare.

His body was incredible. The eight pack abs were worthy of a much longer look, but I couldn't help running my fingers over his massive biceps, broad shoulders, and chiseled pecs. He let me look—and touch—as much as I liked. I could see the hunger in his eyes, but he let me explore his warm, tan skin, and I took full advantage of that.

But as I squeezed his huge biceps, his gaze returned to my mouth and his head dipped again.

God, the man knew how to kiss.

This time, as he ravished my mouth, his large palm was on my bare leg where the hem of my tight dress had ridden up. His fingers slid under the edge, and it bunched up more when he glided his hand up my thigh.

My breath caught as I tracked the warmth of his touch as he moved higher and higher toward my core. When he reached the top of my thigh, he slid his hand to the side, bringing it up over my hip.

“No panties?” he whispered against my ear.

I blushed, wishing it were dark so that he couldn't see my embarrassment. "The line of the panties showed under my dress, so I didn't wear any. I didn't think we'd—"

"You think too much. And though the pink on your cheeks is cute as hell, you have nothing to be embarrassed about. "I fucking love it," he confessed, the richness in his voice sending tingles of arousal across my body. He flexed the muscles in his arms as he slid me forward on the counter, causing my dress to bunch up at my hips. Now I could spread my legs, and I did. He wasted no time in pressing between him. I could feel the hard bulge in his pants, but I was mesmerized by his flat abs. I stared at them so long that it took me a minute to notice his tattoos. I vowed to examine them later—after I'd had my fill of touching him.

As if anyone could ever get their fill of touching a body like that.

Cesare left just enough space between us to slide his hand up my inner thigh. And then he cupped my slit, and I arched my back and cried out. His hand was so large that I had to spread my legs even wider. I did so, lifting them up and hooking them around his hips.

One of his powerful arms wrapped around me as he pressed his hot fingers against my slit. Then he traced up and down it, no doubt feeling how aroused I was.

My inner walls clenched as I closed my eyes. My head tilted back involuntarily, and he moved his mouth to my throat while his long finger stroked up and down my folds.

Oh my god.

He nibbled on the delicate skin of my throat and then resumed kissing me.

Every move he made was done with purpose. With decisiveness. And every single action turned me on even more.

God, had I missed that... a man, trying to get me in the mood, not just trying to get what he wanted within ten minutes. Cesare used his free hand to unzip my dress, and I tugged down the straps. The dress ended up bunched around my

waist, not covering any part of me. Cesare must've come to the same conclusion because he lifted me easily and slid it down my legs. This time, he seemed too aroused to fold it as he had his shirt.

His gaze was fixed on my breasts, and the hunger in his eyes made the moisture increase between my legs. He pushed just the tip of his finger inside me at the same time he cupped one of my breasts, lifting it up. He licked and kissed his way down to it, and when his mouth sucked in my nipple, I almost came.

Everything faded away except for the huge man who was playing my body like a fiddle—or maybe more like a guitar. His thick finger circled my entrance, making me gasp for more while his tongue flicked over my nipple.

“God, you feel good, Piper.” His words were clear even though he still had his mouth pressed against my breast. “Firm but soft.” Then he slid a second finger an inch into my inner channel. “And so tight. You’re perfect.”

That was rich coming from a man with a body like his. A body I was currently running my hands all over.

He pressed the heel of his palm into my clit and exhaled hard over my chest. His mouth hovered over my breast as he looked into my half-open eyes.

If I had any doubts up ‘til that point, that single glance was enough to blow them away. The dark brown eyes were an endless pool, seeming to show into his soul. I read desire in that gaze. Passion. Admiration. Desire. All the things that turned me on were rolled into one. And I was ready and willing to savor each and every one of them.

His lips moved to my other breast as my hands sank into his short, dark hair. The tip of his tongue formed a slow, sensual circle around my nipple. His fingers pushed farther inside of me, and I gasped. It was already a stretch, and it was just two fingers.

Cesare caught my eye, making sure I was okay, but he didn't withdraw his fingers. In fact, after a long moment, he pushed them in more.

My stomach clenched as he stretched me. It made me wonder what it would feel like if he added another finger—or if he replaced his fingers with his cock.

His warm, wet tongue stroked my nipple and flicked it up and down, the sensations sweeping me away.

Those flicks were not hurried. But as my breathing grew more rapid, he focused more on my clit, rubbing the moisture from my opening back and forth across my most sensitive spot.

“Look at me,” he said, his raspy voice compelling me to obey. “Watch me when I make you come.”

I wanted to, and I was close. He obviously knew that by the way he was rapidly stroking my clit. But some part of me held back. Despite all the delicious sensations, part of me held back.

Cesare’s dark eyes were on mine as he straightened up. “You’re not getting off this counter until you come.”

His words turned me on, but did he really think it was that easy? Then again, many men did. In the past, I’d sometimes faked an orgasm just so that they could feel good about themselves. But I didn’t want to do that with Cesare. Besides, he seemed to know his way around my body much better than any other man who’d touched me, and I didn’t even know if he’d buy it.

“Stop thinking,” he ordered. “Just feel.”

He slid a hand down my back and palmed my ass, squeezing. With his other hand, he attacked my clit with his thumb while his fingers pushed back inside me—farther this time.

God, his fingers were long. They reached a spot deep inside me that made my toes curl. And still, as I panted and clung to him, I couldn’t quite reach the peak of the mountain I was climbing.

“You’re not at the hospital, dammit,” Cesare growled. “Patients aren’t counting on you. Lives aren’t at stake. You’re a woman, Piper, a woman with needs. Let me fill them for you. Let me take care of you.”

He used the word “let” but he didn’t mean it. No, Cesare didn’t let, he took. He was taking my will from me, taking my thoughts, and clouding the rational side of my brain so that only sensations were left. He squeezed my ass roughly as he pumped his fingers inside of me and my cries filled the room as I got closer and closer.

Then, when I thought I was going to explode, he changed his tune. “Not yet,” he ordered.

What? After he’d just told me to come? I clung to him, gasping for breath, not sure how to ride out the sensations as I quivered on the edge.

Then one long finger curled around my ass cheek and pressed against my opening back there at the same time he ran the back of his fingernail sharply over my clit.

“Now,” he demanded.

Somehow, my body obeyed. I screamed as my muscles tensed. It was too much—his fingers inside me hitting my g-spot while he pressed against my clit and my asshole at the same time. I cried out as I clung to him, my arms and legs trembling as waves of pleasure radiated out from my core.

“Good girl,” he growled, his eyes on my face as I fell apart into a million pieces. “Don’t stop.”

He was the one who didn’t stop—wringing every ounce of feeling out of my body as I clenched around his fingers, trapping him deep inside me.

I could barely breathe, and my vision grew blurry, but the sensations didn’t let up until he allowed it.

He was in charge, and we both knew it.

Finally, he relented, easing his fingers away from my heated flesh. He pulsed me against his broad chest, holding me there. He stroked my hair away from my face and then brought one of his wet fingers to my mouth. I licked tentatively at his index finger before sucking it into my mouth. It felt strange to taste myself, but judging by the huge tent in his pants, it pleased him. He licked his other finger clean as he stared into my eyes.

He held me and stroked my back for a long time as my body regained the ability to breathe. I was torn between just allowing myself to collapse against him—and wanting more.

More won out.

I reached up and pulled his head down to mine. I could taste my juices on his lips—or maybe on mine. I didn't care—all I wanted to do was to kiss him and be in his arms.

Well, okay, that wasn't all I wanted to do. Because my hands were already fumbling at the button on his pants. When I got the zipper down, he took over, shoving his pants down his powerful thighs and releasing his cock from the confines of his boxers.

My mouth went dry as I stared at the massive cock that bobbed between us.

“Bedroom,” I gasped, curving my arms around his neck.

He didn't waste any time, easily picking me up and carrying me into the living room.

“Second room on your left,” I uttered in a husky voice. Not that he'd mistake the bathroom for the bedroom, but I was so eager to get in there. I wanted him in my bed. I wanted to stroke every inch of his body. And I wanted him to touch and taste every inch of mine.

He set me down on my bed, and for a long moment, we just stared at each other, me on the bed, him standing in front of me, both of us naked. My thighs clenched as I stared at his cock. If his fingers had felt big inside me, what would his cock feel like?

I really, really wanted to find out—even if it meant I'd be walking funny for my next few hospital shifts.

Involuntarily, my tongue darted out, moistening my lips in appreciation of the sight right in front of me. He was breathtaking. There was a trail of dark hair that led down his flat stomach to his huge erection. Lightly, I ran my fingers along it, following the trail downward.

He stopped me just as I was about to grasp his cock. I looked up at him and pouted. I really wanted to know if I could even close my fingers around his cock.

But he had other ideas, and as he'd shown me very clearly before, he was in charge.

He pushed me back on the bed, and my hair spread out over the pillow. He climbed over me, holding himself off me as he stared down at me. It was maddening—he was right there, so close... yet he was holding himself still.

His self-control was maddening, but finally, something in his face relented. He held something up—a condom. He must've had one in his pocket, and I hadn't even noticed him retrieving it.

In my eagerness to touch his cock, I held out my hand. "Let me." His gaze intensified as he stared at me. "Please?"

That was apparently the magic word because he gave the little square to me. Then he sat back allowing me access to his rock-hard erection.

I gasped at the first touch. It was like steel. I stroked it up and down, and no, I couldn't close my fingers all the way around it. Good lord, would that really fit in me? I truly wanted to find out.

He watched while I rolled the condom over his massive girth. Excitement tore through me as I anticipated what was about to happen.

Cesare grabbed me and gave me a searing kiss, his fingers raking through my hair. Then he lowered me down so that I was laying on my back, looking up at him.

He hovered over me, in a plank position, seeming in no hurry as he gazed into my eyes. His control of himself was impressive and maddening. I wanted to feel him inside of me so badly.

I spread my legs and pulled my knees out and to the side, resting my feet on his hips. The head of his cock stroked my slit once and then twice. The tip felt massive compared to the width of the two fingers he'd used on me before. Then he

positioned his cock at my entrance, and I ground my hips, trying to draw him in.

He pushed forward and I exhaled sharply, sensing the thickness of his shaft about to stretch me out. Then he slid another inch inside and I threw my head back on the pillow, my mouth open in a silent cry. He was big. Too big. But I wanted that. I wanted him to stretch me. To fill me. To overwhelm me. I wanted him to get me to turn off my mind and just feel all the sensations like he had before in the kitchen.

He withdrew and then pushed in, his thick shaft stretching me more.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he groaned, his breath tickling my chin. “And I didn’t even go down on you.”

I grinned, hearing an unspoken “yet.” Then I gasped again as he drove into me harder.

He was watching me carefully, making sure I wasn’t in pain. And yeah, there was a little discomfort there—but there was a lot more pleasure.

I clutched at his massive biceps as he thrust into me. This time, I felt the full weight of his balls nudging my ass, and I knew he was fully seated inside me, or nearly so.

My moan filled the room. I tried to tighten my inner walls, to massage his cock, but there just wasn’t room. I was just too full.

And I loved it.

“More,” I gasped, but he stayed still, one eyebrow raised. “More, please,” I begged.

His grin was carnal as he pushed into me again, and his eyes glinted as I cried out.

I lost myself in his gaze, its intensity pouring oil into the fire of my desire. It was more than a turn-on to maintain eye contact with him. His brows furrowed and his face contorted with pleasure as he filled me up again and again. His breathing grew nearly as ragged as mine and I clutched his muscular

shoulders like I was holding on to them for dear life. He was a powerful man with a powerful body, and let's face it, an extremely powerful cock. I guess I did still have new things to learn about anatomy, or at least about male anatomy.

Like how damn good it felt to be this filled. Each long, tantalizing thrust was meant to satisfy me and make me crave more.

A whole lot more.

I dug my heels into his hard body as he drove in and out of me. I already felt on the verge of orgasm, but Cesare was taking no chances. "Rub your clit," he demanded.

My hand encountered all kinds of wonderful sensations as I snaked it along his sculpted body. But then I found my clit and rubbed it, harder than I usually did. I tried to move my finger the way he'd moved his before in the kitchen.

"I want to feel you come around my cock."

Cesare's mouth locked with mine once again, moments before I felt the initial flutters of my orgasm. My whole body was on fire from his long thrusts. My senses were in tune with his as he pounded into me, our gasps and moans almost in unison.

He somehow pushed in even deeper, and my clit relished the increased friction. And then my orgasm was right there, boiling under the surface. Rational speech left me, but I caught his eye, a silent question on my face. He nodded and I exploded, my body thrashing under his as he drove all the way inside me and held himself there. His thick cock pulsed, an immovable rod holding my core steady as the rest of my body shook and trembled.

"Fuck!" he shouted as he came. The sound was deafening in the small room, or maybe it was because of the blood thundering through my veins.

The force of my climax threw my head down into the sheets. My arms went limp as wave after wave rocked my body from top to bottom. I jerked up and down in quick succession, my eyes shut as his big, stiff cock filled me more than anything had ever.

“Fuck, yeah!” Cesare growled, holding himself inside of me for one more endless moment. And then he eased back, leaving me breathless again. Because suddenly, I felt empty, like something was missing. But before I could process the loss, he took me in his arms, rolling me on top of him as he collapsed at my side.

He stroked my hair and held me to him, and it went a long way toward curing the sense of loss I’d felt when he pulled out.

Soon, my cheek rested against his powerful chest as my breathing slowed. He stroked my hair and I wanted to stay there in his arms forever.

There were literally a thousand things I could have said to him.

About how good he’d made me feel. About how amazing it had been to not be in control. About how much I wanted to do that again.

But then an absurd thought hit me, and I bolted upright on the bed. “I wonder if they tried to deliver the Chinese food.”

Cesare chuckled and pulled me back down onto his chest. “I heard a knocking on the door at one point in the kitchen, but I had an appetite for other things.”

“Me too,” I said as I relaxed against him. “I’ll make sure they get a big tip.”

“Good.”

My strength left me as I snuggled against him. I was all but purring as he stroked me. This body heat, his hard muscles, his arms wrapped around me—it was all perfect. Too perfect. A wave of drowsiness washed over me. But I couldn’t fall asleep. I hadn’t even given him anything to eat. We hadn’t talked. This wasn’t how I’d planned for this evening to go.

But I wasn’t disappointed that it had. So I let him stroke my skin and my hair while my eyelids drooped. And when sleep beckoned again, I didn’t fight it. Falling asleep in his strong arms seemed like the most comforting thing ever.

I felt cherished.

I felt safe.

MATTEO

FIVE DAYS AFTER MY CHANCE MEETING WITH MAGGIE OWENS-Roselli, I hadn't forgotten a thing about it.

Quite the opposite.

I dissected those few minutes we spent together in that bar. I analyzed her words. Her attitude. The tone of her voice. I went over every single thing I could remember, again and again.

Clearly, she had a lot of money. She was also well-connected, which was why she had been able to find out so much about me and my friends.

The first question on my mind was why she would bother warning me off. Maybe she didn't want us to upset the status quo. Maybe she was still a do-gooder at heart. After all, she had opened a domestic violence shelter for women. But it just didn't add up for me.

This woman was the head of a mob family. She could spend millions on a charity, but it wasn't going to change the fact that she had the means and the resources to take all three of us out. She could have put a hit out on us, and we wouldn't even get a chance to hear about that out on the street. No one would warn us—I was sure of that. It was difficult for anyone to catch wind of a hit, especially if the organization had ordered it. In other words, it would've been easy for her to get rid of Cesare, Leonardo and me if she thought we were going to cause too much trouble. So why had she gone through the trouble of talking to me? Three bullets would have taken care

of the problem we posed, once and for all. Then we would've been out of her admittedly pretty hair.

I did appreciate Cesare's determination to carry on, however. It showed his complete lack of fear and his big, brass balls. Sadly, though, my friend didn't have any answers. He just wanted to plunge into danger head-on. I had no problem taking risks, but I wasn't Cesare. I needed to know as much as I could about a situation that affected me. I needed to know what Maggie's motives actually were.

Finding her office wasn't what you'd call difficult. That woman was hiding in plain sight. Under the cloak of the philanthropist. The boss's office was in the Upper East Side. Spotting her building, I was somewhat surprised. It was a four-story structure situated next to the House of Angels, a home for abused women and children. The sign on the side of the building read:

“Maggie Owens-Roselli - Shelter Manager”

Those two words made me change my mind about the size of that structure. If she was a do-gooder, she apparently wasn't above seeing her name really fucking large on the side of the building. From what I'd learned, Maggie hadn't ever known her biological father, Emilio Roselli, nor his asshole son, her stepbrother. But the apple apparently hadn't fallen far from the tree.

I walked through the open entrance of Maggie's workplace, not the shelter. I had a thousand questions about Maggie's organization, not her charitable work.

I thought about how I wanted to play it as I took an elevator up to the fourth floor. Anger was not going to resolve much. It was just going to complicate an already strange situation. Yes, I did have a lot to discuss with that woman, but barging in there yelling would not avail me at all. Plus, it wasn't my way. Cesare often got quieter—scarily quiet sometimes—when he was upset. Of the three of us, Leonardo was the only one who regularly flew off the handle, but he was still young. He'd gain more control when he was our age. Maybe.

Stepping out of that elevator and into a wide hallway, I saw a couple of guys strutting away from me. A much bigger man was gesturing to them, standing near the far wall. Our eyes met, and he kept eye contact and gestured them away. Man, that guy was large... nearly as tall as Cesare with a similarly bulked up physique. The main difference was the stranger's clean-shaven face.

“What in the *hell* are *you* doing here?”

Good. At least he let me know what I was going to face in that building. There was no reason for me to play nice. The gloves had come off right from the start...

“People say ‘good morning’ where I come from,” I said, not fazed by his show of anger. “They also introduce themselves. I

assume you know my name. That's why I didn't bother. And you are?"

"Rocco DeLuca." His posture was stiff as he told me his name. "Yeah, I know who you are. You're one of the assholes who failed to hold up that truck the other day."

"Wow, that really hurts coming from someone I know nothing about and don't care to. Good thing I'm not here for you, but for Ms. Owens-Roselli. Is she in?"

"No."

His response was blunt, his gaze intensifying. It was as if that guy viewed me as an enemy, and every step I took in his direction was being construed as an act of aggression.

"Even if she was, you wouldn't get past me. I'm the head of her security. You'd need an appointment first."

"Right," I nodded. Did the mob have online booking these days? "Explain something to me, will you? Just what did I ever do to you? Or her?"

"To me and her? Nothing," he stated, his tone firm. "But you did piss off some people we know."

"Like the mob?" I asked, coming to a halt two feet in front of the big guy.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, but he didn't make any effort to sell his lie.

"The whole fucking world knew what Roselli was. Your boss inherited his enterprises. Are you going to stand there and tell me she's not running anything illegal?"

"She's not," he snapped, anger firing in his eyes. "And I don't have to listen to you say she is. So get the fuck out of here."

"Not so fast," I said, my feet bolted to the ground. "Look, man. I just need to clear the air with her on a few things. How long until she gets here?"

"Maggie warned you, Borelli," Rocco said, pointing at me. "Don't fuck with the people you tried to steal from. They'll tear you apart. Which part of this don't you understand?"

If what he said was true, then the armored truck didn't belong to Maggie. "Why?" I shrugged my shoulders. "Why did she warn me? And don't give me any more bullshit, all right? Don't say she did this out of the goodness of her heart, because I'm not buying it."

"I don't care what the fuck you buy. Buy Greenland for all I care." The big man paused after what may have been an attempt at humor. Then he nodded. "Okay, here's how it is. Maggie didn't want anything to do with Roselli's illegal enterprises, so she gave them up. I used to work for Roselli. To get out of the organization, my old associates and I had to work with them. None of those Dons want any outsiders barging in, Borelli. We're keeping an eye on things, to let them know when someone tries to pull off anything smart."

I squeezed my lips together, processing the information. "So, you and Maggie are out, but you're not really out."

"Pretty much," he confirmed with a nod. "Me, Maggie, and my crew."

I changed tactics. "What would happen if you looked the other way after we tried to rob that truck?"

I couldn't wait to hear whatever he had to say, but Rocco wasn't going to indulge me.

He wasn't going to open his mouth.

He just pointed at me and mimicked a gun firing, his thumb staying bent.

"Now, you know why Maggie had to reach out to you," he finally said. "Next time, there'll be no warnings. The mob *will* come after you big time. Those guys—they don't play around."

"Noted. If you and your boss really are sincere, then thank you for the warning."

"You can thank me by staying away from high-profile targets like those fucking trucks, Borelli," he continued, his tone calm. "Do that and we're cool. Nobody needs to get hurt."

I gave him one last glance and turned around. I couldn't make any promises. I couldn't look him in the eye and lie to him. I wasn't a good liar—both Cesare and Leonardo had told me that about a hundred times each.

Plus, this decision wasn't only mine to make. The others had a say in this, too. And I doubted if Rocco's massive presence plus his female boss who both was and wasn't in charge of the Roselli family would be enough to persuade them to leave the riches that truck held alone.

PIPER

A NIGHT FULL OF SENSUALITY, PASSION AND ORGASMIC delight.

Honestly? I had forgotten what that was like. Or, more accurately, I had never actually known what that was like—until Cesare waltzed into my apartment and claimed my body.

He was a more generous lover most women could dream of. Yeah, he was domineering in the bedroom, but I sure as hell wasn't going to complain. He made me feel pleasure I'd never felt before, and he'd all but worshiped my curves and bare skin.

He'd just done it in a very bossy way.

His massive form was still next to me in my small bed when I got up in the middle of the night to get some water from the kitchen. He was snoring slightly, and the sight of his massive chest rising and falling with each breath made me smile.

Throwing on a robe, I padded to the kitchen, veering off when I remembered the Chinese food I'd ordered the night before. Sure enough, it was on the mat outside of my door, making the hallway smell rather rank. I deposited it in the trash chute down the hall before getting a glass of water from the kitchen.

The water reminded me of the flowers, and I picked the vase up off of the top of the fridge and set it on the counter so that I could see the lilies better. Then I remembered Cesare's shirt.

It was still folded, but looking somewhat wrinkled, so I picked it up in order to smooth it out and refold it.

At least that was the plan until something fell out of it and hit the floor with a thud.

Light from the streetlights in the alleyway did little to illuminate the kitchen floor, so I flipped on the light over the stove.

Then my heart skipped several beats.

A black pistol was on the floor just inches from my feet.

My breathing sped up as I stared at it in horror. A gun. In my home. Cesare must've taken it off when he'd pulled off his shirt.

Cesare had brought a gun into my home.

My breath escaped from me in panicked little gasps. I'd never wanted this. I hated guns with a passion. It was more than the fact that they scared me. It was also that I'd seen what they did, time and time again. I couldn't escape the knowledge at work. And I hadn't been able to escape the knowledge at Colby's funeral.

As I stared at the hated object, water spilled out of the glass I was holding at an angle, bringing me back to myself. I didn't want to touch the gun, but I also didn't want Cesare to step on it or something in the morning. What if it went off?

So I wadded up his shirt, no longer caring about it getting wrinkled, and used it to pick up the gun. I put them both on the counter and hastily made my way out of the kitchen.

Cesare was still snoring softly on my bed, but everything felt different now. I climbed in, careful not to disturb him. I settled myself at the very edge of the mattress as far as I could from him.

Then I tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn't.

When sunlight filled the apartment, Cesare woke with a start. He rolled over, facing me, and tried to pull me against him, but I buried my face in the pillow and mumbled sleepily. When he tried again, I said I needed more sleep because I'd be working the night shift again.

Which was true, but not the only reason I didn't want to be in his arms right now.

He eventually stopped trying and got up.

I heard him moving around for a bit and then eventually, the door opened and shut. He must've known that I'd found his gun since it was moved, but he didn't say anything. My sleepy act must've been convincing, which was good.

I needed time to deal with my conflicting feelings on my own.

LEONARDO

*ABANDONED WAREHOUSE. 6947, AMITY STREET. TONIGHT. 8PM.
You're going to want to hear this.*

Matteo's text was an inconvenience.

The address was pretty close to my building. He could have suggested a meeting there, but for some reason I couldn't fathom, he had chosen this warehouse.

A minute after receiving this, I got a phone call from Cesare. Surprise of surprises, he was wondering about the same thing. Still, seeing as Matteo didn't do anything without good reason, we agreed to meet him there. Our friend had to be the most anal son of a bitch on planet Earth. He loved to study situations. Every single detail was on the table. He never left anything out, and, in case he did, he would then go back to the drawing board and review his options one more time. Even if that meant spending hours or even days on the same subject, Matteo would not be rushed.

The skies over New York had opened on that cool, September night. Noticing the ripples of water drops across a paddle in front of me, I checked the street. I jogged off, focusing my attention on the meeting place. Its blue paint had to have been flaking off for years, if not decades. The sign over its entrance was in white font and missing quite a few letters.

“L vings on: Spar Par s & Ac esso r es”

In a Knicks cap to cover my features, I slid open the metal gate to the property. Well down the front yard and slightly to the right, I spotted a large, grayish door. I continued onwards at a steady pace, throwing cautious glances left and right. To my satisfaction, traffic was light. There were four vehicles on the road at the time. An old lady was rolling a cart down the sidewalk, her back to me.

I gripped the latch and yanked it aside, metal grinding into metal as I did. With the latch's handle still in my palm, I pulled it to the side, until I felt resistance. That door had to have weighed a couple of tons. I heard it slide slowly to the right, some light coming through the gap. I moved around its edge and stepped in. Amazingly, Cesare and Matteo were already there. Cesare was a lot of things. Punctual wasn't one of them, unlike Matteo. Obviously, our friend's suggestion to meet in that warehouse had piqued his interest. Right under an old fluorescent light, they were facing me. A blackboard was between those two, Matteo holding a long stick close to its surface.

“Sweet disguise,” Matteo commented as I slid that beast of a door back shut.

“Don't give me that shit,” I growled, setting off towards them. “I want to know why the hell we had to meet here. What was wrong with my place? Or yours?”

“Patience, young one,” Matteo raised his voice, tapping the end of the stick into the board.

“He's not familiar with that concept,” Cesare added, his sideways gaze on his cousin. “Maybe you should have explained to him.”

“He'll get over it,” Matteo assured, before settling his gaze on me. “I took an initiative, Leonardo. I had to know why that Owens-Roselli woman had bothered following me around. So, I paid her a little visit.”

“You did?”

I cocked both eyebrows, waves of surprise hitting me.

“Yup,” he said, the writing on the board getting clearer with every step I took. “I didn’t find her, but I ran into the next best thing. A guy named Rocco DeLuca, the head of her security. You’re not going to believe this, but the girl isn’t part of the organization. The mob’s actually using DeLuca and his associates, to make sure no one’s interfering with their business. That’s the price they had to pay to get out of the organization.”

“So, Owens-Roselli’s crew is what? Watchdogs?” I wondered, my voice rising up an octave as I stared at the blackboard. There was a large circle on top, with “Mob” written in it. Right below that, was a smaller circle, containing the name “Roselli.” Our names were on there, too, but I couldn’t quite figure out how our circles fit in with the bigger ones.

“You got it,” Cesare confirmed with a nod. “They’re like mafia cops.”

“Boys, I hate to say it, but we’ve got our work cut out for us,” Matteo pointed out. “DeLuca is about Cesare’s age. He’s got a lot of experience under his belt. He knows that world inside out. I don’t know about his associates, but it’s going to be a *bitch* trying to take him out.”

“If it comes down to that, we will,” I said, my voice steady. “I don’t care how experienced he is. We’ll get that motherfucker.”

“Matteo’s right, Leonardo,” Cesare interjected. “Whatever we’ve been planning to do just got a lot harder. We’ll have to be *very* careful with those guys, especially now that they’re onto us.”

“It’s all pretty simple, now that we know the score.” Matteo was the next to speak up. “DeLuca’s crew is in a tough spot. They have to watch out for people like us and stop them, or else they’re in danger of getting whacked themselves. He made that pretty clear yesterday.”

“Whatever,” Cesare said, waving his hand in front of his face. “Leonardo, any updates on the truck’s new route?” That had been one of my jobs the past few days.

“Yeah,” I answered, taking my cell phone out of my back pocket. A few swipes later, I held it down in front of those two, to show them the new route of our target. “Before, their route took them through some fairly populated areas, but now they’re trying to skirt those areas and stick to the woods.”

Cesare frowned. “But we attacked them in the middle of the woods. Why wouldn’t they drive down the most well-lit street in the goddamn city?”

Matteo grimaced. “Because they’ve got more backup now. They’re expecting a shootout, and there will be fewer questions if it happens in the middle of nowhere.”

“Those bastards must feel pretty comfortable under the wing of the mob,” Cesare growled. “Look at this shit. That truck’s going to be on dirt tracks for a while. It’s practically *begging* to be robbed.”

“I hear you but taking them out isn’t going to be easy. If they were going to drive through a town in the middle of the night, I’d recommend a sniper rifle on a rooftop a couple of blocks out, but that’s not going to work in the middle of a forest.”

Matteo had had special weapons training when he was in the army, so he was our arms expert.

“We’ll figure it out,” Cesare said, looking up at him first and then, me. “We’ll need to do some recon, but I think we’ll find a sweet spot. Let’s go.”

Excitement filled me. At last, we were going to do something.

We wouldn’t just talk. Maybe it was the time spent in the hospital, but I was tired of sitting on my ass. Of resting and recuperating. I wasn’t made for that kind of thing, and neither were my buddies.

We needed to get out there and see for ourselves just how we were going to hit that damn truck. I did agree with Matteo. Shooting at a tall, moving vehicle from the ground level would not be easy. We were all good marksmen, but there would be a

lot of obstacles along the way. Still, I wouldn't lose hope. Not after Cesare's suggestion to scout out the area in the dead of night. There would be fewer people to see us, and it would more closely recreate the conditions we'd be under when we eventually took those bastards out.

PIPER

WORK KEPT ME BUSY THE NEXT FEW NIGHTS, WHICH WAS good. It gave me less time to dwell on Cesare. He'd texted a few times, but he'd seemed preoccupied and busy, too. Probably it would be best to just let things fade away.

Yeah, it was for the best, but it was also disappointing. But it was clear that Cesare was not boyfriend material. He wasn't the type of guy a woman could rely on. His lifestyle seemed a little too dangerous. There was a pretty good chance of him getting killed out on the street. Yes, he'd treated me well the two times I'd seen him outside of work. Apart from the fact that he was a control freak and carried a gun, he was actually a pretty good date. Charming. Well-spoken. Polite as long as it was clear that he was the one in charge.

So yeah, it was a pity. I had met a fine-looking man, great at flirting, knowing how to treat a woman, but the life he had chosen for himself just didn't agree with me.

Nevertheless, part of my mind couldn't get over how good it had felt to be in his arms. To feel safe and cherished. And then there was the sex. I'd never had sex that good. Or orgasms that powerful. Hell, I'd never seen a man who looked as good as Cesare did naked. It made me wish that he were in a different line of work, but that was kind of like wishing that he was a different person, which made no sense. He was who he was.

I kept thinking about him, though, as my mind went around in circles. In the shower before work, I'd run my hands over my

skin and remember how amazing it had felt when he touched me.

And my brain began to betray me. I began to wonder if giving up on the idea of Cesare as a suitable boyfriend truly meant giving up the sizzling-hot sex. After all, some men seemed perfectly fine with having sex without a relationship.

Maybe Cesare and I could be like that. We could enjoy each other's bodies and make each other feel good without bothering with a relationship.

After all, one more time wouldn't hurt anyone. It would just give me more memories with him. Amazing images I could go back to, every time I felt like it. Like after a long shift when I needed a little relief before bed. If I could make a few more memories with him, it would be worth it to me. It might even distract me from thinking about the gun he'd brought into my home.

Maybe.

MATTEO

A LATE-NIGHT FIELD TRIP TO A STATE FOREST?

I hadn't seen that coming.

Truth be told, I expected that the truck's new route would go through more populated areas. To use some more crowded roads, with enough traffic to deter any wannabe robbers.

But thanks to Leonardo's research, I'd been dead wrong. At least if what he'd learned was legitimate. Truth was, the new route gave me the creeps. I'd never been a fan of darkness. Cesare's dad—my uncle—had died when we were young, and his mom went through a series of boyfriends who made Cesare's life miserable. One who was a particular bastard would lock us in a storm cellar when he didn't want to deal with us anymore. It was dank and dark down there, even after we'd learned to hide flashlights, food, and water down there.

So yeah, I wasn't afraid of the dark anymore, but I also wasn't its biggest fan. Still, we learned something after making the trip. The first thing was about the people who put the truck's new itinerary in place.

They had to have been feeling invincible. They had to believe that no one would dare pull their truck over to rob it. That vehicle would be well away from civilization. It would be miles away from any witnesses and law enforcement agents for at least thirty minutes. This was plenty of time for a skilled crew to do anything they had in mind. So, whoever had ordered the driver of that truck to take that route had to have

been stupid or too confident. They had too much faith in DeLuca and his men, if they were part of the backup.

My second conclusion had to do with Cesare's so-called sweet spot.

Two hours into our recon, I started calling it the shitty spot instead. For more than three miles along that route, those were all I could get. The terrain around the road wasn't level. All in all, it was a shitty place for a marksman. Huge trees would block the truck from view. Getting a clear shot at the driver would be next to impossible. And if we couldn't take out the men in the truck first, it was all pointless. No matter how much we needed the money, I wasn't going to stand by and let one of my buddies get shot again.

We huddled in the fucking trees in the dark and discussed every single option. We finally settled on the only solution that made sense—one of us would have to climb a fucking tree and perch up there like a damn deer hunter, waiting for prey to walk—er, drive—by.

Even just getting up there would require flexibility and lightness. Those weren't qualities that tall guys like me and Cesare possessed. Leonardo was the lightest of the three of us, but he was also the worst shot. Not to mention he was still recovering from his wounds.

Shit. I was too old to climb a fucking tree. Still, it was either that or standing on the side of the road. Stealth was key in our operation. We didn't wish to be seen by the driver or anyone else for that matter. Plus it was a battle tactic as old as time itself—maintain the high ground.

The next morning, we met at Cesare's place to continue planning. His place was less than a mile from my own, so I decided to walk since the weather was nice.

When I neared his building, I became extra alert. We were on some pissed off people's radar now, so I wanted to be extra careful. My eyes scanned the grounds for anyone who looked like they didn't belong. Just when I thought it was all clear, I spotted someone who clearly didn't belong.

The blonde was in skintight jeans and a white top. She had on black sunglasses and a huge purse that she was clutching like she thought it was going to get stolen. It took her a minute to place her, but then it hit me. She was that nurse, Piper something. The one who'd taken such good care of Leonardo in the hospital.

But we were nowhere near her workplace. What the hell was she doing out here?

As she neared, I couldn't help admiring the way those long, shapely legs moved. Or the way the top few buttons of her blouse were undone at the top. She was gorgeous, there was no question about that.

But I had plenty of questions about why we were apparently heading toward the same place.

The following morning, I was back in Cesare's neighborhood. We would draw straws to see which one of us would become a fool of themselves by pretending to be an ape. I locked my car, hoping in my heart it wasn't going to be me. I didn't have a problem pulling the trigger. I knew some people would have to be hurt in our wake. I just hated the idea of sitting on a tree branch and waiting for that truck to get close.

Then one possibility hit me fast. *Very* fast.

Cesare was private about his sex life, but that didn't mean he didn't have one. And she was beautiful, single, and had kissed his brains out the first time they met. Still, it didn't make sense that he'd invite her to his place right now, not when Leonardo and I were about to meet with him to discuss strategy.

Which meant the pretty nurse was going rogue.

I lengthened my strides and intercepted her when she was about twenty paces from Cesare's building. "Morning, Piper."

She looked startled, clutching her purse, but then she took off her oversized sunglasses and squinted at me. "Matteo, right?"

"Right." The smile I gave her was likely less than enthusiastic. "You're the last person I expected to see out here."

“I was in the neighborhood. I thought I’d stop by and say hi to Cesare.”

“I’ll pass the message along.” Yeah, I was being rude, which she likely didn’t deserve, but this wasn’t a situation that could lead to anything good.

“He’s a big boy,” she said. She put a slight emphasis on the word *big*. “He can take his own messages.”

“Or it could be that he’s got more important things to think about. Like making sure his buddy doesn’t get shot again.”

Piper’s face whitened, and I regretted my flippant words. There was no doubt she cared about Leonardo’s health. I took a deep breath. “Look, Piper, I don’t know what connection you think you have to him, but Cesare isn’t your typical nice guy. He’s not going to become your doting boyfriend if that’s what you’re after.”

“Nice way to speak about your cousin,” she said, but there was a wounded look in her eyes, and I felt like an ass.

I tried again. “Our line of work... it isn’t something that gives us much leeway. In fact, it basically just gives us trouble. Is that what you’re looking for? Because that’s what you’ll get with a man like Cesare.”

By this point, I wasn’t sure who I was protecting. My cousin, who didn’t need this gorgeous distraction in his life at such a complicated crossroads, or the nurse who didn’t deserve the problems we’d brought her way. For a moment, I was sympathetic with Maggie. Clearly, warning people off wasn’t as easy as I’d originally thought.

“I know you think I’m a jerk, but for your sake and for Cesare’s—I think it’s best if you just turn around and go home.”

Her lips squeezed together as she stared up at me, her green eyes trouble. Then she put on her sunglasses, hiding them from view. To my surprise, she turned around and walked away without saying another word.

I watched her put distance between us, unable to keep myself from staring at that sweet, heart-shaped ass of hers. I had to

admit, I couldn't take my eyes off of it until she disappeared from view. It seemed wrong to ogle her when I'd just upset her. Even if I had done it—mostly—for her sake.

But god, she was hot. It was easy to see why Leonardo, and now possible Cesare, had fallen for her. And unlike Ms. Owens-Roselli, there was no question that Piper truly was a do-gooder.

And I'd treated her like shit.

I didn't feel good about that as I jogged up the steps to Cesare's apartment, but then I pushed it out of my mind. The operation we were about to embark on had to be executed to perfection. We'd screwed up once, and we couldn't afford any more mistakes. Not if we wanted the status and power we craved. And not if we wanted to live past the next few days.

So now was definitely *not* the time to get hung up on a pretty blonde.

PIPER

HOW COULD I HAVE BEEN SO STUPID?

How could I have not considered doing something as simple as picking up the phone and calling Cesare?

This would have told me if he was available or not. After crossing paths with Matteo outside his building, it became clear to me that he wasn't.

For crying out loud, I'd acted like a schoolgirl who was about to meet her boyfriend in secret. Meaning to surprise him in his bedroom. Staying out of sight of his parents and mine as well. I had been much too impulsive and paid the price.

As for Matteo? I wasn't mad at him. I shouldn't have been mad at him, although he wasn't so nice to me. It was me I was mad at. I should have acted like an adult, not like a sex-hungry girl who couldn't wait to pounce on Cesare. He might have been amazing in bed, but I could have waited a day or two for some more of his sexy moves.

Deep in regret, I arrived at the hospital that afternoon. As usual, I greeted my colleagues and said "fine" to anyone who had the courtesy to ask how I was doing. I was preparing mentally for another routine day at work. A dozen or so true emergencies would turn up and have everybody running like chickens with their heads cut off. In my emotional state, I was kind of hoping they would be more. I was looking for distractions. Cases that would draw my attention from start to finish.

The first one that day didn't seem like an emergency at all. Just fifteen minutes into my shift, a young dark-haired beauty showed up in the ER. She couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty years old. At first glance, I realized that there was something off about her. Her outfit was just a little too nice. It was a purple pantsuit and three-inch heels. She reminded me of some ladies in cop shows, like CSI and Law & Order. Furthermore, that brunette wasn't alone. She was accompanied by a couple of bodyguards. One of them sat down in the waiting room with her, while the other was at the entrance.

“Allegra?”

I called out the first name on the patient list. Amazingly, it belonged to the young woman who got up from her seat, her bodyguard pressing his wrist to his mouth to alert his colleague.

“That would be me.”

“Come on in.”

I stood several feet from the door of the exam room, watching her approach. The girl's demeanor was rather unusual. She kept looking over her shoulder. Her walking style was funny, too. It didn't resemble a woman's per se. It was more like a child, moving away from the remains of a vase she had broken. Light-footed and scared, Allegra joined me in that exam room, her two bodyguards right behind her.

“Gentlemen, please, wait in the hall,” I requested, turning my attention to the one closest to me.

“That's not going to happen, ma'am,” he said, interlocking his fingers over his stomach. “We're here for Ms. Allegra's safety.”

“No kidding,” I assumed a sarcastic tone, eyeing him with anger. “I thought you two took knitting classes with her. This is an exam room. I need some privacy to do my job. Don't make me call security.”

“Please, leave us,” Allegra finally broke her silence, looking up at the same guy on her right.

To my satisfaction, they listened to her. I waited for them to leave us alone, before bringing my attention back to the chart in my hand.

“Let’s see here. You’re here for a stomachache?” I said, taking two, short steps towards her. “Sorry to say this, but stomachaches don’t qualify as emergencies at age twenty. Anyway,” I paused and picked up the stethoscope from the desk on my left.

In the next ten minutes, I checked her breath, her pulse and had a little chat with her about what she had had for dinner the night before and breakfast. She was a bit thin for her 5’5” build, but, other than that, she was perfectly healthy. Her eating habits were nothing out of the ordinary. Her diet consisted mostly of fruit and vegetables, with pizzas and burgers few and far between.

Confusion setting in, I put the chart down on the desk and looked her in the eye.

“You seem perfectly healthy to me, Allegra,” I began, studying her face. “I can’t find what caused that stomachache, so, I’d like you to describe to me how it first manifested.”

“Ma’am.”

“Piper,” I interrupted, pointing up at the nametag on my chest.

“Okay,” she said on an exhale. “Piper, I had cramping and a pretty strange feeling in my stomach yesterday. I thought it would have gone away by this morning, but it’s still there.”

“The circumstances, dear,” I requested, making my voice sound sweeter. “I’m waiting to hear those circumstances I just asked you about.”

“It’s all because of a man!” She exclaimed, talking much faster than before.

I jerked back and shook my head, struggling to comprehend just where in the world this had come from. So far, she had been calm and cooperative. In fact, her voice had been so low that I had asked her to speak up.

“Honey,” I said, maintaining my composure. “There’s no reason for you to get angry, okay? You’re here to get to the bottom of that stomachache. Now, what did this man do to you? Did he hurt you in any way?”

“No,” she croaked, her gaze dropping to the floor. “Pete is my father’s driver. He’s been making eyes at me for weeks. I’m not going to lie to you; I’m attracted to him. My, uh...” she faltered, her eyes shooting back up to mine. “My folks are strict. They won’t allow me to talk to men, especially if they’re on their payroll.”

“I see,” I nodded, noticing pools of tears in her big, brown eyes. “That’s sad if you ask me. You’re an adult. The only person you answer to is yourself.”

“You really think so?” She asked, her voice much more high-pitched.

“Of course,” I affirmed, my next observation giving me more cause for concern. That poor girl’s fingers were trembling. Hand on her knee, they seemed to dance over her pants. “Continue, please.”

“Oh, god,” she sighed, lifting her other hand up to her eyes. She closed them tight before they disappeared behind her palm, a tear streaming down her cheek.

I didn’t think twice. I needed eye contact with her, even though this was clearly painful for her. I raised my own hand up to her face and curled my fingers around her wrist. I eased it away, holding it in a gentle manner. Her eyes opening, she focused back on me.

“Yesterday, Pete caught me passing by the staff area of the house,” she revealed, her voice shaking. “He pulled me back in and kissed me. I liked it. My parents were in the house, so, the danger of getting caught kind of thrilled me.”

“They didn’t see anything, did they?” I posed another question, my voice gaining in volume.

“No,” she replied quite fast. “The staff area is in the back of our house. That kiss? It got very intense at some point. Pete put me on top of a washing machine that was running. That

thing was vibrating. Hard. That's when I felt that cramp and a very weird sensation below my abdomen. Is that normal? Am I going to be okay?"

Holy mother of god.

I could see a young woman her age never having had a boyfriend. Or still being a virgin. But to not even know how sex worked in this day and age? How could anyone be that sheltered? But it was clear that she had been.

Part of me wanted to burst out laughing. All the same, the woman and the professional in me didn't allow that silly reaction to surface. I assumed a serious expression and leaned closer to Allegra.

"Was that experience actually painful?" I asked, my tone free of the stress of the last twenty minutes or so.

"Hmmm," she hummed, tapping her index finger on her chin. "Not really. I just made funny noises when I felt that sensation below my abdomen."

If I was tempted to laugh before, I was struggling to keep inside an even bigger fit of laughter. I pressed my fist to my mouth to hide my broad smile, looking away from her.

"Well?!" Allegra exclaimed, throwing both arms out to the side.

"You actually had an orgasm, Allegra," I told her, wiping the smile off of my face.

Gauging her reaction, I put my arm back down.

It was hard for me to wrap my head around what I was looking at.

She stared at me as her jaw literally dropped. It was as if I had just broken the news of her suffering from a terminal disease.

Poor thing.

I heard the same voice in my head, repeating those two words.

Not only did she not have any experience with men, but my explanation had stunned her to stillness and speechlessness.

I snapped my fingers in front of her face, trying to get her to say something. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she blinked twice and shook her head repeatedly. “I’m confused. I’ve heard of orgasm, but I thought it happened between a man and a woman when they truly loved each other.”

“Well, that’s just one of the possibilities,” I remarked, holding my index finger up. “It’s easier for men. They get aroused visually and reach orgasm just by physical touch. It’s much more difficult for us women. We need mental simulation and emotional connection. Sometimes, however, it’s all about the heat of the moment. You said it yourself. The danger of getting caught thrilled you.”

“That’s true,” she agreed with a nod. “So, that’s it? I don’t need any medication?”

I smiled over at her. “No, Allegra. Like I said, you’re perfectly healthy. If you need any more advice, don’t hesitate to call here. Ask for Piper Briggs, okay?”

“Sure,” she said, beaming with appreciation. “Thank you, Piper. You’ve been a lot of help.”

Unbelievable?

Shocking?

Funny?

All of the above. Allegra had no idea about some fundamental things about her own nature. She had read about them, she had probably imagined them, but her experience was non-existent. It broke my heart to see her speak about orgasm like it was something she had to wait for, until she had found the one.

I watched her leave the exam room, feeling sorry for her.

Another feeling soon stormed into me as I recalled some parts of our conversation.

Anger.

Lots of it.

That ignorance was shocking, yes, but it wasn't her fault. That girl was living in a cage. She wasn't allowed to interact with men that worked for her parents. Maybe they thought those guys had the plague—I didn't know. Those people had been holding her back. They had been controlling her life, ever since the day she was born. So, her complete unawareness of basic female anatomy made perfect sense. I doubted I would have known much if my own folks had had so much control over my personal life.

CESARE

“WE WAIT FOR MATTEO’S SIGNAL. WE DON’T MOVE AN INCH, until he gives us the green light.”

With those words, I dismissed my boys and told them to take up their positions.

It had been a long time coming.

A rough ride, full of ups and downs.

The most recent one would have to be Leonardo’s injury. He’d been lucky to get out of that one alive.

Now, somewhere in the middle of a fucking state forest, the three of us had one more chance to carry out our biggest plan to date. The plan that had set the mob against us.

Just ten yards from the road, standing between a couple of cedar trees, I pressed my index finger to my ear.

“Talk to me, boys.”

“Leonardo here. Copy loud and clear.”

“This is Matteo. In position. Target’s five minutes out.”

“What about company? Can you see any?”

“Not yet. I’d bet everything I own, though. They wouldn’t let one of those trucks without a chaperon. We’ve seen it before.”

“Roger.”

Without a doubt, this would be the trickiest part of the operation. Taking care of the tag team. Making sure that none of them survived to go back and tell his handlers what had

taken place out in the wilderness. We had failed to do that once. After our arrival at the hospital, it had been impossible to track down both of the enemy's men.

Still, that night was a whole different story.

We had planned this better.

We had taken into account every single detail, including the two fuckers that would try to mess with our plan.

I tapped my boot into the moist soil in impatience, holding my rifle across my stomach.

"Cesare, Leonardo," I heard Matteo's voice on the intercom. "I've got eyes on that chaperon. One car. Black Escalade. Half a mile behind the truck."

"Copy, Matteo. Can you get to them?"

"Nope. I'm positioned on top of a branch about fifteen feet from the ground. I can't aim at anybody in that Escalade. I can hit its roof, but that's about it."

"I hear you. Take care of the driver and come back down, then. We're going to need your help."

"Will do. Target in sight in thirty seconds."

At that point, my arm dropped, my breath quickening. My boots squashed a small pile of brush as I started off towards the road. With the distant noise of a diesel engine in my ears, I peeked my head from behind a balsam fir tree. I made out the headlights of a tall vehicle, well down the twisty road. Casting its light across the asphalt, it continued along the road, my heart pounding like a war drum. Just as it was about to take a left turn, two, almost simultaneous clicks filled my ears.

I rushed off and stayed parallel to the road, my gaze not leaving the dark road up ahead. Just past a steep hill, that truck was serving right and left.

"Driver's down."

Matteo's voice confirmed my suspicion. The armored truck's tires screeching in protest, it snaked along the asphalt, losing speed as it did. The uphill road it encountered slowed it down

further. I barreled down the hill, Leonardo bursting out of the forest to the left. Closing in, I came to a disturbing realization. The truck still had quite a lot of momentum. Its steering wheel hard left, it jackknifed in the middle of the road, revealing the bright shade of silver of that cab. Smoke rising from all six tires, the truck rolled over, its cab smashing down into the asphalt. The ground underneath my boots vibrating, a sheer cacophony of noise dominated the atmosphere. Metal slammed into asphalt. The windscreen shattered to pieces, chunks of glass spreading out into the road. Aluminum grinding into the surface of the road, I spotted Leonardo's figure just past the vehicle. His pace slowing to a jog, he came to a halt, his ski mask pulled down his face.

"What are you waiting for?" I said, trying to catch my breath. "Set the charges."

"No need," he spoke, gesturing me closer. "Look at that."

I stepped around the corner of that mangled truck, curious as to why he didn't have to blow up its door. One glance proved his point. The impact had destroyed the double locks of that door. Its right panel was wide open, while its left was still latched in place.

But we didn't have time to celebrate. Or to get in that truck and check out how much money was in it. The roar of a powerful engine reverberating through my skull, I whipped my head left. The black Escalade's high beams forced me to thrust my arm up to shield my eyes as it headed straight for us. I sensed a serious amount of force on my wrist, yanking me down. My knees hitting the deck, I saw Leonardo on all fours, crawling into the truck. I followed him in, the crackle of bullets tearing into the stillness of the night.

Some light coming through the gap behind me, I turned around as Leonardo positioned himself behind the closed panel. I reached out, my fingers making contact with the metal edge of the open panel. Without wasting any time, I pulled it in my direction, leaving just a two-inch gap in the middle. The roar of that engine growing louder by the second, I craned my neck to look through the scope. Those sons of bitches were less than fifty yards out and closing the gap fast. I squeezed the trigger

of my rifle, its muzzle flash shooting past the edge of that panel. Bullets thumping into its surface, my ears picked up another, rumbling sound, along with the noise of glass shattering. The Escalade slowing down, Leonardo shoved his gun through the gap and opened fire. My eyes narrowing to protect myself from those high beams, I kept aiming at the driver. The next bullet pierced the windshield, just to the right.

No good.

I had missed—that monstrous SUV was still going.

A large figure stormed into my line of sight from the left. Matteo lunged through the passenger window, sending my heart into the embrace of tension and fear. For the second time that night, I was left to watch a vehicle swerve left and right. Only this time, it was too close for comfort. In an instant, the Escalade veered off to the left and out of the road. Its lights illuminating the towering trees, it disappeared between the trunks of two, elm trees.

“Fuck!” I cried out, lifting my rifle up as I crawled forward. I put my left arm forward and bent my right leg, my heart pounding so hard I could hear it. The echoes of the bullets still lingering in the air, a tremendous thud ripped through the wilderness. I hurtled off and away from the truck, Leonardo following right behind me.

“You stupid son of a bitch,” I said to myself, jumping past the edge of the road. The Escalade had slammed into a tree, its side to me. Its hood had bent and twisted, parts of its front bumper littering the dirt. I sidestepped one such piece, noises of struggle reaching my ears. Matteo’s loud, deep cry raised the fine hairs on the back of my neck, Leonardo passing me by. Being the first to reach that banged-up SUV, he yanked the passenger door open. Just as he did so, a stranger’s body fell out of the seat, his head stopping just an inch from the ground. Blood was dripping off the seam of his lips. A large cut by his right eye and a bruise right over it told us what had happened. Matteo had pounded the shit out of him. Two bullet holes on his chest. Our friend had knelt on top of him, his head pressed to the headrest as he gasped for breath.

Speechless, Leonardo and I looked at each other, before he held out his arm. Taking Matteo's hand in his grip, he eased him out of that Escalade, the enemy's head bumping into the ground. I peeked in, only to find an open airbag and the driver lying back in his seat. Eyes shut, his mouth agape, a bullet had been lodged in the middle of his forehead. Blood dribbled out of the wound, and I turned in Matteo's direction. He leaned his weight against me, his panting subsiding.

"You crazy bastard," I told him, admiration dripping from my voice. "Were you trying to be a hero?"

"Ah, shut up, asshole," he grunted, flashing me an angry, sideways glance. "If I hadn't jumped in, those motherfuckers would have crashed into the truck. On purpose."

"That sounds like something I would have done," Leonardo said, my gaze on the wide-open panels of that armored truck.

"We did it, boys," I stated, my heart plunging into a sea of joy. "Matteo, you should go in first. You earned it."

"Right," he muttered, lengthening his strides.

I halted just a few feet from the truck, my friend going down on his knees.

He had earned it?

No. That wasn't entirely accurate.

Matteo had made this happen.

Without him, we'd have been crushed to death in that truck. Leonardo and I would have been squashed like bugs. There was no way we'd have survived that impact. That Escalade was enormous. It weighed more than two tons. Those panels wouldn't have protected us.

"Catch!"

Matteo's shout came right before the sound of a heavy object sliding filled my ears. Looking down, I saw a large, gray box, its top open. five wads of hundred-dollar bills were on top of five stacks. I swallowed a big gulp of my own saliva and picked one up in my hand. Leonardo doing the same, he had a broad grin on his face. Two, even bigger boxes sliding out,

Matteo emerged from within the cab and leaned back on his palms.

“It’s official, bitches,” Leonardo said, his voice a little faster than usual. “We’re rich. We’re *fucking rich*.”

I helped Matteo up, letting out a long laugh. Right there, standing between the wrecks of our enemies’ vehicles, we high-fived one another. At last, the spoils of an armored truck were ours. How much did it contain? Five million? Six? Eight? It didn’t really matter. All that did matter, was that it was ours now. We wouldn’t be broke anymore. We had what we needed to get into the world that had been eluding us for years and years. And, most of all, we were all in one piece. None of us had been badly hurt. Except for some bruises along Matteo’s arms, we were just fine. Happy and praising each other on a job well done.

PIPER

“THREE DEAD IN ARMORED TRUCK HEIST OUTSIDE WESTCHESTER, NY”

The headline of that story was enough to draw my gaze.

What a tragedy. Three men had to lose their lives, so that someone else would get rich.

I could understand theft. Sometimes, I could even justify it. People in need can do desperate things to survive. I just couldn't understand or justify murder. To me, taking a life was a despicable crime. A crime that should be punished much more harshly than felonies like tax fraud or tax evasion. There was nothing final in those. Money was money—it could be replaced. A human being could just not be replaced...

Naturally, my mind went back to the trio that stormed into the hospital, not so long ago. Of all the people I knew, those guys were the most suitable to offer me a glimpse into the mindset of a criminal. Of course, I didn't have any proof of them actually committing a crime, but they had said so themselves. At least, one of them had:

“Cesare isn't your typical nice guy.”

Being so tight, I had to assume Matteo and Leo fit that description, too.

Seeing as he'd come down on me quite hard outside his friend's building, I had an idea.

Having a cup of coffee with him.

Nice and casual.

Not that his looks didn't deserve a date. Matteo was almost as tall as Cesare, with dark hair, brown eyes, a short beard and one hell of a strong jawline. Yet, I had already gone out with his friend. I wasn't going to pursue Cesare, but I had no intention of coming between them. Besides, I doubted Matteo would want to date me anytime in the future, either. His attitude the other day had convinced me of that. To him, I was just a nuisance. Some sort of pest that he had to stay away from.

I texted him that afternoon, hoping he wouldn't turn down my suggestion.

"Hey, Matteo. Piper here. Are you free for a cup of coffee tonight? Say six o'clock?"

"Talk about surprise. What do you want, Piper?"

"Nothing much. Just to ask you a few questions. It won't take long. I promise."

"Okay. There's a nice lounge café near my neighborhood. 'Jean Paul's.' You know where it is?"

"No, but I'll find it. See you later."

A sense of satisfaction was splashed onto my face.

This wouldn't be a typical get-together of a man and a woman, trying to get to know each other. I didn't view it like that. It was just an interesting way to spend my afternoon. No lingering glances. No staring at my breasts or my thighs—hopefully. Matteo would speak and I would listen. It sounded simple, and I hoped in my heart it would stay simple. That's all I wanted from him. To hear my questions and answer them. If not all, then, most of them.

Jean Paul's was indeed a lovely café.

Couches and lounges were spread across a spacious hall. Light fixtures were suspended from the ceiling, blue, green and red lights providing a relaxing illumination. A mixed scent of coffee and cinnamon rushing into my nostrils, I scanned the

café for Matteo. He was in the lower left corner, well away from the glass façade.

There was something different about him. I could tell that, the minute our eyes met across that beautiful hall. He had a funny smile on his face. It wasn't wide or sarcastic or anything of that sort, but it was there. And I would have found the reason behind it, had I known him just a little better.

"Welcome to Brooklyn," he said, gesturing me to the seat across from him.

"Thanks," I smiled back at him, leaving my purse on the table. "I didn't know Brooklyn had nice cafés like this one."

"You'll be surprised," he assured, a young waitress stopping beside me.

"That cappuccino sure smells delicious," I told her, putting a grin on her skinny face. "I'll have one. Thanks."

"Make it a double for me, Francesca," he requested, setting his arm on the armrest. "So, what is it you wanted to know?"

"So much," I uttered in a low voice, crossing my forearms over the table. "You looked a little funny when I walked in."

He shrugged his shoulders, his relaxed posture speaking volumes. "I'm just feeling good these days."

"Matteo, I, um..." I paused, contemplating how to phrase the rest of my sentence. "I've been wondering about the three of you. I mean, obviously, you're doing stuff that you'd rather keep under wraps, but aren't you scared?"

"Every minute, every day," he revealed, his tone unchanged. "That's why you wanted to meet with me? That's why you drove here all the way from Manhattan? To ask me if I'm scared?"

"That, too," I responded in a sharp manner. "Did you hear about that heist up in Westchester?"

"I read about it online," he said with a series of nods. "Gutsy operation."

“Gutsy?” I repeated his last word with a squint, somewhat surprised by the adjective he had used to describe it. “Three people got killed, and you call that gutsy?”

“Three *criminals*, sweetheart,” he corrected me. “I take it you read just the headline.”

“That’s right,” I admitted. “Criminals?”

“Yeah,” he insisted, leaning forward. “Two of them had been accused of trafficking and racketeering on multiple occasions. The driver was a known hothead. He’d done time for attempted murder. I don’t think anybody’s going to miss those three.”

“You sound like you condone this kind of activity,” I said, noticing how stiff his posture had become.

“Who cares what I think, Piper?” he asked, offering me a warm smile. “Those three are gone. Whoever wanted to steal from their bosses, got the job done and got rid of them, once and for all. Can I ask *you* something now?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the story between you and Cesare?”

Holy crap, I wasn’t prepared for this.

Not by a long shot.

I was prepared to ask all the questions, not have my back to the wall.

“Well, he’s *your* friend, isn’t he?” I attempted to answer with a question of my own. “Why don’t you ask *him*?”

“Because he’s way too private about his personal life,” he explained, his gaze still on mine. “He’s not going to tell me in a million years.”

“Then, I won’t tell you, either,” I said, taking my eyes off his face to look down at his bicep. Its bulge was stretching the sleeve of his red t-shirt. A thick vein was spanning the entire length of his arm, disappearing under that sleeve.

He gave a brief chuckle. “Guess what. You just did.”

Damn.

I shouldn't have allowed this. I should have come up with a lie. I wasn't a fan of those, but a lie would have prevented him from pressing the issue.

I was just about to burst out in anger. I wasn't expecting this from a grown man. Gossiping? For real? And who was he gossiping about? A man he was tight with. A man who considered him more than just a cousin.

I didn't.

He smiled, the waitress setting down two mugs of steamy-hot coffee. His long fingers surrounding his mug, he looked up at me, still wearing that wicked smile. It was a little like Cesare's. Only he wouldn't part his lips. Matteo's mouth was a bit bigger, and he offered me a glimpse of his pearly white teeth. The tip of his tongue peeping through the seam of his mouth, I tried to phrase a proper comeback.

"I don't understand the purpose of this question," I confessed, feeling red heat rise up my cheeks. "Why was it so important to you to find out if Cesare and I were a thing?"

"It wasn't," he said, stirring the coffee in his mug. "We were just making casual conversation. It's funny, though."

"What's that?"

"Why you're having this conversation with me, instead of him," he explained, putting some force in his voice. "I mean, clearly, you two had a moment. You should feel more comfortable around him. At least, comfortable enough to not hesitate to ask him those questions. We've only seen each other twice, and, let's face it, the second time didn't end so well. Unless..."

He ceased talking altogether, his gaze dropping down to my cleavage and rising back up to my eyes. His gaze dipped back down to my mouth, and then shot up to my left eye first, before settling on the right. My lips drawing his attention once more, he repeated the same thing. Sparks flew between us, our eyes locking in the soft illumination. A wave of heat roared through me. I stared down at his big bicep for a second time

that night, before my eyes rose back up to his face. I studied the hairs of his well-trimmed stubble just below his bottom lip. I could see some moisture across the length of that lip. As I did that, I sensed some moisture spreading through my core.

“Unless you wanted to have a moment with me, too,” he finished his little speech in a strong, masculine tone, leaning over towards me.

More waves of heat splashed around my existence. A naughty thought entered my mind, bringing a devilish smile to my face.

Rub my heel into his crotch under the table.

It would be hot.

It would turn him on for sure.

Also, no one would notice. The tablecloths were long enough to hide everything.

But I wasn't going to move a muscle. I wasn't going to do anything inappropriate. Not in there. Not in a public place like that.

“A lady never tells,” I said, the rasp in my voice unmistakable.

“Well, I'll be in the men's room if you change your mind.”

Oh, my god.

He was tempting me. Big time.

He had to have noticed my body language.

I breathed out, watching him leave his seat. He disappeared from my line of sight, leaving the ball in my court. What the hell was he doing to me? Trying to make me decide between leaving and joining him in the men's room?

I tapped my heel on the floor, resting my chin in my palm.

Just one kiss...

The same voice echoed through my head. It didn't help me do the right thing, which was to run out of there. On the contrary, it planted that idea into my brain.

Was a single kiss going to hurt anyone?

No.

It would just make me feel good.

Feminine.

Wanted by a smoking-hot man like him.

I put my hands on the table and arose to my stature, my heart starting to pound in my chest. I walked down the hall, promising to myself that I wouldn't let this spiral out of control. I wasn't the kind of woman who surrendered to men in public restrooms. That wasn't my idea of sexy or fun.

An aging guy strolling out of the men's room, I looked back over my shoulder. Matteo had cleared the hall and was just feet away behind me. I stepped in and pushed the nearest stall door open and turned around to face him. His sheer size and my figure took up all the available room. I felt the back of my knees hitting the toilet as he cupped my hips. In a decisive move, he spun me to the right and my back hit the wall with force. I lifted my legs up to the toilet seat lid, my heels scratching its surface.

Our mouths crashing into one another, I threw my arms around his shoulders and dangled them over his back. His strong body rubbing into mine, he trapped me between himself and the wall. His lips moved down to my jaw and bit my skin for a fleeting moment, before he ran his hands down my body.

One moment, they were clutching my back thighs. The next, they were gripping my outer thighs and making their way up to my ass. I tilted my head back, his fury taking me by complete surprise. Up until then, I thought his approach would be slow and gentle. I was badly mistaken. He squeezed my cheeks over my skirt, his index finger brushing the top of the zipper. Long exhales were escaping me as he nipped at my chin. I took my arm off of him and put my fingers over my mouth.

Just as well.

A couple of seconds later, came a sound that should have made him stop.

The men's room door, clicking open and shut.

It had absolutely no effect on him.

“Yeah,” I whispered, feeling his hot breath on my neck.
“That’s it. Keep going.”

“Fuck!” My eyes snapped open at his growl. Just like that, he had pulled back, his reddened eyes looking at me with regret.
“What the fuck are we doing here? I’m going to break the code because of you?! I can’t break the code!”

“What code?” I asked, my voice a little more than a whisper.

He heaved a long sigh and palmed his forehead. “Men’s code. I can’t do that to Cesare. I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“Matteo...”

Only a fool would have believed he wouldn’t walk out.

And I was that fool, because I called out his name twice, with no results.

Matteo punched the stall door away and stepped outside, leaving me alone, turned on and confused. He was well-aware of what we were going to do. He hadn’t rejected the idea. In fact, he loved that idea, since he had followed me to the ladies’ room. With my heart racing, I straightened out my skirt and my blouse. I didn’t want anyone to suspect what I had been doing, especially after being dumped by Matteo...

MATTEO

CESARE'S TEXT TESTED MY PATIENCE THAT MORNING.

We're in Brooklyn Bridge Park, putting together our crew. You're the arms expert. A candidate for that job will be here in about an hour. You should be here to see if he fits the bill.

Who gives a shit? This was my initial possible response. My thumbs over the screen of my cell phone, I did consider telling him to get lost.

I wasn't in the mood.

No. Scratch that.

I was too pissed to do much else, other than look at myself in the mirror and call me names.

What the fuck was I thinking?

Why had I let that nurse lure me to the ladies' room?

The good thing was that I had an answer to the first question.

I wasn't thinking. Not really.

Not with my head anyway.

I had allowed the little guy in my pants to take over. In other words, I had kicked out reason and allowed lust to take charge.

Recipe for disaster.

A guaranteed way to get in trouble with Cesare.

Of course, I knew what was going to follow after that. My cousin would never forgive me if I laid a hand on Piper. He

might have kept this secret from me, but I had reached the truth. She had tried to hide this, but she had given herself away. Leonardo wouldn't be so pleased with me, either. If I did that with one of Cesare's girlfriends, he'd suspect I would do that with one of his, too. I wouldn't blame him. He'd have every right to believe that I would double-cross him, just like I had done to Cesare.

Throughout the night, I wracked my brain to find out why I had done such a thing.

An obvious explanation was looks.

Smoldering-hot looks, to be exact.

Damn, that Piper girl was a sight for sore eyes.

Those curves would even make monks stare at them. That perfect, hourglass figure looked like it had been sculpted by the finest sculptor in the whole world.

Yet, I didn't think this was the only factor in play.

When she texted me with the suggestion to meet up, I suspected that she and Cesare were a thing of the past. Yes, they had been fooling around. She hadn't bothered denying that. However, they were not dating. If that had been true, there was no way she would call me, willing to have that so-called casual conversation. I respected the fact that she had questions, but I wasn't the one she should have gone to, to get answers. That guy was in Brooklyn Bridge Park that morning, waiting for me to turn up.

Sadly, this was a joke of an excuse.

It didn't matter whether a friend had been seeing a woman, or they had ended things with her ten years ago. An ex was always an ex. She was considered nuclear territory. A person you should stay away from at all costs. She made a pass at you? Shut up and walk away. She invited you over and tried to seduce you? Keep your hands to yourself and get the hell out. That's what the whole "nuclear territory" was all about. And I hadn't respected that rule. Instead of those two words, I read "free access to anyone interested."

Fuck...

Despite all that, I had to admit Cesare and Leonardo needed me that morning. They could fire a rifle and a gun, but they had no idea about small details. Those included country of origin, manufacturing quality and materials used in the making of those weapons. Not showing up at this meeting would be like me asking for an argument. And it wouldn't be just Cesare I'd be having an argument with. Leonardo would be mad at me as well. Letting both of them hang out to dry was going to give me yet another headache. After kissing Piper in the ladies' room of that café, god knew I didn't need more problems than I already had.

Brooklyn Bridge Park was basking in glorious sunshine that day. There wasn't a single cloud in the New York sky. There was a smell of freshness in the air, mixed with the scent of freshly cut lawn. The trees that bordered the park were providing thick shade to lucky visitors. A huge lawn spreading out before me, I spotted Cesare, Leonardo standing beside a bench. A rather skinny guy was sitting on that bench, resting his elbows on his thighs.

"There you are," Cesare said, acknowledging me with a nod. "I thought you'd forgotten where the park was."

"Meet Felix," Leonardo interjected, gesturing to the stranger. At that, he got up and offered me his hand for a handshake. "Felix, this is Matteo. He's the one you're going to have to impress."

"Pleasure," Felix said with a slight sneer smile. "Felix. You should know I'm a former infantryman. I did a couple of tours in Iraq, before I decided it wasn't for me."

"Sounds like me and college," Cesare joked, giving me an elbow jab. "Only I just lasted six months. How long did you serve?"

"Four years, give or take," Felix replied. "I know all there is to know about rifles and handguns."

I pulled Cesare aside and whispered in his ear. "Where did you find this guy?"

“He comes highly recommended,” he declared, looking me in the eye. “Leonardo and I were talking to some gangbangers last night. When his name came up, they all said he knew his shit.”

“So, he’s going to be the first new member of our crew?” I asked, throwing a quick, sideways glance at him. Man, the dude was short. I was sure I was at least eight inches taller than him.

“No.” His response was sharp. “Leonardo and I are vetting four more men. You know we need more muscle.”

“I do,” I admitted, before turning my attention back to Felix. “Here’s a quiz for you, kid. Let’s say you’re caught in a firefight. It’s a rainy day, and your M-16 falls in a puddle of water on the street. It’s your only weapon. What do you do? Do you pick it back up and open fire? Or do you run for your life?”

Felix snorted in amusement and shook his head a few times, his gaze dropping to the lawn between his feet. “Well,” he paused and lifted his gaze back to mine. “I’d have to say neither. The M-16 wasn’t designed to operate in extreme conditions, like excessive humidity. You try to pull the trigger on a wet M-16? It’s going to jam—that’s for sure. I wouldn’t run, because my enemies would probably get me. I’d try to create a diversion, so I could slip past those bastards unnoticed.”

“Good answer,” I commented, eyeing Cesare and Leonardo. “Did you talk money yet?”

“Yeah,” Cesare said, folding his arms across his chest. “He’s getting fifty grand per shipment. Are you okay with that?”

“I am,” I told him, more questions popping in my head. “Do we have a fix on our first shipment yet?”

“Our guy from the port authority says there’s one coming in from China tomorrow night,” he informed. “He wanted me to give him the money to bribe the cops, so they’ll look the other way. I told him to go fuck himself. Leonardo’s in charge of that.”

“Listen up,” I addressed Felix in a louder voice, standing just inches from him. “Once we’ve secured those guns, you and I are on quality check. This is going to be a test. You fuck it up? You’re out. Am I getting through to you?”

“Yep,” he nodded. “Quality check. I hear you.”

For all his confidence, I wasn’t going to be convinced.

Not like this.

He did have credentials. He had been abroad, getting shot at by enemy combatants, but that didn’t make a weapons’ expert. He would have to prove that to me. I could forgive one mistake every now and then. A scratch on a handle was no big deal. His real test would have to do with telling apart genuine handguns from fake ones. Not many people knew the differences between those. For his sake, Felix had to know. Otherwise, I’d kick his ass out faster than he could say gun.

CESARE

THE DOCKS.

The one place we all knew we had to stake a claim to from day one.

At the very least, we needed a foothold.

I wasn't naïve. I knew several crews had been operating there, long before we turned up that night. They all wanted—and had—a piece of the action. Whether they'd been smuggling in drugs, weapons or exotic cars, they had been using the docks. So, outsiders wouldn't be welcome.

To that end, I had brought my entire crew there. We were eight, instead of three. More firepower meant that rival groups would think twice about opening fire. Facing eight armed men was much harder than facing three. Of course, this was just me and my theories. Reality could be a lot different. It was all a matter of power. Whoever wanted it, they had to go after it. The ones who had it, would not let go that easily.

In any case, I wasn't so worried about the outcome of that night's work.

The way I saw it, the hardest part was over. We had more than seven million in our disposal. It was plenty for us to get started. It was more than enough to buy at least three gun shipments at once. By selling those guns, we would make more and invest it again. That cycle would repeat itself and stuff our pockets with cash. This was the whole point of us sticking our necks out. This was why Matteo had decided to

go Cesare Bauer on the two thugs that were about to crush me and Leonardo to death.

Elizabeth III was one ugly ship.

Docked just twenty yards from my spot, I could make out plenty of nasty details about her. It had been years since that dark-blue paint on either side was applied. Sunlight and humidity had turned into a pale shade of gray. The red around the prow and its stern had turned into a light shade of brown. Just over its hull and near the middle, rust had been splashed across the metal.

But none of us was interested in that old pile of scrap.

It was its contents that had brought us there.

In particular, container four-three-five.

A forklift driver setting it down, the ground shook for a split second under the weight of that container. Putting the forklift in reverse, its wheels sent bits of gravel back and past my spot. I waited for him to disappear back in the cargo hold of Elizabeth III, my gaze on the huge, red box across from me.

“Matteo, do the honors,” I told my friend, a raindrop landing on the top of my head. More raindrops falling around us, he sat on his knees in front of the container. He gripped the bottom latch and yanked it up, its grinding noise overshadowing the distant sound of that forklift.

“Yeah, baby,” Matteo whistled at the view, before turning his head right to face Felix. “Get over here, man.”

“Details,” I said, somewhat annoyed by their silence.

“It’s all here,” Matteo announced, his back still to me. “Rifles, shotguns, pistols, revolvers and their ammo. Cesare,” he paused and looked back at me. “I’ll have to check the manifest, but it looks like the shipment’s full.”

At that point, our attention was drawn to a loud rumble from the west. All eight heads turned in the direction of two, black SUVs, their headlights cutting through the darkness of the docks.

“Cops?” I murmured to Leonardo next to me.

“No way. I paid them off this afternoon.”

“Hold your fire,” I ordered, raising my arm in the air. I walked off in the direction of those cars, wondering just who the hell we were dealing with. Those two Cherokees pulling up next to one another, the passenger in the front one stepped out. He was a 5’10” Latino in a black, sleeveless tee and gray pants, with a large tattoo of a tiger’s face on his right shoulder.

“Which one of you gringos is in charge here?” He asked, looking around at my men.

“I must have missed the part where you gave me your name,” I said, my slow footsteps closing the gaps between us.

“Big gringo with an attitude, huh?” He scowled, smiling over at his driver. “Oh, I’m shaking,” he added, his entire body trembling in fake fear. “You and your little bitches ought to get the fuck out of here, ese. This ain’t your turf.”

“Or else?”

At that, his expression got even more sullen than it was. He shifted his gaze over to the container, before starting off back to the SUV. He slammed the passenger door shut, the car next to his rolling forward. A man in a similar outfit popped through its sunroof and leaned his arm on the aluminum roof. My eyes went wide as I spotted the weapon in his grasp. It was a long tube with a scope in the middle.

“Down!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, flipping around as the stranger pressed his eye to that scope. I lunged forward, propelling myself through the air, the moment a faint click reached my ears. A flash tearing through the darkness, gasses shot out from the back of that rocket launcher. I fell to the deck, tiny pebbles sticking to my chin as a powerful blast echoed across the dock. A huge fireball shooting up into the sky, my ears picked up noises of metal slamming into the ground. I looked up, my chin brushing up against the collar of my shirt. Chunks of iron and aluminum were hovering several feet over what used to be a container. Towering flames in between them, they dropped to the ground, their clattering louder than the singeing of that container. Plumes of black smoke engulfing their shape, nasty stench flooded my

nostrils. Molten plastic, along with burning metal were permeating the air.

I pressed my palms to the deck and pushed myself up, those SUV's finishing a U-turn. The four new additions to our crew were well away from the scene. Those gutless bastards hadn't bothered ducking. They hadn't even bothered sticking around. I just caught a glimpse of them, before they disappeared between two, parked trucks. Leonardo was crawling towards the remains of that container. Matteo was closer, staring at the—still burning—shipment, trying to rise from the ground. Felix was to the left, his side to me. Lying down, clutching the right side of his ribcage as he howled in pain... I swallowed hard and cringed, noticing something between his fingers. A small chunk of metal was sticking out from the wound, its jagged edge covered in Felix's blood.

"Matteo, Leonardo," I said, my attention shifting back to my friends. "Are you guys all right? Are you hurt?"

"No, man," Matteo was the first to provide an answer. "I took a nasty hit on the head, but I'm okay."

"Me, too," Leonardo nodded, looking up at me from beside Felix. "He needs a hospital. *Now.*"

"I'll get the car," I told them, jogging off.

I couldn't believe this. For the second time in a month, one of us was fighting for his life. A member of our crew needed medical attention, otherwise he'd bleed out. I hardly knew Felix, but the last thing I wanted was for him to die on the docks. Shots of adrenaline rushing through my system, I hoped I would be quick enough. I hoped I hadn't gotten him killed by hiring him.

PIPER

A CONSTANT VIBRATION ON MY NIGHTSTAND PRIED ME OUT OF my sleep. My cell phone was moving across the wooden surface, getting closer to the bed, before pulling away. I reached over in the dark, my eyes remaining shut. My fingers making contact with the wood, they crawled across, until they nudged the plastic on the side of the phone. I cleared my throat and brought it up to my ear, my cheek pressed against the pillow.

“Hello?”

“Piper?” A female voice was on the other end of the line, two phones ringing in the background. That ring was much too familiar.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me—Kayla Marks from Presbyterian Hospital. Remember me?”

“Hey, Kayla,” I spoke in a groggy voice, sitting up. “It’s been a while. What’s wrong? Why did you call me so late?”

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you. Your brother was brought in about ten minutes ago. He’s been hurt pretty badly.”

Sleep made my mind foggy. “Colby?”

There was a pause. “It says here his name is Felix.”

I didn’t know whether to be relieved or to cry as I remembered that Colby was already gone. That at least meant he could never be hurt again. But Felix... now that was another story.

My stepbrother and I hadn't spoken in years, and we'd never been close, even as kids. The proof was right there in the way I referred to him. He'd always felt like a stepbrother, while Colby had always felt like a biological brother, even though he wasn't.

"What happened to him? Where is he hurt?"

"That's all I can disclose over the phone, dear. You know the rules. If you want more information, you're going to have to come down here."

"Yeah," I exhaled, cupping my forehead. "Thanks for calling me up, Kayla."

"No problem."

Scooting closer to the edge of my bed, I couldn't help but wonder.

What did you get yourself into, Felix?

My brother had never liked to play by the rules. He loved to break them, no matter their importance. After having been fired from about a million jobs, he tried his luck in the army. Personally, I didn't think he'd fit in, although my mother was a big fan of his choice. There was a chain of command in the army. A certain structure in place, which had to be respected by everybody, regardless of their rank. Sometime later, Felix returned home with his tail between his legs, claiming he had been wronged. Of course, a conversation with his superior told a different story.

He showed complete disregard to rank.

He and some of his fellow troopers had turned the barracks into a gambling house.

As for the icing on the cake? He had picked a fight with his squad leader.

That would be all she wrote. Not only had he lost the only job that guaranteed he'd never starve, but he had tried to convince me that it wasn't his fault. I had been sick and tired of hearing the same words come out of his mouth.

"Can I borrow some money?"

“I swear; this is the last time!”

“I’ve got something big in the works. Pretty soon, you won’t have to worry about me.”

Yeah, yeah...

We lost touch. I wasn’t proud of it, but there was nothing I could have done about it, either. My own blood had been too selfish to realize that I didn’t owe him a living. I wouldn’t always be there to save him from himself. He had to become his own man. Not depend on his little sister all the time...

More than an hour later, I was crossing the gate of Presbyterian Hospital, drowning in anger and fear. The few, unfamiliar faces around the reception desk didn’t appease me. I spotted the red emergency sign on a chart on the wall and rushed down the stairs. The wait for the elevator would feel like an eternity. In my haste, I didn’t even see a doctor coming the other way. My elbow bumping into his dossier, I knocked it out of his grasp, papers flying past the steps as that dossier tumbled to the floor.

Cool air from the air-conditioning hitting my skin, I looked around me. The “Emergency” sign was overhead, at the beginning of a somewhat narrow hall. Well down that hall, Kayla was heading in my direction. I might have not seen her in quite some time, but that girl hadn’t changed much. Her red hair and those freckles under her eyes, helped her stand out.

“Kayla,” I said, unable to keep the concern from my voice anymore.

“Hey,” she greeted me with a wave, my quick footsteps resounding across the basement. “Boy, you got here fast.”

“Tell me,” I said and paused to catch my breath. “Tell me more about Felix.”

“Well, as I was saying to his buddies back there, he’s lost quite a lot of blood,” she revealed, using her thumb to point behind her. I craned my neck and looked over her, my pulse rising more and more. Indeed, three, big figures were straight ahead, talking to one another. Hands in their pockets, they were putting distance between me and them. “He’s still in surgery.

He needed a double transfusion. I'm not sure if he needs another one, but I wouldn't rule it out. It's a little too soon to tell."

"Transfusion? Double?" I repeated her words, fear making my heart race harder.

"Yeah, he, um..." She faltered, dipping her gaze to the floor before looking back up at me. "He had a piece of aluminum lodged in his gut. I don't know any specifics, girl. You'll have to ask his pals about those."

"I see. Thank you, Kayla," I spoke, offering her a glance of appreciation. I passed her by, wondering just how that piece of aluminum had ended up in my brother's stomach.

I wasn't going to wait for that surgery to be over. And I wasn't going to wait for Felix's so-called "friends" to walk up to me and disclose whatever had transpired that night.

No way.

I kept my attention on them, willing to find out every single detail of my brother's injury. But a few paces afterwards, a certain view fed my anger.

A leather jacket. Or, rather, the back of a leather jacket.

A patch of a panther, looking back with its menacing, yellow eyes.

I had seen it before.

In a hospital.

Just not the Presbyterian.

It was on the night of Leo's injury. I had seen it on his friend's back.

Standing between Leo and Matteo, Cesare was oblivious to my presence, just like the other two misfits.

"You!" I said, my eyes darkening with anger as I got within five feet from them.

Cesare flipped around at my voice, the other two following suit in a second.

“Piper?” He squinted down at me. “What are you doing here? I thought you worked at the Metropolitan.”

“I do, you idiots.” My gaze settled on his. “Am I in scrubs? No. The guy you brought in? He’s my brother.”

“Whoa!” Leo exclaimed, Cesare and Matteo staring at each other, their faces loosening in disbelief. “Seriously? Felix’s your brother?”

“Shit,” Matteo muttered.

“That’s right,” I confirmed with a stiff nod. “Now, I want you to tell me *exactly* how my brother ended up fighting for his life. And don’t leave anything out.”

My little speech could have well been a bomb. It had the exact same effect as one. Those three somehow swallowed their tongues, preferring to either glance at each other or focus on the floor. As if my brother’s life hadn’t been hanging in the balance, they had decided to keep me in the dark, too. What a bunch of losers. None of them had the decency to let me know what had gone down that night. They had chosen silence over coming clean. I guessed the truth was too much for them to bear.

“Oh, my god,” I spoke through gritted teeth, struggling to wrap my head around their attitude. “So, no one’s got the guts to give me something? Anything?”

I had been hoping that my insult would yield some results. I didn’t know about Leonardo yet, but Matteo and Cesare’s egos were bigger than monster trucks. Again, though, my hopes were disproved. Matteo gnawed on his bottom lip, while Cesare and Leo selected to stroll away from my spot.

“Your brother’s a big boy, Piper,” Matteo spoke out, still avoiding making eye contact with me. “He knew what he signed up for. I know we should have asked him his last name, but still, you can’t blame us for this mess.”

“Shut up!” I shouted, turning quite a few heads. “How the hell do I know?” I lowered my voice. “The way I see it, if he hadn’t met you, he wouldn’t be in that OR. Know this, you sons of bitches. If he doesn’t make it, I’m holding you

personally responsible. I'm sure the cops would just *love* to hear what you have to say about tonight."

I spun around at the end of my sentence, something else coming to mind.

"I'll be at the chapel, praying for Felix. If any of you grow some balls, come talk to me."

I strode off, wishing I could just disappear from that waiting room in the blink of an eye. I couldn't stand being around those gutless bastards. They had put Colby's baby brother in harm's way, and none of them had the courage to disclose what had come so close to killing him. Tough guys my ass... A man's strength wasn't in his muscles. It was in his heart. For all their posturing, those three were acting like they didn't have one.

LEONARDO

TOUGH WORDS.

Real tough.

Coming from a nurse, too.

If I had one reason to admire Piper before, I had two now.

It wasn't every day that I got to meet a woman who didn't take any shit from anybody. Matteo and Cesare wouldn't admit this, but I couldn't hide this from myself. Keeping the truth from Felix's sister was just that. Giving Piper shit. Sure, we had to protect ourselves. We had to keep whatever we had been up to secret, but she wasn't wearing a badge, was she? She wouldn't go to the cops, either. She proved that on the night I got shot. So, not telling her what had gone down at the docks was one hundred-percent wrong. And, even knowing those two wouldn't approve, I decided to head up to that chapel and have a conversation with Piper.

A real conversation.

Not a joke like the one we'd had earlier.

I left the busy hall behind me, a large crucifix against the far wall meeting my gaze. On its left, there was a picture of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. Two rows of pews were stretching across the chapel, a small chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Two candlesticks were in front of either row, Piper sitting down on the first pew. I stepped into the flickering candlelight, watching my shadow on the hardwood floor.

“If you’re not here to come clean, you might as well leave,” she said, staring down at her interlocked fingers.

“Actually, that’s *just* what I wanted to do,” I said, my voice steady. “We tried to buy some guns but got caught in a turf war. There was an explosion. Felix just happened to be closest to it. It could have been either one of us.”

“An explosion,” she muttered, her eyes shut as she shook her head. “Dear god.”

“Look, I don’t mean to pour salt into the wound or anything, but your brother’s a big boy,” I pointed out. “He knew what he signed up for; he knew the dangers. No one forced him into anything.”

“You should have asked him his last name, Leonardo,” she suggested, scratching her cheek. “If you’d known, you wouldn’t have hired him. I hope.”

“I know, but...” I paused for a moment or two. “Would that have made a difference? I mean, we needed a trustworthy weapons’ expert, and Felix was in the army. Some street guys vouched for him, and voila. We hired him.”

“I wouldn’t have Okayed that,” she went on, turning her head left to face me. “I would have told you to find someone else.”

“Nope. That wouldn’t have happened,” I told her, my confidence bringing about her next question.

“How can you be so sure?” she asked with a squint.

“Because Felix was broke,” I explained, remembering what we had heard about him out on the street. “The people we talked to were positive. He’d been living on scraps for weeks. I thought you’d know all that, being his sister and all.”

She let out a long sigh, taking her eyes off of me to look into the void. “We’ve been estranged ever since he got discharged from the army. Felix’s been bouncing from job to job throughout his entire adult life. I got tired of the same old excuses.”

I was just about to give her a comeback, when my cell phone buzzed in my pocket. The caller ID showed that it was Cesare.

“Yeah?”

“Where are you? Felix just woke up.”

“I’m with Piper in the chapel. I’ll be right down.”

“Save it. He wants to see Piper. He won’t talk to anyone else until he has a word with her. Tell her, will you?”

“Sure.”

“Felix’s awake,” I announced, setting the phone down on my thigh. “He’s asking for you.”

“I guess I’d better go, then,” she said, getting up from her seat. “Thanks for this, Leonardo.”

“When you’re done, I want to have a drink with you,” I added, my voice a bit stronger. “I could use some booze. I know you could use some, too.”

“I don’t know,” she replied, her cold expression not giving me much to hope for. “Maybe some other time, but thanks for the offer.”

Quick and painful.

That’s what this was.

She let me down fast and hard.

I wasn’t aiming to get in her pants. Not that night anyway. I just wanted to get some alcohol in my system to relax. It was almost 2am, and it had been one, fucking long night. Both of us were exhausted. More than that, she hated my guts. Maybe she hated me a little less than Matteo and Cesare, but I could make no mistake. Piper’s name wasn’t really on my list of fans. Not after what happened with her brother.

PIPER

I HAD TO ADMIT LEO'S VISIT WAS A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

I wasn't expecting this from a man who had completely ignored me just minutes ago. Also, his demeanor was nothing like Cesare had described. He was perfectly respectful to me and his surroundings. He didn't raise his voice even once, not to mention he didn't use foul language.

Perhaps I had earned some of that. I hadn't been nice to him or his buddies. My anger had led me to insult them and call them names. I had been mad at them for good reason, but that didn't justify name-calling. Despite this, however, Leo had exhibited a cool head. He could have easily snapped at me, but he had done no such thing. Instead, he chose to disclose the circumstances under which Felix got wounded. To my disappointment, knowing didn't change a thing. My stepbrother had screwed up once again in his life. He had mixed with the wrong people. I was curious to hear who he would blame this time. I didn't think he would accept any responsibility. Not Felix...

I walked into his hospital room after another, short chat with Kayla. According to her, he was stable. He had lost quite a lot of blood, but the transfusions had resolved the issue. He would have to stay in at least another twenty-four hours so the doctors could monitor his condition.

I should have been feeling relieved. I should have been happy. My brother had survived, right? He had looked at death in the eye and had lived to tell the tale.

Still, no sense of relief came over me. Happiness? No.

Because I knew Felix.

Sooner or later, he would be back out there, doing the same, crazy crap. It wouldn't matter who he did it for. It could have been the trio or not. The bottom line was that he would try to make some easy money again.

A large bandage was wrapped across his abdomen, disappearing under his back. Portions of his hair had been singed, while the left side of his face was covered in soot.

"Well, well, well," he sneered, making me pause by the foot of his bed in surprise. "Look who it is. My little sister. Not."

"Excuse me?" I said, my voice high-pitched. "Didn't *you* ask for me?"

"I did when I heard you were right outside," he answered, his ironic smile staying on. "Look at me, Piper. Look what you did. And think about what could have happened if those guys I work for hadn't brought me in quickly enough."

"What *I* did?" I asked, pointing at myself. "Did *I* send you out there tonight? Did *I* try to blow you up? No, you stupid moron! *You* did all that! So, don't try to pin this on me!"

"I wouldn't have had to stick my neck out if you'd been there for me!" He yelled, slamming his palms into the sheets. "Don't you get that?"

"Go to hell, Felix." I shook my head in disgust. "I shouldn't have come here in the first place. Next time you screw up, don't expect me to be there."

I didn't give him a chance to verbalize.

I knew this conversation—if one could even call it that—was over.

I flipped around and headed back out, regretting my decision to be there for that ungrateful jerk. I had been a fool to think that my presence would be appreciated. Felix was not going to change. He'd keep on being the same, reckless idiot. It was a shame really. He had the potential of becoming something

better than what he was. A failure. Not to me, but to himself. He was the one he'd been letting down all these years...

In the front yard of the hospital, I located an empty bench near the gate and sat down, with tears welling up in my eyes.

I was in shock and disbelief.

That joke of a brother had blamed me for his predicament for the hundredth time.

I knew I shouldn't have been shocked. Felix just loved to put the blame on other people. No one else was making his life choices but him. I wasn't aware of what he had been up to for the past eight months or so. Hell, I didn't even have his new address.

Tears rolling down my cheeks, I sniffled and leaned back, a gust of wind tossing about pebbles and dry leaves alike. The wind rustled through the trees behind me, bringing their delightful scent to my nostrils. It was too bad I couldn't enjoy a single whiff of that smell.

"Talk about shitty."

A male voice interrupted my sobs. More melodic than Cesare or Matteo's, but with an unmistakable masculinity I could recognize with ease. It was Leo. Standing just a few feet from the bench, he had his hands in his pockets. The light from a spotlight behind him was silhouetting him against the dark, making his brown hair look a shade lighter.

"It's that obvious, huh?" I said, my voice riddled with sorrow.

"You know what they say," he assumed a gentle tone, seating himself beside me. "Talk with family for two minutes, and they can fuck you up for two years."

I snorted in half-amusement, half-bitterness. "I think the whole conversation lasted less than that."

"So, the first part ain't true, but the second is?" He posed a question, his eyes glinting with mischief.

I chuckled, sniffing back some more tears. "Yeah. You could say that."

“Lucky me, then,” he concluded, lying back on the bench. “I don’t have any siblings. Except a lunatic and a geek.”

I laughed out again. “Which one is which?”

“Matteo’s the geek. Cesare’s the lunatic,” he said, resting his elbows on the bench. “Cesare went to college for a full six months. Matteo calls him pedantic, whatever that means. I just call him anal. It suits him better. Matteo’s just crazy about all things that go ‘boom’ or ‘bang.’ That’s where your brother came in. He needed someone to check on technical stuff that Cesare and I know dick about.”

“I understand,” I nodded, beginning to feel just a tad lighter. “Listen, I’m sorry about all the nasty things I said back there. I was...”

“Pissed off?” He attempted to finish my sentence. “It showed. I’d be pissed, too, if my brother was lying in a hospital bed with a piece of metal stuck in his gut. Just one question, though. He’s going to walk out of here pretty soon, so, why are you so upset?”

“Because he blames me for what happened to him,” I responded, running my fingers through my hair. “Typical Felix. He’s *never* to blame. Everyone else is, including me.”

“That sucks,” he commented, pursing his lips. “He should own up to his screw-ups. Although, tonight wasn’t really his fault. He just happened to be in the wrong place, with the wrong crew.”

“I could talk about his failures for hours,” I said, my voice weakening. “But I’m not going to do that, because it’s not who I am. Let’s say he could have done more with his life. Anyway...” I paused and leaned over sideways towards him. “Thanks again.”

“What the hell for?” He chuckled, rolling his shoulders. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did,” I disagreed, looking up into his green eyes. I could see a tiny reflection of the light in their middle, his smile sending warmth into my heart. “You made me laugh. When I

walked out of Felix's room, I needed to laugh more than I needed my next breath."

I reached up and stroked his cheek, his stubble brushing into my skin. It was funny, but it was much softer than I thought it would be. His mouth just half-an-inch from mine, I remembered who had been responsible for me being out there. Another, happier reminder then flashed into my mind. He was there when I needed him. He never abused me verbally, even though he had good reason to do so. I had given him that reason—I couldn't escape that fact. Our lips joined in a tender kiss, his arm curling around my shoulders. He held me closer, his scent enveloping my entire existence. A sense of safety was thrown around me, like some sort of invisible net. I exhaled into his mouth, his gentle caress over my shoulder deepening that lovely sense. The tip of his nose nudging the middle of my forehead, I felt my whole body relaxing. I was like a puddle of goo, spread over that bench. I clutched his cheek and eased back out of his embrace, his eyes coming back into view.

"Goodnight, Leo," I whispered, a small smile forming on my face.

"Goodnight."

I moved away from him, the taste of his kiss strong in my mouth.

So comforting.

So sweet.

And so necessary.

Not in a sexual way. The last thing on my mind after that crazy night was getting intimate with anybody. That small dose of intimacy was just enough to take the edge off of me. Felix had gotten on my nerves as usual, and Leo was there to help me find some peace. He didn't know it, but, to me, this was more important than getting drunk. Because that's what I would have if the two of us had gone out: Drink my ass off, in order to forget my brother's pathetic attitude.

MATTEO

SO MUCH MONEY TO SPEND.

Millions and millions of dollars.

But nothing to spend it on.

The irony painted an awkward smile on my face.

I looked at the tall stacks of wads in my storage room, recalling what we had been through to get them. We had suffered a lot for that cash. Just when we all believed we would put it in our first endeavor, we nearly lost Felix, which was another blow to our confidence.

We were all stunned. None of us would go ahead and say it out loud, but our long silence during the first few hours after the event was quite clear. Whenever one of us did say something, it was about Felix's condition. Not once did we bring up the deal that went south. It all changed when Piper paid a visit to her brother. That's when we all mentioned that we should have noticed his last name. And that was also the moment when we realized that we had accomplished nothing. The guns we were supposed to buy had gone up in flames. Worse still, if we wanted to buy another shipment, we would have to meet up with the people who considered the docks their turf. We just couldn't go back there, thinking things would go smoothly. We had to come to an understanding with whoever was running the show. It wouldn't come cheap—we all knew that. Yet, it would be preferable to one or more of us getting shot or even killed.

The following night, I texted Cesare and Leonardo, asking them to meet me at “Amanda’s.” I wished the venue was different. I wished it was some big, nice bar in downtown Manhattan. For that to happen, though, we’d all have to be in a good mood. We’d all mean to celebrate, and none of us wanted to party up all night. As far as I was concerned, we needed a small, relatively quiet place to enjoy a few drinks and go over our mistakes. That way, we would avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

I sat at the table in the corner of the hall, Emilio Clapton’s “Layla” playing from the speakers. I shook my head to its rhythm, humming its lyrics, drops of moisture rolling down my beer bottle. My fingers firmly around it, Cesare and Leonardo walked in. As one would expect, they both had disappointment written all over their faces. More often than not, they liked to visit Amanda’s. They would head over to my spot in a bit of a hurry. Well, *not* this time. They dragged their boots across the floor, their expressions grim as a waitress followed right behind them. I just had to wave her away. Those two were dying to get things off their chest...

“You don’t have to look so cheerful, boys,” I told them. “I mean, we only screwed up *one job*.”

“One of these days, I’m going to hurt your sorry ass,” Leonardo snapped, sitting down across from me. “Where did you...?”

“Relax, Leonardo,” Cesare interrupted him. “He’s just trying to lighten up the atmosphere. It’s what he does. You should have known that by now.”

“Really?!” Leonardo squinted, his voice dropping down an octave. “So, I should just laugh? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah, you idiot,” I said, my tone calm. “Okay; we didn’t get to buy those guns, but we could have been blown to pieces. We were not. We dodged the bullet. Or rather, the rocket. Speaking of which, how’s Felix? Did he get discharged yet?”

“Just this morning,” Cesare said, waving that waitress back to our table.

We ordered some drinks, Leonardo's anger not troubling me one bit. He wasn't exactly famous for his cool head. I could—and would—handle it. What did worry me was the near future. We were planning a move into a world we were eager to get into, but it had been surprising us every step of the way. Even a fool could see the facts, and I was no fool. We hadn't been prepared for this. We had been anticipating some hurdles along the way, but none of us was ready for what we had encountered so far. None of us had anticipated the various setbacks that could even have killed us. They didn't, but I could make no mistake. They had put something dreadful in all of us.

Doubt...

Was this too hard?

Was it too dangerous?

Reckless, even?

I didn't want to believe any of the above.

"I don't think he's coming back," Cesare continued, his vodka loosely in his grip. "He mumbled something about..."

I was interested in hearing everything he had to say. Felix was important to our crew. But the view from down the hall kept me deaf to the rest of my cousin's sentence. One by one, three men entered Amanda's, looking left and right. With rifles in their grasp, they fixed their gaze on me. They lifted them up to their chests, their weapons' stocks pressed into their shirts. Shock widening my eyes, I thrust my arms forward. I grabbed Cesare and Leonardo by the collar of their shirts and yanked them down and leaned forward.

Screams starting to fill the hall, I ducked under the table, my forehead grazing its corner. I crouched to fit my big frame, Cesare's right hand coming into view. Using his left one to cock his gun, I reached down to my waist for my own. I pulled it out of my belt and took a deep breath, bullet crackles torturing my ears. I jerked back and looked over the edge of that table. Those three were getting closer. At about ten yards away, in the faint illumination, they were nearing the pool

table. Fire spewing from their rifles, their fire was shattering glasses and bottles all around us. One of their bullets hitting Leonardo's beer bottle, chunks of glass were ejected across. A larger one missed my cheek by a hair, my gut reaction was to duck back down.

No.

Hell, no.

I wasn't going to die hiding.

I was going to go standing on my feet. Not crouching under a table like a terrified kid.

I threw one last glance at Cesare and Leonardo. Their sides against their chairs, they were peeking over their top, their guns pointing up at the ceiling. Cesare threw his arm forward, before his weapon hurled four bullets in quick succession. He yanked his arm back and stole a glance at me.

That emotion in his eyes...

That fear dictated my next move.

I gripped the side of the table and knocked it over. Rolling away from my spot, it came to a halt with its top facing our wannabe killers. I dropped to the deck, a bullet getting lodged into the leg of the couch I'd been sitting on when those three barged in. I bent both elbows and crawled forward, before looking up at those three. Two of them were side by side on the right of the pool table. Their partner was closer, his gaze on Leonardo. That huge figure and his clean-shaven face were too familiar for me to make a mistake. This was Rocco DeLuca, the so-called head of Owens-Roselli's security...

I raised my arm over the edge of the table and rested my wrist on the wood, knowing I was just seconds away from taking him out.

Yet, just as he crushed some chunks of glass under his shoe, I felt I was having a déjà vu.

A tremendous blast rocked the bar to its foundations. Light fixtures, tables and even the pool table were blasted away and into the far wall as a fireball roared across the hall. My body

was picked up like it was a leaf. Caught in the shockwave, I was blown several feet to the right. My left arm smashed down into the floor, and I rolled across glass and chunks of wood alike. One of those splinters was lodged into the palm of my hand, a loud buzz rising in my ears. I wound up lying on my back, moans of agony lacing the atmosphere. I could hear some behind me, my eyes on Cesare and Leonardo. Cesare had tumbled to his chest, a large cut across his forehead. Leonardo was on his side, his head thrown back as he clutched his knee. His beige shirt had large chunks of fabric missing from it, while his forearms were completely bare. Blood was dripping down his right one, having reached his wrist.

I looked down at myself, only to find that my pants had been ripped to shreds as well. There was also a large hole in my red shirt, right over the stomach. Feeling moisture on my thigh, I spotted cuts in my flesh. My blood had soaked what remained of my pants and was dripping on the floor.

“Get the fuck out...”

My ears picked up a faint, yet clear, male voice. Whizzing and gasps made me look back. Those three emerged from the smoke, staggering. Stepping on broken glass and wood, they moved away. The little light coming through the hole in the wall, didn't help me make out much. I pressed my forearm to my nose to shield myself from the smoke, noticing a figure on all fours crawl through that hole. Bits of his ripped, grayish jacket hanging over either side of his back, I identified him. Rocco DeLuca... Letting out a cry of pain, he disappeared in the dark. With his comrades following suit, I headed towards Leonardo. By then, he had rolled on his back, his mouth wide open to release all the agony that had been plaguing him.

CESARE

GOD DAMN IT...

Searing pain in my legs and my gut.

A spinning head, a badly bruised face and enough lacerations to make me think I'd been in a fight with a mountain lion.

Matteo wasn't much better off. He had a bloody nose, some serious cuts along his arms, a bruised collarbone and some nasty burn marks over both knees.

Leonardo was in even worse shape. He could hardly walk. He limped his way out of that mangled bar, all the while complaining about the pain in his thighs.

The worst came when I started the motor of my Torino. And it wasn't my blurry vision or the insane dizziness.

It was treatment for all those wounds.

We just couldn't get any.

Back when we had first tried to rob that armored truck, there had been no witnesses. Nobody had seen what had gone down on that empty street. It was easy for us to hide the incident from the cops.

That night was nothing like that.

There had been at least three or four dozen people in Amanda's. All of them saw those gunmen. They were right there before all hell broke loose. Heading to a nearby hospital would automatically place us at the scene. The cops would roll in, flashing badges and demanding to know more. Even if one

of those witnesses didn't identify us, our wounds and those burn marks would speak for themselves. We wouldn't be arrested, but getting the NYPD off our backs would be tough.

More than that, the Metropolitan was out of the question. At fifteen miles away from Brooklyn, it was too far for me to consider it as an option. We'd have Piper's help down there, but, this time, I doubted I could do much to talk the staff out of notifying the cops. In other words, we'd have the exact same problem as we would if we went to a hospital in Brooklyn.

There was just one thing left for us to do.

Get to Matteo's apartment building and patch ourselves up. We didn't know if we had sustained anything worse than cuts and bruises, but this was a risk we just had to take.

It took a lot of effort on my part to bring some sheets from Matteo's bedroom and spread them over his double couch. He and I took that up, while Leonardo had to make do with a sleeping bag. Laying it down on the floor, he sat in it and brought his knees to his chest, pulling out Kleenexes from a box. With Matteo wiping dirt and blood off his knees, I popped a painkiller. I applied a band-aid on a long cut over my elbow, the wailing of sirens making all of us look at Matteo's balcony door.

"What the fuck happened back there, man?" Leonardo's voice shattered the silence. "Who were those guys?"

"DeLuca and his crew," Matteo was quick to respond. "I recognized him immediately."

"DeLuca?!" I said, surprise pitching my voice higher. "Why would he...?"

"Oh, come on, Cesare. Don't act so surprised," Matteo interrupted. "This was payback for robbing their truck. They knew it was us; we'd tried to do that once already. How long do you think it would take them to put two and two together?"

"He's right," Leonardo agreed, tossing a bloody Kleenex in a blue bowl by his feet. "But answer me this, will you? Just who the *fuck* blew the shit out of that bar?"

Leonardo's question pushed away the fog of confusion, reminding me of a detail I had forgotten in this incredible mess.

The blast.

During DeLuca's crew's assault, someone attempted to blow Amanda's bar to kingdom come.

"I'll tell you who it isn't," Matteo said, his cringe indicative of his agony. "The mob. They don't do anything that sensational. It's not their style. They prefer doing things quietly. They hate the attention."

"I know, but they hate losing their money more," I argued, putting some force in my voice. "It's got to be them."

"And risk taking out their own crew?" Matteo asked, sitting bolt upright. "DeLuca works for them, Cesare. Why would they try to kill him, especially with a bomb? No. It just can't be them."

At that moment, my phone buzzed with an incoming call. The caller ID was "Unknown."

"Hello?"

"Cesare Borelli?" A sweet, feminine voice puzzled me.

"Yeah?"

"Maggie Owens-Roselli here. Are you and your men all right?"

"Why do you care?" I asked, anger strengthening my voice. "You tried to have us killed tonight, you bitch!"

"I didn't give the order, if that's what you mean. Two of my crew are in hospital, Mr. Borelli. The third one is suffering from temporary memory loss and can't remember what happened. Can you?"

"You've got some nerve, honey," I snapped, yanking the phone away from my ear. "I'm putting you on speaker. So, you want me to tell you what went down?"

"Not really. I saw images from that bar. It's quite clear there was an explosion. I'd just like to know if it was you who used

some sort of explosive device, like a grenade or something.”

Leonardo and Matteo stared at the phone in disbelief. I shook my head in anger trying to make sense of her question.

“Yeah, of course we did. We all have a death wish, so we decided to use some grenades in a crowded bar, to kill some bikers and go out with a bang.”

“Sarcasm?”

“No. I’m actually speaking to you from hell. Lucifer sends his regards.”

“Oh, god,” she sighed, the sound of her breath coming through the speaker. “Okay. I guess I got my answer.”

“If you didn’t put the hit out on us, who did?”

“I have no idea, Mr. Borelli. I need some time to get to the bottom of this. In the meantime, please, keep a low profile. I’ll see you soon.”

“See me...?”

I didn’t have time to finish my question because she’d already ended the call.

Matteo and Leonardo were silent.

“I don’t know about you, but I think she sounded pretty upset,” I gave them my opinion.

“Her men are in hospital, Cesare,” Matteo commented. “Of course she’d sound upset.”

“It’s more than that,” I disagreed. “Someone’s out to get them. We just got caught in the middle of it. And what the hell was that ‘see you soon’ thing? What’s she have in mind? A party?”

“I’ll only see those fucks again the day I empty my gun on them,” Leonardo growled. “We can’t let this slip, boys. We *have* to go after them.”

“I second that,” Matteo assumed a confident tone, his arm resting on his stomach.

What a couple of idiots.

Mindless.

With no awareness of their situation.

Just willing to indulge in their instinct. They wanted payback. I respected that and I wanted it, too, but this wasn't the time to go out looking for the people who had tried to pump us full of lead.

"I expected that from Leonardo, but you?" I squinted over at Matteo. "You're supposed to keep it together a lot better than him."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Matteo asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"It means you're talking out of your fucking ass. Both of you," I explained. "First of all? Look at you. Look at *us*. We can't go after Cesare shit, guys. We're too banged up to even walk out the door, much less go out looking for three mobsters. Second? You heard that girl. Two of those mobsters are in hospital, and probably have a couple of cops right outside their rooms. What will we do? Shoot those cops, too? I don't like that Owens-Roselli woman any more than you do, but I'll take her suggestion."

"What's that?"

"Lay low."

Those two words shot out of my mouth without me even thinking of them.

"There's a lot of heat on us right now," I continued, realizing that neither of them was willing nor able to offer me his opinion. "The mob can't wait to see us dead, plus the cops will be desperate for clues as to what really went down in Amanda's. So, I'm not lifting a finger until we get better and this whole thing blows over."

"Cesare, I hear you, but those fuckers must pay," Leonardo said, the determination in his tone showing his intent. "I want us to come up with a plan to get them, the minute we feel better."

"Again, I'm going to have to agree with our little hothead over there," Matteo spoke out, bobbing his head. "Sorry for losing

it, man. I'm just upset about what happened in Amanda's. That's all."

"They'll pay," I promised them, my gaze darting from Matteo to Leonardo and back to Matteo. "We just have to be careful and avoid doing anything stupid."

I left them both in the living room and went to the bathroom to clean myself up. The guy in the mirror didn't resemble me much. A chunk of my goatee had been singed off. I had plenty of cuts all over my face, including two, deeper ones across my forehead. I knew it would take us a few days to heal. I knew we wouldn't like it, but the alternative was much, *much* worse. The truth was that once we got back out there, we'd be easy targets. Our bodies had taken a battering. We had to recover first, before getting back at anybody.

PIPER

TEN DAYS AFTER MY LAST ENCOUNTER WITH THE TRIO AND MY stepbrother in the Presbyterian hospital, my life was back to normal.

None of them had been admitted with life-threatening injuries.

None of them had called or texted me.

In truth, they all acted like they never met me.

And boy, I was relieved.

Needless to say, I wasn't expecting Felix to call me up. He hadn't done that in months. He was going to pick up the phone and ask to see me, especially after his pathetic outburst in that hospital.

On the other hand, I felt a little disappointed. I did believe that at least one of those guys would have done so.

Not Cesare. It had been clear to me that he had gotten what he wanted and wasn't interested in anything more.

Matteo was not going to break the "code." If anything, I thought that kissing me would weigh down on him for a while. To him, this code was too important. Too sacred to be broken. He wasn't going to betray his cousin by starting something with me. His relationship with Cesare was too precious for him to fool around with me.

It was Leo that I expected to hear from.

I might have not had a relationship in months, but I could recognize great chemistry when I saw it. It was true; we had

connected on the night my brother was wounded. Both in and out of the hospital, the two of us got along very well. He made me laugh and helped me take my mind off Felix's terrible behavior. In spite of that, Leo kept his distance from me. For some reason I couldn't put my finger on, he chose to ignore me.

Nevertheless, I wasn't going to contact him. I liked him, yes, but I couldn't overlook something very simple about him: He was part of a group that invited trouble. I had seen that too many times already. I didn't know what those three had been involved in, but it wasn't real estate, sports or anything legal. Besides, I liked my peace of my mind. I appreciated waking up in the morning, feeling carefree.

Finishing the afternoon shift, I took the elevator to the ground floor. It was a bit after ten pm, and I couldn't wait to go home, take a shower and watch some TV. It wasn't thrilling, it wasn't exciting in any way, but I had missed doing this. Being by myself, enjoying something I liked, without my mind drifting off to gunshot wounds, explosions, or anything of that sort.

Still, finding myself out in the parking lot, I realized that spending the remainder of the night in my pajamas, with a bowl of popcorn on my lap was an unlikely scenario. Nearing my ancient car, I caught a glimpse of a big, masculine man just thirty feet from my car. Walking in my direction, his usual swagger and his black leather jacket gave away his identity. It was none other than Leonardo Turner.

"Hey there," he said, tipping his head down, hands in his pockets.

"Leo..." I murmured his name, pressing the unlock button on the key fob. "What a surprise."

"Pleasant I hope," he confessed, coming to a halt near me. Looking closer at his face, a mix of disappointment and curiosity came over me. His good looks had been spoiled. He had several scratches across his cheekbones, while the area over his right eye was yellowish.

"I don't know," I said honestly.. "I thought you'd have called me by now. But now that I see you, I understand why you've

been out of touch.”

“I wasn’t in a bar fight if that’s what you mean,” he claimed, his voice losing its relaxed tone.

“Then, what happened to you?”

“Too fucking much,” he said, dragging his gaze away from me.

“You’re not going to tell me?” I reached for the door handle.

“Too bad. Have a good night, Leo.”

“Wait!” he shouted, taking a large step towards me. “I’ll tell you. Just not here—it’s too public. Can we go to your place?”

I sighed and rubbed my forehead, buying some time for my answer. It didn’t take me long to open my mouth again. This was Leo. He had had the decency to reveal how Felix had wound up in hospital. Had it been one of his friends, my response would have been a big, fat no.

“All right,” I agreed with a nod. “This had better be good, though.”

“Trust me.”

I waited for him to turn away and entered my car, wondering just how in the world he’d gotten those scratches. The bar fight he mentioned wouldn’t have surprised me. In fact, any kind of fight wouldn’t have shocked me. Just like his buddies, Leo had a knack for getting in trouble. I just didn’t know what sort of trouble he had been in.

Whatever it was, it had to have been big.

He was an athletic guy. More than six feet tall and with a great build, one would think twice about starting a fight with him.

Or not think at all. There were plenty of dumb morons out there, ready to use their fists to settle a dispute.

Unwilling to believe scenario number two, I arrived at my apartment building a few minutes later. Just because he had run into somebody stupid, didn’t mean that Leonardo had to engage him in a fistfight.

I walked into my apartment, with the same amount of curiosity in my head. He clicked the door shut, and his gaze settled on mine.

“A blast in a Brooklyn bar,” he began, his sullen eyes and his words sparking worry within me. “Did you read about it?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “But witnesses said there was gunfire before; something about three gunmen.”

“Right,” he said, biting his bottom lip. “We still don’t know shit about who blew that place up, but we know who those sons of bitches were after. Cesare, Matteo, and me.”

“What did you just say?” I squinted up at him, fear creeping into my tone.

“You heard me, Piper,” he went on, his tone steady. “The minute they walked in there, they set their sights on our table. It’s crazy, but that blast saved our asses. They were about ten feet from our spot, and they had rifles. They were showering us with bullets. Our guns just couldn’t protect us.”

I pressed my fingers to my forehead and breathed in and out, at a clear loss for words. I had been expecting him to narrate a normal fistfight.

To hear that someone had insulted him, and his ego couldn’t take it.

Not a shootout.

Not a life-and-death situation.

“Why...?” I whispered out, my gaze still on the space between his shoes and mine.

“Money.”

His answer was blunt. He wasn’t going to beat around the bush, unlike Matteo.

“It’s always about cash, Piper. We stole theirs and they got pissed.”

“You lost me,” I confessed, taking my hand off of my face. “You mentioned a gunfight. Why would the same people try and blow up the very bar they were in?”

“They didn’t. No way,” he said, shaking his head sideways. “If you ask me, someone else tried to whack the guys that had come to take care of us, but that’s just a theory. Anyway...” He paused, his stare intensifying further. “I’ve got another theory, and I’m pretty sure you’re going to hate my guts for saying this, but I’ll do it anyway. Those people are out to get Cesare, Matteo, and me, and everybody who’s been helping us.”

“Oh, god,” I whispered, putting my hands together over my mouth. “Me, too?”

“Yeah,” he spoke in a firm tone. “I told you you wouldn’t like this.”

“Why?!” I squeaked, tears rising up in my eyes. “I mean, I had nothing to do with that money you stole.”

“That’s true, but you were working the night I got shot,” he argued. “You kept your mouth shut about the whole thing. You’re also Felix’s sister. The mob’s methods are very old, Piper. When they take out someone, they take out their entire family, too.”

“Mob,” I huffed out that word, shivers of fear running down my spine. “Jesus...”

“Look, I’m sorry,” he said, his voice coming out mellower. “I for one didn’t mean for you to get tangled in this mess.”

“Well, I did.” A bitter smile spread across my face. “I can’t believe this. I was just trying to do my job, and now you’re telling me that some mobsters are out to get me? This is unreal.”

“It’s as real as it gets,” he added, an expression of sorrow written all over his face.

“I need a drink,” I told him, shuffling off to my drink’s cabinet in the corner. Squeezing tears out of my eyes, I grabbed a full bottle of vodka and went to the fridge to get some ice. I filled up two glasses and offered him one, before seating myself on the couch. Without uttering another word, I gulped down the vodka, until the rocks nudged both of my lips. I heard them clicking together, Leo’s last words still echoing in my brain.

“It’s as real as it gets.”

“I should probably take off.”

His masculine voice snapped me out of a nasty thought process.

“Oh, no, Mr. Turner.” I stared at him with dead-serious eyes. “You’re not going anywhere. Not just yet.”

“If someone told me I’d been targeted by the mob, I’d need some time to myself,” he said, his voice steady. “That’s why I wanted to leave.”

“Are you sure about all this?” I asked, tension speeding up my tone. “Because it sounds like a stretch to me. I never harmed those people.”

“It ain’t a stretch. Not when it comes to the oldest mob families in New York,” he pointed out. “That’s how they’ve been handling things for decades. They’re not going to change now. Cesare and Matteo think I’m exaggerating, though.”

Holding the bottle over my glass, more of that beverage splashing onto the rocks, I had another question. “Why?”

“They just don’t want to believe this,” he replied. “They believe we’re the only ones in danger. I don’t think so. You should call that doctor Cesare threatened. The guy should hire bodyguards. At least, that’s what I’d do if I were in his shoes.”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” I asked, holding my glass just an inch from my chin. “You want me to call up a colleague of mine? Picture this, okay? ‘Dr. Baines, remember that huge guy who threatened you? He says you not calling the police could get you killed by the same people who shot his buddy.’ I bet that’s going to brighten his day, don’t you think?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Leo grumbled, slamming his own glass onto the table. Vodka spilling out and over the top of his palms, he sat down in the armchair across from me. “Dr. Baines won’t be around much longer, unless you warn him about what’s coming to him. Got it?”

“Yeah!” I blurted out, my eyes wider. “I just don’t know how I’m going to say this to him. I’m sure you understand it won’t

be easy.”

I swallowed about half of my drink, vodka flooding my taste buds. The edges of those rocks sticking out from the surface of that beverage, I topped up the glass.

“I trust you,” he said, still not touching his drink. “You have a way with words. I’d probably tell him something like: ‘Pack up and leave town, doc. A bunch of wise guys will blow your fucking head off if you stick around.’”

“Thanks for the compliment,” I told him and left my seat. I returned to the fridge for some more ice, feeling my knees a little shaky.

However, I wasn’t going to let that deter me. I had to stomach what had to be the most disturbing news I’d heard in my whole life. I couldn’t—and wouldn’t—do that sober. Honestly? I didn’t want to believe Leonardo. His story sounded too terrifying. I used to believe that the mafia was a thing of the past. That my city had somehow gotten rid of vicious mobsters. Yet, he had much more knowledge about the underworld than I did. He was part of that world, and I wasn’t.

LEONARDO

DRINK.

Top up.

Repeat.

The same thing went on for hours that night.

Clearly, the bomb I'd laid on Piper was too much for her to bear. Question after question, she tried to find out more about the threat I thought she was facing.

Fine by me. She had no idea about any of the things I had brought up. It was like she was learning a whole new language. Words like "capos," "henchmen" and "foot soldiers" were all Greek to her. And I had no problem explaining to her. Besides, I was one of the reasons why she'd been caught in this dangerous web.

After an entire bottle of vodka, though, I doubted she could pay attention.

The signs were all there.

Red eyes? Check.

Yawning? Check.

Stuttering? Check.

Laughing? Check. Lots of that one.

So, I decided to take matters into my own hands. Or rather, keep the booze out of *her* hands. There was hardly an ounce left in that bottle, but she wouldn't drink that.

Her drowsy eyes following my arm, she lunged forward. Poor Piper... All she got to grab was the couch cushion, once she'd landed flat on her chest.

"You're mean, Leo," she moaned, her lush hair covering almost her entire cheek. "Really mean."

"Nah," I said, leaving the bottle on her leaving room table. "I should have done this sooner."

"One other thing about you," she spoke in a trembling voice, rolling over on her side. "You're hot. So masculine. So ridiculously sexy. Man..." She giggled, reaching out to my knee. "I could just bite into your chest. Yum."

I exhaled long and hard, my fingers locking around her wrist. "Whatever. Let's get you to bed."

"Into bed?" she muttered, the moment I lifted her off the couch. "Sounds great!"

I held her upright, her fucking gorgeous hair filling my view. Her smiling face was so close... Her tall glass couldn't fit through the gap between us.

I felt my cock getting hard in my pants.

How couldn't it?

Piper was in a red pair of shorts. Her white top was too tight for her big breasts. They were squeezed in there. My eyes dipped down to that juicy cleavage for a second.

Fuck, I wanted to bury my face in those amazing boobs.

And her giggle wasn't helping one bit. Neither did her smile. That sexy little devil was doing her best to seduce me. Not through touch, but by just standing there.

Tempting me to reach.

To kiss.

To lick.

To suck.

To fuck all night long.

Because thirty minutes or so with that kind of woman were just not enough. I needed hours with her. Fucking long hours...

My dick stretching my jeans, I focused back on her face. Just when I was about to give in, a thought flashed in my head.

Drunk sex? With this nurse? I must be out of my fucking mind.

Maybe I was, during those moments. I didn't know.

Her sexiness was absolutely insane. It had blinded me to other, more important things.

She was a nurse—a nurse that had been kind to me and the guys.

She was drunk out of her goddamn mind, too. If I ever went for it with Piper, I'd want her to remember everything. I'd want her to remember every single thing, from start to finish. A whole bottle of vodka had almost guaranteed that she wouldn't. She would wake up in the morning, wondering why I was still in her apartment. Why I was lying naked next to her.

And why I had taken advantage of her.

That would have to be my biggest problem. Explaining why I had been an asshole and unable to keep my dick in my pants. Excuses like "you were too hot to resist" wouldn't work. Piper wasn't one of the bimbos I'd been picking up in bars. She had brains in that pretty head of hers. If I told her anything about her looks, I'd get a slap in the face.

So, I raised her arm up to my shoulder and looked away. To me, this was the only way to keep the guy downstairs from complaining about the prison of my pants.

"Put your weight on me," I told her in a stiff tone.

"Fine," she chuckled. "Will you undress me when we get to my bedroom?"

"It ain't happening, Piper," I said, keeping the same tone. "You might as well face it."

"Mean, mean, mean," she chided, stomping her foot into the floor once.

I kept my mouth shut, knowing that this wasn't leading us anywhere. She would just go on and complain some more. Hell, I didn't want to hear any more of that. Also, she could have called me any name she liked. It still wouldn't change my mind about how the rest of the night would play out. She would get some sleep and I would stay near her, just in case. She'd had too much to drink, and I didn't want to take any chances.

PIPER

A FUNNY FEELING IN MY STOMACH PUT AN END TO MY NICE little slumber.

I twisted around in my bed, my body not liking the idea of leaving its comfort. Sadly, a throbbing sensation in my head made it impossible for me to snuggle just for a few more minutes.

I had to get up and take care of that headache.

My nostrils picking up a lovely scent, my eyes were pried open.

The view of a spoonful of soup took me by complete surprise. The identity of the person holding that spoonful up in the air was... unexpected.

No. Scratch that.

He had to be the last person in the world I thought capable of doing that. A knock-around guy, decked out in leather, swearing a little too much? Someone had to have been playing a practical joke on me.

“Hey. Look who’s up,” he said, his voice low. “How’re you feeling?”

“Leo?” I stammered. “What are you still doing here? I thought you’d have left by now.”

“So, you remember I was here last night,” he said with a small smile gracing his face. “That’s good. It means you didn’t get

so shitfaced. Anyway, I stayed put because there was a chance you'd need help during the night."

"I got what?" I asked, somewhat annoyed by the language he'd used.

He scoffed and shrugged his shoulders. "Call it whatever the fuck you like. Where I come from, gulping down a bottle of vodka all by yourself means getting shitfaced. It just didn't affect you so much, and that's a good thing. Now, eat up."

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry," I claimed, smiling in embarrassment.

"So what?" he argued, bringing the spoon even closer to my mouth. "The soup's going to calm down your stomach. It works for most people I know, so, eat up."

What a pushy bastard.

He wasn't going to let me off the hook.

Still, despite his persistence, I had to admit there was more to him.

Leo had been sweet to me.

Not just once, but twice in a matter of hours.

He had had the courtesy to spend the night in my apartment, although there was nothing in it for him. Better still, he had made me soup and brought it to me in bed, in order to fill my stomach with something other than alcohol. I didn't tell him, but I had loved both of those gestures.

I stayed right where I was and watched him feed me, like I was some helpless little girl. I could have stopped him at any point, but I didn't. Why? Because I liked the attention. I enjoyed being pampered. I liked the way he was treating me. If anything, it showed care on his part. Thoughtfulness. Kindness. Leo might have been a member of the underworld for a while, but that hadn't prevented him from being sweet to me. His behavior was a rather ironic reminder of another truth about my personal life. Of all the men that had come and gone, none had had the will to take care of me after I'd had too much to drink. It had only happened twice, and I was with someone

both times. Their reaction? Complaining, bitching at me and a “holier than thou” attitude that got on my nerves. Those idiots couldn’t resist the idea of preaching the wrongness of getting drunk.

Barf.

Leo wouldn’t say a thing about this. He just accepted it and tried to cope with it.

Once the plate was empty, I watched him pull away from my bed, his massive back catching my eye. My bare legs twitched under the sheets, naughty ideas swirling around in my mind. His sweetness had moved me. I had found just the way to thank him for what he had done for me. The question was: Would he accept my gratitude? Or would he blabber on about “the code” and run like hell out of my apartment?

There was only one way to find out.

To do that, however, I had to get rid of the smell of alcohol. So, I went to the bathroom and took a quick shower, all the while wondering what to do to him. Of course, I could just walk out completely naked and invite him back to my bedroom. But that was a bit too slutty. I didn’t want him to think less of me. Furthermore, I was desperate for some intimacy. If Leonardo saw me acting like a sex-hungry bitch, it was possible for him to treat me like one. And the worst thing about this? I would have had no one else to blame but me. Therefore, I decided to just be myself and hope he’d get the message.

I got out of the shower in my pink bathrobe, smelling floral scents on my skin as my wet hair draped over my upper back. Leonardo had just strolled past my living room table, his leather jacket slumped across my couch.

“You don’t mind if I take a shower, do you?” he asked, the hesitation in his voice clear.

“Nope. Not at all,” I said, stepping aside and gesturing to the open bathroom door.

“Thanks.”

Perfect.

His question solved my problem.

Moreover, it sent waves of delight through my system. I loved water. In particular, I loved the idea of fooling around with a sexy stud in the shower. It was one of my fantasies, a fantasy that I'd never been able to indulge in. Leo seemed like the ideal candidate for that job...

I waited to hear the sound of the water running, before undoing my bathrobe. I left it on; this was part of my plan. My first steps towards the bathroom sent chills of excitement up and down my body. Thankfully, the gap between the door and the doorframe was enough for me to fit through it. I didn't wish to alert him of my presence. I just couldn't wait to see the surprise in his eyes.

His head was much higher than the curtain rod, his back to me as I picked up the yellow bottle of body lotion from the cabinet. The sound of that bottle clicking open made Leonardo flip around. By then, I had already put my foot on the corner of the tub.

"What the f...?" He squinted, his gaze dropping down to me. "What are you doing in here?"

"I'm just putting on some lotion," I explained, my tone casual, my hand moving down my outer thigh in a slow manner. I rubbed some of that liquid around my knee, my eyes not leaving his for one second. My fingers going back up my inner thigh, I squeezed some more lotion out of the bottle. It landed on top of my thigh, and I used the heel of my palm to spread it across my skin.

"Lotion..."

My ears picked up a low growl, right before the curtain was swept aside.

And there he was.

Naked.

Wet.

Water streaming down his chiseled chest, it forked through the ridges of his abs and rolled off his masculine body. His semi-

erect cock had me wondering what would have happened if I'd tried anything bolder.

“Crappy excuse, but I’ll take it,” he spoke in a sexy voice, his massive figure blocking the view of the wall behind him. Before I knew it, his big, strong arms had locked around my lower back. He lifted his leg over the side of the bathtub and stepped back in, gazing down into my eyes. With a simple move, he eased me off the floor. A playful scream leaving me, I bent my knees. Feeling cool water underneath my feet, his strong hands pushed me back. I sensed some more water dripping onto my head, Leonardo claiming my mouth with vigor. I welcomed his full lips on mine, cupping his hips. His fingers clutching my back thigh, he raised my leg up. He squeezed my flesh, and I locked my leg over his hip.

“You were so nice to me,” I whispered in his mouth, more water dripping down my forehead and off the bridge of my nose.

“I wouldn’t leave you like that,” he spoke in his raspy voice, his fingers mapping out my skin. I leaned back and exposed my neck and chest, Leo’s hungry lips closing around my chin. He nipped at it, my heart thumping against my chest. I could feel his balls bumping into my groin, his fingertips teasing my senses as they closed in on my core. He caressed my thigh and moved his hand up to my ass, my chest getting soaked more and more. Leo licked the water around my breast and let go of my flesh, before a proper slap resounded through the bathroom.

A loud whimper escaping me, I sensed his soft lips stroking the underside of my breast. Little by little, they climbed up, steam beginning to fill the room. Threads of it hovering over my chest, I closed my eyes against how amazing his mouth felt on my nipple. His gentle, yet demanding kisses were audible over the sound of the water hitting the bathtub floor.

I released his hips, only to thrust my hands up and grab him by the shoulders. My half-open eyes met with the view of his handsome face between my breasts. I squeezed his shoulder muscles hard and held on, eager to get an even better taste of their strength. His delicious moves were weakening my thigh

muscles. I knew I wouldn't be able to stay upright much longer. I put my foot back down and stepped back, Leonardo following me. I sat down in the corner, watching the water splash down onto his back and his butt. I spread my legs, my left foot landing on the side of the bathtub. His eyes took in the view of my pussy, before his gaze moved up my body.

"So fucking creamy," he said, and ran the tip of his tongue along his bottom lip.

"Taste me," I demanded, looking down into his eyes. "I can't wait for you to taste me."

That was it.

He wasn't going to say anything more.

He was going to *do*.

The wet warmth of his mouth over my slit, sent ample waves of delight roaring through my body. I threw my head back, the top bumping into the wall as his lips fulfilled his promise. In a haze of sensuality and arousal, I could hear his deep moans and groans. They were not loud by any means, they were not long, but they were right there.

Turning me on.

Showing me he had been enjoying this, just as much as I had.

My pelvis jerked up and down, trying to get more from him. That man was doing more than turning me on. He was turning me into a lustful creature. A greedy woman, determined to make the most of this.

I sensed his mouth over my entrance, sucking out my juices with untold desire. His thumb slid down my inner thigh, offering me a tantalizing promise while my body sank deeper into the world of his worship. His tongue split my folds, traveling up my pussy. His fingertip rubbing around my entrance, I felt the wet tip of his tongue stroking my clit for the very first time.

"More!" I moaned, planting my palm into the tiles next to me. "Give me more!"

"Yeah."

His word came out muffled, his lips replacing his tongue for a brief moment. My body glued to the wall, my chest rose up and down in rhythm. His slow, tantalizing strokes making my clit swell, I found myself in disbelief. Those movements of his tongue were... slow. Sexy. Made to please me, and *only* me.

And, god, he was doing one *hell* of a job.

I could feel every single millimeter of that tip as he swiped it up and down my clit. Its wet warmth was spreading along my slit, mixing with my juices. The tip of his thumb dipping into me, my loud moan rang through my ears. Its rigidity starting to slide in and out, I reached down and grabbed a fistful of his hair. Its softness filling my palm, I raked my fingers across his scalp, knowing how close my orgasm was. Three, faster swipes of his tongue across my clit were enough to help me reach a powerful climax. Pinned against the wall, I shuddered, losing myself in the deliciousness of his worship. My juices flooding my core, I tried to control the spasms in my body.

“Dizzy?” He teased me as I opened my eyes.

“Oh, you’re so bad,” I murmured, leaning forward. “I should punish you for this.”

“Not yet,” he said, his hands landing on my hips. The amount of force on my body ruined every notion of me taking control of the action. One minute, I was relishing in the sight of his muscled body. The next, I was facing the white wall and part of the yellow tiles on my left.

But I wasn’t going to turn this down.

I was more than willing to play along.

I was desperate to feel him inside of me.

To savor the expression on his face while he claimed me as his own, although it wasn’t going to be easy.

My ass hanging in the air, I moved my legs apart. I sensed his wet finger drawing circles around my asshole, his big, stiff cock rubbing into my slit. A mere push later, the head was sliding in. My folds held on to his sheer girth, a long moan flying out of my mouth. I hissed, sensing his hands on my ass cheeks. His tiny fingernails digging in, I looked back over my

shoulder. His eyes had been studying my ass. He finally tore his gaze away just to look down at me.

“I fucking love these sweet cheeks,” he grunted, spreading my ass cheeks open.

“God, it’s so deep,” I moaned, squeezing my eyes shut. “So deep inside of me.”

“Take it,” he commanded, plunging harder into me. “That’s right, baby. Take it.”

“Aww, yeah!” I moaned, his long, hard strokes stretching me out. Warmth was burning in my stomach. Sensations of molten pleasure were spreading throughout my body. Its pulse had started to build, long before I joined him in the bathroom. Just the thought of me making that fantasy a reality had been enough.

But reality was a hundred times better.

Feeling that rock-hard cock pulsate through me.

Filling me up.

Offering him something back.

Repaying him for the kindness he had shown me.

I held on to the edge of the tub, his heavy balls smashing into my clit with each thrust. More of his slaps echoed back at the walls of my apartment. His large hands have to have left a mark—I couldn’t know for sure. All I did know, was that he was keeping me well within the realm of lustful pleasure. Our bodies had merged amid numerous threads of steam, water continuing to splash down onto his shoulders. Amid our sounds of desire, I opened my eyes to slits. My breasts were bouncing back and forth. Water had pooled around my feet and his alike as a flurry of sensations hit my entire existence.

I cried out in ecstasy, riding my waves of pleasure as my second orgasm tore through me.

“Fuck! I’m going to come!” his own groans came just moments afterwards. All of a sudden, my body complained at the loss of stimulation and pressure. Leo was out of me, his cock firmly in his grasp. He jerked himself just inches over my

ass, before his essence spilled out of his swollen manhood. His juices covering my crack, he gasped out and tipped his head back.

“Oh, wow,” I panted and rolled around. I sat down in the bathtub, my arms parallel to one another. “This was...”

“Fucking great,” he interrupted me, offering me his hand. I slammed my palm into his and he helped me up. “Unexpected, but great. Believe me, I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

“Leave? Why?” I complained, feeling more of his body heat on my skin.

“I’m meeting with you-know-who in about an hour,” he explained. “I’m already late as it is.”

I didn’t want him to leave like this. I wanted some more intimacy. Some more of Leo...

“Kiss me,” I said suddenly.

Again, he wasn’t going to verbalize.

Responding with words wasn’t his style.

He tossed his arm around my waist and pulled me in, angling his lips. I cupped his hips and pressed myself into him, getting one more taste of that sexy mouth of his. If I couldn’t have him again, I would get the least I could from him. Okay, this wasn’t the ideal end to that morning, but, even so, I had every reason to be happy. I had surrendered to the man who had been watching over me all night. To the man I had connected with at the Presbyterian hospital. He had respected my body and treated me like a queen. I couldn’t ask for more than that.

MATTEO

A WEEK OF DOING NOTHING AT ALL TOOK ITS TOLL ON ALL OF US.

It was easy at first. We spent two days daydreaming and saying what we had been planning to do, once we'd gotten the ball rolling.

Cesare brought up his dream of buying a house in the suburbs. A large property with a lawn and a pool in the back. His optional extra was a boat, which he'd use to go out fishing. Personally, I couldn't see the appeal of that last part. I could understand the huge house and the pool, but venturing out in the Atlantic? No. The ocean was much too vicious for me to consider risking my life for some fish. Of course, Cesare claimed that he'd do that in sunny, summer weather, but he couldn't convince me. The Atlantic was unpredictable. Its waves could swallow up much bigger ships than a fishing boat.

Leonardo wouldn't shut up about his long island vacation. He mentioned his plan of renting a four-by-four and visiting Blue Mountain in Jamaica. Crazy son of a bitch... The island had dozens of pristine beaches, and he was fascinated by exploring a mountain? In all fairness, it seemed very interesting. It had a mystical vibe to it, one that couldn't be found in other mountains. Still, I found it very strange that he'd choose to head to that mountain first and not go out sunbathing.

My dream? Well, it consisted of four wheels, a grumbling motor and miles and miles of freeway.

I didn't care about brands. There were dozens of those to choose from. In my mind, a simple road trip across the States was an enormous temptation. Eight cylinders, a big trunk for all my luggage and good company were more than enough. I would get to hear that motor roar while the car ate up the miles. Whether it was on the Interstate, in a tunnel or some expressway, I would just love the thrill. I would drive on and on without purpose, other than enjoying the scenery, some laughs and great food.

Unfortunately, once those two days had passed, daydreaming ceased.

In its place came an awful lot of silence, interrupted by some serious crankiness.

From Cesare and Leonardo.

Yep—those two just couldn't control their temper.

As far as Cesare was concerned, this was odd. After all, disappearing and laying low was his idea. All the same, just forty-eight hours into that week, he was getting impatient. He would stare at his phone for minutes at a time, expressing his desire to see Maggie's number flashing on the screen. And, once I told him it wouldn't be happening for at least a few more days, he got mad and said I was being pessimistic...

Leonardo was even worse. He acted like everything and everyone annoyed him. There was a time when I fell asleep on my couch, and he slapped my calf because I was breathing too heavily. I wasn't snoring, but I was about to, according to him. After that, he asked me and Cesare to turn off the TV, because it was too bright for him to sleep. For crying out loud... He could have gone to one of the two bedrooms in my apartment and slept for days for all I cared. When I told him, though, he said that my couch was too comfortable to leave it.

We might have been a tight group, but I knew we were going to snap at some point. Sitting around and wasting time was something that none of us enjoyed. Sooner or later, we'd have a huge fight. It wasn't a matter of "if." It was a matter of "when."

So, when my phone rang, seven days after the incident in Amanda's bar, we were all very interested in hearing what Maggie Owens-Roselli had to say. I set the device down on the coffee table and put it on speaker.

"Hello?"

"Good to know you're still breathing, Mr. Borelli. I take it you want to keep it that way."

"I do."

"Okay, then. I have an idea. My crew hated it, but I was able to convince them in the end. I doubt you're going to like it, either, but please, pay attention. We need to meet. In person. All seven of us."

I raised both hands up right and left to silence Cesare and Leonardo, knowing that this would get them all riled up. I wasn't so thrilled, but I wanted her to explain why she thought this was the correct course of action.

"Let's say we do meet. What happens next? We share some wine and sing 'we are the world'?"

"Funny," she chuckled. "My sources over at the NYPD gave me some very important and unsettling information about the incident at Amanda's bar yesterday. It would be wise of you and your friends to know. I know that selling this to you is quite difficult, so, let me try and convince you. I'm sending you a picture."

"Of what?"

"You'll see. Just give it a minute."

The notification bell of my cell rang, and a picture popped up on the screen. Cesare and Leonardo leaned in from either side as I zoomed in since it was a bit dark. There was a large hole in the middle of that photo, chunks of plaster bent inward. Shattered bricks were inside that hole, their jagged edges clear. Before anybody could verbalize, the notification bell on my cell rang again. This time, the picture we were looking had been taken from a distance. It contained the same hole, but with the flashing red-and-green "Amanda's" sign in the top left corner.

“What do you make of this, Mr. Borelli?”

I heaved a long sigh and ran my hand through my hair, having come to an important conclusion.

“There was no bomb in the bar. Someone took a shot at us from outside. Probably with a rocket launcher of some sort.”

“Precisely. That’s what my crew told me as well. I hope this is enough to help you reach a decision about that meeting.”

“We’re doing it,” Cesare interjected. “I’m texting you the location. We meet tonight. Nine pm. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes, it is. Thank you, gentlemen.”

“Are you nuts!?” Leonardo exclaimed, furrowing his brow. “Those motherfuckers tried to kill us, and you want to sit down with them?”

“Look at that, man,” Cesare commanded, pointing down at the picture on the screen. “The mob probably fed them some bullshit story about taking us out in that bar, so that they could take care of them *and* us.”

“Kill two birds with one stone,” I said, agreeing with my cousin. “Six men with one rocket or whatever the *hell* that was. We need to know more.”

“Agreed,” Cesare nodded.

Leonardo huffed in frustration and kept on repeating his reservations about the meeting. Truth be told, I stopped listening after the first time he’d done that. I knew he hated it—he’d made that clear. I didn’t like this meeting so much, but I could understand its necessity. I got why we had to spend some time with the same people who had been shadowing us for weeks.

The meeting point was the same warehouse I had met with Cesare and Leonardo some time ago. I didn’t know what would occur in there. There would be some tension in the air; I was sure of that. However, I would try to maintain my composure. This wasn’t some stupid contest. We weren’t going to see who could take whom. This would lead us nowhere. What we needed was a proper discussion, where we

could lay everything on the table and decide how to proceed from here on out.

After the three of us arrived at the warehouse, I left Cesare's Torino as the rain pelted down around me. I kept my head down and sidestepped a large paddle of water, Leonardo running past me. I eyed him with suspicion, my drenched fingers diving through the gaps of the wire gate in front of me. Pushing it to the side, I waited for him and Cesare to go through before following them in the front yard.

"If we don't make it out of here alive, just know I'm coming back to haunt both your asses."

Leonardo's words interrupted the sound of the hard rain but failed to amuse me and my cousin.

"Relax," Cesare said as we approached that heavy, steel door. I reached for its latch, but, before I could touch it, the noise of metal surfaces grinding prevented me from doing so. That door was pulled open from the inside, a familiar face standing behind it. Rocco DeLuca.

"An abandoned fucking warehouse?" He scoffed, bringing his gaze to Cesare. "It's the last place you'd want to meet wise guys in. Your stupidity's going to get you whacked."

"Come on!" Leonardo snapped, lunging forward, his arm jerked back. I caught it whooshing past my shoulder, out of the corner of my eye. I thrust my own arm forward, Cesare grabbing him by the waist. Rocco swayed back, my friend's fist just missing him.

"Hey!" Cesare shouted, rocking him to the side. "We ought to be smart here, and you're trying to start a fucking fight? Get a goddamn grip!"

"I'd listen to him if I were you."

A feminine, delicate voice shifted my attention away from Leonardo. Ten yards away, under the strong, fluorescent light, Maggie was standing between a couple of strangers.

"Good evening, boys," she tipped her head down in a polite manner, shuffling off in our direction. "For all its crudeness, Rocco's remark about our meeting point is valid. You might

want to refrain from meeting mobsters in secluded places such as this.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Cesare said, moving around Rocco.

“Frisk them,” Maggie ordered her man. I raised my arms in the air, my boys doing the same. I eyed her in annoyance, but that was all I could do. There was just no point in complaining—they would have done this anyway.

“They’re clean,” Rocco told her as we drew near her.

“Meet my crew, gentlemen,” she spoke, gesturing back to her men. “Julian Knight and Slater Winslow. Remember when I told you that two of my men were in hospital?”

“Yeah?”

“That was them,” she revealed. “Both of them suffered concussions, and Mr. Knight had four cracked ribs.”

“Why are you telling us all that?” I asked, a touch of discomfort in my tone. “Your boys were the ones who charged in that bar, guns blazing. And correct me if I’m wrong, but we never tried to blow them to pieces.”

“Thank you for reminding me why we’re here, Mr. Borelli,” she said, nodding with gratitude. “Now, I’d like to speak about my crew, but first, I need you all to be honest with me. What is it that you’re trying to achieve really?”

“We want a piece of the pie,” Cesare spoke out, taking a short step forward. “We robbed that armored truck to get the necessary capital to buy some guns.”

“Fucking amateurs,” Slater scowled, folding his arms across his chest. “You think the organization would just step back and let you have the arms trade? Guess again.”

“He’s right,” Rocco confirmed, returning to his goons. “The mob would have you whacked before you could sell a single cartridge.”

“If you really want in, there are only *two* ways to do it,” Julian interjected, making the appropriate gesture. “One? You join a family. You earn your stripes. Two? You whack the head of a family and take over in their stead. Anything and everything

else is just a half-measure—a guaranteed way to get a bullet between your eyes.”

“We knew both,” I said, keeping my voice somewhat down. “We wouldn’t become anybody’s bitch, though. Errand boys don’t make much, and they do all the work. As for killing a mafia boss? We’d have to get pretty close; maybe too close. If we screwed up, we’d have an entire family on our tail.”

“I’m still waiting to hear about you and your crew,” Cesare complained, his gaze drifting from Maggie to Rocco. “These men... What are they? Your bodyguards?”

“That’s one way to put it,” she replied, offering him a polite smile. “For your information, Mr. DeLuca is a made man. Mr. Knight and Mr. Winslow aren’t, due to their non-Italian descent. The Roselli family walked away from all illegal enterprises in New York and elsewhere, when Nick Roselli fell to his death, about a year ago.”

“Walked away?” I cocked an eyebrow, struggling to believe her little narrative. “I thought this meeting was all about transparency. You asked us what we were trying to do, and you got a straight answer. Why won’t you give *us* one?”

“That *was* a straight answer. Almost,” Rocco remarked, turning around to face us. “It’s true. This family stopped all of its illegal activities when Maggie took over. Just one thing about Nick Roselli. His death wasn’t an accident. I pushed him off a hotel roof.”

“So, if you’re not running anything illegal, why are you still considered part of the organization?” I asked, my voice rising in volume and nerve. “I mean, that’s what a made man is, right? Part of the mob?”

“Correct,” Maggie answered, fast. “A made man is a lifelong member of the organization. There was a twist in the story of Nick Roselli’s death. You see, at the time, Rocco wasn’t a made man but Roselli was. Killing a member equals death. To avoid this fate, we had to strike some sort of deal.”

“Exactly,” Rocco went on, his posture stiff. “Anybody who earns for the organization is considered valuable. The ones

who don't are disposable. So, after having given up all the illegal stuff, we had to provide a service to the mob: Surveillance. Someone tries to steal from wise guys? We report first and shoot later, not necessarily in that order."

"I get it, but you warned us first," Cesare stated, curiosity growing in his tone. "Why? I mean, we're nothing to you."

"Because I was able to figure out your little plan," Maggie explained, her voice losing some of its nerve. "It wasn't so difficult if I'm honest. Three, small-time thieves, moving on to robbing armored trucks? That is a *major* step up. Plus, you made a serious mistake in selecting your target. Nine out of ten of those trucks belong to the organization. So, I figured you wanted to put a dent in a family's cash flow, so that you could take their place."

"We didn't know that," I confessed, waves of embarrassment hitting me. "We knew most of those trucks belong to casinos and banks, but mobsters? No."

"Really?" Maggie asked, her voice a little more high-pitched. "Well, you fooled me there."

"I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen," Slater broke his silence once more. "Those amateurs couldn't have known who those trucks belonged to."

"Then enlighten us, hotshot," I demanded, flashing him an angry look.

"Easy, boys," Maggie requested, her tone slower as she stared up at Slater first, before turning her attention to me. "We didn't come here to exchange accusations. I must admit I gave you more credit than you deserve, but we can't change that now."

"That truck we robbed the other day," Leonardo began, his voice echoing across the warehouse. "Whose was it? Can you give us a name?"

"I'm afraid I don't have one for you," she claimed, her gaze dropping to the floor for an instant. "I tell you what. I'll pull some strings and get you that name, on one condition."

"Let's hear it."

“We work together.”

Three words.

More like three bombs.

Because that’s what it felt like in that warehouse. Like someone had dropped three bombs, not just one. Her men just stood there, side by side, gauging our reaction. I was left staring at her for a few moments, not knowing how to respond to this insane idea of hers.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Leonardo grumbled, cocking his head in a spasm of frustration. “I told you, you assholes. Coming here was a shitty idea. We should have told her to fuck off or something.”

“Work with the people who shot up an entire bar, just to get to me and my crew?” Cesare asked his wobbly voice indicating how hard he had to try to keep his anger at bay. “Thanks, but no, thanks. You’re right. We’ve made mistakes, sure, but we’re not stupid. I’m not going to be allies with the same bastards that...”

“Were almost killed in the same bar as you?” she interrupted, her face twisting into an expression of anger. “For the love of god, Cesare! You saw those pictures! You know damn well that this was a trap!”

“Damn straight,” Rocco agreed with his boss, his voice bass deep. “We received word from a certain Don. I’m not going to mention his name, but his exact words were: ‘Those three little fucks have caused too much damage. Take care of them.’ When a Don gives you an order, you obey. So, yeah. We did try to get rid of you, but the truth is, we were all targeted that night.”

“Explain this to me,” I said, feeling the tension in the air thicken by the minute. “Let’s say we believe you. I know the mob doesn’t like sensational stuff, like shooting in public and in broad daylight. Why did they change their tactics?”

“Sometimes, they don’t have a choice,” Rocco replied, shaking his head sideways. “If we all died in that bar, it would

have saved them a whole lot of trouble. I guess they believed the reward was worth the risk.”

“Give us some time to think about this,” Cesare spoke in a firm tone, his gaze settled on Maggie. “We’ll call you with our decision.”

“Gentlemen...” She paused and pursed her lips. “This is the only way for you to get out of this alive. The only way for you to keep the people closest to you safe. Like your lady friend. Think long and hard before you turn down my offer.”

Lady friend...

She didn’t say her name, but she didn’t have to. I for one, knew who she was talking about. The girl with the gorgeous hair and curves for days. That was definitely Piper.

Cesare preferred silence over coming up with a rebuttal. Leonardo just looked away in derision, while I mumbled a “goodnight.” One by one, we strolled out of that warehouse. With our heads down low. Silent. Worried. Unsure how to proceed. We were at a crossroad. The direction we would take would shape our future. And, as Maggie mentioned, it would also define the future of a girl we had known for a while. I agreed with her, even though I didn’t like her so much. We had a decision to make; a big one. We couldn’t reach it in an hour or two. We needed to sit down with each other and study every aspect of that decision. Otherwise, the chances of us making another mistake were much too high.

PIPER

“I WISH I DIDN’T HAVE TO LEAVE.”

Leo’s words had been dwelling on my mind for days. The look in his eyes proved that he meant them. There was a certain sorrow in them, sprinkled with a bit of regret.

I forgave him that day. I understood he had another engagement.

I couldn’t forgive what he didn’t do the day after that. And the day after that.

Radio silence.

Complete disappearance.

It was like he had dropped off the face of the Earth.

I did try to contact him. I texted and called more than once.

Yet, texts went unanswered. Calls lasted about ten seconds each and ended with a promise on his part.

“I’m busy right now. I’ll call you back later.”

Well, guess what.

He didn’t.

Not once.

So, two, amazing lovers had sent me to orgasmic bliss. They had offered me so many incredible moments in bed that I wondered if our encounters were real, or just a figment of my imagination. However, both those men had vanished. Worse

still, neither of them had had the decency to let me know why they weren't interested in seeing me again.

Inevitably, I began wondering why history had repeated itself.

I started to think that, perhaps, I was doing something wrong. I was too nice to them. I had made this very easy for them. I shouldn't have encouraged them so much. I should have played hard to get. But how was I supposed to do any of those things? It wasn't like I met guys like Cesare and Leo every day.

Handsome.

Sinfully sexy.

In Cesare's case? Dominant and tough.

In Leo's? Loud, rough around the edges but with plenty of empathy and care.

If I could have gone back through time, I didn't believe I would have changed much. I would still have gotten physical with them. I would have let them have their naughty way with me. That's what I wanted, and that's what they gave me.

The only thing I would have changed?

The "after" part.

I wouldn't have been so casual about it. I would have demanded more. Some women spend their lives wondering if they could ever have mind-blowing sex. In that quest, they settle for mediocrity, hoping that it would get better along the way. They switch partners over and over again, but they don't find that kind of connection with anyone. I had been lucky. I had found it twice in a few weeks, but then, I had been careless. I had let those two slip away, and I had no idea what to do to get even one of them back.

"Where are you, Piper? Because you sure aren't here."

Ava's voice was a call back to reality. Her hand close to my face, I could make out the details of the silver ring around her middle finger.

“I’m sorry,” I said, taking my eyes off of her hand. “I’m a little distracted lately.”

“Please, pull yourself together, okay?” She requested, walking back to the door of the exam room. “Your first patient of the day is here.”

“Right,” I sighed, picking up the chart, catching the click-clacking of heels. “Sophie Parkinson. Twenty-six. Chest pain...?”

Baffled by the comment, I looked up at the patient in question. Her attire was rather strange. She had a black pencil skirt on, really high heels, and a white blouse. She also had a red scarf around her neck and wore shades. Her blonde, curly hair reached well past her chest.

“Is this right?” I asked, holding the chart out in front of her.

She didn’t speak. Instead, she raised her hand up to her head and dived her hand into her hair. She pulled it to the side, taking a mass of blonde hair with it. Below all that blondness, I noticed a dark-brown shade and a hair type I had seen so much of. She threw the wig back over the exam table and removed the shades, confirming my initial belief. This was Maggie Owens, my dear friend.

“Maggie!” I spoke, my voice coming out like a cheer. “It’s been so long! What’s with the disguise? You wanted to surprise me?”

“I wish,” she uttered, her voice monotonous. “How have you been, honey? Quite busy, I suppose.”

“Not busier than you,” I smiled. “How’s little Emily doing?”

“Busy with men,” she clarified. “Your love life is very rich these days. I’m not trying to pass on judgment here,” she declared, her hands up to her chest, palms facing me. “I’m the last person in the world to judge anyone’s love life. And Emily is doing just great. Thank you for asking.”

“You still haven’t told me why you had to disguise yourself to come see me,” I said, my voice dropping down an octave.

“I came here to warn you,” she added, softening her tone. “Those guys you’ve been seeing are aspiring mobsters. They’re fighting tooth and claw to enter that world. Very soon, they’ll be in a lot of trouble with the law. Trust me, Piper. You wouldn’t want to get caught in that mess.”

“Whoa! Hold on a minute,” I requested, feeling like she had banged a brick into my forehead with all that information. “I know they’re up to no good, but they’re actually trying to enter the mafia? How do you know that?”

“Yes, they are,” she affirmed with a nod. “You know I inherited a mobster’s fortune, Piper. It was easy for me to find out.”

“So, you’re in the mob, too?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“Yes and no,” she said, squeezing her lips together. “I’m not running anything illegal. But, to keep myself and my family safe, I had to give something back to the mob. So, my associates are keeping an eye out for wannabe mobsters. The men you’ve been socializing with perfectly fit that description.”

“Why? What did they do?” I posed another question, my tone intensifying.

“A couple of weeks ago, they tried to purchase an entire gun shipment,” she told me, putting her hands on my shoulders as we looked each other in the eye. “The whole thing went terribly wrong, but those three are very determined. There’s no doubt in my mind; they’ll try again.”

“Oh, my god...” I whispered, coming to a painful realization. Matteo, Cesare, and Leo hadn’t attempted to buy handguns to protect themselves. They had tried to buy hundreds of weapons, with the intent to sell them. My stepbrother had been wounded during that transaction.

“Look, Piper,” she urged, rubbing my shoulders over my lab coat. “I’ve met some dangerous men. I’m sure you remember my stories about them. I remember how much you hated my involvement with them. But—and this is a big but—they got out of that life. Was there a price to pay for that? Yes, but

they've all straightened out now. I wish I could say the same about these men you've been seeing. I've talked to them. They seem nice, but they want to conquer a world that's too dangerous."

I lifted my hands up to hers and wrapped my fingers around her wrists. "I appreciate your concern, but I'm afraid it's too late."

"What?" She asked, her big eyes widening. "What are you talking about?"

"Maggie..." I faltered, my mind traveling back to the night that Leo was brought into the ER. "I'm in too deep already. I didn't mean to. It happened because I patched up one of them and didn't call the cops when he showed up full of bullet holes. Someone's put a hit out on them. They think I might be in danger, too."

"Oh, no." She put her hand over her mouth. "I knew I should have come here sooner. This wouldn't have..."

"There's nothing you could have done for me, Maggie," I interrupted her. "There's nothing anybody could have done really. I just tried to do my job, and this is what I get. Now, I'm going to ask you something and I need you to tell me the truth. Are they right? Could the mob come after me for helping them?"

"Yes," she spoke in a weak voice. "I hate to admit it, but yes. Now, don't panic, okay? I've got connections. If there's actually a hit out on you, I'll try and call it off. I'm so sorry, Piper. I know how you must feel. I've been there."

I breathed in, tears pooling in my eyes. My limbs went numb, and my lips shook as my friend leaned over towards me. She took me in her warm embrace, her words replaying in my mind in a loop. What Leo had suggested as a theory, had been confirmed. Maggie had absolutely no reason or desire to frighten me. She was a dear friend of mine, although I hadn't seen her in months. I only wished there was something she could do. If she couldn't, I would receive the ultimate punishment for just doing my job.

CESARE

THAT WEEK OF DOING DIDDLY SQUAT HAD FELT LIKE A goddamn age.

Tensions were high among us.

But the days that followed after our meeting with the head of the Roselli family were actually worse.

Much worse.

It was hard for me to wrap my head around it, but the truth was staring me in the face. Even the usually cool Matteo, had no intention of speaking. In two days, he broke his silence three times. Once he did, I couldn't recognize that bastard. He burst out in shouts and cries, reminding me of our mutual friend. The composed man had left the building. In his place was a baffled, loud son of a bitch who wouldn't keep his voice down.

During a conversation with him, Leonardo got so upset that he went on to destroy everything made of glass in his living room. A thick vase, a platter and a couple of bowls had the misfortune of being around him. After he was done throwing stuff against the walls, all he had was a floor littered with glass and a living room that looked like a grenade had gone off in there.

Their feelings about our situation wouldn't allow me to reach a decision. One would think that Maggie's frustration should have convinced me. She wasn't wrong—I wasn't blind to that. Her crew had indeed been in the crosshairs of the organization. Still, there was a big difference between acknowledging

someone's fate and working with them to avoid it. Those guys had attempted to execute us. I couldn't look past that. I couldn't brush aside the fact that they had walked into a bar, with the intent to empty their rifles into me and my boys.

Regardless of her personal feelings, though, Maggie had brought something very important to my attention: Piper's predicament.

I told no one about this, but, as we made our way out of the warehouse, I wanted to kick myself in anger. That's who I was mad at. My own, stupid self. With everything that had been going on, I had failed to contact Piper. I had neglected to do something as simple as picking up my phone and calling her. Our struggle had consumed me. I had put it ahead of everything else, which included communicating with a girl I liked so much.

But that *had* to change now.

I couldn't go on pretending that nothing had happened between us.

I couldn't sit back and watch while the mob went after her.

Unfortunately for me, paying her a visit in the hospital or at her apartment was out of the question. I had to assume both places were being monitored. There would either be wise guys on her block, or their associates would let them know I was there. To see Piper that rainy night, I had to get creative. And take a chance I wouldn't normally take if the circumstances were different. I knew her building had a fire escape. It was old and rusty, but it would have to do.

I ditched my Torino two blocks away from her neighborhood. Car after car rolling down the drenched road, I held my coat over my head to shield myself from the rain. It was funny, but the bad weather was acting like an ally of mine. Walking around like that, I doubted anybody could recognize me. Besides, whoever had been in charge of monitoring Piper's building, they had to have known my Torino. They had to have been expecting to see it nearby. I didn't think anyone thought they would see me on foot. Even so, I kept a good portion of my jacket hanging over my face. Its zipper and part of its hem

kept bumping into my forehead almost throughout my walk to Piper's building.

Noticing the brownish color of that building, I quickened my pace to a jog. I turned right and away from the sidewalk, rainwater tapping onto the metal of that fire escape. I caught a glimpse of some drops falling off its rusty edge as I put my foot on the bottom step. I felt the cold, soaked surface in my palm, starting my climb. I kept my gaze up at the dark sky, raindrops smashing into my forehead and my cheeks.

I must have been crazy...

That fire escape was long overdue for a replacement. I heard it creaking with every step I took. It swayed forward, my two hundred pounds clearly too much of a burden for it. The metal banging into the wall behind it, I put one foot over the other slowly. I tested each one of the steps first, applying just a little bit of force, before resting my weight on it.

Damn...

I was getting soaked out there, and, somehow, I could feel beads of sweat spreading across my forehead. To my disappointment, the light in the bedroom on the second floor was off. Reaching the second floor, I stepped on the landing, the white curtain behind the window coming into view. I held on to the railing on the right for support, suspecting it wouldn't be much help if the whole damn thing collapsed. I used my drenched fist to knock on the glass, before throwing a quick glance down at the road. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. There was a row of parked cars on either side, a green van speeding down the road.

"Hello? Who's there?"

I heard Piper's muffled voice, the light in her bedroom coming on.

"It's me. Cesare," I spoke out, more drops of water moistening my stubble.

"Holy god!" she yelled, pulling the window to the side. "What the hell are you doing out there? You could have used the door. I would have let you in, you know."

“Cute,” I murmured, unwilling to get into that kind of conversation on that crappy fire escape. “Get back. I’m coming in.”

She took two steps back, before I reached in. I grabbed the ledge and lifted my leg over it, my shoe grazing the pane. I heard some pebbles fall on the aluminum, my shoe leaving a wet print on her floor. My head pressed against the pane of her window, I repeated the same process with my other leg.

“Well, I can’t complain about being bored,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Me neither,” I agreed, wiping water off of my forehead with my forearm. “That fire escape nearly killed me.”

“This is the part where you explain why you didn’t use the door like regular people do,” she stated, a touch of irony in her voice.

“You’re being watched, Piper,” I announced, my expression serious. “I don’t know if you’re being watched twenty-four-seven, but someone’s monitoring your moves. I didn’t want them to know I was here tonight.”

“Thanks, but I got that information when a certain someone paid me a visit at the hospital yesterday,” she told me, a cold look in her eyes. “Does the name Maggie Owens-Roselli sound familiar?”

“She did...?” I stopped talking halfway through my sentence, unable to believe her last statement. “How come?”

“She’s a long-time friend of mine,” Piper went on. “We hadn’t seen each other in over three months, because she recently had a baby and found a new job. Anyway...” she paused for a second. “She said some quite disturbing things about you, Matteo, and Leo. Honestly? I couldn’t believe my ears. I mean, I knew you were not law-abiding citizens per se, but you actually want to join the mafia? Do you realize how *crazy* that sounds?”

“Not to us,” I disagreed, recalling just some of the images I had taken from my old neighborhood with me. “You see, we got a pretty good taste of what those people have when we

were kids. Or, rather, what we lacked. Little things like food, adequate shelter, safety, and security. In short, everything you can obtain if you have enough money.”

“So, you’re willing to risk your life out there every day? For what?” I threw my hands up in the air. “Fast cars? Loose women?”

“Look, I’m not here to explain why I’ve made that choice,” I snapped. “I just wanted to explain why I’d been out of touch. And why we can’t be together.”

“Too much danger,” she said, taking her eyes off of me to look out the window.

“The last thing I want to do is see you get hurt. *Especially* because of me,” I said in a louder voice. She just *had* to get the message, or else my little climb up her fire escape would have been for nothing.

“I understand,” she whispered, tilting her head to the side, her gaze still down on the floor.

This should have been my cue to leave.

We could part ways in peace.

No drama.

No screaming.

But, as I looked closer, I noticed a tear in the corner of her eye. Leaving its edge, that tear streamed down the side of her nose. I parted my lips, her snuffle coming to confirm what my eyes were telling me.

“Hey,” I said with a whisper, my fingers tipping her chin up. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear.”

“You’re right. It’s not,” she agreed, lifting her eyes back up to mine. That redness in them... Man, it hurt. Bad. All that disappointment on her face shut me up for good. I wasn’t going to open my mouth—I had nothing to say. I felt my heart breaking, her labored breath the only sound in my ears for a few seconds. “Thank you, though.”

“Thank me?” I asked, her last sentence stunning me. “What for? Disappearing on you? Not calling you back?”

“For the memories,” she explained. “And for climbing up the fire escape to hide the fact that you were here. I can’t think of anyone else who would do that.”

I let out a quick laugh, trails of tears down her cheeks taking away my will to speak any further. Words felt so useless sometimes. This was one such case. I felt some moisture along the side of my thumb, her sad eyes continuing to gaze up into mine. That feeling made me want to hold her again. I snaked my arm around her neck and pulled her into my embrace, my fingers stopping over the back of her neck. I squeezed her figure in my arms, leaving a soft kiss on top of her head. I smelled her hair, wishing I’d done that weeks ago. Regret poured into my insides; I had screwed up with her big time. She locked her arms around my waist, more of her sniffles and sobs destroying the awkward silence. I sucked in a deep breath, easing my fingers out of that lush hair of hers. Kissing her forehead, I lowered my arms down to her hips and gave her a gentle push back.

“Take care.”

I offered her just two words, before setting my sights on the window I had come in from. I couldn’t give her anything more. Besides, I had delayed this long enough. I had done what I had set out to do. I had explained myself to her. Piper wouldn’t remember me as some selfish prick who’d just dumped her after one night in bed together. I didn’t know how she would remember me, but at least she wouldn’t be mad at me. In my mind, this simple truth made the climb up her fire escape worth it.

LEONARDO

THIS WAS HANDS DOWN THE MOST IMPORTANT MEETING WE'D ever had.

I was so tense that I couldn't even sit my ass down.

I just leaned against his kitchen counter while the two of us waited for Matteo to turn up.

I would have given pretty much everything I owned to know what was on Cesare's mind that night.

I often bragged about my ability to read people. Whether it was a guy or a woman, I could often tell by the look on their faces what they'd been thinking.

Not with Cesare.

That big son of a bitch had a great poker face. I couldn't recall a single time when his expression gave him away. Even though we managed to pull off that armored truck heist, one just couldn't know how he felt. Yes, he'd high fived me and Matteo and smiled, but that only lasted about seconds. After that, he went back to the same mysterious guy I'd known most of my life.

Serious.

Analytical.

Calculating.

He was all business.

When he went out to buy something from the local supermarket the next day, Matteo and I wondered if his cousin actually enjoyed all this. We couldn't find an answer, but we did come to a conclusion.

If he did enjoy whatever we'd been up to, he wasn't doing it like me and Matteo. He just wasn't made like that. He wasn't going to cheer, laugh and crack jokes after a success. He would share in the fun at first, and then, he would go back to what he did best.

Leading. Taking charge. Making split second decisions and acting on them.

Once Matteo had arrived, I felt my anticipation doubling inside me. He and I stood side by side while Cesare stepped around the armchair in his living room and faced us with a stone-cold look in his eyes.

"Before I tell you my decision, I want you to know I've hated the past week or so," he said, his tone calm. "We were all pretty edgy. We were all ready to rip each other's throat out, but I'm also glad that we didn't let things get out of hand. A fight would have fucked us up."

"Cut to the chase, will you?" I told him, growing all the more impatient.

"Guys, we need to face reality here," he advised, his gaze traveling from me to Matteo and back to me. "The Roselli family's got resources. We don't. So, if we want to stay alive, we have to work with them."

"Cesare..."

"I'm still talking here," he said, pointing up to his mouth. "I know you're going to bitch about them trying to kill us in Amanda's. Hell, I wanted to tear those motherfuckers apart when we met them in that warehouse. Right now, though, there our best chance at becoming members."

"How the *fuck* will we do that?" I asked, raising my voice. "The mob's trying to whack them, too."

"By beating the mob to it," he replied, his eyes sparkling with determination. "We take out our wannabe killers? We get the

respect we've been looking for. There's something else that makes me want to work with the Roselli family."

"Let me guess," Matteo suggested, his tone lazy. "Piper."

"Yeah."

And there it was.

For once, Mr. Ice Cold allowed me and Matteo to peek into his brain. How? By hanging his head and completely avoiding eye contact with us. Only he had done that for the wrong reason. Because I had something to say about this girl, too.

"The mob might try to get rid of her, just because she did her job when I got shot," I reminded him. "Whichever way you cut it, that's not fair."

"It's more than that, Leonardo," Cesare claimed, shifting his gaze up to look at me. "There was something going on between us. It didn't last for a number of reasons, but we did go out twice."

Matteo's lips curled into a smug smile as I stared at my friend with my mouth partially open. "I suspected as much. I'm going to be honest, too. I tried to fool around with her once. We kissed, but I didn't let things get out of control. Like I said, I'd been suspecting she fooled around with you, Cesare. I didn't want to steal her from you, man."

"Well, you didn't," Cesare pointed out. "It's okay. I didn't pursue her. She was free to fool around with anyone she wanted."

"Holy shit," I whispered, unable to even speak up. Those two hadn't just shared stuff. They had hit me with a fucking hammer, the size of their heads.

"Leonardo, what's wrong?"

"Every fucking thing," I grumbled, as I realized that our decades-long friendship might be on the verge on imploding.

"You...?"

"Fucked her?" I finished Cesare's question for him. "Yeah. I didn't know about you two, though. Right hand to god, I didn't

know shit. If I did, I wouldn't have touched her."

"Damn it," Cesare sighed, tearing his gaze away from me. Matteo cupped his chin, wearing an odd smile that had me puzzled.

"Am I amusing you or something?" I asked in a loud voice.

"We," he corrected me. "*We* are amusing me. I mean, that girl's been screwing around with all three of us for weeks, and we're *just* finding out about it. Not from her—from one of *us*."

"She shouldn't have done that," Cesare shared his opinion while I tapped my shoe on his floor. Unlike him, I wasn't good at hiding what I felt. "She shouldn't have come anywhere near you. When you date someone, you don't date his friends, even after things don't work out between you two. That's the code."

"I don't think women have that same code," Matteo interjected. "When I told her about it, she stared at me like I was speaking Chinese. I know I shouldn't have kissed her and I'm sorry. I was weak."

"I'm not going to hold it against you, man," Cesare said, before setting his gaze on me. "You? You should have been paying attention. You should have known I'd had a fling with her and backed off."

"How the *fuck* could I have known?" I asked him, furrowing my brow. "Ask my fucking magic eight-ball? I'm not regretting shit, man. You can be pissed all you like. I'm not going to say I'm sorry, because I'm not."

"To be fair, I ran into Piper outside your building a while back," Matteo spoke, tension speeding up his voice. "That's how I suspected there was something going on between you two. Leonardo couldn't have known—that's the truth."

"Maybe, but we still have to talk to Piper," Cesare argued, a knock on his door not allowing him to say anything more.

Up until that point, I believed that the biggest surprise of the night was his decision to work with Maggie Owens-Roselli's crew.

I was wrong.

The one who'd knocked was none other than the head of that family. She looked like a million dollars as usual, dressed in a fancy, purplish dress, high heels and a white coat thrown over her back. The only thing missing was her signature polite smile. The sullen look in her eyes and her dead-serious expression could speak volumes. This time, she was in no mood for a casual conversation. She meant business...

"Good evening, everybody," she greeted us by tipping her head down, her quick footsteps sending her to the middle of the living room. "Thank you for the invite, Mr. Borelli. I really want to believe you thought about my proposal and your answer is 'yes.' Please, don't let me down."

"It is," Cesare said, passing her by. "Fair warning, though. If one of your boys steps out of line, I won't think twice about shooting him. Are we clear?"

"You needn't worry about that, but yes," she accepted with a nod. "My men will follow my orders to the letter. Anyway, I have some information for you. It proves that the organization has its hands on pretty much anything. Would you like to hear it?"

"I can't wait," Cesare spoke, standing beside me.

"The armored truck you robbed belongs to a casino chain owned by Atlas Construction, a conglomerate based in Las Vegas," she announced, her voice a tad louder. "The organization's been investing in construction for well over a hundred years. And, though no member sets foot in Vegas themselves, they rely heavily on the profit of those casinos. Atlas is run by a man named Howard Kanin. He's put a hit out on both you and my men. He says we failed to keep our end of the bargain, and you are a nuisance that has to be eliminated."

"What about Piper Briggs?" Matteo asked, flashing a sideways glance at me. "He's put out a hit on her, too?"

"I was just about to get to that," she claimed, her voice losing both volume and nerve. "I'm afraid the answer is 'yes.' Ms. Briggs is in grave danger. So is the doctor who patched you up, Cesare. They must be warned. I would have taken care of

that, but they don't know me or my crew. One of you must do this."

"You never told us she was your friend," Cesare complained. "Why? Is that some kind of big secret or something?"

"No. She was just irrelevant, until this morning," she responded. "That's when I got the information I just gave you. Gentlemen," she paused and reached into her purse. She pulled out a piece of paper with three names and phone numbers and handed it over to Cesare. "This is my men's contact information. Call them and have them meet you. Whatever personal feelings you have for them, now is the time to set them aside. Goodnight."

"Thank you," Cesare offered her a nod of gratitude and walked her back to his door, Matteo and I eyeing each other in silence.

"I think we all know who we're paying a visit ASAP," Matteo said, shuffling off.

"Yeah," I murmured, my friend looking back at me. "Just so you know, I've already told her she could be targeted, so, this won't really shock her."

"Come on. Let's go," Cesare requested, gesturing me closer. "I'm calling her from the car—she might be at work."

The echo from his front door fading into nothingness, the three of us waited for the elevator. This wasn't how I'd imagined my next meeting with Piper. It would involve just her and me and no one else. But that had been on my mind, until the moment I heard what she'd been up to with Cesare and Matteo. After that, any ideas for my next date with her went down the drain. Now, she had to know about the danger to her life, along with how much her little games had upset me.

PIPER

“HE’S STABLE.”

The entire room breathed a collective sigh of relief.

A hit-and-run victim had demanded our full, undivided attention. At just twenty-six, this man had to be saved. Fatalities in those cases hit hard. Whenever someone too young passed on, most of my colleagues were too distraught to utter a word for days. So was I. Their families demanded answers, but we could handle them. Losing someone in their prime was very difficult to deal with. Knowing that a person with their whole life ahead of them died on our watch.

I left the OR, my body craving some caffeine. Not because I wasn’t already on edge, but because I considered a hot cup of coffee my reward. Taking a few minutes to calm my nerves, all the while sipping some cappuccino was how I had survived three years as an ER nurse.

However, as I headed for the elevator down the hall, a glance at the entrance effectively ruined my plans for a cup of coffee.

Matteo, Cesare, and Leo were in the opposite direction, alongside one another, their gazes fixed on me.

Waves of cold sweat washed over me. For a moment, I thought I was having a bad dream. They had to have known. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have shown up together. I also figured out why Cesare had texted me so late at night. With him just fifteen feet from my spot, I realized I shouldn’t have answered at all. I should have avoided typing “work” on my cell phone.

“I am *so* busy,” I emphasized, turning around.

Too late... They all passed me by and came to a halt just inches away, staring down at me.

“Boys, isn’t Ms. Briggs an ER nurse?” Cesare posed a question, not taking his eyes off of me.

“Yep.”

“Do you see an emergency around here? Because I don’t,” he declared, curling his index finger towards me.

“No emergencies,” Matteo spoke, looking back over his shoulder. “Things seem pretty quiet from where I’m standing.”

“Take us to that locker room of yours.” Cesare demanded. “And lock the door when we get there.”

My initial reaction was to complain. It was well after midnight, and I was at work. I knew they had a lot to say to me, most of which was bad. They could have waited until the next day. Calling security crossed my mind as well. Yet, I rejected that idea very fast indeed. Those three could—and probably would—overpower security guards. Quite soon, they would pick a fight and make some serious noise. This would be a nightmare. My colleagues would get curious. They would find out why the trio was making a fuss and blame me.

So, I decided to play along, in the hope that my explanations would prevent them from lashing out at me.

I closed my eyes and turned the key in the lock in that dressing room, afraid to face them.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Piper,” Cesare was the first one to speak up. “You played us. You played a bunch of three street guys. Not many people can do that.”

“I don’t think I played anyone,” I disagreed, finding the courage to turn around. “You’re friends; maybe I shouldn’t have fooled around with all of you, but play you? No. I *never* did that.”

“You expect us to believe that?” Leo banged his palm into a locker door behind him. “Cesare’s my fucking best friend! You should have told me you’d gone out with him!”

“Yeah, I should have,” I admitted with a. “That was my mistake and I have no problem owning up to it. But you can’t just stand there and accuse me of playing you. Cesare,” I paused and turned my attention over to him. “Did you call me after we’d slept together?”

He exhaled long and hard, averting his gaze from me. “No.”

“Matteo...” I called out his cousin’s name and took two steps closer to him. “You tried to seduce me. Honestly? I really liked our kiss. We could have gone all the way that day. Maybe not in the men’s room, but in my apartment or yours. You had my number, too. Did you use it to ask me on a date?”

“No.”

“Leo.” I finally shifted my gaze up to his. “We had some fun together, too. What happened afterwards? Because I don’t remember you contacting me in any way.”

“That’s true,” he said, lowering his voice.

“There you have it, then,” I stated, gesturing at Leo. “Casual fun. That’s it. Nothing exclusive. Nothing permanent. All three of you could have pursued something more with me. None of you did. So, take your insults and...”

“Don’t say it,” Matteo interrupted me. “You might regret it. You’re in a tough spot, sweet pea. We all are. We may deserve it, but you don’t.”

“Elaborate, please,” I urged, a throbbing pain in my head making me wince.

“There’s a hit out on you.”

Prior to hearing Leo’s theory, this information would have shocked me to my core. Still, although I hated it, I wasn’t really surprised. I had helped the wrong people. I had provided a helping hand to men who had been doing their best to provoke organized crime. This “hit” as they called it, would be my punishment...

“That’s what I get for doing my job,” I uttered in a somewhat shaky voice. “Why would I regret saying what I had in mind?”

“Look,” Matteo said, his tone calm. “Cesare told us tonight that he wanted to work with a bunch of mobsters. I’m not going to lie to you—I didn’t like that. But, seeing as you could get killed for just helping us out, I’m willing to do it. It wouldn’t be fair for you to pay for our mistakes, Piper.”

“I wanted to shoot those pricks; I really did,” Leo confessed, softening his tone. “But I’ll bite the bullet and work with them if that’s what it takes to keep you safe.”

“The same goes for me,” Cesare put some force in his voice, looking at me with a bright-eyed look. “Your safety was a big factor in my decision to work with a bunch of people that tried to take me and my boys out.”

“Oh, my god...” I whispered, waves of utter confusion smashing around me. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I stared at them, one at a time, my mouth agape. They were going to shield me, for all my mistakes. I had made some—I couldn’t lie to myself. I hadn’t led them to believe we were exclusive, but I hadn’t exactly been honest with them, either.

“You look like you just saw Godzilla in the flesh,” Matteo remarked. “Say something.”

“Like what?” My heart fluttered in my chest. “Thank you? How could I ever thank you for what you want to do for me?”

“We dragged you into this,” Cesare pointed out. “We didn’t mean to, but this doesn’t change the truth. We should be the ones to get you out of this mess, alive and in one piece.”

“Oh,” I huffed out, starting off towards them. I threw my arms forward, in my attempt to hold just one of them. I must have looked quite ridiculous... I needed to be six or seven inches taller to have any hope of closing my arms around one of them. Before I knew it, I was snuggled up against a broad chest, with six, masculine arms over my back. A gentle squeeze intensified that enormous sense of security, my heartbeat slowing with each passing second. Even after the revelation of that hit, I wasn’t feeling scared. On the contrary, I was peaceful. Aware that those three would gamble their own lives, in order to protect me.

CESARE

IT WAS UNBELIEVABLE HOW PEOPLE COULD AMAZE ME.

Even the ones I had known all my life, like Matteo and Leonardo.

Nevertheless, Piper was the one who had blown me away the most.

I considered myself smart. Able to analyze situations by using my brain. And, once I'd left that hospital, I felt beaten.

By her.

She had destroyed me. Rejecting my accusations was one thing. Anybody could do that. Proving my mistake to me was a whole different matter. I was really struck by how she had managed to maintain her composure and offer me her counterargument. She had a point, while I felt like I had made a complete fool of myself. How the hell could I have been so wrong? Was it pressure that had blinded me like that? Was it stress? Or was something else at play? I didn't know. Worse still, I didn't wish to delve deeper into this.

We had more urgent matters to take care of. My pride could wait.

We had to have a sit-down with Maggie's men.

I never thought I'd be in this position. Planning a meeting with a group of wise guys who had stormed into a bar, guns blazing? If anyone had told me this about a month ago, I would have laughed in their faces and told them to get lost.

Now, this was the only way forward. The only thing we could do, to make sure that we didn't get whacked by another crew.

After a lengthy exchange of texts, we agreed to meet on Roselli's turf. Nowhere near Brooklyn and far away from typical mob hangouts, that two-story building housed Maggie's office. I found myself admiring her idea. That woman had brains. Knowing she had to stay away from crappy neighborhoods, she had chosen Upper East Side to run the shelter next to her building. Of course, wise guys could get to her there if they wanted. Yet, this place had everything a spot in Brooklyn just didn't have.

Peace.

Prestige.

An average nobody wouldn't suspect that the heir to one of the most notorious gangsters in New York was the only tenant of that building.

We found Rocco, Julian, and Slater in the waiting room outside the office, enjoying whiskey over a casual chat. In the few moments it took us to join them, I realized how valuable their experience was. Those three were acting like they were about to go for a walk in the park. Definitely not how to take down someone who had ordered their death.

"Evening," Rocco greeted us in a gruff voice, screwing the cap back on. "You're a pain in my ass, boys. Ever since you showed up, a lot of bad things have been happening to me and my crew. That hit's the fucking icing on the cake."

"DeLuca, shut up and hear me out for a change," I snarled, casting a nasty glare over at him. "None of us is exactly thrilled to be in the same room as you. When I mentioned that I wanted to work with you to my guys, they fucking *hated* it. But, seeing as we've got a common enemy and your boss is scared of losing you, I thought we should suck it up and do it. You don't want us here? All you have to do is say the word and we'll be out of your hair in no time."

"I wish," he spoke in a lazy tone, resuming his seat across from the empty couch. Leonardo, Matteo, and I sitting down

on it, I leaned forward. “Have either of you been to Vegas?”

“I have,” Leonardo said, raising his hand a little over his head.

“It was a long time ago, though. Why?”

“That’s where our target is,” Rocco revealed, Matteo handing him a large building schematic. “Atlas Construction is just off Vegas Boulevard. We’re talking about a twelve-story building, with similar size buildings all around it. Raiding it in broad daylight is fucking suicide. The cops will be all over us before we can say ‘gun.’”

“What about Kanin’s house?” I asked, unwilling to look at the schematic just yet. “Why don’t we try that one? Besides, the chances of him being at work after dark are pretty slim, aren’t they?”

“His house is in Centennial Hills,” Julian interjected. “It’s not that far from the city, but it’s a magnet for rich CEOs like Kanin. Security vans patrol the streets twenty-four-seven, not to mention cop presence is strong in the area.”

“Then, how are we going to get him?” Matteo asked, his voice louder than usual. “You just said we can’t pay him a visit during working hours.”

“Yeah. We need a hook,” Rocco concluded, eyeing me and then Matteo. “That’s where his son Graham comes in. You see, Graham’s a fucking sex maniac. He parties with hookers almost every day. I’ll go over to Neon Tassels; it’s a strip club just on Vegas Boulevard and hire a couple of strippers. They won’t come cheap, and they won’t like it, but when money talks...”

“Bullshit walks,” I finished his sentence. “So, we kidnap Graham to lure Howard into his company building? That’s the plan? What about his men? He must have a security detail.”

“They won’t lift a finger, man,” Rocco answered, his face stiff. “Engaging us will put Graham’s life in jeopardy and Howard knows that. Julian and Slater will get you in the building. When you’re in, wait for me. Any questions?”

Silence followed Rocco’s last words.

To me, everything was nice and simple.

I rose back up on my feet and offered him my hand for a handshake. To my satisfaction, there was no hesitation on his part. He shook hands with me, for once not eyeing me like I was a worthless piece of shit.

“Be prepared for anything and everything, Borelli,” he advised. “Those sons of bitches are ruthless. If you’re not ready to pull the fucking trigger, you’d better keep out of this.”

“We’re ready as ever,” I assured, my thumb pressing into the side of his palm.

“Good,” he praised with a nod. “We leave tomorrow morning. Be here at seven. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us. No planes. Kanin’s got people at airports all over the country. We don’t want them to tip him off about our visit.”

I turned away from Rocco, Julian and Slater, a sense of optimism rising within me. We were going to come face-to-face with the man who wanted our heads on a silver platter. Of course, about a million things could go wrong during that operation. But, this time, my boys and I wouldn’t be alone. We’d have experience on our side and twice the manpower. Deep down, I hoped that these two factors would be enough to help us stay alive. To help us get rid of the threat on our lives for good.

PIPER

I'M SENDING A COUPLE OF BODYGUARDS OVER TO YOUR PLACE TO pick you up. Pack a bag. You'll be staying with me for a few days.

I blinked rapidly after reading Maggie's text.

At first, I considered texting her back to state my surprise. We had gone from hardly seeing each other to roommates. How? Besides, shouldn't she have asked me first? I wasn't some kid she could order around. I was her friend.

However, it took me about two minutes to realize that this couple of sentences made all the sense in the world. Maggie wasn't a barmaid anymore. She was a millionaire. She had become one of the city's most prominent benefactors. If there was one person in New York capable of protecting me, it was her. I could have no doubt about that.

Stacking up clothing items in my brown suitcase, I couldn't help but smile at one of fate's whims. Not so long ago, Maggie was buying me drinks at her bar, all the while complaining about not being able to practice law. We'd go over her life story every once in a while, trying to determine where she had gone wrong. Those conversations usually ended with laughs and some more alcohol. I'd tell her something like: "Don't worry, honey. Good things are coming to you. Trust me. I know." She would then dismiss me with a sad smile and rub the top of my head. This was her way of telling me "thanks for being there, but I know you're making this up to help me feel

good about myself.” Now, Maggie Owens was a mother and had enough money to buy my entire block.

Though I’d been to her Brownstone in Brooklyn, I’d never seen the mansion her biological father had owned. It was in Sands Point, well away from Manhattan. Located near the beach, its iron gate opened into a wide driveway, lined with palm trees. Each of those had to be over sixty feet tall. I saw dozens of leaf needles on the lawn as her limo rolled to a gentle halt close to her front door. Right in front of it, Maggie had her baby girl in her arms. Little Emily was so cute. She had red, chubby cheeks and short curly hair. Her mother had her hand across her stomach as the child stared at me with her index finger in her mouth.

“Hey!” she sang, literally beaming with joy. “Welcome to my humble home.”

“Humble,” I chuckled, my eyes on her daughter. “God, she’s grown up! And she’s so cute I could bite her little cheek!”

“I know, right?” She laughed, the two of us strolling inside.

“Wow,” I muttered, looking up at the high ceiling. I lowered my gaze to the wall across from me. There was a portrait of my friend, amongst a number of oil paintings. She was in a red bikini, leaning against her shoulder, with a wide-frame window in the backdrop. “You’ve done so well for yourself, honey. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, but it was a fluke, Piper,” she maintained, handing her son to his babysitter. “I just realized I’ve never told you the truth about my inheritance. Why don’t you have a seat? Believe me; you need to sit down to hear what I have to tell you.”

Her little speech piqued my interest.

I did know she had inherited a fortune. Her mother had kept from her the fact that her biological father was a gangster. Once her brother died, she was his only heir.

Nevertheless, as I listened to her story, I discovered that I’d only had bits of the truth. Maggie was right. This was a fluke indeed. Nothing of this would have been made possible

without the courage and the tenacity of the three men who used to work for her deceased brother. They pursued the truth and made Nick Roselli pay for his crimes and his intent to have his own sister murdered. By the time she finished her narrative, I was dumbfounded and in desperate need of some fresh air. I excused myself and walked out into her porch. The scent of the sea rushing into my nostrils, I watched the waves roll in and out, before her light footsteps filled my ears.

“I know it’s wrong to speak ill of the dead, but your brother was an asshole,” I said, clutching the railing in front of me. “He was hell-bent on killing you. Thank god for Rocco, Julian, and Slater. You’d be dead if it wasn’t for them.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, halting on my right. “They risked pretty much everything to keep me safe. Say, does that sound familiar to you? Just a little bit?”

“Stop teasing me,” I urged, taking my eyes off of the ocean to offer her a sideways glance. “I’m sure you know about Cesare and Leo, so, I’m not going to bother telling you about them.”

“I do, but what about Matteo, too?” She posed a question, her raised eyebrow illustrating her want to hear more about him. “He was the first one I met. He struck me as an intelligent man. He’s very handsome as well.”

“If you must know, yes, we’ve kissed,” I revealed, unable to keep a smile from bursting across my face. “But that’s it. If he’d bothered flirting with me a little more, I would probably have gone all the way with him, too. His big brains you mentioned are a big turn-on, but he stuck to his man code and kept his distance from me.”

“Sweetheart, I really hope you get what I have with Rocco, Julian. and Slater,” she stated, her voice stinking with excitement. “Anything I say can’t do it justice. The love, the closeness, and don’t even get me started on the sex. You’ll feel like you’re in your own, sexy chunk of heaven. A *big* chunk to be exact.”

“Who knows?” I rolled my shoulders, my mind drifting to the trio. “Where are your...?”

“Taking care of business,” she replied before I even got to finish my question. “Let’s just leave it at that. They’ll be working with your boys, just this once. I hope they all play nice. I don’t want to imagine what’s going to happen if their huge egos get in the way.”

“That makes two of us, but that’s not my biggest fear,” I confessed, my tone weakening. “Danger. That’s what gives me the creeps.”

“Danger had that effect on me, too,” Maggie went on. “Especially at the beginning.”

“How did you handle it?”

“I’m *still* handling it,” she emphasized. “They may not be doing anything illegal right now, but they still have to answer to some powerful figures in the mafia world. I just treat that danger as part of their job, Piper. It comes with the territory. I just had to get used to it. You should do that, too.”

“I’ll try,” I told her, focusing back on the rough sea. I watched the waves roar in, wondering if I’d ever be able to find that kind of strength in me. To consider peril as part of their everyday routine. For now, all I could do was put my hands together and pray that none of them got hurt. I hoped that god would look past their sins and shield them from their enemies. I knew how selfish this was, but, at this point, my life depended on them. On a bunch of aspiring crime lords.

MATTEO

DRIVING ALL THE WAY TO SIN CITY.

It should have been great.

A wonderful road trip, filled with laughs, amazing roads, awesome food and some sightseeing. Sure, there would be a few sleazy motels along the way, but that would be just a minor detail. A hiccup in the whole thing. It would make a good story to tell in the future.

Well, it wasn't.

Leonardo's obsession with Vegas came back with a vengeance. Not that it had gone anywhere really. It had just been slipping my mind these past few weeks. I had been too busy with other stuff to dwell on Leonardo's damn love affair of the city of slots, blackjack, poker and all things gambling. I could understand a visit to a casino, although I wasn't stupid. The saying about casinos was as old as the dust in that desert around Vegas.

The house always wins.

Yeah, but there was nothing wrong with someone trying to beat the house in their own game. The thrill was just too big to ignore. For some degenerate gamblers, that thrill was so irresistible that it could bankrupt them in a matter of hours. Even so, I wouldn't mind trying my luck in a casino, just for the hell of it.

But, in Leonardo's mind, one casino was just the beginning. He'd been meaning to hit each and every one of those. It

would take him days to do so, but he was going to love every minute of it. So, during that long drive, the man wouldn't shut up about his plan to win in pretty much every game available to him. There were times when I thought I was listening to a ten-year-old. He sounded like he knew every trick in the book and was going to outsmart dealers and machines alike. And I would have loved to yell in his face once or twice, had it not been for my conversations with Cesare. More often than not, we would get to talk about Howard Kanin and his role in the recent developments with Maggie's crew. Those chats had quite an effect on Leonardo, too. They shut him up and sparked his interest in the task at hand. It should have been on his mind in the first place, but this was Leonardo. A visit to his most favorite city in America had messed with his head too much to ignore it.

Almost three days after we'd set off from the Big Apple, Cesare's Torino crossed the city limits. I did expect Leonardo to get all excited when he saw that famous sign:

Welcome to: Fabulous

Las Vegas

Nevada

Thankfully, he proved me wrong. He just whistled at the city lights and pointed up ahead. Once Cesare had left Las Vegas Boulevard, he lost his appetite to comment on the sparkly view of Sin City.

As we neared the Atlas Construction building, it dawned on me that Rocco DeLuca had made a very good point. There were skyscrapers all around us. Skyscrapers meant people, and people equaled witnesses. Attempting to go anywhere near Kanin in the middle of the day would get us all thrown in a jail cell.

Cesare following Julian's car, we left the main road. The head of Maggie's security pulled over, the Atlas building on our left. It was large and wide, much like most buildings in downtown Manhattan. The lobby was dark and empty. I looked up at the windows on each floor. There were no lights on whatsoever.

Just after 2:30am, I looked in the rearview mirror. There were still cars rolling up and down the road behind us. It wasn't exactly a traffic jam, but it wasn't what I'd call "light traffic." Julian and Slater jogging over to the side entrance, my boys and I joined them.

"I just got a call from Rocco," Julian said and rolled his mask down his face. "We left him at Neon Tassels about an hour ago. He hired those strippers and he just arrived at Graham's place."

"Good," I commented, pulling my backpack off my shoulder. "Boys, you might want to stand back. Form a circle around me; I don't want passersby to see what I'm doing here."

“What’s that?” Slater asked, the moment I held the laser cutter in my grasp.

“Our way in,” I spoke, holding the cutter vertical to the glass. At the push of the button on top, a red laser beam struck the surface, causing a tiny puff of smoke to rise from the glass. I held the cutter steady, starting to draw a large circle. The smell of burning glass getting stronger and stronger, I saw the men’s reflection. Julian and Slater were standing next to one another on my left, with Cesare and Leonardo right behind me. The laser beam completing a full circle, I used the device to push the glass back. That chunk dropped to the floor with a thump, my ears catching the buzz of a cell phone.

“Not bad,” Julian commented, Slater holding his phone up to his ear.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got Graham.”

“Sweet. How long till you get here? We’re going in now.”

“Good. Ten minutes or so.”

I put the laser cutter back in my backpack and zipped it up. I crouched through the hole, for a moment considering using the flashlight in my pocket. There wasn’t much light in there. The light pole right across the street provided little illumination. I could hardly make out the grouts in between the tiles as I straightened myself out. Yet even a single beam of light could give away our presence. So, when I reached the far side of that lobby, I pulled my mask down my face while Leonardo set his bag down on the floor.

“Here,” he said, slamming a rifle into my palm.

“Over there,” Julian spoke, pointing at a closed door down the hall and to the right.

We jogged off, heavy footsteps resounding through the lobby, the faint noise of cars passing by coming through the glass façade. Being the last one to enter that storage room, I kept the door open. My side to the four guys behind me, I stood by the pane and looked out. A car’s headlights washing across the road, I turned to Julian.

“They’re here,” I said, my voice a little more than a whisper.

The headlights switched off, and Rocco’s large figure stepped out and reached the rear door. In a matter of seconds, he was dragging a smaller man towards the hole in the glass. Thrashing and kicking, hands bound together, that man attempted to break free from the vise-like grip around his neck.

It wasn’t going to happen.

Rocco tossed him through the hole, making him struggle to retain his footing. Grabbing him by the back of his neck, I signaled to him, Graham’s muffled cries reaching my ears.

“Boys, I’d like you to meet a good friend of mine,” Rocco announced, before I pushed the door shut behind them. I pressed the light switch on the wall and shut my eyes for a second; the lush illumination was too much. Undoing the knot on the scarf around his head, Rocco pressed his elbow into Graham’s chest.

“Say ‘hello’ to my friends, rich boy.”

“Hello,” Graham spoke in a faint voice, his wet, brown locks sticking to his forehead. Sweat was dripping down either side of his neck, his chest rising and falling fast and hard.

“Graham here lived up to his rep tonight,” Rocco said, a sarcastic smile on his face. “When those two girls rang his bell, he went wild. He invited them in right away. I was hiding right behind them.”

“Where’s his daddy?” I asked, the idea of spending more time goofing off with Howard’s boy not exactly thrilling me.

“We called him on the way,” Rocco replied. “He should be here any minute. “He should be here any minute. And he knows calling the cops will get his boy whacked.”

At that point, the noise of tires squealing to a halt made me grab the doorknob. I yanked the door open, and spotted a black Mercedes right behind the car Rocco had arrived in. A taller man exited that Benz and headed for the entrance. He shoved the key in the lock, Leonardo and Slater whooshing past me.

“Where are you? Where is my son?!” He cried out, those two gripping his wrists and yanking him back. I walked out of that room, aiming at his head.

“Hey, Howard,” I smirked, approaching him at a quick pace. “Your boy’s with us. You know, the two crews you tried to blow up in a bar in Brooklyn.”

“What?!” Howard yelled, Leonardo and Slater leading him to the room we had been in.

“Don’t play dumb, old man,” Rocco grumbled, pinning Graham against the wall with an elbow to his chest. “We know it was you who put out the fucking hit.”

“All right! All right!” Howard exclaimed, holding his arms over his head. “Yeah, I did. Your crew had fucked up, DeLuca. You’d let these nobodies steal from me. You let them off with a warning the first time they tried ripping me off. I couldn’t have that.”

I stayed out of the room and threw a glance over my shoulder, Cesare’s snarls rising above Graham’s heavy breathing.

“You’re *goddamn* right we stole from you, you *fucking prick*.”

Kanin should have been terrified.

All alone, surrounded by six, armed men, and with his son being held at gunpoint should have scared the crap out of him.

Nope.

My eyes staying on the road outside, I heard him chuckle. I shifted my attention back to him in surprise. He had his hands in his pockets, his gaze on Cesare as my cousin stood inches from his spot, trying to intimidate him with his sheer size.

“You’ll fucking regret that, Borelli,” Kanin said, smiling up at him. “That *and* tonight.”

Right at the end of his sentence, a sense of worry tied my stomach into knots. I felt the back of my neck tightening, my ears picking up noises of screeching tires. A glance outside revealed why Kanin seemed so relaxed. Two cars pulled up behind his Benz. Eight men burst out, rifles in their grasp as they sprinted towards the open entrance.

“Nobody fucking move!” Cesare’s voice roared like thunder as he led Howard Kanin out of the room. Kanin’s neck locked in the crook of my cousin’s elbow, he clutched Cesare’s forearm, the two of them coming to a stop a few inches behind me. “Drop the shit, bitches! Now!” He ordered, shoving the barrel of his rifle into Kanin’s temple.

“Don’t listen to him!” He spoke through gritted teeth, his lower jaw hardly moving in Cesare’s powerful grip. “Shoot him! Kill them all!”

His men looked at each other, their weapons pointing at us.

“Put your guns down!” Graham cried out, Rocco holding his hands together as they left the room.

I shook my head in disappointment, witnessing those men’s next reaction.

There was nothing different in it.

They still stared at each other in silence, wondering whose orders to follow.

“Cesare,” I whispered, taking a short sideways step towards him. “We can’t let them leave this place alive.”

“I know,” he said with a quick nod. “Stand back.”

I obeyed his order, my gaze dropping to Kanin’s shaking head. Cesare turned his head right to face Rocco, the barrel of his gun stretching Graham’s light-blue t-shirt. Rocco turning his own head left, my cousin thrust his arm up to the back of Graham’s head.

A simple nod later, Cesare pulled back the hammer of his gun, as Julian, Slater and Leonardo rushed out of the room, their rifles aiming at Kanin’s men.

Two, consecutive gunshots crackled through the lobby. Father and son fell to the deck on their knees, our enemies opening fire. I dropped to my knees to give them a smaller target, eight muzzle flashes erupting from our rivals’ rifles. Cesare tossed his head back, his left leg jerking to the side. A bullet ripped through his pants, leaving a bloody mark on his skin as I

aimed at the man closest to me. Three of my shots hit his chest, causing him to reel back.

Leonardo stormed past me, holding up two guns and letting out a tremendous cry. In the meantime, Rocco was lying down on his chest, using his left hand to prop Kanin's body up. Holding him by the shoulder, he used him as a shield as he went on to empty his gun.

Lunging towards his nearest foe, Leonardo forced me to get closer. His rival's rifle falling from his grasp, it tumbled to the floor with my friend landing on top of him. His left arm just over the guy's head, he let go of his gun. He bent his arm at the elbow and shoved his forearm into the guy's neck, raising his other gun over his foe's mouth. The light coming through the glass illuminating the side of his face, Leonardo pulled the trigger. A rifle clicking empty, I lifted my gaze, only to spot someone hurtling towards me. I didn't have time to react. A huge sense of pressure on my chest knocked me off balance. I landed flat and hard on my back, deep growls rushing through my ears. We rolled over across the floor, more bullet crackles bouncing off the walls of that lobby. I threw my hand down to my waist, my fingertips brushing into the wooden handle of my knife. I yanked it out, my fingers locking around that handle. In a snap, with him lying on his side for a brief moment, I shoved the blade into his gut. I heard him gag, the two of us close to the glass façade.

I pulled out the knife, blood dripping off its edge. The little light was enough for me to see the fear all over his face. His green eyes were wide open, a cough shaking his chest. Coughing up blood, it smeared the stubble under his bottom lip. He reached up to my knife-wielding hand, in a last attempt to avoid his fate. His grip was too weak. His fingers brushed my wrist, before his arm fell to the ground. I wasn't going to spare him. Hell, no. I held the knife vertical to his neck and shoved it into his skin, more blood gushing out of his wound.

Only then did I realize the shallowness of my breath. I rolled over on my back and lifted my head up just enough to take off my mask, Cesare standing just three feet away from me. His gun pointing down to the floor, smoke was still rising from the

barrel. He loosened his grip around it and let it fall down, before shuffling off.

“Balls of steel,” he praised, offering me his hand. I slammed my palm into his and let him pull me back up, my gaze landing on his—still bleeding—thigh.

“Are you all right?”

“It’s just a scratch,” he said as Leonardo, Rocco, Julian and Slater gathered around us.

“Time to haul ass,” Rocco spoke as I looked around me. Howard and Graham Kanin were lying on their chest, not moving. Eight more men were scattered across the hall, their bodies riddled with bullet holes.

That was all I had the chance to see.

Rocco was right. This hadn’t been a subtle incident. Nothing had been taken care of quietly. Someone had to have called the cops. Hundreds of bullets had been fired in that lobby. That building would soon be crawling with men and women in uniform. So, we crawled out of that hole in the glass and made a run for our cars. Adrenaline was still shooting through my veins. My victim’s image was still swirling around in my head. His gagging. His shock. The fear that had taken over him. Even the echoes of the bullets in my ears hadn’t faded yet. Back in Rocco’s Torino, I cupped my drenched forehead, believing my heart was going to explode. It was pounding like a damn war drum. But, when that powerful motor came into life, I smiled to myself. It was small; I didn’t think anybody would even notice it on my face, but it was there. We had won that war.

LEONARDO

WELL AWAY FROM THE SPARKLY CITY LIGHTS, I LOOKED BACK through the rear windscreen.

And it felt good.

Hell, it felt fucking great.

I couldn't believe it, but I was happy to leave Vegas. It was about the last place in the world I wanted to be in.

Probably because sticking around meant that cops would crawl up our ass. Nothing was certain, but it was a possible scenario. None of us liked the idea of talking to those sons of bitches. We were all just dying to drive back to New York.

And that drive felt like heaven on earth.

Unlike the one to Vegas, it just didn't feel like it took forever. Hours upon hours just flew by, with me and my boys all smiles and making jokes about the fuckers we had just wasted. About a situation where we had come out on top. We had done something big. We had taken out a mob boss—an important member of the organization. After a vicious gunfight in that lobby, Kanin and his boy were dead, and we were not.

Stopping at one of those shitty motels on our way, I realized we had an extra reason to feel good for ourselves.

Rocco and his crew stopped being dicks. Our contribution to the whole operation made them talk nicer to us. They had more than a few niceties for us, like:

“You kicked some serious ass back there.”

“That thing where you charged them with both guns blazing? It showed a lot of guts.”

“Stabbing that prick in the neck to finish him off? Brutal. That’s what a true gangster would do.”

I also loved Matteo’s take on this.

“That’s just the beginning, man. We mean something to them now. We’ve got their respect.”

This meant so much.

A mob crew looked up to us. Word would spread, and soon, the whole organization would do the same.

I repeated that about a hundred times in my head, because I was having a hard time believing it.

I hadn’t known respect. Ever.

Other than the two guys I’d been tight with since I was knee-high to a goose, nobody else respected me. No one would say: “I know Leonardo Turner. He’s a badass. He doesn’t take shit from anybody.”

Hearing a seasoned crew talk me up was like having Scarlett Johansson call me “smoking hot.” *That’s* how fantastic it felt.

Most of all, though, it wasn’t their comments that made me feel so good. It was the prospect of all those crews discussing me and my boys. The story of us getting rid of the Kanin’s and their crew would be on everyone’s lips. This was priceless. We had been busting our butts for months to accomplish this. We had toiled away, we had bled, we had come face-to-face with death, but we had done it.

Three days later, we were back in New York. Tired more than ever and having spent a night out in the fields. The plumbing in the last motel we’d tried to stay in was broken, so we had to improvise.

Our plan was to head back to Brooklyn. We would then contact Piper and ask to meet with her.

But Rocco’s text made us think twice.

*Piper's over at Maggie's mansion in Sands Point. Follow us.
We'll take you there.*

And here I thought things couldn't get any better.

The idea of seeing where Maggie lived didn't throw my socks off. Too much luxury never really did it for me.

The prospect of seeing Piper without planning a meeting first?

Yeah.

I loved that.

I was tired of driving to Manhattan and back, especially during rush hour. If a drive was what it took to see her again, I would take it. I just couldn't wait to see the look in her eyes. To hug her again. Of course, I wouldn't be the only one to do that, but I didn't care. There would be time for us to talk about our personal issues in the future. Taking care of our enemies had bought us that time.

PIPER

“THEY’VE DONE IT.”

Three words.

Three words that had me staring at Maggie, my face having twisted into a mixed expression of joy and amazement.

I burst out in cheers and a long fit of laughter, giving her a long, tight hug. My friend hugged me back, her own reaction more restrained than mine. Beaming with joy, she kept on smiling, claiming that she didn’t doubt them for a second.

She was lying through her teeth.

Unbeknownst to her, when I went to my bedroom the night before, I watched her through the window. I couldn’t help it. It had a clear, unobstructed view to the living room. The lights were on until almost 3 pm. Maggie hadn’t even attempted to hide from me. She had drawn the curtains to the side. For hours that night, she kept pacing up and down, always holding a glass of vodka.

In spite of that little lie, I wasn’t going to argue with her. There was no point in engaging in arguments. We both had what we wanted. So what if she’d lied? It wasn’t like it hurt anyone, was it?

Out on her porch, we were enjoying the glorious shades of pink, orange and red up in the clear sky, when Cesare’s green Torino rolled up to the power gate. I jumped from my seat, feeling the need to run over to him, Matteo and Leonardo.

However, as I abandoned Maggie's porch, it occurred to me that I had a problem.

Choosing.

I had no idea who to hug and kiss first.

Regardless of our history, they had all done something noble.

They had destroyed the people who'd been trying to kill me and them alike.

So, as they emerged from Cesare's car, I was still debating. Would it be him? Matteo? Or Leo?

Regardless of my indecision, those three looked absolutely exhausted. Their usually energetic walking styles had disappeared. Their swaggers—especially Leo's—were gone. Out in Maggie's driveway, was a group of men who were finding it hard putting one foot in front of the other. Their eyes had shrunk due to sleep deprivation. They might have seemed peaceful and relaxed, but their outlook screamed their need for a rest.

"Welcome back," I told Cesare, since he was the one closest to me. "You look so worn out."

"It's good to be back," he uttered, his tone much slower than usual. "We didn't get much sleep last night. Our motel got flooded just after we'd checked in. We spent the night out in the countryside. In a tiny tent."

"Oh," I gasped out, catching Maggie out of the corner of my eye.

"Welcome to my home, gentlemen. It's great to see you again," she confessed, approaching Cesare from his left. "Now, I'd really love to hear what took place in Vegas, but it's clear to me you're too tired for that. So, I suggest you go get some sleep. My guest rooms are upstairs and they're at your disposal."

"Thank you." Cesare nodded in appreciation.

"I'll see you later, then," I told him, somewhat intrigued by this development. I hated to see those three like that. In spite of this, I liked the fact that we'd be under the same roof for the

remainder of the day. We'd get a chance to chat about their mission. I'd finally hear some details about their undertaking and how they'd managed to pull it off.

Better still, Maggie had mentioned an indoor pool, which I hadn't visited yet. It had crossed my mind to do so more than once. However, I didn't. It just felt wrong of me to indulge in something like that, while knowing that Cesare, Matteo and Leo were in grave danger. They would be engaging a bunch of gangsters, and I would be taking a swim? No. There was no way I would do that. I'd feel guilty before even dipping my foot into the water.

Hours later, I was in the basement of that enormous mansion. A double-sided door separated that pool from the rest of the basement. I pushed it open, the view up ahead bringing a smile to my face.

The calm surface of the pool seemed so appealing in the romantic illumination. Soft light from the four appliques on the walls was washing across that surface. It illuminated some parts of the water, while keeping others in the dark. In particular, the corners were fairly lit, and the space in between them was not.

I looked at myself in the glass façade across from me and took off my pink bathrobe. Halting just inches from the edge, I kept my legs together. I tucked in my chin and put my arms in position over my head. Rocking my forward, I glided in, my head crashing through the surface. Liquid coolness engulfing my entire figure, I kicked back to reach the other side of the pool. I lifted my head up and reemerged, before pushing my hair back from my face. I held on to the edge, my toes nudging the wall as I looked into the glass façade once more. Just then, a tall, masculine figure came through the wide door.

His sculpted body was in plain view.

In just a pair of black shorts, Matteo shuffled towards the pool, wearing a smile of contentment. I took a moment to marvel at his athletic figure. A figure I hadn't seen free of clothes so far. Frankly? I had been wondering what he had been hiding under those tight shirts.

Well, not anymore.

His complexion was just as dark as Cesare's. His upper and lower abs were so cut that I could count them. His chest muscles were heavily defined. In the dim illumination, his large shoulder muscles cast shadows down his arms.

"I thought I might find you here," he said, his voice putting an end to my visual feast.

"Hey, you," I smiled, extending my arms along the edge of the pool behind me. "Did you get any rest?"

He gave a quick chuckle. "Too much. I slept like a log. So, how have you been this past week?"

I giggled and shook my head in amusement. "Working as usual but feeling like a queen in this huge mansion. *I* should be asking *you*. How was it back there? Were you scared?"

"Everybody was—including me," he admitted. "We hadn't done anything similar, Piper," he added, his toes hanging over the edge of the pool. He hopped off, his massive body falling into the pool with a splash. Drops of water reaching my cheeks, I watched his head break through the surface, his black hair sticking to his forehead. Pushing it back, his eyes focused back on me. "I've been thinking about you."

"Really?" I cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah," he confirmed with a nod. "How you were caught in this. How they went after you for no reason. It just wasn't fair, you know?"

"Just that?" I asked, my smile staying on. "Because I seem to recall a certain man fitting your description trying to seduce me in the men's room of a café."

"Aren't you being a bit too flirty?" he answered with a question of his own. "For a woman who's slept with both of my friends?"

"It was a simple question, Matteo," I said, a touch of disappointment in my tone. "You want to answer it? Good. As for your buddies? I liked them and I have no regret over

sleeping with them. It's not my fault they didn't pursue me afterwards."

"I wouldn't ignore you like they did," he claimed, his gaze dipping down to my cleavage for a moment, before returning to my eyes. "I would have stayed in touch. You asked me a question earlier. You still want an answer?"

"Yes."

"On our way back, I kept thinking how much I wanted to finish that kiss," he stated, sending waves of excitement down my spine.

"What about the code?" I asked, remembering how he had freaked out on me.

"Screw the code," he said, his answer sharp. "I should have taken you back to my apartment that day. I've been regretting my decision ever since."

"To be honest, I've been thinking about you, too."

It was my turn for a confession.

"You decided to put your life on the line for me," I continued, stepping away from the edge. "That's the noblest thing anyone's ever done for me. You didn't have to, but..."

"I wanted to," he interrupted, shuffling closer. "That's why I did it."

Our gazes remained locked together, and I felt a huge desire to kiss him.

I didn't hold it back.

Maybe I should have since we were not in my place or his, but I didn't.

His long arms went around my waist and caressed my skin, before pulling me closer to him. Our bodies pressing together in the water, his lips surrounded mine in a long, fiery kiss. I sensed his muscled stomach against my skin, his fingers roaming across my lower back. I cupped his hips in eagerness, my mind flying back to our first kiss. It was in a cramped space. I could hardly move in there. It was also filled with

hastiness. There was just one thing these two kisses had in common:

Passion.

Matteo's lips surrounded mine, his breath washing over my chin as his hands traveled down my body. His fingers slid over the curve of my ass and squeezed, making me whimper. Shivers ran down my spine as he led me closer to the edge of the pool. I sensed the tiles on my lower back, before Matteo let go of my ass cheeks. In a swift move, he grabbed me by the hips and eased me up and out of the water. Drops rolling off my thighs and my feet, he set me down on the floor. I leaned forward, staring down at his handsome face. I curled my legs around his neck, my calves rubbing into his stubble. His mouth landing on my left one, I put my hands down and leaned on them.

His gentle bites were ever so delightful. Little by little, his mouth went up my leg, taking my flesh between his teeth. His hands squeezed my outer thighs and pulled my legs apart, his hot breath warming my cool skin. He undid the knot over my hip and pulled my panties aside, exposing my slit. His nose rubbing into my inner thigh, he nipped his way up. My legs dangling over the edge of that pool, I felt his full lips stroking my entrance. A delicious kiss over my folds fueled the fire of arousal within me. So tender and sweet, his move had me lean back against my shoulders and pull my legs out of the water. With my feet on the ground, I tipped my head back. His lips opened and closed around my entrance, and he sucked on it, taking some of my moisture in his mouth.

"God, those kisses feel so good," I moaned, squeezing my eyes shut.

"I could go on all night," he said, his raspy voice sending sensations of pleasure through my system. His words were full of promise. All night? My god, I wanted to see what that would be like. How it would be for me to just lay back and have him play with my body and my senses. Of course, I wouldn't be just on the receiving end. I would reciprocate, trying to match his vigor. I knew it would be difficult, but I was more than willing to try.

For starters, I meant to tease him. I wanted to see how wild he could get by just a simple move of mine. Yet, with his mouth all over my slit, moving an inch sounded like a tall order. I couldn't pull away from those delectable licks. I didn't have the heart to interrupt him. I felt his tongue rolling around my clit, his bottom lip brushing into my entrance. Sensations heightened the moment Matteo's teeth grazed my clit. My whole body jerked back, right before one more of his kisses landed on my folds. He lifted his hands up to my breasts and held them together, running his tongue down my pussy. Once more, he kissed his way up, and the tip of that tongue made contact with my clit.

As if he'd read my mind, he didn't move it away.

Not this time.

He flicked it across, his thumbs rubbing my nipples at the same time. He pressed them into me, moans shooting out of my mouth. My breath was getting shallower, his passion bringing me to closer to the threshold of orgasm.

"I could go on all night."

That simple phrase added more intensity to my sounds of pleasure. My climax took hold of me, and I shivered from my head down to my toes. I was still riding out the waves of ecstasy, when Matteo's face came into view. Somehow, I found the strength to leave my spot. Up until that moment, he had been doing all the teasing. Not me.

I rolled over and faced the glass façade. His sexy form was still in the pool, staring at my ass. I crawled forward, my eyes staying on his reflection. I shook my ass up and down and from side to side, eager to hear what he had to say.

"Damn, girl," he grunted, raising his leg over the side of the pool. "You make me want to bite those cheeks."

"I dare you," I said, jokingly.

However, the expression on his face didn't indicate he was joking. I shrieked as I felt his teeth sinking into my flesh gently, following each nibble with a kiss.

“Yummy,” Matteo muttered, leaving one last kiss on my flesh. He straightened himself up, keeping one hand on my ass. He squeezed my cheek and pulled it apart once again, and I sensed the stiffness of his cock around my entrance. My drenched folds parted around his ample girth as inch after inch slid into me. I looked up at his reflection through half-shut eyes, the feel of his throbbing cock becoming more intense. He withdrew almost halfway, before sliding back in just as slowly. Son of a bitch. He was doing everything in his power to make me go crazy with lust. There were no fast motions on his part. Nothing hasty or too abrupt to turn me off. Just slow, deliberate, sensual moves to turn me right on.

Matteo bent his head down, his hungry eyes taking in the view of my arched back and my ass hanging in the air. My nails scraped across the tiles, leaving trails of water in their wake. I felt the full weight of his balls nudging into my slit, our moans picking up in intensity and volume. His long, deep strokes were filling me up, my heart pounding in my chest. One side of the door partly visible, I recalled my encounter with Allegra.

“The danger of getting caught kind of thrilled me.”

So, what if someone did walk in and catch us in the act? After all, we both were just guests. That thrill sparked even more sensations within me. Starting from my core, they swirled around my insides like a tornado of pleasure. My senses were heightened in an instant, enabling me to savor this experience so much more. Matteo’s manhood was pulsing in me, his big, wet hands firmly on my hips.

But just as I started to lose myself in the eroticism of his delicious penetration, the thrill of getting caught ceased to be a thrill.

It became a reality.

Two men walked in the door.

Tall.

Athletic.

Within four paces, they were both stunned to stillness. Witnessing something I wished I had kept private.

Or did I?

Because those men were none other than Leo and Cesare.

They had known about each other, and it hadn't damaged the relationship between them.

All three of them at the same time? Wow...

With that thought entering my mind, I smiled devilishly through the glass. There was only one way to find out whether they'd accept this, or storm right back out in anger.

I crawled away from my spot, Matteo's manhood slipping out of me. I stayed parallel to the glass façade and lifted my right hand off the floor. Curling my index finger, I heard Matteo's grunt of complaint, Cesare, and Leo eyeing each other in confusion. Silence lingering between them, I realized I didn't wish to wait for them to decide.

"Don't just stand there," I told them, a rasp rising in my voice. "Do something."

"You mean *you*?" Cesare asked, furrowing his brow.

"Stop teasing," I demanded, throwing a quick glance up over my shoulder. "And get over here."

To my satisfaction, Leo walked off, his lips curling into a cunning smile. He turned around the corner of the pool and pulled down his brown trunks, Matteo positioning himself behind me yet again. I sensed his stiffness inside of me again, noticing Cesare heading for me as well. I bit my bottom lip, holding in some moans, Leo and Cesare standing alongside each other in front of me.

In all their naked glory.

Waiting for me to start playing with them.

And I did.

I reached up both of my arms, my fingers cupping the base of their shafts. I guided Cesare's cock to my mouth, running my

hand up Leo's. In one, wet slide, I took him in, my index finger bumping into the head of Leo's shaft.

"Fuck, baby," Cesare groaned, Matteo's hand landing in a proper slap on my ass cheek. The slap resounded through the hall, Cesare kneeling down to help me out. Leo followed his example, and I felt some pressure on top of my head. I was too busy to check who had pushed me down like that. I teased Cesare's shaft with my teeth, barely touching him. The head of his cock hitting the top of my mouth, I held Leo harder in my grasp.

Feeling them both harden, I realized something.

Whatever satisfaction I had been getting from Matteo just two minutes ago, was nothing compared to this.

All three studs were under my spell.

I had them wrapped around my finger.

Pleasuring them.

Turning them on, whichever way I could.

Matteo pulled out and Cesare's cock slid into my mouth. His girth stretching my mouth, I eased him out. Threads of saliva from my mouth to his shaft, I turned my attention to Leo. I swallowed more than half of his manhood in a hungry move, forcing a sharp moan from him.

My lips stayed around the head, the tip of my tongue teasing the tiny hole as I felt Matteo's tongue around my forbidden entry. I growled in response, squeezing the base of Cesare's tool. A few jerks later, he was groaning harder, his friend rolling his hips forward. I could tell he was after the friction that was going to send him over the edge. The sensation of him exploring the depths of my throat. And I wasn't going to deny him that.

I bobbed my head up and down on his cock, my saliva dripping down the center of his shaft. I left the tip in my mouth for a brief moment and looked up at him, flashing him a sexy smile. I didn't let him enjoy it for more than a second. I swallowed the head again, Matteo dipping the tip of his tongue in my ass. He spread my cheeks open, digging his fingernails

into my flesh. He swiped his tongue down to my pussy and licked my juices off, and then moved it back up. I pulled Leo out of my mouth and took him in my grasp, more waves of lust washing over me.

“God, I’m so wet,” I confessed, my synchronized strokes making Leonardo and Cesare groan louder. Cesare cupped the top of my head, his eyes buried into mine. I wouldn’t break eye contact with him, feeling Matteo’s tongue dance around my asshole. I hissed and hissed, my eyes snapping shut over and over while he played with my taboo hole. Only this time, it wasn’t so taboo for a man to focus on that part of my body. Somehow, it felt perfectly natural.

I growled, my gaze going from Cesare to Leo and back to Cesare, loving the thick veins around their shafts. Matteo’s fingertips nudged both my pussy and ass at the same time, I let out a long moan of desire and looked back at him. He met my eyes and stared at me while he pushed two long fingers inside of me.

“Oh god,” I moaned, my voice husky. “That feels so damn good.”

“So nasty,” he commented and licked his upper lip. “You like this? Here’s some more.”

At that, he pushed both of his fingers deeper, and my grip on Cesare’s and Leo’s cocks tightened. I threw my head back, the ceiling coming into view before I closed my eyes. All of a sudden, Cesare released my head as Matteo kept fingering me, making me moan and squirm. I considered opening my eyes; yet once Leo’s sweet mouth surrounded my own, I had a change of heart.

“Are you ready, gorgeous?” he whispered the moment Cesare’s big hands squeezed my cheeks.

“Yes,” I gasped out, aching to be filled up.

He spoke no more. He sat down and then slid underneath me as my eyelids rolled up. Matteo was kneeling down just inches from me, his rock-hard cock pointing right up at me. Leo holding my ass cheeks open, the head of his cock rubbed into

my soaking-wet slit. I lowered myself onto him, Matteo wrapping his fingers around his tool. Unwilling to wait any longer, he led it to my mouth. My lips parted for me to release a tremendous moan as Cesare eased his way into my ass. Leonardo continued to slide in, I sensed the walls of my ass stretch around his friend's cock. I squeezed my eyes shut and hissed hard, the two of them inside of me. The third one was desperate for my attention—his own shaft bumped into my chin. Smelling my juices on him, I opened my mouth. I licked around the crest, his taste flooding my taste buds.

With all three of them under my spell, I thought that someone would burst this delicious bubble.

By waking me up.

Because this couldn't have been real.

All this attention on me. All this sensuality and the care being showered upon me had to have been a figment of my imagination.

The incredible number of sensations roared across my insides, becoming stronger and stronger by the second.

My rear entry had split around Cesare's stiff cock, his hands stroking my shoulders. My pussy was gripping Leo's, while Matteo was pushing in and out of my mouth, stifling out my moans.

I was full of them.

Pampered like never before.

The center of their attention while they fulfilled what had to be my naughtiest fantasy. It was a reality now. A smoking-hot, lustful reality that was intoxicating my senses like some powerful drug. Cesare and Leo managing to synchronize their strokes, they stretched me out and withdrew, Matteo cupping the back of my neck. I kept a tight suction around the head of his tool, threads of my saliva dripping along the sides. I squeezed and rolled his balls in my palm, their groans rushing through my ears. It was a good thing I couldn't hear myself. I wouldn't have been able to enjoy all those sounds of their immense pleasure.

An orgasm stormed through my insides, making my body shiver in this all-erotic feast. I exhaled over Matteo's shaft over and over again, my pussy clenching around Leo's cock. Cesare pushing all the way into my ass, I yanked Leo out of my mouth, releasing the growl I had been suppressing. Cesare biting into my shoulder, I ran my fist up Matteo's shaft and jerked. The pulsating in my pussy and ass was loud and clear. I sped up my strokes, knowing he was close.

"Fuck!" Matteo cried out, his spine extending as his juices shot out. Cesare groaned in my ear, but he didn't bother pulling out. I sensed liquid warmth filling my rear entry as Leonardo held me steady. He was still gripping me tightly when he cried out in pleasure.

I lay on top of him, with Cesare leaving kisses on my shoulder blade and Matteo caressing the side of my neck. I inhaled and exhaled, beginning to submerge in the afterglow. The sweetest, kinkiest afterglow. I smiled to myself, contentment and joy swelling up within. If I were in a bubble earlier, I was in a cloud now. My own, sexy, incredible cloud of emotions and sensations. I was happy to share it with them, just like they had been happy sharing me.

CESARE

CRAZY.

What went down in that basement was fucking crazy.

We all agreed on that.

The funniest thing about it?

We didn't mind.

The three of us having sex with the same woman? We just shared her, no problem at all.

Leonardo blamed it on the rush of our success back in Vegas. And, to a point, he was right. We had done something we had all been considering impossible. We had destroyed the man who had wanted to put us six feet under.

To Matteo and me, though, things were not so simple.

First of all, that rush had evaporated. Three more days of driving around had made sure of that. By the time we'd gotten back to New York, we were beat. We were also looking forward to what was next. According to Rocco, this next step was even more important. It just didn't involve shooting anybody.

Second? This was more than just us trying to blow off some steam. We hadn't treated Piper like some whore we'd picked up on the street. Quite the opposite. We didn't force her into anything. We just did what she wanted us to do and indulged ourselves in the process. Had she wanted us to leave her alone with Matteo, we'd have just walked back out. Sure, we'd have

been pissed and we'd need to talk with her, but we would have respected her wish. Besides, she'd had a point. We hadn't agreed on anything exclusive. More than that, we hadn't shown her that we wanted more than just a fling with her.

No matter my opinion about this wild night in Sands Point, I had to brush it aside.

Because Rocco just shattered everything I believed about him with a single, short statement the next morning.

"I'm going to vouch for you to Don Gambini during our meeting this afternoon. If he accepts—which he probably will—you and Matteo will be made members. Leonardo's not Italian, so he can't become a member."

It was amazing how much my view of this guy had shifted. He'd gone from an offensive prick to something close to a friend. I could have remembered at least two cases where I wanted to punch him in the head but held back. I had to swallow my anger, because I knew he had things I didn't have. As I realized that morning, perhaps the most important of all was the organization's ear. If I'd ever even attempted to meet with a powerful Don like Gambini, his men would have beaten the shit out of me. My Italian descent wouldn't have played a role. To them, I was just an outsider, someone who could have pulled something nasty on their boss.

Back in my apartment, I chose to wear a beige suit and a red tie. I wanted to look my best that day. I had never met a Don, and I knew first impressions mattered. There was no way in hell I'd attend that meeting in jeans and a t-shirt. That was something Leonardo would probably do. He loved his casual wear too much for him to consider putting on a suit, even for a meeting as important as this. It was a good thing he wouldn't be attending it.

Somewhere on the outskirts of Manhattan, I pulled up outside a large estate. Its Victorian style and the lack of fancy stuff like a power gate, had me wondering. I expected to find more luxury at a Don's house. Beyond a short wall just off the sidewalk, I could make out a small pool in the front yard. Rocco emerged from a door to the right, wearing a navy-blue

suit. Jogging across the yard, he welcomed me in typical, Rocco fashion: His face was just as stiff as his posture.

“Hey. Matteo’s already here,” he said. “Don Gambini and his two capos have been waiting for you. I’m going to repeat the same things I told your cousin when he got here. First of all, what do you know about being made? Have you heard of the process?”

“Not really,” I shook my head in denial. “I know I have to take an oath, but that’s it.”

“A *blood* oath,” he corrected me. “That’s why I got out here. You’ll see a knife at some point. Don’t freak out; nobody’s going to try to kill you. If they wanted you dead, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“I hear you,” I said with a nod. “Any tips?”

“Just relax,” he advised and patted me on the shoulder. “Show those men the necessary respect and you’ll be fine.”

He turned around and I followed him, my gaze studying the front yard.

“Whose is this place?” I asked, Rocco strutting to the front door.

“It used to be Nick Roselli’s, until he died,” he answered. “It belongs to Maggie now.”

Turning the key in the lock, he stepped aside for me. In the living room to the right, I saw three men. Two of them were sitting on the couch, while an older, graying man was sitting in an armchair. Leonardo was to the left, still standing up as our eyes met across the room.

“Gentlemen, this is Cesare Borelli, a friend of ours,” Rocco said, halting next to me. “Cesare, this is Don Michael Gambini,” he added, gesturing to the man in the armchair. “Pat Torello and Steven Luciani. They’re his capos.”

“It’s a pleasure, Don Gambini,” I spoke in a firm voice, bowing my head as I offered my hand for a handshake. The boss slammed his palm into mine and rose from his seat.

“Nice to meet you, Cesare,” he stated in a gruff voice as I tried to wrap my head around his gesture. He’d stood up for me. A mafia Don had just shown me respect. “Rocco and I were just talking about how you and your crew helped them out in Vegas. You showed a lot of balls back there.”

“Thank you, sir,” I told him, tipping my head down. “We just did what we had to do to stay alive.”

“Which made me sure he was worth it,” Rocco tried a louder voice, settling his gaze on the Don. “Don Gambini, I vouch for Cesare and Matteo Borelli. They pulled their own weight during that thing in Vegas. Their help in the whole Kanin matter was invaluable.”

“True that,” Gambini nodded in agreement. “Kanin underestimated their crew and paid the price. Now, the question is, are you gentlemen willing to take the oath of Omerta?”

“Yes,” Matteo and I said in one voice.

Gambini snorted in amusement. “Not so fast, boys. Omerta is our code of silence and honor. We don’t rat on our friends and we always keep our mouth shut, no matter what. You *must* honor that oath. Breaking Omerta is punishable by death, you understand?”

“I do,” I said with a swift nod.

“Yeah,” Matteo spoke, stepping closer to me.

“Good,” he nodded, standing between me and my cousin. “Remember this, boys. In case you break that oath, there’s no place in the world where we can’t find you. Torello, do the honors.”

His capo standing up, he reached into his jacket. My eyes were glued to the object in his grasp. It was a rather long blade with a silver handle, polished to perfection.

“This oath is sealed in blood,” Torello said, flipping the knife around. Holding it by the blade, he handed it over to me.

I didn’t utter a word. It was time for the messy part. Compared to everything else Matteo and I had done, though, it was easy.

I set the blade down into my palm. I sensed its double edge against my fingers as I clutched in my grasp. With a firm grip around the handle, I began to slide it back. I watched drops of my blood drip off the heel of my palm. They formed a trail and began to fall on the floor, in the narrow gap between my shoes. Just then, the two capos, Rocco and Gambini put their hands together. I took my eyes off my bleeding skin to look over at them. They were all smiling and flashing me glances of appreciation, Gambini approaching me. He spread his arms out to the side, Torello then holding his hand out.

“Welcome,” Gambini said, his arms locking around my upper back. I left the knife in Torello’s hand and returned the gesture, my bleeding hand staying well away from his fancy suit.

“Thank you,” I told him, my heart singing in my chest. I’d been waiting for this moment for a long time. I had bled for it. I had been shot at. Damn, I had suffered too much to consider abandoning this goal. I looked at the men around me, no longer feeling like an outcast. I was one of them now. I would be under the organization’s wing, just like Matteo would. At last, we would be untouchable. Nobody was going to mess with us, unless they had a death wish.

PIPER

I WOKE UP IN THE MORNING, FEELING ON TOP OF THE WORLD.

I could still smell my men's scents. I could still feel lots of pressure between my legs. I could remember the look in their eyes while they conquered my body. The lust all over their faces. Their hunger, a hunger that only I could quench. I was also a bit sore, but that little detail wasn't going to spoil my mood.

Nevertheless, this was just the physical part. One could say that we had all acted on impulse. We got carried away and surrendered to the moment. It was something natural—a product of the tension we had all been carrying.

The emotional part was astonishing.

I stayed in between Cesare and Leonardo, purring like a kitty. Neither of them said a thing. They didn't complain about each other's presence. And, once I'd had enough of their cuddles, I jumped back into the pool where Matteo had been waiting for me. He took me in his arms, and I rested my head on his chest, plunging deeper into a sensation of closeness. Even then, none of those three did anything to convey annoyance or jealousy. They just teased each other, remaining in a relaxed mood.

As for me? I didn't interject.

I didn't open my mouth once during the time we spent in that basement. I just left them to it. I had no reason or motive to meddle with them. It was so much more enjoyable to just listen to them. Besides, the only couple of times where we had been alone in the same room, had been very tense indeed. The

first one was on the night that Leo got shot. The second was when they decided to confront me. This change in the atmosphere had been most welcome. We had known tension. Now was the time for us to relax and enjoy ourselves.

I made myself some coffee, unable to stop thinking about one of my recent conversations with Maggie. In particular, one of her statements.

“I really hope you get what I have with Rocco, Julian and Slater.”

Was I going to? Well, I was certainly on the right track. My men were unbelievably tight. They had no problem sharing me; they seemed to love every minute of it. There was an emotional connection as well. It had been there before we went wild in Maggie’s mansion. If that wasn’t true, they would never have risked their own lives to protect me. So, I had every reason to believe that I would soon get my own “sexy chunk of heaven” as Maggie had called it. All I had to do was wait and see for myself if I’d get to keep them all in my life. Of course, I had to try hard. I had to work on my relationship with them every single day, but that didn’t scare me one bit. They would be worth it.

Getting ready for work, I was in for a very pleasant surprise. The text I received from Leonardo widened my smile, proving to me once again how unpredictable they were:

“How does five days in Vegas sound to you? We think it’s time for a break. What about you?”

“A well-deserved break. I’m down! Let me just get to the hospital and request some time off.”

Las Vegas?

I wasn’t thrilled by the notion of heading to the city of lights. I was neutral to it if I was being honest. Lots of noise. Too many lights. Too many fancy establishments, designed in a way to take people’s money. However, I’d take that break. Not just because we had earned it, but because I would have my men with me. And it didn’t matter if we’d be surrounded by casino hotels or any other flashy buildings. In our hotel room, we’d

have our own fun. A fun that entailed me and all three of them at the same time. Some more, steamy action with me in the center of their attention, on the receiving end of their passion.

LEONARDO

FUCKING VEGAS.

At last, those idiots had listened to reason.

We'd finally get to my most favorite place in the whole world.

The last time we'd been there didn't count in my book. That was pretty sad. We'd driven thousands and thousands of miles, just to go after some rich prick who'd put a hit out on us. I hardly caught a glimpse of the Boulevard, much less hit a casino and gamble. After Kanin was dealt with, we just got the hell out of there. I could understand that. We had gunned down ten people in that building. It was a massacre, and cops would be all over the place, being nosey as usual. Reporters from all over Nevada would swarm into the city, chasing down men and women in uniform, desperate for some news. I might have loved to gamble, but I wasn't dumb. I could postpone a trip to the slots and blackjack tables to keep my freedom.

There would be another—yet smaller—difference this time.

No cars.

I liked that long road trip we'd taken, but we had no reason to repeat it, especially so soon after the first one. Also, we wouldn't be heading down there with another crew. We'd have Piper with us, not a trio of seasoned gangsters.

And this was what had me lit.

This was the second reason behind my awesome mood.

I was so cheerful during the flight that I might have messed a little with Matteo's face while he snored in his seat. I borrowed a red crayon from a little girl behind me and drew a sketch on his forehead. Nothing too much; just a dick, pointing to the left. To Cesare, that is. The girl's father laughed his ass off when he saw that. Matteo and Cesare didn't find it so funny. Maybe I should have drawn another dick on Cesare's forehead. One that would point to Matteo and in a different color. That way, at least one of them would have laughed, instead of glaring at me like a butt-hurt jerk.

Our hotel had some funny name I couldn't even pronounce.

Vdara Hotel & Spa.

When I asked Matteo why he'd booked it, his eyes sparkled with excitement, and he said:

"Because it's on the Strip and it's got huge rooms."

That did it for me.

Every single casino would be close. Better still, I wouldn't have to go back to that joke of a room.

Upon laying eyes on that hotel, I couldn't help but smile at Matteo and give him my sincere congrats. It was just *enormous*. Towering over most of the buildings around it, our hotel overlooked the Strip, offering some spectacular views to the city. The lobby was spacious enough for a truck to just roll in and park in front of the reception desk. Couches and armchairs stretched all the way to either side of the building. The only glitch in the whole thing was the temperature outside. It was a little too cold for the management to keep the pools filled with water.

Returning to the lobby, Cesare and Matteo strolled away from the elevator, Piper standing between me and them, her side to me.

"So, Mr. Vegas expert," Matteo said, looking back at me. "I know this may sound stupid, but what do you want to do?"

Gamble.

Yep, this was my first instinct. To go out, walk into a casino and just gamble away. I had never done that in Vegas. I'd been to Salt Lake City once, but I didn't like it so much. It just didn't have the same appeal to me.

After about thirty seconds of silence, it was Cesare's turn to ask me something.

"You don't want to go find a casino boss and tell him we whacked Kanin, do you? Because this place is still run by..."

"Corporations. I know," I interrupted him, my gaze shifting to Piper. Her cheerful expression and those big eyes of hers made my heart pump so much faster. She looked so fine in her white, ankle-long dress. In fact, that color gave me an idea. It was wild; there was no doubt about it, but I wasn't going to keep it to myself. I pulled her aside and gestured to Matteo and Cesare away from the center of the lobby. "Let's go to a chapel," I suggested, goosebumps rising all over my body. "There are tons of chapels around here. We won't have to worry about getting a license first and all that crap."

"Huh?" Piper huffed, she and my boys staring at me like I had tentacles sticking out from my sides. "You want me to marry you?"

"Not just me," I shook my head sideways once. "All of us. I love you, Piper."

"I love you, too," Matteo interrupted me, leaning closer.

"*I love you*, Piper," Cesare said, before swallowing hard. "I'm sorry on his behalf. Clearly, this isn't the place or the time for confessions, but..."

"Hold on a minute!" she shouted, her hands raised at chest height as some heads turned in our direction. "Leo." She lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "Do you realize what you just asked of me? And where? I mean, take a look around you. Am I supposed to decide right here? In a hotel lobby?"

"Let's go back upstairs," Matteo suggested, throwing a vicious glare my way. "I always knew you were crazy. Thanks for proving me right again, you moron."

Yeah, yeah...

Moron my ass.

To me, this made all the sense in the world.

I was itching to get my point across. Even back in the elevator, it crossed my mind to start saying why we should do this. To list all the reasons that had helped me reach that decision. Hearing that ding was a relief.

“All right, you crazy son of a bitch.” Cesare was the first to speak up once we were back in our room. “Why don’t you go ahead and tell us why you talked out of your ass down there.”

“Right,” I murmured, looking out the window to my left. I had a clear view of the Bellagio, water shooting up in the fountains down below. “Out of my ass, huh? Okay. The place was all wrong; I’ll give you that. But can you two remind me why we drove all the way to Vegas just last week?”

“We all know why,” Cesare spoke, shrugging his shoulders. “To take care of Kanin.”

“Who wanted to have Piper killed for patching you up,” I went on, my voice stronger. “We don’t just love her, man. We love her so much that we’d *kill* for her. That we’d *die* for her. My nurse,” I stopped talking for a moment and took a slow step towards her. “I know I can never love anybody else as much as I love you. So, I’m sorry if I said that the first time in a crowded lobby, but...” I faltered. “It just felt right. I hope you understand.”

“Wow,” she whispered, her gaze dropping down for a moment, before she raised it back up to mine. “Yes, I understand.”

“Look, I get it,” Matteo said, his voice gaining in volume. “You wanted to show her how much we love her, but these things don’t happen because one of us says so. We should have talked about this.”

“I know,” I nodded to him. “Guys, I told you what I wanted to do. The question is ‘do we all want the same thing?’ If we don’t, forget I asked and let’s go out for drinks.”

“I want that, too,” Cesare voiced his opinion, his voice bass deep as he gazed down into Piper’s eyes. “I’m not trying to put any pressure on you—this is just my take on the whole

marriage thing. We stuck our necks out to keep you safe; all of us. That says a lot about how we feel about you. And I doubt there's going to be another Piper in our lives. *Ever*. I mean someone we'd protect with our own lives."

"Well said," Matteo praised, looking at her from across the room. "You're a decent woman, Piper Briggs. You're fun, smart and so smoking hot it hurts. I never thought I'd go after a mobster for a woman, but you proved me wrong. So, yeah. I want that marriage, too. I just wish that little idiot had run this by me before he opened his big mouth."

"Oh, my god," Piper sighed, her gaze darting from me to Cesare, and then, to Matteo. I could have sworn I could hear my heart pounding. It had jumped in my throat, my pulse rising as I waited for her to speak up. Whatever words came out of her mouth, I knew I had done the right thing. I hadn't hidden from her or my boys. I had put my cards on the table. It was up to her to decide what was going to happen during our stay in Vegas.

PIPER

AND HERE, I THOUGHT OUR VACATION IN VEGAS WOULD BE all about fun.

I hadn't just been wrong. I had been stupid.

That's the feeling I got when Leonardo, Matteo, and Cesare poured their heart out to me.

I was expecting them to take my clothes off and treat me like their very own, naughty royalty.

What I got was completely different.

It pulled at my heartstrings, leaving me at a total loss for words. Tears of joy rose up in my eyes during those moments. My men wanted to be more than just my lovers. They wanted me to become their partner in life. To guard me for the rest of my days. To shield me from anyone who meant me harm. For all my initial shock, as the seconds ticked by, I realized that this sounded like a dream come true.

They wouldn't go anywhere.

They would stay right by my side.

Fierce.

Fearless.

Willing to destroy anybody who wanted to mess with their happiness.

I would have been a fool to pass on this.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” I finally told them, holding back a snuffle. Leo started to jog off, I had to thrust my arm up, palm facing him. “Not so fast. There are still some technical issues. For starters, I don’t have a dress for the occasion. Then, there’s the legal issue. I know all sorts of crazy things happen in Vegas, but you can’t expect the chapel staff to allow you all to stand up as a groom.”

“I get the dress part, but who gives a fuck about legal issues?” Leo asked. “Besides, since when did we do things the legal way?”

“We can bribe the chapel staff, Piper,” Matteo suggested, his lips curled into a cunning smile. “It’s nothing a few hundred bucks can’t fix.”

“There’s something else, too,” I pointed out. “The name on the marriage license. Okay, we can get it right away, but I love you all too much to decide whose name will be on that marriage license. Can you please decide?”

“Yeah,” Cesare nodded in agreement. “Listen, we’re going out to get you that dress.”

“How do we decide?” Leo asked, following the other two to the door.

“Move your ass,” Cesare ordered, his voice fading in my ears as his friend clicked the door shut behind him.

I blew all the air out of my lungs and sat down on the bed, running both hands through my hair.

I had managed to overcome my surprise when I offered them my take on the matter. Yet, that didn’t mean I had fully comprehended what I had agreed to.

Marriage.

With all three of them.

I hadn’t prepared myself for this. A casual trip to Sin City—that was all I had been hoping for. A few days full of fancy dinners, expensive drinks and sex.

Cesare and Matteo had been just as stunned as me when they heard Leonardo’s crazy suggestion, but they thought twice

when he made his case. So, if I did object to this, I wouldn't have just to confront Leo. I would have to confront all of them.

Nonetheless, with time ticking by, I discovered that confrontations were absolutely pointless. Why would I throw away something so precious to me? Those men had been my guardian angels. They had proven their love to me. That love was pure and selfless. Why should I have turned them down? Because this had come out of the blue? So what? It might have been decided in a snap, but it was a logical step. At least, as logical as it could be with my men.

Once they were back, they gave me the dress they had promised me. I laid it down on the bed and took a step back. I marveled at the lace hems, picturing the scene of my wedding. One bride and three men posing as groom. Part of me wanted to laugh out loud, and for longer than five or six seconds. It sounded so weird. So out of the ordinary. Something I would have made fun of a few months back. But then, a bigger part of me didn't find this funny at all. It sounded amazing. I would have them all. Three, fantastic men, ready to fall into the fire for me. There were women out there who couldn't find even one, but I had found three.

The next morning, I started getting ready in earnest. I called the hairdresser and arranged an early-afternoon appointment with her. Before that, I went out to town and bought me a pair of white heels for the occasion.

Matteo had texted me a list of possible venues to choose from, which was great. I knew there were hundreds of chapels in Sin City. Some of them were bound to be terrible. My hunch was proven correct when I laid my eyes on the first two. The funny thing was, they were top rated. Both of them featured professional Elvis impersonators as officiants.

Right.

Well, no.

I wasn't going to choose either of them.

Not that I didn't like Elvis Presley. I did, but this would be crazy enough without a fake Elvis asking me if I took all three men to be my husband.

My choice would be the Little Chapel of the Flowers. I didn't want anything too flashy, and this fit the bill. Unlike most chapels in the area, it didn't feature gigantic red hearts, visible from miles away. There were no small lights all around the building, flashing in the dark. There were just two rows of those lights on the roof, next to a tall, yucca plant. Without a doubt, this was perhaps the most understated chapel in Las Vegas. I liked that, though. I was never a fan of huge, extravagant weddings. To me, all that mattered was the connection between me and my partner. I wouldn't complain about details like church size, capacity and bands at the reception. I just wanted things to be genuine. Nothing pretentious or too much in general.

Just after 6pm that afternoon, I received a phone call from Cesare.

"Hello?"

"The limo's on its way to pick you up. Be downstairs in thirty minutes, tops."

"I will. Thank you."

With my makeup almost done, I smiled in the mirror. A feeling of anticipation spread through me in the blink of an eye.

I was doing this.

Yes, ma'am.

There was no turning back now.

I forgot to ask Cesare about the details of the ceremony, like the marriage license and the minister. Knowing him and the others, however, I was more than confident that they had taken care of those. For all Cesare and Matteo's indecision at first, they seemed quite determined after Leo explained his reasoning to them. They were not going to allow minor details like those get in the way.

The sun was about to set in the clear Las Vegas sky as I exited the limousine. My men were right outside the chapel, dressed in black tuxedos, white shirts and black bow ties. They were an imposing sight... Beaming, looking right at me, with the chapel and the wonderful colors of the sunset in the background.

“Gorgeous,” Matteo praised, his gaze following me during my short walk towards them. “I told you she’d look fantastic in that dress, you morons. I chose it, by the way.”

“You chose well. I love my dress,” I said, smiling up at him. “You all look so handsome.”

“Thanks,” Cesare flashed me a sweet smile. “Let’s do this.”

As they gave me their hand to lead me in, something dawned on me.

This wouldn’t be the first time they did that.

They had done this in the recent past, too.

On the night they first appeared at the hospital, one of them with a chest full of buckshot.

Back then, they took me by the hand and pulled me into their own world. A world of danger, ambition, but also kindness, care and impossible sexiness. I had to admit it scared me at first. I had seen gunshot victims up close, and I always felt for them. The pain they were going through was immense, and I could end up like one of them. Still, Cesare, Matteo, and Leo were not going to have that. When time came, they faced danger head-on and removed whoever wanted to see us dead.

In the meantime, my men showed me what it was like to be treated like royalty in bed. My god, I felt like I was going to burst with pleasure, every time one of them touched me. When I had them all at the same time, I thought I was living in the most sensual and erotic dream ever. But this one encounter wasn’t really a dream. It was indescribably sexy and fantastic, but it wasn’t the highlight of my relationship with them. This highlight would be our bond. The tightness amongst us. This bond led them to go head-to-head with a powerful mafia boss.

And it was this connection that had sent us into that chapel, ready and willing to take on life together.

Of course, it would be a bumpy ride. I knew what I was getting into, long before I set foot in Sin City. In spite of that, I was eager to see what life with my men would be like. Eager to give them my heart and have them love me back. My dangerous trio was not going to let me down. They would still be my guardian angels. My hungry, sexy lovers. The men I could rely on for the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE

PIPER

THE WEDDING CEREMONY WAS BIZARRE TO SAY THE LEAST.

A confused minister kept staring at us for several seconds, when Cesare told him that all three of them were going to be the grooms.

Once Matteo offered him a thick wad of cash, the minister somehow overlooked this technicality and proceeded with the wedding. What an idiot. His concern was faker than the bimbo's breasts at the chapel reception. She looked like a younger, uglier version of Pamela Anderson.

At any rate, our little trip to Vegas turned out to be a honeymoon.

Including everything my heart, soul and body desired.

We chose different spots every afternoon to watch the sun go down. The nights were packed with lots of laughter, trips to nearby casinos, wonderful cocktails and out of this world sex. Those hungry men of mine seemed tireless. We wouldn't get any sleep, until they had satisfied their lust. Needless to say, my own sex drive was just as high. Hell, yes, I wanted to party with them all night long. This was our reward for sticking together until the end. My way of connecting with them even more. Looking them in the eye while surrendering to them.

Our hotel featured a spa, which we took full advantage of.

One night, after every member of the staff had gone home, Matteo secured the keys from the hotel manager.

We turned that facility into our own playground.

After they'd chased me around in the locker rooms, my guys cornered me in the steam room. I did wonder what my reaction would be, in case they attempted to get physical. That place was insanely hot. Threads of steam were rising from the floor. They dissolved in the air and stuck to my skin and theirs alike. I could even see drops of water on the walls and the benches around me.

Much to my relief, they didn't.

What they did was very unpredictable and sexy.

They sat down on a bench across from me, staying well away from one another. Noticing their hungry gazes on my body, I was flattered. They scanned my body from bottom to top and vice versa, the bulges in their underwear getting bigger. Soon, I was lying on my back, naked and too turned on to hold back. I touched myself in front of them and reached a tremendous climax.

Which was just the first of that night.

Many more followed; I stopped counting after the fourth.

On the day of our departure, I looked back at our imposing hotel with a sad smile on my face.

I would miss it.

But the people who had made this trip an unforgettable experience would not stay back in Las Vegas. We would go back home together.

The limo driver stacking up suitcases in the trunk, my phone buzzed in the pocket of my jeans. I pulled it out and threw a glance down at the screen. Despite the New York area code, I didn't recognize the number.

"Hello?"

A red Ferrari whooshing past my spot, I had to cover my ear to be able to hear the person on the other end of the line.

"Piper?"

I didn't recognize her number, but that voice was all-too familiar to me. Catching the sound of her snuffle, I recognized

color and tone alike.

“Allegra?”

“Yeah. You said I could call you if I needed help.”

“Of course. What’s the matter? What do you need help with?”

“My father,” she said, one more sniffle escaping her. “He’s forcing me into a marriage with a man I’ve never even met before.”

Holy crap.

Allegra’s issues were far from over. Far from it; they had just begun. Because spending her life with a total stranger was a massive issue she had to avoid. She just couldn’t make that mistake and figure out a way to correct it afterwards.

Could I help her?

The answer was a big, fat “yes.”

I could offer her some advice on the matter. I could tell her how to approach the matter in a calm, composed manner. But I had no illusions. It was clear that her folks—especially her father—were not the most reasonable people on Earth. Would he be reasoned with? I didn’t know, but she had to try... and I’d do whatever I could to help her.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author Stephanie Brother writes high heat love stories with a hint of the forbidden. Since 2015, she's been bringing to life handsome, flawed heroes who know how to treat their women. If you enjoy stories involving multiple lovers, including twins, triplets, stepbrothers, and their friends, you're in the right place. When it comes to books and men, Stephanie truly believes it's the more, the merrier.

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