

One
SECRET

GABRIELLE LAINÉ

ONE SECRET


THE MACHELLI FAMILY

GABRIELLE LAINE

Copyright © 2023 by Gabrielle Laine

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Epilogue

The knock on the door is softly executed but, to me, it's like the crack of a high-caliber rifle ricocheting through my head.

Which might have something to do with the toilet bowl working as an echo chamber.

I glare at the traitorous porcelain.

'Darcy?' Lily-Anne calls through the door. 'You okay in there?'

Fucking spiffy-spectacular, to quote my old Major.

Wilkes always had a colorful way of combining the whimsical with the explicit. Which made now the perfect time to apply his particular brand of cussing.

A wondrous and goddamn frustrating miracle is, after all, the reason I'm crouched on my friend's bathroom floor.

'I'm fine!' I call back through the door, flushing the facilities but not moving from my knees. I brace my forehead against the rim of the toilet and try to get my shit together.

At first, I fail spectacularly. My adrenaline races and my fight-or-flight instincts start sniffing the air for danger. My mouth goes dry and my palms sweat. Images of baby clothes and little booties spark equal parts warm joy and icy terror. Bottles, pacifiers... The screaming and the feedings... The chaotic toddler years, the messy childhood, the angry puberty. The cost of shoes, school supplies, college tuition...

Then, amidst it all, appears a face. A male face, so beautiful yet so violent. With sharp planes, fine scars, and a stunning set of mismatched eyes in green and blue.

Cyrus.

He smiles.

It's the barest of smiles. His own particular brand of the expression. Only the furthest corner of his lips twists upwards. Like a sneer of amusement. The heat in his eyes, however, turns the smile appealing. Makes it *very* appealing. Alluring. *Enticing...*

It warms me through from my heart to my toes, swelling at every major junction along the way.

Until...

His expression shifts. As if in revelation, Cyrus's wide brow descends harshly and his eyes no longer shine with hot, sexual promise. They burn accusingly with betrayal. His upper lip curls in contempt and he looms enormous in my mind. Like a vulture ready to claw out my liver over the treachery of breaking our unspoken vows.

Birds of prey, after all, aren't meant to be house pets, chained by paternal responsibility.

'Oh God...' I whisper to myself, the white ceramic cool against my forehead.

Had this pregnancy been a choice, I couldn't have picked a worse candidate for the father. Nor worse timing.

I live in a box, I'm barely employed... Oh, and there's the little matter of never being able to go back to Sweden again...

I can feel myself spiraling. Bent over Lily-Anne's facilities like a wilting flower, I jerk myself out of the downhill mentality with such force that it throws me upright. Like a deepsea diver forcing themselves back above the surface, a few rays of clarity begin to shine through, and I'm suddenly annoyed at my own melodrama.

Determinedly, I try an old trick and imagine all of my tension as an angry black cloud in my lungs. I hold it. I let it

swirl inside, building and thickening. I feed all of my fears and worries into it, allowing it to grow heavy...

I then exhale long and hard into the toilet bowl, hoping that even a little of my anxiety can go the way of my lunch: down Lily-Anne's plumbing.

It's not exactly a solution to my issues but it makes me feel a little better. When I get to my feet and quickly wash my face and hands, my stomach still feels tied up in knots and my brain too thick for my head, but I'm no longer shaking inside.

I snort to myself.

And the doctor wants me to keep my stress down.

Ha!

Luckily for me, stress is relative. And I've been through worse.

'Hey, Lil?' I ask, toweling off my fingers. 'Do you mind grabbing my bag?'

I open the door to find my friend already holding the once-white rucksack. Age has mottled it to a beige-gray and only two of the three badges fixed over the front pocket still have their face plates.

'I figured you would have something in here?' Lily-Anne says. She's holding the bag like it's a recently deceased animal she found under her car.

I roll my eyes and take the rucksack.

Trained by our techno-culture, I instinctively reach for my phone before anything else. The screen is flashing that I have a new message.

From "C".

Habits from the armed forces are hard to break, including handling your privacy. So, my messages are set to hidden until I unlock the device. But I know what the message says because it's always the same two words:

"I'm here."

Considering how I'd just spent the last five minutes and the fact that I've yet to work out how to break it off with the man responsible, the message should fill me with dread.

Instead, I feel something uncurling inside my chest. Like a knot of tension finally allowed to release. Allowed to breathe.

Well, I think, at least he's not dead.

After seven weeks (according to my doctor), I'd been starting to wonder... He'd never been away so long before.

'Everything all right?'

Lily-Anne leans against the door jamb, eyes full of concern as I stare at my phone.

Deliberately, I drop the thing into the deepest, darkest recesses of the bag and make a vow to ignore it. At least for now.

I flash a bright smile.

'Fine,' I reassure her before turning to more important matters at hand: like my breath.

I'm quick to locate my travel-sized toothbrush and toothpaste, dump my bag at my feet under the sink, and finish cleaning up.

'Thanks for letting me ambush your bathroom,' I say around the white bubbles, as I work up a froth.

Lily-Anne smiles sympathetically.

'No problem. I remember what it was like with my sister. She had terrible morning sickness.'

Morning sickness. Ha!

It's eight-thirty in the evening.

'The first thing my kid is going to learn,' I vow before doing the spit and rinse routine, 'is how to tell the fucking time.'

I grimace at myself in the mirror, then make sure my hair is still in place. The hotel I work at is classy, making my undercut an issue. A center parting and some careful pinning

of the longer layers, however, hides the sides of my head and masquerades my hair into a chignon.

I smooth a few strands back into line.

‘You get it a lot at night?’ my friend winces.

‘I get it whenever I smell something I would usually find delicious. Donuts, pastries, sushi...’ I shudder just at the thought. ‘Time is irrelevant.’

Up until now, I’ve been safe on my walking commute. Most of the buildings in this district are commercial offices. And any nearby cafes are long dead and closed by the time I’m heading for my evening shift at *The Blue Star*.

‘Some absolute idiot has set up a bagel stand a block over,’ I explain. ‘Never seen it before or I’d have gone a different way.’ I glare at the universe in general. ‘Who the fuck wants cream-cheese bagels at this time of night?’

Lily-Anne is giggling.

‘Oh, you mean Mario on Matteoti... He’s been there for a few weeks now.’ She throws me a pointed look. ‘There’s a spin class across the road that gets out at nine.’

I pause and feel the corner of my mouth begrudgingly lifting in amusement.

‘Okay, I take it back,’ I admit. ‘That’s goddamn genius. I just wish I’d known he was *there*.’

Tuesday is usually my night off. But when Isabella had called in “sick” with another one of her day-long hangovers, I’d shelved my judgment in favor of more money and jumped at the extra hours.

Smoothing my clothes, dusting my knees, and swinging my bag onto my shoulder, I check my watch. Thank God I’m always early for everything. At this rate, I’ll get to the hotel just in time.

‘At the risk of upsetting your stomach, do you want to take anything with you?’ Lily-Anne offers. ‘I know my sister liked chewing on dried sardines. I might have a can somewhere?’

I glance around Lily-Anne's place.

Like mine, the apartment is just one room, a countertop attempting (and mostly failing) to distinguish the kitchen from... well, everything else.

There's no couch. Just a bed in one corner and an armchair squeezed up against the little desk in the other.

Unlike mine, which can most charitably be described as "spartan", Lily's home is a land of texture. Blankets, cushions, rugs... even the walls have been papered with sheets of mandala prints. Her thin, translucent curtains have been pulled and the street light directly outside her window is seeping through to stain the room in warm, earthy tones.

It's also insanely messy.

Not dirty. Just... *full*.

Magazines, clothes, books, and pillows are scattered *everywhere*. Every flat surface boasts at least two candles plus a handful of knick-knacks and the kitchen is an explosion of appliances (only two of which I've actually seen Lily-Anne use: the high-tech soap dispenser and the coffee machine).

The idea of Lily-Anne managing to find a stray can of fish she probably lost a month ago is sweetly intended but utterly unhelpful.

At least whilst I still have the *chance* of making it to work on time.

'I'm good,' I tell my friend, 'but thanks.'

'Are you sure?' she coaxes as I make for her front door. I have to dodge the corner of the coffee table and duck to avoid a hanging basket of herbs over the kitchen counter. 'You're definitely eating enough, right? There's not much of you to begin with...'

In my peripheral vision, I catch Lily-Anne eyeing me up and down. Her expression is a mix of concern and irritated envy.

Leaned out by years of physical training and a naturally high metabolism, I can (if one wishes to flatter) be called

“slim”. But at five foot eight, I’m lacking the petite-ness that might have turned my weight to my advantage. Instead, I’m more or less a beanpole with curves only large enough to be functional.

In my rare moments of self-critique, I wonder about having Lily-Anne’s C-cup or tumbling locks of auburn.

But isn’t that always the way? When weak, we crave what we don’t have.

For a second, Cyrus’s face tries to make a reappearance in my head but I shut a mental door firmly on *that*.

Instead of focusing on what I don’t have, I try to be grateful for what I do possess. Such as the ability to run a seven-minute mile and deadlift twice my body weight. Given the number of times I’ve saved a friend or my own skin with shit like that, I’ll gladly sacrifice the boobs.

My bras are also way cheaper.

Which, given my current financial situation, is a total bonus.

‘I’m fine, hun,’ I reassure her. ‘I’m just glad your place was nearby.’

I’d only been caught on the go by *The Sickness* once before. And I’d been forced to find a quiet alley. An old couple had passed by, caught me throwing up behind a dumpster, and hurried away with looks of judgment on their faces. Like I was a drunk still loaded from the night before.

I suppose that kind of assumption will disappear when I start to show. Of course, by then I’ll have a host of other problems.

‘I’ll leave now so you can get to studying,’ I say, pulling up my train of thought and deliberately rooting myself in the here and now.

Just deal with the problem at your feet, Darcy. Just the one you’re about to trip over. Don’t look ahead. Just look at your feet.

‘Ugh, do you *have* to?’ Lily-Anne pulls a face, clearly enjoying my presence as a form of procrastination. She eyes a haphazard pile of textbooks on her desk with contempt.

‘Of course,’ I remind her with a grin. I yank open her apartment door and set a string of bells along the doorframe jangling. ‘I’m looking forward to having a personal lawyer on speed dial.’

Lily-Anne’s expression is one of tickled disapproval as I step out into the hall.

‘For the next time you punch out a groping idiot, you mean?’

I roll my eyes and hold up my hands in innocence as I head off backwards down the corridor, keeping her in view til the last minute.

‘That was *one* time!’ I insist, with only a *little* bit of untruth.



EIGHTEEN MONTHS.

A new record.

I grind a few pistachios between my molars, then suck the salt from my thumb.

Eighteen fucking months.

No one’s been able to hide from me for so long.

Then again, I think, most assassins don’t just fucking retire for over a year. They continue to work, make contact with clients, and leave minute traces of their presence.

Like a trail of bloody breadcrumbs.

But *this* guy? The killer known as “Gabriel”?

Yeah, no breadcrumbs, bloody or otherwise. No signs, no clues.

Just... *Poof.*

And, after a year and a half, what had started as professional friction has grown into a personal vendetta. A barb needling beneath my skin that I can't seem to get rid of.

My phone vibrates against my chest.

I don't have time for a phone call. The guy I'm here to meet will arrive any second...

Cursing, I whip it out from my inside pocket anyway.

'You sure you don't want something else?' Jaime De Luca says by way of a greeting.

'What do you want?' I growl. Damn burner phones and their lack of Caller ID. Jaime was not who I'd been hoping for.

'Whoa. Tone much?'

Naturally emotive, Jaime sounds personally offended by my rudeness. But I know it's a lie. His shield of charm is more impenetrable than Kevlar. All friendly "aw shucks" on the surface. Deadly cool beneath.

The charade probably helps him with his other interpersonal relationships but, with me, it just itches. I like efficiency. I like rawness.

I like truth.

'I was expecting another call,' I explain without apology.

There's a pause, until...

'Aah...' Jaime muses from his end. I don't like the perception in his voice. 'You just got back into the country, right? Say no more, say no more...'

I roll my eyes.

I can just imagine the kind of idiocies he's constructing in his head. Some kind of quaint, domestic setup, no doubt. With a homely, tempting woman, craving my presence.

Well, the call I'd been wanting *was* from a woman.

But "homely" is the *last* thing I'd call her.

And we aren't dating.

‘But I say again, Alesi.’ Jaime gets back to business. ‘You sure I can’t give you this job? I know you’re busy with the Gabriel thing but I need someone on this and it could help tide you over...?’

I resist the urge to smile.

“*Tide me over...*”

As if I’m hurting for cash.

I settle more comfortably into my booth and scan the lounge. Deluxe leather padding and glossy black table tops. The frames on the walls, barely lit with the evening dim, all contain pricey fine art. Each bottle behind the bar costs half the annual paycheck of your average civilian. The VIP Lounge, of which I’ve commandeered a corner, isn’t even open without an invitation.

Killing for a living might cost you your soul but, in all other areas, it’s ludicrously profitable.

And when your soul is worth shit to begin with...

That’s what they call a *win-win*.

‘I’m not dry of work,’ I say into the phone.

The Machellis, for whom Jaime is my new point of contact, are not my only clients. And, even if they were, the hunt for Gabriel has kept me busy enough.

Only two men on the planet are as intent on catching the elusive killer as much as I am. And both are part of the Machelli family.

Though, one of them did die two months ago.

That’s how long it’s fucking taken to catch this bastard.

Giovanni Carlos had gone to his grave finally convinced that Gabriel was responsible for his son’s death but without the sweet justice of seeing him hang for it.

Then again, Giovanni was a bastard by most scales of measurement so perhaps he deserved the dissatisfaction.

‘The boss thinks you’re fixating,’ Jaime’s saying.

The boss. Leon Averna. Now the new head of the Machelli crime syndicate. The other man deeply invested in Gabriel's capture and probably one of the few people in the world I might go so far as to call "friend".

'I think he wants you to cool it on the hunt for a bit,' Jaime continues.

'No longer thirsty for the blood of his brother's killer?' I ask derisively. 'The little woman must be doing him right.'

I can hear Jaime's breath shallow and then a crackling noise on the line, like he's holding onto his cell too tightly. Absently, I wonder which bit offended the loyal lapdog more: the implication against the honor of a boss he'd die for, or the remark about the Machelli's new queen?

Leon Averna met his woman, Freya, a while back but it had taken over a year for him to bring her from America to Italy. I've not seen them personally since Leon was cleared of his brother's death but general chatter now says they're happily married. Whatever that's supposed to mean these days. Expecting a kid and everything. To cap it all, Freya has been making a name for herself amongst the family, winning hearts left, right, and center. Jaime in particular is rumored to be especially loyal to her.

Curious given that the last time I'd seen them together, she'd shot him.

Only pure incompetence had saved Jaime's ear. And his head.

'You know it's not like that, Alesi,' Jaime growls down the line. 'He just wants to make sure you're not driving yourself over a line you can't come back from. Obsessions leave you unfocused on everything else.' His voice drops in a warning. 'And the Machellis don't need an unfocused hitman on the books.'

Message received.

Message disregarded.

'Tell your boss he doesn't need to worry. And that I'm...'
What? Loyal? Dependable?

...Just a little bit thankful?

‘...reliable,’ I finish.

‘*Reliable?*’ Jaime’s tone twists the word until it sounds ridiculous.

‘Yeah,’ I tell him more firmly. ‘And now’s not the time to cool off on this. I’ve finally got a lead and I’m chasing it down right now.’ I pull my cell from my ear to check the time on the screen.

20:54

Shit. He’s due any minute.

‘You got the meet with Fiori?’ If it had been anyone else on the line I’d have said he sounded surprised.

‘Yeah.’

I never know how to end (or answer) phone calls with pleasantries. So, I just hang up, cutting Jaime off mid-sentence. I decline the next, immediate incoming call and, a moment later, my cell buzzes with an alert. A new voicemail left in my encrypted, external inbox. I turn it off.

In my other ear, a new voice has me switching from personal to professional.

‘He just arrived. Front entrance. Navy suit, black shirt. With him: two men, one woman.’

The earpiece I’m wearing is state-of-the-art, so it doesn’t squawk or beep. My contact’s voice is as clear as if she were sitting beside me in the hotel lounge.

She gives an equally succinct summary of the entourage.

‘Thanks, Nat. Going silent.’

When taking the earpiece out, I’m careful to kill the signal entirely before dropping the lump of dead plastic into my pocket beside my phone.

Felix Caruso is widely known as a paranoid, power-hungry egotist. And he likes employing men of the same caliber. It’ll

do me no good to have his head hunter, Alexander Fiori, discover a bug on me.

I select another pistachio from the dish on the table: one of the brightest green pieces.

Color, I muse to myself, gets you noticed. Whether you're animal, vegetable, or mineral.

Which is only one of the reasons I favor gray.

The man who enters *The Blue Star's* Bar and Lounge a few minutes later has no such qualms. Dressed just as Nat described, every garment is a designer tag. His hair is styled down to the follicle and his shoes shine with a high polish.

Alexander Fiori is a man who *likes* to be noticed.

A desire made all the more evident as he preens under the blushing gaze of the hostess.

Fucking peacock.

The only labels and famous names in *my* closet are on my guns. And I only notice my hair when it's grown long enough to need a new buzz cut.

Short of keeping myself clean and fit, I couldn't care less what I put on my back. Most of the people I work for, however, take a different view on life. They follow the mantra: "*If you flaunt it, they will come...*"

I'd liked Leon because, despite his own rich labels and fine suits, he'd only cared enough to look fit for his job. Growing up without much money, he'd never needed to look sharp to feel worthy.

A rarity in an industry where nepotism reigns supreme.

Fiori and his boss Felix are more classic examples of high-bred, high-paid mobsters.

Fiori, in particular, is a handsome man and radiates himself as an alpha male. There's no doubt in my mind that every female staff member will be falling about themselves to—

I freeze when I spot a familiar figure tending to glasses at the far end of the bar.

Darcy.

Something in the vicinity of my gut clenches.

What. The fuck. Is she doing here?

I 'd had little choice in the location for this meeting.

That is the way of things when two enemies approach under a white banner. Deadly skepticism and trigger-happy gangsters are a piss-poor combination. So, considerations like place and time have to be carefully negotiated.

Combining Fiori's preferences for particular brands of scotch and my need for a schematic familiarity of the venue, only a few places in Rome's central district came out on top: a couple of hotels and one gentleman's club

Of those remaining options, Fiori had chosen *The Blue Star*.

So, *I* had insisted on a Tuesday.

The one day of the week I knew that *she* wouldn't be in the building.

Good. Fucking. Job.

Tempted to turn my burner back on and text Nat to call in a fire alarm in Darcy's building or something, I freeze when Fiori scans the room and spies me in the far corner.

Screw it.

If the meeting goes as planned, there'll be no need for violence anyway.

And, more to the point, Darcy's technically nothing to me. Not my partner, not my significant other... She's just a woman with whom I spend some downtime whenever I'm in Rome.

The sex is... well, damn phenomenal if all cards are on the table. But neither of us has sought anything beyond it. Not intimacy, not personal connections. Nothing but phone numbers.

The arrangement between us is clinical and effective. I fly in. I pass by the hotel. We fuck. I leave. It's so hit-or-miss casual that, even with the sex, we can barely be called lovers.

She's more like the garage I take my bike to for a tune-up whenever I'm in town.

And no one gets emotional over their mechanic. I remind myself. So, there's no issue with her being here, is there?

Focusing on the job at hand, I keep my hands in plain, unthreatening view—one over the back of the booth and the other on the table, toying with the dish of nuts—and give Fiori the briefest of nods.

Having never met me before, the man doesn't move in my direction until the nod confirms my identity. Trailing in his wake are just two men. Nat said there was a third, so I assess the room quickly and casually, looking for the woman.

The lounge is wide and shadowy, decked out in navy fabrics and blackwood tables. The bulbs in the wall sconces burn a muted white, twisting ocean blues to sickly aquamarine.

The bar is on the eastern side of the vast hall, stretching nearly thirty paces before turning away in an L shape. The far side is for stool perchers and loiterers waiting for a table in the hotel's restaurant. On this side, the lounge is more exclusive. A set of velveteen ropes perpetuates that illusion. To add to its mystique of luxury, the designer of the hotel favored round booth tables over square cut, obviously jonesing for the speak-easies and gin-joints of black and white movies.

I'd selected one such booth at the very back when I arrived, from which I can now play witness to the entire room.

Including the brunette in the green dress, which Nat had described as "slutty", perched at a high table near the bar.

As Fiori comes to join me, the woman pays him no mind and he plays equally dumb. Which means I'm not supposed to

know they arrived together. Meaning, she probably has some kind of audio recorder honed in on us from across the room. Likely a signal reader too.

Though where she's hiding either of them, I have no idea.

Well, maybe not *no* ideas.

So much for "no tricks", Fiori.

'Mr. Russo,' Fiori greets with an open hand and equally friendly grin. 'Such a pleasure to finally meet you.'

Fiori, like his boss Felix Caruso, knows my real name. Or, at least, the name I use professionally. But it's bad form to verbalize a hitman's moniker in public. Russo is such a common name in Italy that its use has become something of a joke in seedier professions. Yet no less effective in masking identities from wandering ears.

He might be a deceitful bastard but at least the peacock's polite.

I nod my own greeting, steering clear of his offered hand. I pop a pistachio into my mouth.

'Pleasure,' I greet in return, combining a flat grin with a hard chomp.

Fiori freezes for a second and a vein flickers beneath his left eye. I keep my expression blank, even as I have the urge to smile.

Men like Fiori don't like feeling out of step in their fancy-dancy loafers.

'I see you're a man of few words, Mr. Russo,' Fiori says before taking a seat on the other side of the booth.

His two bodyguards claim one of the open tables further into the room, positioning themselves between the main doors and their boss. Both of them are built like fortresses and over six feet tall, so they have to find a way of sitting across from each other that doesn't have them entangled in an accidental game of footsy.

They end up looking like they're on the butchest date ever.

‘I can respect that,’ Fiori continues, dragging my attention back to his navy suit and gleaming hair.

Can you? I ponder, refusing to look at the woman in the green dress.

‘Let us get to the point,’ I suggest in a carefully constructed tone of boredom. ‘You’re the one who asked for this meeting, Fiori.’

Because I’ve been careful to make you do so.

The death of Giovanni Carlos, head of the Machelli crime family, and the succession of his illegitimate son had caused the usual ripples that accompany new leadership. Despite having the majority of the organization’s popular opinion, there had been a few skirmishes before Leon had truly claimed his father’s seat.

It had been almost too easy to float around the idea that the Machellis’ favorite hitman is unhappy with the new regime and looking for fresh employment.

Fiori had reached out with a few feelers. I had reached back.

And here we are.

‘By all means,’ Fiori agrees good-naturedly before flicking an empirical finger in the air. The hostess is quick to obey the summons and, apparently forgetting that she’s not a waitress, takes the man’s order for a Macallan neat.

Fiori looks at me with a questioning glance. The woman looks at me with unease. I note the difference in her reaction between us but disregard it. Her instincts aren’t wrong. Fiori might be a snake but, at the end of the day, I’m far more venomous.

I order a Pepsi.

After the woman leaves, there’s an air of amusement in Fiori.

‘Don’t like to drink on the job?’ he asks coyly but there’s a childish shadow of one-upmanship in his tone.

I don't like to drink, period. But I don't need to justify my life choices to this prancer.

'Has your boss read my terms?' I demand without segue.

That vein under Fiori's eye twitches again and his coy little smile begins to slip. He's used to handling business over scotch and cigars. All pleasantries and flattery. It's becoming clear to him that I don't operate the same way. And it's making him nervous.

He clears his throat whilst I remain still, not wanting to push him too far. It's a fine line between keeping your enemy off-balance and pissing them off right out the door.

'Yes,' Fiori says, a little testily. 'He's looked over your rates and finds them agreeable.' He then hits me with a pointed eye. 'You charge a high premium, Mr. Russo, but Mr. Caruso feels you are worth the expense.'

"I don't," his eyes say.

I offer him no more expression than a slow and measured blink.

'Then Mr. Caruso is a wise man,' I tell him.

"And you are not," my eyes say back.

Fiori doesn't react but one of his men does. I spy the ghost of a smile on his face. I remember Jaime's reaction on the phone when I mocked Leon.

Truly loyal entourages don't laugh at their boss's expense. So, I make a note of the guy's buzz cut and the scar on his neck, in case I need to identify him later.

'Wise,' Fiori agrees with me, 'and *cautious*. You should know that Felix Caruso is not a man who works with outsiders. And he is uncomfortable with your requirement to continue taking outside work. If he chooses to open a contract with you, Mr. Russo, it will only be after he is assured of your fealty.'

I chew on another nut, feigning contemplation. Like a man weighing up his employment opportunities and unsure which way to fall.

In truth, my end goal is Felix. To meet him, to talk to him... to find out more about his connection to the assassin Gabriel. But too much eagerness on my part would not be befitting a hired gun whose entire business model relies on subterfuge.

Better not to start ripples of suspicion with over-enthusiasm.

‘I’m not one for the role of lap dog,’ I warn the man before being drawn to the approaching figure beyond his shoulder.

My tongue is suddenly dry as a northern salt lake.

Darcy is bringing over our drinks.

‘Gentlemen,’ she greets, before lowering a round tray to the table. Her voice is low, cool, and confident. It sends goosebumps of awareness rolling down my spine. She transfers the drinks, asks if there’s anything else we need, and then retreats back to the bar.

I try not to look at her more than necessary.

She tries not to react to my cold shoulder.

Fiori, however, looks thoughtful.

‘You know the woman?’ he asks.

‘No,’ I deny, taking a sip of my soda.

Fiori’s lip twitches and, instantly, I know I’ve stepped wrong. He looks like a hunter, aroused by the sight of a rabbit in his trap.

‘She certainly knows you,’ he points out.

‘How’s that?’

‘She knew who ordered which drink.’

I deliberately glance at the cup I’m holding then tilt a shoulder in a lacklustre shrug. As if to imply she had a 50/50 shot.

‘My terms on exclusivity are clear,’ I say, directing the conversation back to the matter at hand and away from Darcy.

‘What exactly would it take to calm Mr. Caruso’s nerves but keep me independent of the Caruso name?’

‘Felix requires a meeting.’

‘We’re having a meeting,’ I point out.

‘With him personally.’

‘Then why isn’t *he* here?’

Fiori tries to marshal his expression but it’s clear he’s annoyed. He doesn’t like having to explain his boss’s behavior.

‘Mr. Caruso is in Spain currently and is flying to his resort in Greece in a few weeks for his annual soiree.’

I’m not surprised.

Felix, son of Hector, only took leadership of the Caruso group just over a year ago. According to my sources, he’d been lavishly putting to use the family’s private jet and their chain of high-class European hotels ever since.

That had been how I’d found my lead. Felix’s flight manifests.

Specifically, one to Austria. Where I’d already tracked rumors of the mysterious Gabriel.

When I got Nat to hack the security cameras of the Caruso hotel in Vienna, I discovered that Felix had spent a two-hour stretch in his suite, in the middle of the day, with guards outside the door. Two meals had been ordered from room service during that window.

Yet the footage showed no one but Felix and his entourage arriving or leaving.

Unlike in the law courts, in the world of mercenaries, lack of evidence is most definitely proof of *something*.

And, in this case, I’m hoping it’s evidence of Felix hiring Gabriel for a job. Better still, a *second* job. If that’s the case, I’d be able to report back to the Machellis not only that Gabriel *had* pulled the trigger on Leon’s brother Alexei but also who had aimed the gun.

Because it seems awfully coincidental to me that Felix took his much-coveted spot at the top of a rival gangster totem only *after* the Machellis' original successor was killed and their line of inheritance almost destroyed.

You don't become a mafia don in this world without a little flash and circumstance.

'Mr. Caruso would like you to attend, Mr. Russo.'

Felix Caruso wants me at his summer bash?

This time, I don't hide my snort.

'If Mr. Caruso wants to invite a man like me into his home, perhaps I was premature when I called him "wise".'

Fiori is smiling. But the expression is cold.

'You can drop the bogeyman facade, Cyrus,' he says, dispensing with pleasantries. And the pseudonyms. 'You'll find the Carusos harder to frighten than those Machellis. As for the event itself, Felix feels confident of everyone's safety...'

Fiori settles back into his seat with all the pompous arrogance of a man holding a full house.

I should play him at poker one day, I think. I could clean up and retire.

'Mr. Caruso's summer event is for his entire network,' the headhunter explains. 'There'll be nearly a hundred guests, all from *our world*. Many, I assume, will have already used your services or may even be under contract with you currently.'

Fiori leans forward, his scotch poised between his fingers. There, it hovers over the tabletop, light catching the glass and turning the liquid inside to crystallized amber. The reflections cast speckles of bronze over the dark wood grain.

'No matter the quality of your work, Mr. Russo, I think it unlikely that a man in your position would find future employment if his reputation were smeared by a public outburst.'

‘I could equally lose work if my face is *too* well known,’ I counter.

‘Which is why Felix has agreed that, whilst you stay with him at the resort, you’ll be given a moniker and the cover of an “old friend”. The only ones to know who you truly are will be myself, Felix, and his most trusted inner circle.’

‘And this is an advantage to your boss, how?’ I ask skeptically. ‘Seems an awful effort that’ll do little more than give me a flashy vacation.’

Fiori’s nose wrinkles in distaste over having to repeat himself.

‘As I said, Mr. Caruso likes to know who he’s working with.’

‘He knows my work,’ I stall. ‘That should be all that matters.’

‘And it *is*, when it comes to his *confidence* in you. But not his *trust*. As I’m sure you might expect, we already have someone with your skill set on the books, Mr. Russo. We need to be reassured that branching out with another acquisition is worth the risk of *their* surplantation.’

And *there* it is...

“*Someone with your skill set...*”

Another hired gun.

As Fiori said, it’s hardly surprising that the Carusos would keep an independent killer on retainer. The question is... is it *Gabriel*?

Whilst jetting off to a luxury resort and rubbing elbows with the rich and infamous is hardly my natural habitat, I’m willing to adapt. Not only does the invitation get me closer to Felix, in an environment where he feels in control—relaxed enough, perhaps, to drop his guard—but, if this event is as grand scale as Fiori is bragging, Gabriel might even be in attendance himself.

I pause and grind my teeth long enough to seem begrudging before surrendering:

‘Fine.’ I sip from my glass. ‘I’ll fly out and—’

I’m distracted.

It doesn’t happen often. In my line of work, you need razor-sharp focus or either the target gets away or you *become* the target. But, for a second, there’s a distraction. And it catches my eye and stills my tongue.

Darcy has just returned to the bar.

I’d noted her disappearance through the door marked “*Staff Only*” a few minutes ago without reaction. Her return should have been equally uneventful. But, as she takes her place back behind the beer taps and smooths out the half-apron around her waist, I’m caught off-guard by the behavior of her colleague.

He’s watching her with an intensity beyond simple peerdom. His brow is furrowed low, his eyes soft under the dimmed lighting of the bar. Their backdrop is the rows of liquor over the back wall and, beyond it, mirrored tiling. In the reflection, I can see the guy reaching to rest a hand on Darcy’s shoulder.

His posture radiates concern.

My pulse has sped up and the soles of my feet itch. I keep myself rooted in my seat, one ankle slung over the opposing knee. The posture is casual but I’m suddenly tight as corded wire.

Before I can fully mask my reaction, Alexander has turned to peer over his shoulder.

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘The bartender, again. She is rather pretty... in a spunky sort of way.’

I try not to snort.

What is it about men like Fiori? If a woman doesn’t have a ton of bottle-blond hair and hasn’t been nipped and tucked into the shape of Pamela Anderson, they can’t see jack-shit worthy of notice.

Darcy just has to be within a mile radius to start heating me from the inside out and yet Alexander Fiori, self-appointed

connoisseur of all things attractive, barely notices her.

Fucking idiot.

After mimicking the universal sign for the check at Darcy, Fiori turns back to face me, his eyebrow rising in an expression that harbors several suggestions. None of them clean.

Okay, maybe the pig has noticed her a *little*.

I feel my upper lip twitch.

Thank God this meeting is almost over.

‘As I said...’ My words are a little strained, choked dry behind gritted teeth. ‘I’ll fly out to meet Mr. Caruso as requested. Just send me a suitable date for arrival.’

Fiori has access to the same inbox my other clients work with. One that has no traceable connection to me but is unhackable to the outside world. His message about dates would sit nice and snugly beside whatever grumbling voicemail Jaime had left.

‘I’ll do one better and arrange your flight personally,’ Fiori vows before settling his suit in a manner designed to communicate impending departure.

‘No,’ I say, the word stalling his hands over the double-breasted. ‘I’ll take my own transport. I just need a date and location.’

Fiori’s jaw tightens and clicks to one side. I can see it groove out a hollow under his left cheekbone.

‘As you prefer,’ he resigns, just as Darcy appears with a small leather booklet, the check enclosed inside.

Fiori hands her a black credit card and then leers over her; up, down, and sideways.

For my part, I can practically *feel* his eyes on her. The sensation of him trying to read the individual strands and texture in the pitch black of her hair... That gaze trailing along her bare neck and slithering over the little rounds of her

breasts. His stare lingers on her high and tight backside before sweeping down the impressive length of her slender legs.

I push aside the uncharacteristic urge to stab the man in the face and try to adopt Darcy's attitude instead.

She is perfectly cool. No reaction at all, in fact.

That... doesn't sit well with me.

Perhaps she's so used to men staring at her ass that she no longer notices. Or maybe she has a unit of a boyfriend somewhere that I don't know about. One she can run to for exacting revenge, should anything go too far... making her unafraid of petty latches.

I glance at the guy behind the bar. The one who had shown her all that puppy-dog concern.

Not him. The kid is tall but thin enough that I could post him head-first through a mailbox.

Someone else then, maybe.

Not that you care. I remind myself. *Your mechanic, remember? Not your lover.*

After punching in the cost of our drinks, Darcy holds Fiori's credit card against her portable payment screen and, after a beep, returns the piece of plastic.

As she does so, the pocket of her apron flares with light.

Fiori freezes, the card still hovering between them. He glances at me.

'*The Blue Star* appear liberal with their regulations,' he suggests pointedly. 'I recall a time when employees on shift had to keep their phones elsewhere.'

Uh-oh.

Quickly, I piece together the headhunter's suspicions.

He had come here tonight to meet with a man who is, as yet, untrustworthy. A man claiming to want in with his boss: a known gangster and mafia Don. The arrangement had been to

meet alone. And, whilst *he* had flagrantly flouted that rule, Fiori has no patience for others taking the same liberties.

With that framework in mind... Why might an employee—one whom Fiori already suspects to be more than a stranger to me—have a cell phone with her on shift?

And why might that device light up in his presence?

It's a reaching conclusion but not a totally unreasonable one. The woman in the green dress is proof enough that satellite agents, set up to record discussions for future leverage, are common practice. And Fiori is obviously halfway to being convinced that I've hired a similar (if incompetent) equivalent.

Her expression analytical, Darcy glances between the two of us before deciding that the conversation is *about* her and not *to* her. So, she merely thanks Fiori for his patronage and leaves.

As soon as she's safely back behind the bar, I assess my options, meet Fiori's gaze head-on, and finally heave a shallow exhale like I've been caught in a lie.

'I'm seeing her,' I admit, deciding to take the lesser of two evils.

'Your girlfriend? The *bartender*?' Fiori's eyes shoot so wide that I'm offended on Darcy's behalf. Lowly as it might seem to a high-flyer like Fiori, tending bar is hardly a disgraceful profession.

'Something like that,' I grunt to avoid sounding too committed.

'Recent?'

Darcy and I started our... *whatever it is*... in February. It's now August. The more truth in a lie, the easier it is to spin, so I decide to answer with vague honesty:

'A few months.'

Fiori's eyes light up.

'Then you should bring her with you.'

The tips of my fingers numb out.

‘Excuse me?’ I ask, deadpan.

‘To *Nisi tou Chrysoú*. Mr. Caruso’s resort. I’m sure she’ll enjoy a brief getaway.’

Fiori is smiling but there’s nothing friendly in his expression as a whole. His eyes are cold and his expression is stiff. As if everything below his nose is somehow detached from the rest of his face.

‘That way,’ he continues, ‘he can meet the both of you at once and we’ll be saved a deeper search into her background. You understand due diligence, I’m sure, but such investigations always leave a sour taste in the mouth. Especially for new couples.’ Again with that icy smile. ‘No one likes sharing their skeletons too early in a relationship. Far better to just wine, dine, and spoil your lady for a few days on a beautiful island, wouldn’t you say?’

I glance from Fiori to Darcy. Despite being too far away to hear him, she’s scrutinizing us from behind the bar as she wipes over one of the ale taps.

The idea of taking the woman I occasionally screw on some kind of espionage work retreat is laughable. Least of all because it’s hard to book a plane ticket for someone whose last name you don’t know.

But, with the bill now paid, I’m ready to quit this meeting while I’m ahead. So, I try to hurry Fiori back to his state of imminent leave-taking by simply telling him what he wants to hear.

‘Sure,’ I promise. ‘If she’s free, I’ll bring her. Anything for the boss.’

‘Good man.’ Fiori nods, attending again to his suit as he gets to his feet.

‘It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Russo. I dare say we’ll be seeing a lot of each other in the future.’

I pull my cheeks back, likely in a semblance of Fiori’s deadened grin.

‘I guarantee it.’

Looking only a little perturbed under a stare I’ve been told before is “menacing”—a hint that he might be braver than his flamboyant feathers suggest—Fiori heads for the exit with his two brutish bodyguards. Passing the bar, he affords an appreciative stare over Darcy that then morphs into a leer of warning when he throws it back in my direction.

I can read him loud and clear. Even in the pale light of the lounge. The man has all the subtlety of a king cobra.

A fluorescent *pink* king cobra.

Avoiding the supervising eye of the woman in the green dress, I head for the men’s room to decompress, take a leak, and ponder my sudden change in plans.

Spiriting off to a Greek island for a few days would require moving some things around but attending Felix Caruso’s summer shindig shouldn’t be a problem. Especially if it gets me close to Gabriel.

I’m just going to have to adjust to a new working environment for a few days, I muse. Instead of dark alleys, rooftops, and shadows, I’ll be dealing with the sun, sea, and *piña coladas*.

Yippee.

I wash up and apply a paper towel to my hands and wrists with more force than is strictly necessary to work out some of my tension. Dunking the crushed sheets into a shiny silver bin that kind of looks like an upright dick, I push open the washroom door... and nearly truck right over Darcy.

She’d been waiting for me in the hall. Her arms are folded. And she looks pissed.

‘**W**ere you planning on telling me what that was all about or were you just going to leave without a word?’ I ask.

It galls me that I have to look up so high to confront Cyrus. I’m no short-stack but the man in front of me is well over six feet. Beyond that, Cyrus has a cool and calm authority to him; a derisive attitude of superiority that makes him appear all the bigger. The gravity of his presence grows by shrinking the worth of the world around him.

Adding to the problem is *my* physical reaction to the man.

It’s hard to compose an air of condemnation when all you can think about is how good he looks and how amazing he smells.

Damn but I’ve missed him...

Determined not to melt, I deludedly blame my weaknesses on hormones and keep my arms folded defensively across my chest. I plant my feet. No doubt looking for all the world like a small and inconsequential obstacle in the path of an oncoming force. A speed bump before a monster truck. A meerkat before a lion.

No... not a lion.

True, Cyrus possesses all the traits of a man who dominates: the height, the self-assurance, and a wide-shoulder to narrow-hip ratio so prominent it’s almost creepily unnatural. Not to mention he’s a good-looking guy.

Despite all this, however, he doesn't take up the *space* of an alpha male. He doesn't *demand* notice. He bathes himself in more mystique than he does regal pomp and circumstance.

Arrogant, authoritative mystique.

So not a lion... *Perhaps a wolf?*

What does that make me, then? I wonder, annoyed. *A rabbit caught in his sights?*

Fuck that.

I've spent the entirety of our acquaintance working to be anything *but* that.

'Cyrus?' I prompt, casting a careful glance up and down the dimly-lit hallway.

Further on, the corridor leads to only the kitchens and an external door for garbage disposal but, this close to the bar, we could be interrupted by any small-bladdered patron needing the washrooms.

Cyrus seems aware of this too. Still without answering me, he takes hold of my arm and steers us down the hall. Away from the bar.

'Hey!' I cry as heat from his fingers bleeds through my shirt and into my skin. The size of his hand on my arm has my belly uncurling and my chest warming in familiarity. Ignoring the pleasant sensation, I try to shrug free of his hold but the man has an iron grip.

Not to mention control issues.

Cyrus's habit of getting handsy when he wants to manage a situation is one I've yet to train him out of. Not that what he and I have entitles me to teach him jack-shit, of course. We're not permanent. In fact, we're even more short-lived now than we were seven weeks ago.

I've already accepted that a baby will be the *fait accompli* between us.

Suddenly realizing Cyrus is heading for the kitchens, I try to dig my heels in. I'm a strong woman. I was trained that

way. And, even outside of the forces, I've kept up with my physique.

But so has Cyrus.

And, whilst I can take down men twice my size under the right conditions, it's a frustration of my own sex that—when paired with a male of equal power and training—it's a slam dunk in favor of testosterone. Which means I can slow him *down*, I can make him *work* for it, as he drags me toward the clattering noises of pots and pans... But I can't actually *stop* him.

Damn arsehole.

'You can't just—'

Cyrus punches the two-way door so hard that it swings wide and rattles on its hinges. The sounds of a busy, commercial kitchen hit us flush in the face. The rush of the air filters, the hiss of sizzling food, the beep of ovens, the bubble of boiling pans. Heat is a blanket folding thickly over our skin and sucking the air right out of our lungs.

'Darcy!' comes a voice of frustration.

Antonio, the head chef and an Italian down to his bones, looks at me in horror, his hands raised in the traditions of his emotive people.

'I know!' I call back, raising my free arm to show I've only brought a civilian into his kitchen under duress. 'I'm working on it!'

Cyrus ignores the both of us, just dragging me around a countertop and behind a metal rack of ceramic hotpots. Antonio, however, isn't finished and his shouts chase us around the corner:

'I heard you earlier, Darcy! I don't want you in here if you're—'

'I'm fine, Antonio!' I cut him off. The absolute last thing I need is him mentioning my quick rush for the bathrooms in front of Cyrus! 'Nothing to worry about. I'm just—*ouch!* Hey, watch the grabbies!'

This last statement I direct at Cyrus, who has taken both my shoulders and steered me into position behind the wall of crockpots. Hidden from the rest of the kitchen and keeping our voices below the din of dishes, furnaces, and angry waitstaff affords us a little privacy. In this shadowy corner of the kitchen, the overhead lights from the main floor break between the metal racks and throw weird, angular specks of white over Cyrus's face.

Enough light to see by, enough shadow to distort...

Which, of course, suits Cyrus down to a T.

I don't know *exactly* what he does for a living. Because I've never asked. Deliberately.

But it's hard to be completely ignorant of someone you're sleeping with, however irregularly. Over the last five months, I've observed enough pieces of a picture. I'm *choosing* not to put them together.

He does something dark and shady. That's all I care to know.

'You know you're not supposed to be in staff-only areas,' I grumble without a whole lot of conviction. I don't much care about the Hotel's rules. Only my job security.

Cyrus looms close, boxing me in. I try not to flatten myself against the wall like a coward.

I don't fear the man. It's just that things start to happen when that body of his comes into orbit with mine. Synapses in my brain start to misfire. Heat starts burning in all kinds of delicious places. And I generally make foolish decisions.

As if to prove my point, Cyrus braces a hand on either side of my head and leans in closer. The light around us is fragmented and his face keeps getting lost in the darkness. But I know it well enough now to fill in the details for myself.

I paint in his square-cut features and his aquiline nose. Those intense cheekbones and a hard but tender mouth. Then there's the prettiest mismatching gaze I've ever seen. Those eyes, I don't need to recreate. They're burning through the shadows like twinkling ore. One green and one blue, Cyrus's

eyes are all the more attractive for the razor-sharp cunning that lights them from the inside out.

He might suit the shadows over the spotlight but that is in no way because Cyrus is unattractive. And that's just from the head up.

Without his clothes, he's even more spectacular.

'You've not always been so rigid on the rules,' Cyrus whispers.

His words spark a flurry of heated memories. The late-night gloom, the dimming sounds of the hotel muffled beyond the closet walls. His hand over my mouth to cover my cries of ecstasy...

The warmth of his breath tickles over my cheek and finds its way down the back of my neck. My thighs tense and my breasts ache.

'That was one time,' I remind him.

And I was horny as shit and you... look like you, for fucks sake.

For most women, the unyielding features, the ultra-short buzz cut, and the cold blanket of detachment that Cyrus wears around himself like a wall of concrete would probably be off-putting.

For me, that wall was—*is*—one of Cyrus's most alluring qualities.

When we met, I didn't want a man. Not a boyfriend. Not even a lover. I hadn't wanted a partner in my life for whom I would have to compromise or care.

I still don't.

He changed my mind on the sex. But I still feel like a one-woman show. I still *want* to be a solo act.

And I'm not about to let my pregnancy change that.

In fact, before Cyrus's little *tête-à-tête* with the guy in blue and his muscle-bound buffoons, I'd had a very specific plan

for the next time I saw Cyrus. The details had been fuzzy. But the end result was crystal clear:

It was a goodbye.

A thanks-I-had-a-great-time-but-lets-do-this-again-never farewell.

That is, until I'd heard their subject of conversation...

'Are you going to tell me about your trip?' I prompt again, trying to ignore the way Cyrus's chest is brushing against mine with every inhale...

'I wasn't aware,' Cyrus murmurs in the dark... 'That I had to run my social activities by you.'

All of that calm, controlled demeanor comes out in Cyrus's voice. He doesn't growl so much as he *purrs*. Deep and full-bodied. Like a wild cat. All that body makes his tone warm. The more impassioned he gets, the hotter the words burn; gaining heat instead of volume.

I snort in defiance over his dodging my question and try to get my arms up between us so I can fold them across my chest and put some distance between us. This damn kitchen is growing hotter by the minute...

'I believe lack of notification before you fly someone off to a tropical island constitutes kidnapping,' I point out.

'You heard?' Cyrus asks with a curious eyebrow.

'I read,' I say, tapping my lips.

Cyrus and his companion had been too far from the bar for me to eavesdrop. But the only limitation to reading lips is your prescription. And my eyesight is twenty-twenty.

Cyrus blinks. That's the entirety of his reaction. But I've known this block of stoicism masquerading as a man long enough now to recognize his version of mild surprise.

He takes a measured breath. In. Out.

'Whatever you read is irrelevant,' he finally says, before meeting my gaze again. 'I'm not taking you anywhere.'

‘Your companion didn’t seem to be giving you much of a choice,’ I point out.

‘*Me* much of a choice. Not you.’

Cyrus seems highly intent on reducing his meeting to an insignificance. One that I’m supposed to forget post-haste.

Yeah not so easy, buster.

‘He said he’d investigate me if I don’t go with you.’

‘He’ll investigate you, regardless.’

Anger spikes but I try to keep my voice calm.

‘That’s because you called me your *girlfriend*.’

One corner of Cyrus’s mouth is definitely a millimeter higher than the other now. His version of amusement.

‘You have a problem with that?’ he taunts.

‘*Yes.*’

I don’t hesitate in my answer. The both of us, through some unspoken agreement, have made our intentions and the pattern of our acquaintance very clear.

Cyrus rolls into town. If he has the time and inclination (and it’s a night I’m working), he swings by *The Blue Star*. If I have the time and inclination, I join him after my shift. His hotel room, the back of his rental, (the cleaning closet)... I’d even taken him to my place once. But the location is always about convenience over intimacy. Then we have sex.

Okay, we have mind-blowing, physics-altering, never-knew-how-you-lived-without-it sex. If you want to get specific.

And then Cyrus leaves. On to his next foray into the dark and seedy underworld that he’d momentarily risen from.

Sometimes it’s days before it happens again. Sometimes weeks. Once or twice, it had been a month. This last time had been nearly two.

My doctor has the precise date.

Either way, not exactly the setup of a romantic pairing.

So, yes, I have a problem with him calling me his girlfriend.

‘More *specifically*,’ I add, ‘I have a problem with men like your friend running my information.’

‘Not my friend,’ Cyrus grunts.

‘Exactly my point. I don’t want men like that looking into me.’

‘Men “like that”?’ Cyrus asks with a raised eyebrow.

I narrow my eyes.

‘Men like *you*.’

‘Ouch,’ he says, deadpan.

‘Am I wrong?’ I challenge.

‘Nope.’

He doesn’t even hesitate.

Ugh.

I want to scream. I used to like the fact that Cyrus could keep up with the verbal gymnastics as masterfully as he did the sexual ones. But this bickering is getting us nowhere.

Whilst neither of us has shared anything personal before, this seems the time for a few necessary revelations.

‘I’m not Italian, Cyrus,’ I explain. ‘And my—’

I clam up as one of the kitchen porters comes around the shelving in search of something. He skids to a halt and stares at us—a hulking man with the aura of cool death looming over one of the bar staff—with a look that says he knows he’s interrupting.

I curse under my breath.

Cyrus stays silent but gets handsy again.

With a fresh grip on my upper arm, he wheels me around and through a side door with a porthole window.

‘Er, hey, excuse me—’ With one look from Cyrus, the porter shuts up and disappears. I think I actually hear the poor

guy squeak.

My hero, I muse, rolling my eyes.

As the door to the storage room swings shut behind us, a light comes alive overhead. When the aged bulb struggles to hold its brightness, flickering unhealthily, Cyrus punches a switch on the wall and shuts it off completely.

The porthole light from the main kitchen is, at least, enough to see by.

We're in the stores. A room that's more like a large-scale pantry than a cupboard. Almost as big as the kitchens themselves, shelves stretch along every wall, and tall racking units divide the space into a grid of aisles. There's a small, open space in its center in which sits a pair of tables in roughly hewn wood. Cyrus deposits me against one and then braces his very nice ass against the other. This gives me a little breathing room. Perhaps a half foot between us. But when he braces his hands on the tabletop behind him and his shoulders brace forward to look twice their already impressive width, I'm suddenly grieving the loss of that closeness. I can see the tendons of his neck funneling into the curving valley of his collarbone beneath his sweater.

My mouth waters.

I want to touch.

The sweater is grey and casual, loose-fitting and comfy. Paired with pale, distressed jeans. Cyrus might have looked like a teenager if it wasn't for his size and the severe angles of his face. His only hint of color is a leather jacket of desaturated bottle green.

And those eyes, of course.

He looks good. *Very* good. Cyrus might not demand notice the way some men—some lions—do. But, once your eye lands on him, it's hard to steer away.

I try not to feel self-conscious in my bleak and drab uniform.

'You were saying?' he suddenly prompts.

I blink at him.

‘What?’

“‘Not Italian’?” he repeats.

Oh, right.

Jesus, where did the old Darcy go? The one who could simultaneously bark orders, read complex navigational charts, and maneuver a Humvee under fire?

Lost in a sea of hormones, apparently.

‘Right...’ I say, getting back on track. ‘I’m not from here, Cyrus. Though, I’m guessing you already know that...?’

‘No.’

‘No?’ I blink, thrown off-course for a moment.

Cyrus shakes his head.

‘No, I didn’t know that.’

The guy who I’m convinced works for shady organizations and powerful men (the kind who probably favor cigars and “making people offers they can’t refuse”) hadn’t done a standard background check on me?

‘You... you didn’t investigate me?’

For his part, Cyrus appears more surprised than I am. Even uncomfortable. He shuffles his feet, resettles his shoulders, and pins me with a hard look.

‘No,’ he admits again. ‘I didn’t.’

I think there might be something sweet in that. But the last thing I need to do right now is dig for it.

I clear my throat.

‘All right, well... the salient point is that my VISA isn’t exactly up-to-date. If Mr. Blue Suit runs my name through the wrong system, I could get flagged and deported.’

Minimum wage job. Tiny apartment. Baby on the way. I can cope with all of that.

The imminent threat of being sent home to face a court martial? Yeah, not so much.

My baby might not have the greatest of mothers. But she or he is going to at least *have* one.

‘They’re not going to care about your immigration status,’ Cyrus says.

‘I care.’

Whether they intend to use it or not, I don’t like strangers holding leverage over my head.

‘You need to get me off their radar, Cyrus. Completely.’

The tightening at the corners of his eyes could be a wince.

‘I can’t do that.’

I grind my teeth.

‘Only because they think we’re *involved*,’ I growl, still annoyed over *that* little tidbit.

‘We *are* involved,’ he says.

‘Not like that.’

‘Not like what?’

I glare at him. I’m not playing this game.

‘Cyrus, you need to sort this. Keep me out of it. Please.’

A little humanity comes back into Cyrus’s expression. He seems tired. Frustrated. Even a little contrite.

‘I tried,’ he says. ‘He thought you were part of my team.’

‘Yeah, he thought I was a spy. I got that.’

Again, Cyrus seems surprised by my powers of observation. Had I not worked so hard to construct a new life for myself as a simple bartender over trained soldier, I might have been insulted. Instead, I choose to take it as a positive critique of my acting abilities.

‘Better that you’re my girlfriend than my partner,’ Cyrus explains.

I roll my eyes.

‘Yeah, far be it for me to be your equal.’

‘You know what I mean.’ Cyrus spreads pleading hands.
‘A girlfriend isn’t a threat.’

I snort.

‘Spoken as someone who’s never had a long-term relationship.’

This time, Cyrus is the one to roll his eyes.

I sigh.

We’re at an impasse.

Begrudgingly, I’ll admit that Cyrus did what he could to retain my privacy. But good intentions do nothing to resolve the current issue of bozos with big guns checking into my history.

‘What’s the trip for?’ I eventually ask, trying to come up with a game plan.

I watch as Cyrus’s jaw pops and locks from one direction to the other before he answers. He seems to be deciding how much to tell me. How much he trusts me.

‘A man I hope to work for is holding an annual party or something at a hotel he owns. He wants me there.’

‘And why do *you* want to be there?’

‘To secure the job.’

‘Bullshit.’

He raises an eyebrow at me.

I shake my head.

‘*Please*. You don’t expect me to believe you’re the low-rung kind of guy who has to go begging for work, do you?’

Everything about Cyrus is collected. Confident. Assured in his own skin. Whatever it is he does for a living, he’s damn good at it. He doesn’t need to follow the crooking finger of potential clientele.

‘You must be in it for something else.’

To my surprise, Cyrus is grinning. *Actually* grinning. Dual slanting dimples split down the sides of his cheeks. He’s almost holding back a chuckle.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘Just that you’re the first one to notice that.’

I snort.

‘Yeah well, Mr. Blue Suit seemed too impressed with himself to notice much about anyone else, so that tracks.’

Cyrus’s grin melts away.

‘He seemed to notice *you* just fine.’

I pause, startled, whilst Cyrus rubs a palm over his face. Like the smiling thing has made him itchy. Was that *jealousy* biting at the edges of his words? I’m usually pretty good at reading people but Cyrus’s ironclad control makes everything muted and much harder to infer.

‘Cyrus...?’

He meets my gaze and I pause. We stand there in the dark together and let the teasing and the tension melt away.

I soften my face and my voice before asking with genuine sincerity:

‘Why do you need to go to the island?’

Slowly, Cyrus begins to mirror me. His shoulders loosen and his posture bends. He looks me straight in the eye.

‘I’m looking for someone,’ he admits with the same honesty.

‘Who?’

Again, quiet. And then...

‘Telling you would bring you further into this. Neither of us want that.’

I measure his response before nodding.

‘All right. I trust your judgment.’

He seems momentarily stupefied.

‘So...’ I ponder slowly. ‘It’s important that you go to this event?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And it would be helpful if I’m there, playing the little woman?’ I add.

Cyrus goes silent. The tension in the room seems to grow again. Like a rising sealine, it’s ready to divide us, already lapping around our legs in isolating waves.

‘Come on, Cyrus,’ I entreat, before the waters can rise higher, blocking us from one another entirely. ‘I’m not trying to be an asshole. It’s a simple question. Either it’s helpful or it isn’t.’

‘It doesn’t matter if it’s helpful,’ he says. ‘You’re not going. It’s too dangerous.’

‘*Argh,*’ I growl in frustration. ‘For fuck’s sake, Cyrus, you’re my occasional fuck-buddy, not my guardian defender. That guy said *Nisi tou Chrysoú*, right? That’s Greek. I’m sure I can find it. I’ll go myself, if I have to.’

At least if I attend whatever this thing is, I can witness my own leverage material and redress the power dynamic. That’s my working theory. And, right now, it’s feeling like my only protection against deportation.

“The best defense” and all that...

Now, Cyrus looks *really* flustered. Like the fish he’s hooked might just be a great white and he doesn’t know how to let go of the rod. Calculations are zipping behind those pretty eyes of his as he searches for a way out.

Apparently, he lands upon the charm offensive.

Levering his weight back onto his feet, Cyrus takes a step forward and transfers his hands from his table to mine. One broad palm stretches over the wood either side of my waist.

‘Baby...’ he says, the whispered endearment one I normally only hear whilst he’s inside me... ‘This place is going to be filled with dangerous people wielding big guns. I’m not exactly the humble contractor that I told you I was.’

‘Really?’ I ask, with added melodrama, before falling into the flattest deadpan. My eyebrows, I’m sure, are falling as dead level as my voice. ‘You shock me.’

‘I’m serious.’

‘So am I! You think I haven’t surmised what you do for a living? Not that I’m actively trying to work it out, mind you. But I’m not an idiot. So far, I’m down to enforcer, assassin, or human trafficker.’

‘And you’re still *here*?’ he asks with that mild surprise of his.

Not wanting to look at my wonky priorities too closely, I hedge:

‘What can I say? You’re good in bed.’

And on the floor. And against a wall... and that one time on the roof of my building...

Cyrus is so very close now. His lips are practically brushing mine. He only gives enough space between us to look me in the eye as he asks:

‘Why are you pushing this?’ I open my mouth to repeat myself but he cuts me off. ‘Immigration isn’t enough,’ he says, frowning and puzzling me out. ‘There’s something else going on.’

Okay, maybe I jumped the gun when I said Cyrus was the worst choice for a paternity donation. The guy is hot as hell, incredibly built... and annoyingly perceptive. That’s a pretty good hand as far as genetic material goes.

But right now, it’s damned inconvenient.

A man as powerful as Cyrus shouldn’t also be intelligent. It’s not fair on the rest of us.

He can be as smart as he likes... I think, reclaiming my determination. I'm not telling him anything. Not about what happened back home. Not about the pregnancy.

The moment that stick turned pink, my life changed. My decisions are no longer mine but my child's; those my baby can't yet make for herself.

I'm the only advocate she has.

Or *he* has, I add quickly. Somewhere along the way, I've gotten used to thinking of my baby as a girl.

A little girl with one blue eye and one green.

A little girl who deserves a life of peace and security.

And here her father is, telling me I can't join him for a weekend away in paradise because his profession of choice has him summer schmoozing it with gun-toting gangsters.

Not the kind of security my baby needs.

Despite my earlier dig at him, I don't believe Cyrus to be wholly bad. Not yet dark all the way through, like those he works with.

In the months we've known each other, never once have I seen him look down on others. He tips well at the bar. He nods when someone holds a door for him. He might not smile, but he's never once been outright cruel or manipulative.

Not even now.

As Cyrus looms over me, he's using the space to his advantage. He's playing on the desire that rises in both of us when we're close. But he's not truly *forcing* me. No kisses, no outright seduction. He's determined to have me *choose* not to go to that island with him.

No man who's entirely lost his heart, lost his soul, to an ugly world lets a woman know her own mind.

Cyrus is no knight in shining armor. He's barely a mercenary in a tarnished breastplate. But there's still a small glint of chivalry burning in there somewhere. Something honorable. Something valiant.

But—be they knights or sellswords—men like Cyrus come with dragons.

And what kind of mother exposes her child to deadly fire?

‘Darcy?’ Cyrus leans in to whisper along the shell of my ear. ‘Tell me what’s going on...’

I can’t.

Not only does associating with Cyrus bring danger... There’s a darker threat than the world he inhabits. And that’s Cyrus himself.

The truth about why I can’t go home would only raise more questions. He’d then find out about the baby. And then the real damage would be done.

Because Cyrus will never want to be a part of our lives. Of that, I’m certain. A man who takes this much effort to keep his associations to sex and sex alone is not a man who wants commitment in his life. A man who’s always vigilant about protection every time we’re together doesn’t want a family.

That small spark of chivalry might—*might*—lead to some financial support winging its way to me in an envelope every so often but, despite my dwindling bank account, that’s the least of my concerns.

I know what it’s like to grow up without a father. But at least I’ve had the comfort of knowing he was never aware of my existence. That he *might* have wanted me if he’d had the chance to.

To wonder is painful. But to know you were *deliberately* thrown away—or relegated to a mere financial burden—is surely worse.

My daughter can seek out Cyrus when she’s ready. When she can handle any potential rejection. I can’t save her from the pain altogether. But I can at least delay it until I’ve taught her how to be strong.

And to do that, I need Cyrus off this train of inquiry and jumping onto the bandwagon of me following him to Greece.

‘Let’s just say the welcome parade awaiting me back home isn’t going to be a friendly one,’ I finally admit. ‘Enough so that I need to go with you on this trip. I need to make sure your “not friends” aren’t about to send me back to face the music.’

Cyrus raises an eyebrow.

‘The music that bad?’

‘Horrendously off-key,’ I promise.

There’s a long pause but when Cyrus finally exhales I know I’ve won. His jaw is tight. His upper lip twitches. He can’t look me in the eye.

Surrender doesn’t suit him.

‘Hey...’ I murmur in the darkness. I take his shoulders and shake him a little. When he finally meets my eyes again, I smile. ‘Welcome back.’

His eyes blaze.

Our relationship might not be the most traditional or have the most emotional depth. But those words are just a little bit sacred. I say them every time he returns to Rome.

“I’m here...”

“Welcome back...”

Like releasing a plug from a sink, the phrase drains away those rising tides of defensive hostility. The sensation of my palms on Cyrus’s jacket is suddenly more real. The space between us is shrinking. Heated arousal rushes in to replace isolating tension.

On instinct, I shift back onto the table and hook my heels behind his legs.

I can see his nostrils flare in the shadows. His eyes flash hot.

‘What are you doing?’ he purrs darkly.

‘What does it look like I’m doing?’ I whisper.

I fist the leather he's wearing and draw him closer. I part my thighs in welcome. He doesn't resist.

'So much for those workplace rules you were so concerned about,' he says as I wrap my legs around his hips. I can hear the grin in his voice and feel an answering smile spreading across my face.

A smile of heated anticipation.

'More pressing issues have my attention right now.'

Using his jacket as a hold, I lift myself up to taste the thick cord of his neck. I feel his moan vibrating against my tongue.

I smile wide when Cyrus grabs hold of my ass, possessive and greedy. Magazines and media like to tell me I'm lacking in the backside department. But my lack of junk in that particular trunk has never been a problem for Cyrus. In fact, he seems to like the lighter load.

I'm just as possessive in *my* touch. Running my fingers over his short hair, I take the back of his head and claim his mouth with mine. Hot. Hard. And hungry.

No teasing foreplay, no gentle lips. Just open and demanding.

His reaction is instantaneous. A sharp inhale, a delicious groan and then his hands pulling me hard up against his front. The heavy mass behind his zipper steals the air from my lungs. The press of that hard ridge against the apex of my thighs shoots fire beneath my skin.

I gasp. I curse.

Cyrus laughs in the darkness.

From then on, we can't seem to get close enough.

Our kiss deepens and I taste his tongue. I hold him in my mouth, desperate for the feel of his body inside mine. My face flushes, my skin seems to shrink wrap tight.

Cyrus crowds in closer and I splay my legs wider. I dive beneath his jacket and take up bulking handfuls of his sweater.

Beneath my knuckles are the hard planes of his back, the bold edges of his shoulder blades.

I need to breathe, but can't bear to break the kiss. It's too consuming. Too alive. Too everything.

Heavy gasps fill the air and suddenly Cyrus is taking hold of my hips.

Fixing me in place, he thrusts up against me, his hips finding that instinctive, driving rhythm even as we're still dressed. His erection hits me hard, rubbing our clothes against my clit.

I cry out.

'Fuck, baby...' Cyrus breathes, breaking the kiss long enough to exhale. 'It's been too fucking long.'

'Your fault,' I pant, drawing him back to me. His lips are velvet soft, hot as hell, and cling eagerly to mine.

'My fault,' he agrees before entangling our tongues again, and sending us both into overdrive.

There's no reason, no logic. No small voice to remind us of the chefs on the other side of that very unlocked door.

Sensation is the only thing that matters right now. Taste. Scent. Touch... His hands in my hair. Mine working at the fly of his pants—

We both freeze as the kitchen doors are thrown wide. The bright lights of the kitchen render us blind.

'Darc—*Dio santo!*' Antonio sputters, standing in the rectangle of glowing yellow. Even as a silhouette, he's clearly taken aback. 'The *cazzo* are you—' He grinds to an awkward halt, not knowing what to say. Instead, he turns on Cyrus. 'You! Get your hands off my staff and your ass *out of my kitchen!*'

I don't hear from Cyrus for two weeks after Antonio's grand *entrance interruptus*.

When I do, it's a sole text sent one random afternoon:

"Tuesday. 11:30am. I'll pick you up."

With any other guy, I might have worried that his limited communication was personal. That being accosted by an angry Italian in a large, crooked chef's hat had somehow killed the mood between us permanently.

But Cyrus isn't the sort to suffer performance anxiety. Back in the kitchen stores, he'd held cool in the face of the intrusion, admitted that he had somewhere he needed to be, and—after a little forcing of his hand—promised to be in touch about the trip.

The minimalist communication since then is SOP as far as our relationship goes.

'He's not here yet,' Lily-Anne calls from across the room.

Dousing a couple of teabags in hot water, I take the pair of mugs in hand.

As I skirt the kitchen counter and head across the room, I'm struck by Lily-Anne's pose: perched cross-legged on my roll-out bed with her thumb and forefinger prying apart the slats of the blinds.

With the AC always on the blink, it's a necessity in the summer to keep the apartment in shade. Lily-Anne's nosiness

is casting a guillotine of light across the dull carpet and I can't help but think she's the epitome of expectation.

Of waiting.

The concept strikes a chord somewhere in my chest. Somewhere a little too close to home.

I give myself a mental shake, hand her the mug of jasmine tea, and keep the earl grey for myself.

'He will be,' I tell her, glancing at the clock.

11:27am.

'You sure? I thought you said this guy is unreliable?' Lily-Anne scowls as she warms her palms on the ceramic.

'I said *irregular*,' I correct. 'I never know when I'm gonna see him but when he confirms a meet, he's never not there.'

'"*A meet*".' she emphasizes mockingly. 'You make it sound like a business deal, not a romantic getaway.'

I snort softly to myself.

That, my friend, is exactly what this is.

'So, what does he do when he's not in Rome?' Lily-Anne asks, turning her attention back to the window. Her curls bounce and sway as she looks first east and then west, inspecting the desolate street for any signs of life. 'What car does he drive?'

What does he do when he's not in Rome?

Or, more specifically, what had he been doing for the last two weeks whilst in Rome?

Whilst I have every intention of finding out the answer to those questions as soon as Cyrus and I are alone, I've had to push them to the back of my mind until today. Dwelling on the unknowable, worrying about the future... all of it is ineffective and has been sending me into spasms of jitters.

I only ever shower in my apartment because the bath is creaky and always seems at risk of falling through the floor.

But I've taken that chance three times over in the last fortnight just to try and de-stress amongst the bubbles.

The only revelation I've come to, lounging very still amidst the suds, has been to keep my focus on the present. Not to worry about Cyrus's past absences. Nor lament the future in which he'll be nothing *but* absent. If this is the only time I'm choosing to have with the man, I'm going to savor it. Not allow myself to be drawn into distraction by all the crap I cannot change.

Ignoring Lily-Anne's first question—simply because I don't know the answer—I focus on the second.

'He doesn't drive a car. Least not that I've seen. He rides a —'

'Holy crap...' Lily-Anne breathes, suddenly twisting her neck and smudging her cheek against the window. The blinds rattle and crack.

I glance at the clock on the wall.

11:29am.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, no doubt with his habitual message.

"I'm here."

'Told you,' I tell Lily-Anne. 'Always on time.'

'On time?!' my friend screeches, popping the blinds wider. 'You have sex with this man regularly and all you tell me is that he's *punctual*? Jesus, Darcy, he's some serious *yum!*'

I move to find my own crack in the blinds.

Cyrus has arrived on his bike—a large silver beast of a machine—and is parking up along the curb right in front of my building. Silver lining: when you live in as decrepit an area as we do, you never have parking trouble. Beside the graffitied sidewalk and the uneven slabs, Cyrus's bike looks like something out of a sci-fi movie. And him the Hollywood star headlining it.

‘I mean *God*, Darcy,’ Lily-Anne croons. ‘Look at those shoulders!’

Wearing tight jeans and a fitted riding jacket, Cyrus’s figure is even more noticeable than usual. The splay of his collarbone and upper body, the sharp taper down to his hips, and the powerful point of the triangle down his long legs.

Plus there’s that tight little butt...

‘Please tell me he’s ugly as sin under that helmet,’ Lily-Anne begs. ‘I do *not* want to fall out with you over a piece of man candy.’

‘Fraid not,’ I chuckle to myself.

‘Oh, look at you!’ she cries with a laugh.

‘Look at me, what?!’ I try to avoid her gaze, leave the window, and head for my bag.

‘You’re grinning!’

‘Am not!’

‘Sweetie, the only person to grin bigger than that is the Cheshire Cat. After he ate the canary *and* got the cream.’

Good grief...

‘I guess that answers my next question then,’ Lily-Anne snorts, trying to sort out the blinds where she had mushed them into a garbled sheet.

‘Which was?’ I humor her, before shouldering my travel bag. I’ve been packed and ready to go for hours.

‘Whether his thing is normal.’

‘Excuse me?’ I laugh.

‘Oh, come on. Mother Nature can’t be *that* generous. You said he’s smart. If he looks like that and isn’t dumb as a box of hair then there must be something wrong with his equipment. Either he’s super tiny or it’s bent funny or something.’

Okay, now I’m *definitely* grinning. I shake my head.

‘Sorry,’ I apologize without a hint of sincerity.

‘*Daamn,*’ she whistles to herself. ‘You sure you don’t want to keep this guy?’

My amusement dims.

I’d be lying if I said I’d not thought about it. In my weaker moments, I’ve imagined telling Cyrus I’m pregnant. I’ve fabricated an alternate reality in my head where he’s enthusiastic, where he tells me he loves me and adapts to life as a family man. But every time I’ve let my fantasy play out, it’s left me feeling twisted and forlorn. First, because of how much a rebellious little part of me craves it. And second, because I feel shame for craving something that isn’t the real Cyrus. Being a husband and a father is so far removed from what Cyrus is and how he conducts himself that even I, the creator of the illusion, can see how flimsy it is. How inaccurate.

Cyrus has never lied to me. Never made promises he couldn’t keep. He’s a free man and has gone out of his way to communicate that fact.

And I’ve always loathed the kinds of women who take such men and entrap them with unplanned pregnancies. As far as I’m concerned, using our exclusive abilities of reproduction against men is as bad as the arseholes who use their natural strength to beat on women. Differences in sex should be celebrated. Not used as weapons.

I refuse to do that to Cyrus. I refuse to become a hypocrite.

‘I’m sure,’ I tell Lily-Anne. ‘After this trip, I’m not seeing him again.’

‘Is *he* going to be okay with that?’ she asks.

I frown.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, he’s taking you away for a weekend to an exotic Greek island. That’s usually a not-too-subtle code that a guy is getting serious.’

‘Trust me, he’s not.’

I couldn't very well tell my friend the truth, so "romantic getaway" had been the only explanation I could come up with for my absence. I might not have a lot in life but I wanted *someone* to know where I'm headed should anything happen to me.

With no family and few friends, Lily-Anne is kind of *it*.

'Did you ever think he might surprise you?' she asks, peering through the blinds again.

Distracted by a second buzzing in my back pocket, I drain my mug, pat my bag and pockets in a mental check and set my shades on my face. I raise a quick eyebrow at Lily-Anne over the rims.

'What?'

'Did you ever think he might surprise you?' she repeats. 'That, when you break things off, he'll want you to stay? Or might want the baby? My sister's husband was useless before she got pregnant. Just a big kid himself. But, when she told him about the baby, he totally changed! He matured and got a job and—'

'Sweetie,' I say, cutting her off. 'That's awesome but I don't think it's what's going to happen here.'

I don't know if I'm trying to moderate her expectations or mine. I can already see her eyes all sparkly with fairytale optimism.

'I really need to go. He's waiting for me.'

'Okay, but just... think about what I said?' she beseeches me. 'Maybe take a risk with this one?'

I pause by the door and sigh. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have Lily-Anne's endless positivity. I've never been able to decide if it would make life a thousand times more cheerful or just utterly heartbreaking.

I try to deflect her comment.

'After the service, I've had enough risk,' I tell her.

'That's physical. And you know that's not what I'm—'

On the third buzz from my phone, I hold it up for her to see.

“Three unread messages from “C”.”

‘I really have to go.’

‘He’s naggy.’ Lily-Anne goes back to her spying so she can glare down at the street.

‘He’s *efficient*,’ I counter, unsure why I’m defending him.

‘Ooh, he’s taking his helmet off! Does he know what number you ar—oh, he must do. He’s looking up at—oh, *God...*’

It’s not a flattering “Oh God”...

‘What?’ Despite my being late, I hurry back across the room, my thoughts flying to all kinds of injuries a man in Cyrus’s field might suffer to the face.

‘Nothing, I mean... well he’s hot but...’ Lily-Anne flops back against my pillow and clutches the mug closer to her chest. ‘I think I just got the chills. Does he always look so... *murder-y?*’

I laugh but there’s a brittle edge to the sound.

‘It’s never bothered me. Look, I really need to go,’ I insist, getting back up from the bed and rushing for the door.

‘Okay, well... be *careful*.’

‘You were the one just telling me to take risks!’

‘You know what I *mean!*’ Lily-Anne haughtily throws her hair over one shoulder.

‘Yeah, yeah...’ I wave a reassuring hand and yank open the door. ‘Lock up when you leave and good luck with your exam!’ I wink at her as I head out into the hallway. ‘I’ll send you a postcard from paradise!’

Her sarcastic response escapes around the closing door.

‘Gee, thanks!’

Laughing, I resettle my bag on my shoulder and rush for the stairs. A quick sprint down four flights and a hard yank of

the front entrance (the superintendent really needs to sand down that doorframe), and I'm out onto the street.

I jog down the half-dozen stone steps to street level and am greeted with a glare.

'You have someone up there?' Cyrus asks with a stony expression.

For a minute, I think he's just wincing against the summer sun. But then the chills hit me. Hostility is rolling off him in waves.

I'm momentarily tongue-tied.

When I don't reply, Cyrus nods his brow up towards my apartment window. He must have seen the blinds twitching.

'A friend.'

'The guy from the bar?' he asks, his tone beyond icy.

'What?'

I have literally no idea what he's talking about. I haven't met any guy in a bar.

'The tall guy who—never mind.' He cuts himself off. 'Not my business.'

Unsure how to respond, I let myself fall under the distraction that is Cyrus in the sunshine.

Normally when he's in town, we've met after shift or in the dead of night. With him often gone by morning, I hardly get to see the man in the daylight.

He looks paler than usual, his skin a smooth palette of cooler tones. His hair is light, cut ultra-short, and gleams a dark silver in the sun.

Throw in the seriously annoyed vibe he's giving off this morning and I can see why Lily-Anne got the heebie-jeebies.

Cyrus's gaze falls on my bag.

'That all you've got?'

'Flipflops and sunblock don't take up all that much space,' I joke. 'And you're *sure* I don't need my passport?'

‘Positive.’

Whilst it hadn’t been much of a conversation, I’d received texts (in his usual minimalist manner) confirming that flying out of the country wouldn’t cause the very issues I’ve been trying to avoid with immigration. My passport and VISA, according to Cyrus, would be unnecessary.

How he’d managed that is beyond me, but I’m choosing not to argue.

I figure if he plans to sell me into white slavery or something, I’ll just clock him in the eye and steal his bike.

Getting off the machine in question, Cyrus holds out a large hand.

‘Give me the bag. I’ll store it.’

I hand it over and he pops the seat of the bike. On closer inspection of my rucksack, he glances back at me for a moment.

‘What?’ I challenge.

He points to one of the badges that still has its face plate. It’s faded and ragged around the edges, but the band logo emblazoned across its front is still legible.

‘Van Halen?’ he asks with a sneer.

‘Shut your judging face.’

‘Not judging.’ His words are saying one thing but that little curl at the corner of his lips is saying another.

‘They rock. And David Lee Roth was hot. End of discussion.’

‘That’s the hill you’ll die on, is it?’ he asks.

‘It is.’ I’m vehement in my reply.

Cyrus finishes stowing away my bag and then raises his hands in defeat. It looks less like a voluntary surrender and more like he just doesn’t want to touch a subject so distasteful to him.

Well, if ever you needed a sign that this relationship was to be short-lived, Darce...

‘Put this on.’

Cyrus has unhooked his helmet from his handlebars and is holding it out to me.

I’m surprised when he then takes out a pair of aviators from inside his jacket and puts them straight onto his nose.

‘You...’ I glance at his now-sealed seat compartment as if it might suddenly produce a new piece of headgear. ‘You don’t have two?’

‘Nope. Now, put it on,’ he orders, slinging a leg over the bike and knocking up the kickstand.

I’d argue if it weren’t for the maths. At least if I wear the helmet, it’s two lives protected instead of one. Though I’m not a fan of Cyrus riding without one.

Settling the helmet in place, I adjust the straps and click them together under my chin. Cyrus, I’m flattered to notice, is staring at my chest.

‘That the only jacket you have?’

Oh.

‘It’s August, Cyrus.’ I sigh, feeling more than a little criticized this morning.

First Lily-Anne and her taking issue with my life choices. Now Cyrus and his negative review of my music tastes and wardrobe.

My jacket, Goddammit, is lightweight and comfortable for the time of year.

‘It’ll be cold on the bike,’ he warns.

‘The airport is twenty minutes away,’ I point out. ‘I’ll be fine.’

Cyrus doesn’t agree. He’s already shrugging out of his riding jacket. Bracing the enormous machine between his thighs, he throws the jacket at me.

The hard padding along the spine makes it heavier than I'm expecting and I almost drop the damn thing.

'Put it on,' he says, before focusing on the bike. The front console lights up and the softest, barest of hums fills the air.

'What about you?' I ask with hesitation.

He's wearing only a loose, grey T-shirt.

"The airport is twenty minutes away," Cyrus mocks, throwing a challenging look back over his shoulder at me. "I'll be fine."

I glare at him.

Fine. Screw you, then.

I shrug into his jacket and zip up what's supposed to be a fitted garment. On me, there's more than enough space. Particularly in the chest department.

It's just insult to fucking injury, this morning.

Although, the scent of the leather goes a long way to soothing my wounded pride. The jacket smells of warm lacquer, softening beeswax... and the dark, spicy heat of Cyrus's body.

I glance back up at the apartment, where I spy Lily-Anne peering down through the blinds. I make a two-fingered salute in her direction.

'Get on the fucking bike, Darcy,' Cyrus nags coldly.

'All right, I'm coming... Jeez.'

Whatever flew up Cyrus's butt this morning seems wedged there for the long haul. Which bodes well for us playing the loved-up couple for the next few days.

Then again, I muse—as I swing up behind Cyrus and try to negotiate a space for my leg beside a long, hard case lashed against the side of his bike—perhaps him being a total jerkface the entire time will make it easier to say goodbye at the end of all this.

Not that we're thinking about that, I remind myself.

Not the future, not the past.

Cyrus steers the bike free of the curb and we're suddenly rushing along the *vicolo*. Lampposts, storefronts, and parked cars fly past in a blur.

We're keeping our attention right here and now, I remind myself.

On the rushing wind against my legs, the hum of the bike between my thighs...

...and the warmth of Cyrus's broad and reassuring back.



IT DOESN'T TAKE us twenty minutes. In fact, we ride Cyrus's bike along sideroads and highways for nearly an hour.

We weren't, I quickly discover, headed for Giovan Battista International but to a private airstrip some ways south of the city. Even engulfed by Cyrus's leather jacket, the cold has seeped into my bones by the time we turn off the interstate and begin following signs for a world war bunker memorial and the town of *Rocca Massima*. Later, skirting seven feet of chain-link fence and frequently-spaced signs warning of private property, I'm half numb. Only my cheeks, pressed against the form padding inside my helmet, have any warmth left.

How Cyrus hasn't yet turned into a hunk of ice and fallen sideways to shatter on the motorway, I have no idea.

The bike is electric. Without engine noise to judge our speed, I only know we're slowing down when the links in the fence become less of a blur and the wind begins to ease. The sleeves of Cyrus's t-shirt are no longer pressing around his muscles like a second skin but left to flap and dance in the breeze.

We approach a turnstile. The single bar-barrier kind you find at parking lots. There's a small booth for a ticket taker but it's empty and practically derelict. The red and white stripes on the barrier are peeling.

Despite appearances, *some* kind of tech is still working because the barrier automatically lifts at our approach.

Through the gate and another five-hundred yards east, I spot a jet out on a short runway. Opposite, to our right, is a small carrier, only large enough for a couple of birds.

To my surprise, we drive right inside. Into the bunker. And into a storage container kept in a back corner.

I follow Cyrus's lead as we dismount the bike. My step echoes inside the vast metal tin and I quickly take my luggage in hand and head back outside.

Cyrus is vigilant in checking the bars, barriers, and all-out padlocks keeping the container secure. Like he's tucking in his baby for the night.

I roll my eyes.

Men and their machines...

Caging the judgment, I shoulder my rucksack and head out towards the runway and into the sunshine. With no planes inside the carrier, I assume the jet is our ride. Outlandish as that is.

After all, who charters an entire jet for just two people?

'Darcy...'

The tone of Cyrus's call has me stalling on the tarmac. Without the shade of the helmet visor, I wince in the summer light. Without the whipping of the wind aboard a high speed bike, the sun is hot and balmy.

I use my hand as a shade over my eyes. I raise an eyebrow quizzically.

What's the hold up now?

'I swear if you're about to kick up a stink about me going with you,' I start, 'I'm gonna—'

'I'm not,' Cyrus assures with hands raised in surrender.

I can't help but shuffle where I stand. Totally unimpaired behind his aviators, it's like Cyrus has the upper hand.

Especially as he steps out of the shadows of the carrier and that great ball of white sunshine becomes a halo of lasers over the ridge of his right shoulder.

I wince harder.

‘I just think you need to know something before you get on that plane,’ Cyrus says.

‘Right now? Why?’ I ask, befuddled.

We’re literally a hundred feet from the damn thing.

‘Because you need to be fully informed before you make your choice to come with me.’

Seriously?!

‘I’m here, aren’t I?’ I say, trying to divert the—

‘I’m a killer, Darcy.’

We both fall quiet.

Had I been anyone else... had our association been anything other than what it is... I *might* have been shocked.

Within all reason, I probably should be. Any sane individual would be running for their life, Uber-ing it the hell out of there, or, at the very least, assuming the entire thing to be a joke and laughing in Cyrus’s face.

Instead, I just sort of stand there and stare.

Because it’s hard to pass judgment on those who break the cardinal sin of murder when you yourself have a body count.

As an ex-soldier, I’ve killed before. Under the right circumstances and with the law on my side, of course. But it’s still a death. It’s still a loss on someone.

Still a wound on me.

And when the authority that sanctified those losses turns on you? When they denounce your actions and change the color of your actions from patriotism to homicide...?

Yeah... it’s kind of hard to believe that one killing is any different from another, after that.

So, who am I to judge Cyrus?

‘The people I’m flying out to meet’—Cyrus is speaking slowly as if to test my silence—‘are members of a crime syndicate. A mafia group.’ He takes a step closer to me, his hands low and palms up. ‘I work for mobsters...

‘...And I’m a killer.’

The scale of this admission is not lost on me. The trust Cyrus’s giving: that I’ll not turn tail and immediately run to the authorities. The chance he’s offering: for me to change my mind about going with him and hightail it back to Rome.

Given he’s just driven me an hour from my home before offering said chance, it strikes me that he’s probably been wrestling with his confession the whole way here.

I take a slow breath and try to look him in the eyes, despite the blazing sunlight.

“‘You’re a killer...’” I quote back to him. ‘As in... you’ve killed people in the course of what you do? Or killing people *is* what you do?’

One eyebrow inches above the frame of Cyrus’s sunglasses.

‘Is there a difference?’ he asks.

‘To me there is.’

There’s an awkward pause. Until:

‘It’s my primary occupation,’ Cyrus admits. ‘I’m a contract killer.’

‘Specialising in?’

Again, my question seems to throw him off-pace.

‘Sniper rifles mostly. I’m a sharp-shooter.’

The long hard case slung over his shoulder—the one I’d had to avoid when getting on his bike—suddenly makes a lot more sense.

I find it curiously comforting that Cyrus doesn’t execute his business up close and bloody. Nor poison his enemies from

afar like a coward.

Once more, I'm reminded of that knight in tarnished armor analogy. Inflicting death from the long end of a lance.

A small voice in the back of my head warns sinisterly that my libido might be making allowances for crimes I'd otherwise find abhorrent. But I'm not easily convinced.

I learned long ago that death, even killing, is no true crime. It's the motivation behind it. The reason for the death that makes it either a necessary tragedy or a true sin.

I've known a lot of men and women, who enlist—who *volunteer*—to be executors of those necessary tragedies. Every one of them heroes.

Without more information, how arrogant would I have to be to judge Cyrus as any different?

So, I simply say:

'All right.'

'All right?' Cyrus parrots back. 'That's *it*?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'I...'

My lover, the man made of more stone than flesh, seems ready to crumble in startled confusion. 'I... I don't know, but I was expecting...'

Cyrus sighs. He rubs the back of his neck. He shrugs. Abruptly, the tension drains from his shoulders, as he has no choice but to simply admit:

'You are not like other women.'

Even through his shades, the look Cyrus is giving me heats me through to my toes. I try to ignore a reassuring tightness winding around my chest.

Not like everyone else? Entirely unique?

Well, isn't that just the finest of compliments one could ever be paid?

I clear my throat.

‘Look, you wanted me to know and now I know. So’—I jab a thumb over my shoulder at the jet—‘are we getting on this thing or what?’

Absolutely nothing. Not a batted eyelash, a gasp, or a flinch. No accusation of “murderer!” or “lunatic!” Just...

“All right.”

All right?!

I admitted to taking human lives for a living and Darcy swallowed the news as she would a hearty meal: with deliberate care and a complete lack of drama.

As we cross towards the runway and mount the stairs into the plane, I can’t help but stare after Darcy’s gorgeous backside and wonder if I should be questioning her sanity. Or maybe just thanking the powers that be that the one woman I might call lover in this world hasn’t been sent running.

Lover, huh?

For a moment, I wonder what happened to the mechanic analogy...

‘You have your own plane?’ Darcy asks, as she mounts the final step and turns right into the plane’s interior.

Following her inside, I find a patch of wall that’s not bearing safety regulation signs and prop up a shoulder, watching her. For the first time today, I can take her in from head to toe without distraction.

Black lace-ups that remind me of army boots, boyfriend jeans, and a white tank top. No jewelry, save a braided band

around one wrist. No make-up. After returning my helmet, she'd pulled an elastic band from her back pocket and tied the longer layers of her hair into a little knot on the back of her head. Her undercut emphasizes the angle of her cheekbones and the stubborn little set of her chin.

On anyone else, the dower outfit might have been so casual it was unbecoming. On Darcy, the jeans seem designer and her slightly androgynous look becomes the height of chic.

Slick teenager meets sexy tomboy.

And, if that isn't tempting enough, she's still wearing my jacket.

It's archaic—Hell, it's practically Neanderthal—but it pleases something deep in my core to see her wearing that. To know she's bearing a sign, a mark, that she has a man in her life.

Though, apparently, not just one.

That oh so sweetly-concerned bartender. The twitching blinds at her place. Darcy's cagey dislike of being seen as "involved" with me...

Logic dictates that, since I was last in Rome, Darcy's found someone to be in a real relationship with.

Which means that our... *association*... is now living on borrowed time.

Realizing my hands have curled into fists, I try to relax. I fold my arms to pin my fingers flat against my sides.

Darcy and I have made no promises to one another. I should feel nothing if she decides to end things.

Though, in my experience, "should" and "reality" aren't exactly bosom buds.

When Darcy looks back at me over her shoulder, I realize she's waiting for an answer.

Shit, what had she asked me, again?

"You have your own plane?"

‘It’s a friend’s,’ I explain as Darcy makes a slow pirouette, assessing all of the vanilla leather and glossy textures of the interior.

‘You have a *friend*?‘ Darcy asks with the exact same level of amazement she’d pitched over the plane.

‘Ha. Ha,’ I drawl. Then, I’m forced to shrug my free shoulder as if conceding her a point. ‘Fine. More like a client than a friend. He lets me use it whenever, provided he’s not already booked in a flight plan.’

Thank God Freya is now in Italy full-time. For the last twelve months, booking time on the Machelli jet had been near impossible. It seemed to almost always be on route to or from the States.

Darcy whistles long and low. I watch as one of her hands, her fingers slim and tapered, brushes over the backs of the chairs.

‘One hell of a perk,’ she says.

I barely hear her. I’m distracted by a sudden tightness in my throat, a hunger in my belly. I’ve always liked Darcy’s touch. How it shifts from the gentlest of caresses—like now, on that leather—to a firm and possessive hold. Darcy is petite and kind of delicate-looking. But she’s far from fragile. There’s a strength, a power, in her that is so at odds with her elven appearance that it’s sexy as all get out.

A warrior in a sweet maiden’s mask.

I nod.

‘The perks are definitely one of the upswings to the job,’ I admit.

But the drawbacks are just as real.

Such as never being able to admit what I do for a living. Or, on the rare occasions that I trust someone enough to open up, watching them hightail it as fast as they can in the opposite direction.

More often than not the retreat is emotional over physical. Oh, the distance becomes real enough with the dodged phone

calls and general avoidance later on. But there, in the moment, when I so much as hint at my profession, I get to witness a retreat of a different kind. One that kills the light in their eyes, like shutters coming down behind their irises as their genuine smiles are replaced with detached, wobbling replicas.

It's a mental rejection. An instinctive, protective barrier forged against the monster they now view me as.

I'm fairly convinced I'd be less offended if they gave up all pretense and just made a beeline for the nearest exit.

Darcy, on the other hand...

Darcy had made no kind of escape at all.

Just... "*All right.*"

Total and complete acceptance.

It makes me itch. But it also makes particular body parts sit up and pay attention.

The undercut, the attitude, that little chin... I've known for a while that Darcy is tough. But maybe I've been underestimating just *how* tough...?

And if she's really as *au fait* with my occupation as she seems... perhaps this thing between us doesn't have to be so short-term?

From mechanic, to lover, to permanent addition in the space of a week, Alesi?

How quickly you forget about her bartender boyfriend...

How quickly you forget that you and long-term is not a winning combination...

Wondering what the hell has gotten into me the last few weeks, I turn to greet the pilot as he pops out from the cockpit, confirm the flight plan, and then encourage Darcy to find a seat so we can get moving.

I buckle in next to her—which turns out to be a royally stupid idea—and then spend the next ten minutes trying to ignore the childish glee with which Darcy welcomes take off.

She twists in her seat to watch us speed along the runway, grins broadly at the upward thrust beneath our feet as we leave the ground, and then, once we're at cruising altitude, she settles into the plush cushioning of her seat like the captain of the damn Enterprise.

Even when still, her body seems to zing with energy, her eyes bright and vibrant.

God, but I've always liked her eyes.

Under brows of jet black, Darcy's eyes are so sharp a hazel that they leave behind all warmth. No brown, barely any green, they're almost yellow.

Right now, they sparkle like citrine.

'You like flying?' I prompt, for no good reason.

'I *love* flying. I like *speed*.'

Her smile has the beauty mark under her left eye crinkling.

'How did you find the bike?' I ask, genuinely curious.

She nods.

'It was great. Though, I'd have preferred to have been upfront.'

'You can ride?'

I kind of like the sound of that...

'I can. But more specifically, I like to be able to see where I'm going.'

Without warning, her joviality seems to melt away and she turns in her seat. The warriorress is back and ready to go.

'Speaking of which...' she begins.

Uh-oh.

'We need a game plan.'

'Meaning?' I ask, treading carefully.

'*Meaning...*' she says, propping up a foot on the edge of her seat. She settles into the corner of her chair, the collar of my jacket dusting over her jawline. The black of the leather

sets her complexion off paler. ‘If I’m going to help you whilst we’re on this island, I need to know what you’re looking for.’

‘I thought you were only going so you could dig up some dirt on the Carusos?’ I point out.

We’d spoken little since our interrupted interlude at *The Blue Star*. But Darcy has a knack for getting across an entire plan in a single text message.

And it’s a plan I’m at a loss to fight against.

By claiming her as my lover, I’d forced her into a seat at the table. A table full of dangerous, powerful men. For her, this trip is about Darcy claiming her own hand. With the insider knowledge she might pick up at Felix Caruso’s resort, she’d have a play to make if anyone poses a threat to her immigration status. It’s a defensive maneuver.

And whilst I might hate that said maneuver puts her at the heart of a dangerous situation, it’s the only strategy available to her right now. Because of me.

Plus, I’d be lying if I denied the help it afforded *me* in keeping Fiori’s suspicious nose out of my business.

‘I’m a fantastic multi-tasker, Cyrus,’ Darcy reassures me. ‘I can keep an ear out for what I need and help you with your plans. Besides, if I don’t at least *look* like I’m in the know and that we share a few secrets, we’re not going to convince anyone that we’re truly a couple. And then we’re both in the shit.’

Again, it’s hard to argue with her on that.

‘Fine,’ I agree, trying to decide how much I need her to know and how much she should be kept clear of. ‘Like I said before... I’m looking for someone. They’ll either be on the island personally or I’ll be looking for information that will lead me to them.’

‘Who is it?’

‘I said—’

‘I know what you said before, Cyrus. But I’m *here* now. The stakes are higher and I think I need to know.’

Goddammit...

Fine. Fuck it. I'm getting tired of fighting her at every turn anyway...

'An assassin,' I admit. 'I'm looking for an assassin. Like me.'

'Last location?'

Again with the just breezing right past the little tidbit that I kill people for a living.

'Austria. But they're highly mobile, so that's almost irrelevant at this point.'

““Almost”?”

I resettle awkwardly in my seat. I have to debrief Nat a little on my missions but, on the ground, I always work alone. I've never had to be so open with my intentions, so detailed in my explanations...

It doesn't sit well with me.

'Even if he's not there anymore... I know who this guy was meeting in Austria,' I explain. 'The head of the Caruso crime family.'

'The guy who owns this island,' Darcy says, piecing everything together very quickly.

'Right.'

'What about the assassin?' she asks. 'Anything on his identity? A name?'

'No. I only know his moniker.'

Darcy waits for more. When none is forthcoming she tries to push:

'Which *is*?'

I shake my head.

'I'm not going to tell you that.'

'Cyrus...' Her tone is dark with warning but I'm digging my heels in on this one.

‘No,’ I say, looking her straight in the eye. ‘I’m serious Darcy. You say that name in the wrong company, you reveal that we even *know* that name to the wrong person, and there’s a high chance you’re dead within the hour.’

‘And I screw up your plans,’ she adds. As if my mission is of greater concern than her life.

‘That’s part of it,’ I confess. ‘This job is too important to risk on your inexperience.’

‘Too important to *whom*?’

‘To me.’

‘To you *and*?’ she badgers. ‘Come on, Cyrus, you said it yourself: you’re a contract killer. Emphasis on *contract*. You don’t do this kind of shit without getting paid for it.’

‘True. But I’m not about to blab to you the name of my client. Not to mention, this is personal as well as professional.’

The quiet that falls between us is suddenly very heavy. Pregnant with meaning. I glance over at Darcy to find her expression has shifted. It’s hard, angry... and highly compassionate.

“‘Personal’?” she repeats.

I realize her assumption quickly.

‘It’s not what you think,’ I assure her. I knew Alexei Machelli but we hadn’t been close. Nor did I know Gabriel’s other victims over the decades. ‘I just don’t like other hitmen on my territory.’

‘Your “territory”?’ Again, those eyes of hers flash with a clever curiosity. There’s a predictable reaction from behind my fly.

I’ve always found intelligence sexy.

‘Southern Europe,’ I explain. ‘The Med. It’s my area of work.’

‘And you’re the top dog, you mean?’

I snort softly.

‘Something like that.’

‘Over that large an area?’ Her eyebrows inch upwards.

I let my head fall back against the seat, turn to watch her reaction, and deliberately plaster a whole lot of amused arrogance on my puss.

‘I’m kind of a big deal,’ I tell her.

For a moment, Darcy seems impressed. Which is as odd as it is arousing. The plane begins to feel damn stuffy and I have to shuffle in my seat to make more room in my jeans.

Bartender boyfriend... Bartender boyfriend...

The warning flashes through my head like a clanger alarm.

But another voice rebels. It was, after all, Darcy who kissed *me* back in the kitchen stores at *The Blue Star*. And it’s Darcy who hasn’t said anything (yet) about calling things to a halt.

How is it *my* job to give up something that *I* want for the sake of keeping *her* love life straight?

Then again, maybe I’m just grasping for any justification that allows me to keep taking her to bed.

Still in two minds, I play it safe and change the subject:

‘I’m going to need to know where you’re from,’ I tell her.

This time, it’s Darcy who’s on the back foot.

‘What?’ she asks, startled. I watch a worrisome divet appear between her brows.

‘I don’t need to know why you can’t go back.’ *Though I’m damn curious.* ‘I just need to know *where*.’ I raise an eyebrow at her. ‘A boyfriend would know.’

She exhales. Long and hard.

‘Sweden,’ she finally admits.

I’m surprised.

‘Sweden?’

‘It’s up north,’ she remarks flippantly. ‘The big bit between Norway and Finland.’

‘I know where Sweden is,’ I growl. ‘You just... don’t have an accent. Your Italian sounds native.’

‘So does yours,’ she points out. ‘But I know *you’re* not Italian-born.’

Touché.

‘Germany.’

Her lower lip juts out as she considers this new piece of information.

‘Pleasure to meet you, Germany.’

‘You too, Sweden.’

‘Shall we do last names too?’ she suggests. ‘Because I know yours isn’t Russo.’

Again, I can’t think of a good reason why my “girlfriend” wouldn’t know my last name. At least not the one I use reasonably openly.

‘Alesi.’

‘Now that *is* Italian.’

‘I’m half and half,’ I admit. My paternal grandmother’s maiden name, I’d taken Alesi when I’d gone freelance. ‘I’m from all over.’

‘Me too.’

We both fall quiet.

The soft whirr of the plane engine sweeps in to fill the silence. Its hum pours through the cabin, the seats, and into my back.

Darcy closes her eyes and seems to sink deeper into the clutch of the leather. Surrendering to the floating pleasures of flight.

‘You feel like we’re doing this backwards?’ I ask, trying to distract myself from the sudden ache in my gut and a heavy case of dry tongue.

Darcy's lids remain lowered but the corner of her mouth turns upwards.

'You mean knowing what you taste like before I know your last name?' she suggests.

Okay, that's *so* not going to help keep my focus on the here and now.

In my mind, I've already taken Darcy past the privacy door, ripped away every stitch of clothing save for my damn jacket and—

'Something like that,' I choke out.

Darcy sighs to herself, still keeping her eyes closed and completely oblivious to the dark temptations playing out inside my head.

'I like to think that life doesn't come with a rule book,' she muses. 'If it did, we'd probably all be failing somewhere somehow. And who wants to live like that? I think we just make the best choices we can with what we have at the time. If we pivot and adapt, we survive. If not...'

The corners of her lips have grown tight and she gives a brittle shrug.

If not... we die, I finish for her. I stare at her face, scrutinizing her features for the thoughts that lie beneath.

She's hiding something...

If I wasn't already convinced, I'd be sure of it now.

No one talks that way about life, about survival, without having learned its significance.

"...we just make the best choices we can with what we have at the time" ...?

The words hit hard and it's like my chest opens up to their truth; allowing them in and swallowing them deep.

No one grows up wanting to be a killer. "Assassin" isn't an option at the kids' costume store. "Ninja" and "Cowboy", maybe, but never "Executioner".

But, after my father collected me from Germany like baggage, I'd grown up in Italy's criminal underbelly. Like any kid, I'd gravitated toward what I was good at. It's just that... instead of those talents being soccer, painting, or mathematics... They'd been with a heavy trigger and a set of crosshairs.

I'd pivoted and adapted depending on what was useful to the family and where I could succeed.

I'd survived.

I'd had to pivot again later. Eight years ago when I left the Machellis, left the world of a hired gun behind.

But I came back, didn't I?

'All right...' Darcy says on an exhale. She sounds sleepy and, for the first time, I notice dark smudges beneath her eyes. 'So, we get to this island... You play like you want a contract with the Carusos but, in actuality, you're probing for information on this other killer so you can hunt him down... simultaneously completing a mission for your real client and clearing a competitor from the board. Have I got all that correct?'

'In a gist, yes. That's the plan.'

'Then, can I share *my* plan with you now?'

'You want to find something damning on them, I know.'

'No. Well, yes... but, given your description of these people, I suspect I'll see and hear more than enough whilst I'm there without having to actively go looking for it... I *meant* that I have a plan for when we get back from the resort.'

For a minute, I think the plane's engines have died. Everything in the cabin seems to fall quiet. I meet Darcy's gaze head on and there's absolutely nothing in that stare that seems willing to back down.

This can't be good...

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'I'm going to be making a change, Cyrus.'

‘A change?’ I repeat dumbly.

‘For one thing, I’ll be moving.’

‘Moving?’ I feel like a broken toy, unable to do anything but repeat back sound bites.

‘Yeah.’

I wait for more. When there is none, I get a sinking sensation in my gut. *If you have to ask, she probably doesn’t want to tell—*

‘To where?’ I ask, anyway.

Her eyes harden.

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Aaand there it is.

My heart is thumping against my ribs and I take a calming breath. The kind I use to settle my nerves before pulling the trigger on a high-profile target. My palms are itching too. Like the spike in my adrenaline makes them crave some defensive ammunition. My mind automatically ticks off the pistol strapped to my ankle, the piece in the small of my back, the two rifles in the hard case at my feet, and the numerous assault weaponry in my duffel bag.

All of which might as well be made of paper for all the protection they offer against what I can sense coming...

‘So, when you say *change*...’ I say like I’m poking at a fresh wound.

‘I mean everything,’ Darcy explains. ‘My place, my job, my... *connections*.’

Ha. Connections.

Connections that have seen you naked, you mean?

‘You mean me,’ I grunt.

‘I mean you.’

Ouch. She doesn’t even hesitate.

‘Why?’ I swallow.

Why do you care? Mechanic, remember? Remember the mechanic thing? What about the boyfriend? You can't seriously not know why, Alesi...

'I need a fresh start,' Darcy shrugs, clearly dodging the question.

'A fresh start with who?' I demand before I can catch myself.

Something in me needs to hear it. I need to *hear* her say she's with someone else. That she loves them. And that *that's* why whatever we have is ending.

For a moment, I think I spy a flash of panic on Darcy's face at my question. But I blink and it's gone. Probably never there to begin with. Probably just a fancy from my own mind; an unfocused desire to see her as rattled as I feel.

Instead of showing any such thing, Darcy just neatly avoids my question.

'I don't need to answer to you,' she says.

For a split second, rage washes through me from head to toe. My thighs seize up and my fingers dig into the leather of the armrest. The truth of her words eventually soaks in enough to cool me down.

We were never exclusive. We were never even a real couple. And she is absolutely correct: she doesn't need to answer to me and I have no right to demand explanations from her.

'All right...' I finally sigh. *Damn, but that word is dogging me today.* 'After we get back to Rome, I won't contact you again.'

The promise rolls off my tongue like sandpaper.

Darcy shifts awkwardly in her seat.

'Thank you...' She clears her throat. 'I didn't know whether to tell you that now or wait until after the trip, but it felt... *wrong* to sit on something like that.' She winces. 'I know that we're now going to have to act like a couple in front of—'

‘You said when we get back,’ I interrupt. Again, before I can stop myself.

‘What?’ she blinks at me.

I’m as surprised as her. Apparently, being dumped by my not-girlfriend has erased any sense of discipline I have over my tongue.

Fuck it. In for a penny...

‘You said you wanted to make changes *after we’re back*. Which means we don’t have to *act* or pretend anything.’ I shrug and try to adopt a casual stance over the whole thing.

‘You mean...’ Darcy speaks slowly, as if unsure I’m as damn desperate as I sound. ‘Stick with... whatever we are... until we fly back?’

‘Exactly as we are,’ I nod.

My confidence is barely skin-deep. Underneath, I know the truth:

I’m pathetic.

She wants to end things. She wants to leave. Probably with another man.

And I’m too hooked on the high I find between her legs that I’m willing to hold on to whatever scraps she’ll throw my way for a few more days.

‘If it makes this trip easier,’ I say, using the lamest excuse I can come up with. ‘Nothing needs to change between us until we’re back in Rome.’

Those damn citrine eyes of hers are drilling into me. I’m keeping my eyes fixed on the seat in front of me and I can still feel them against my profile. They knock my ass into my gut and my gut into my throat. So perceptive that they burn.

‘Okay,’ Darcy finally agrees. I find I can exhale again. ‘But even if we’re staying... what we are... for now, we’re still going to need to amp up the romance whilst we’re on the island. That Fiori guy thinks we’re an actual couple.’

‘That’s fine,’ I promise her. ‘I’m good at adapting.’

Or, at least, I always *thought* I was. Right now, I have the horrendous suspicion that letting go of Darcy might just turn out to be a change I'm not so willing to adapt to.

The only good news in all of this is that I have seventy-two hours to strap on a pair and *deal*...

...or to convince Darcy to change her mind.



THE FLIGHT ISN'T LONG. Just a few hours between lifting off of Italian soil and descending over the turquoise waters of Greece.

A hired car takes us from the airport on Mykonos to a local port on the coast. A short ferry ride gets us to the isle of *Nisí tou Chrysoú* and a ten-minute taxi shuttles us uphill from the docking pier right to the doors of Felix Caruso's lavish resort.

All in all, we reach our destination by mid-afternoon.

'Holy...'

I glance over at Darcy who is pressing her nose against the window of the cab, her eyes wide with awe.

Felix's resort is the only building on the tallest hillside of the island, making it impossible to ignore upon approach. The ground floor is vast and boasts traditional Grecian designs. Geometric mosaics sparkle in a thousand colors and pillars of alabaster give the place a beautiful sense of authority. The second floor is smaller and just as elegant with the open space left behind reserved for a rooftop terrace and, by the looks of the raised lifeguard perch, a pool.

'The Carusos don't do anything by half,' I mumble, as we drive past ivy-strewn walls towards the main gates.

'You're telling *me*...' Darcy murmurs back, half to herself.

We pass a set of large, wrought iron gates—the kind with fancy curlicues topping their bars—held open by staff in fine black livery. As soon as the car crosses into the front grounds of the estate, those same gates shut on an automated

mechanism. The two uniformed men follow with a gentle, if obsolete, hand on the bars.

Which makes them only there for show... or for security.

Through the rear window, I eye their dark jackets more carefully and spot a few unnatural shapes nestled under their arms.

The taxi turns smoothly to the left and heads around a central fountain merrily spewing crystalline waters in the sunshine. On the outer edges of the paved circle is a tropical menagerie of plants with huge, thronging, green leaves and bulbous flowers of orange and fuchsia. Even inside the car, we can hear exotic birdsong twittering away overhead.

A finely dressed woman is waiting for us on the front steps. A young man in uniform hovers beside her.

‘Ready?’ I ask Darcy, as we come to a stop.

Darcy grins, her tongue pinned between her teeth.

‘As I’ll ever be, sweetheart.’

‘Ugh, *no*,’ I joke before opening the door.

‘Honey, then?’ Darcy counters, following me out into the balmy Grecian heat. ‘Sugar-plum?’

I roll my eyes at her.

The cabbie helps us with our luggage and I’m quick to take possession of my bags. Just in time to deny the approaching bellhop the pleasure of taking them from me.

Yeah, not happening, buddy... Not with this much firepower inside.

The bellhop’s companion, a stunning blonde in a killer red dress, doesn’t seem surprised when I keep hold of the hard case and duffel.

In fact, there’s a soft smile of understanding on her face.

This, I decide, is no simple concierge.

‘Mr. Alesi,’ she greets us in Italian. ‘So wonderful to have you with us. My name is Lana Caruso. I understand you are

here to meet with my cousin, Felix?’

Huh. Not only part of the organization but one of the
bloodline itself...

I trace the woman’s face, noting any family resemblances. Blonde, blue-eyed, and objectively good-looking, she fits the Caruso fundamentals. Anything more specific is lost behind a mask of carefully applied make-up and polite hospitality.

I give a grunting ascent, distracted for a moment when Darcy gives the bellboy a dazzling smile. The kid—no more than twenty years old, if he is a day—blinks in surprise and almost drops her rucksack.

‘Unfortunately, my cousin has been detained on business a little longer than he’d hoped,’ Lana explains. She winces prettily in the quintessential expression of apology famous in the service industry. ‘He asked me to greet you in his stead and ensure you’re comfortable until tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’ I ask, annoyed.

We’re supposed to be out of here in twenty-four hours. Forty-eight max.

Lana’s long and voluminous blonde hair is pulled back into a classic chignon. As she nods, a heavy and deliberate wave kept to one side of her face brushes along her cheek.

Momentarily, I wonder if the blonde is less a family trait and more the result of a bottle. Does hair even come in that shade of brilliant gold?

‘Felix will be returning to *Nisi tou Chrysoú* tomorrow afternoon and asks that you dine with him in the evening? He apologizes for the unplanned delay.’ Lana then turns her perfectly straight and very white smile towards Darcy. ‘I assure you, we have much to commend the resort. All of which you’re welcome to enjoy until he arrives. Do you like to swim, Ms. Calabrese?’

Calabrese...

The Carusos have done their homework because they didn’t get that name from me. It is, in fact, the first time I’ve

heard Darcy's surname. An *Italian* surname. Was her father of Italian descent? Or had she chosen the name when moving from Sweden?

'I do!' Darcy replies with enthusiasm. She turns towards me with a coy sparkle in her eye. 'I even brought a new swimsuit for the occasion.'

Lana gives a feminine chuckle and her mask of professionalism cracks softly. She looks me up and down, glances back at Darcy, and then shoots some inferred telepathic comment with her eyebrows. Darcy grins back.

I roll my eyes.

Women...

'Let's get the two of you inside and settled for now, shall we?' Lana suggests with a shade more informality. She begins to lead the way up the wide, shallow steps, speaking back at us from over her shoulder. 'I can offer you a tour of the hotel after we drop off your bags, if you'd like?'

I turn to Darcy, whose head is working like a periscope to take in the hotel's foyer. Glossy marble, white pillars, and a shit-ton of gold filagree detailing. The reception desk on the left is the only dark spot in an otherwise white-gold vista, drawing the eye to its front face: a shining block of obsidian bearing the name *Caruso Chrysoú* in gold script. Behind the desk sit a pair of elegant ladies similarly coiffured to Lana but in dresses of charcoal grey. At their backs is a map of the Grecian isles, formed by a thousand triangular tiles in white and amber.

On instinct, I scan the people as comprehensively as I do the venue.

Separate from the receptionists, several guests are loitering. One wearing only a bikini, sarong, and a giant set of sunglasses, has settled herself in a seat by the glass doors and keeps checking a slim, platinum watch on her wrist. Two gentlemen in golf shorts and polo necks are chatting by the stairs. None appear armed. Just rich and mighty business types, enjoying a high-class getaway.

That's going to be one of the biggest obstacles to inspecting this place... I think. The *Caruso Chrysoú* is a place of open business. Not everyone within its walls is a mobster. But any and all of them *could* be a threat.

I turn my focus back on Darcy.

Despite her interest in the luxury all around her, I notice that the bruises under her eyes have become more apparent since the flight. She looks drawn and shadows have dulled the fire in her gaze. Glamour and novelty might go some ways to keeping that smile on Darcy's face... but she's tired.

Keeping my case and duffel hooked over one shoulder, I wrap my free arm around Darcy's shoulders. For an instant, she stiffens at my touch, then relaxes. I feel the lines of her body slot neatly in beside mine. The snug fit feels nice and I tighten my grip on her shoulder.

'I think for now a little rest is in order,' I explain, after Lana collects something from the reception desk and then leads us towards a set of elevators. Because God forbid the rich and famous have to climb a single flight of stairs. 'I think we can manage to explore things ourselves later, right baby?'

Darcy smiles up at me with an adoring expression so natural that *I* almost believe it.

'Sounds like a plan.' Her tone turns intimate. Purring. 'Bed sounds real good right about now.'

Suddenly heated, I have to resist the urge to tug at the collar I'm not wearing, as we walk into the fanciest damn elevator I've ever seen.

With all its glass and spun gold, it feels more like stepping inside a crystal chandelier than a simple lift.

I've only ever seen pictures of Felix Caruso. But from his hotel alone, I can tell he's as much a pompous peacock as his acquisitions manager, Fiori.

Birds of a feather and all that...

We ride the crystal pod, which seems to be held together with little more than golden dental floss, up just one level and

then step out into a square lobby as embellished as the foyer below.

This time, the space has been plastered in a peach-toned marble and long, gossamer curtains over the glass doorways gives everything a slightly homier feel. To the right are a butt-load of wrapped towels and water dispensers. In one floats cucumbers, another lemons. Further on is a discreet sign highlighting the way to the resort's spa. Up ahead runs a separate corridor flanked on one side with bedroom doorways and lined on the other with floor-to-ceiling windows. Those windows look out across a rooftop garden, another pretty fountain, and a set of wide, winding stairs that hug the upper floor and around to the rear side of the building. Based on the architecture I'd seen out front, I recognize the steps as heading toward the pool.

Given the status of the resort's guests, staff are unlikely to take the same path to and from somewhere as traffic-heavy as the poolside. Which means there has to be another, more secluded route somewhere.

I keep up my analysis for a few more feet. I watch around corners and inspect the ceilings for hidden cameras. I eye even the glugging water dispensers with suspicion...

Until an elbow hits me pointedly in the ribs.

'Ah!—*what?*' I grunt.

Lana glances back at us.

Darcy smiles and hugs closer against my side.

'Nothing,' she whispers with a grin of mischief.

Confused, I drop the subject in time for Lana to turn and offer me a plastic wallet. I can see the edges of a couple of keycards nestled inside.

Whilst all the doors we've walked past so far bear only numbers, the one we've stopped beside has its own plaque.

"The Athena Suite"

'Goddess of Wisdom,' Darcy muses to herself. She glances at Lana with a grin. 'I like the sound of that.'

‘Wisdom *and* War,’ Lana corrects.

‘Even better.’

Another hidden message darts between the women’s estrogen receptors and I can do little more than take the offered key cards.

‘I hope to speak with you again whilst you’re here Mr. Alesi, Ms. Calabrese,’ Lana offers in parting. ‘Please enjoy your stay.’

As the little wallet is transferred, my hand brushes against Lana’s and I notice a small, rough patch on the side of her thumb. A callus. The kind you get from the repeated activation of a safety toggle on a firearm. I’m momentarily impressed.

The Caruso men might be peacocks but the women are apparently badasses...

It’s a subtle but distinct difference from the Machellis.

Traditional to the point of archaic, the Machellis never hand out wet work to their women. As far as Leon and his family are concerned, the fairer sex is to be protected, honored, and worshipped. Never sent into the fray.

Personally, I’ve never really seen the issue.

With modern weaponry and the right training, a female finger can pull the trigger as well as a male one. Women don’t have to be delicate flowers.

Working the keycard into the lock, I take Darcy by the hand to steer her inside the suite. At the touch of her fingers, I’m immediately offered proof of concept. Darcy, after all, has scars of her own. Little cuts and calluses. A small burn over the top of her hand. Working for a crime family isn’t the only way to gain a few occupational souvenirs, after all. Industrial kitchens can be just as unforgiving.

And not once has Darcy’s scarred touch ever been a turn-off.

In fact... a little friction can be a damn powerful aphrodisiac. Knowing your girl won’t break with a little rough handling is seriously attractive.

As soon as we're alone in the suite, with the door locked behind us, Darcy opens her mouth to speak but I press a finger to my lips. It takes me ten minutes to do a proper sweep of the room and, after finding nothing that might be used as a listening device, I give her the nod.

'You really need to relax,' are the first words out of her mouth as she parks it on the end of one of the beds. The suite boasts two king-sizes, each draped in snowy linens. The dark wood of the headboard is tall and casts a frame around her lithe figure.

I'm constantly struck anew at what a great body Darcy has. Lean like a runner. Strong like a fighter. Elegant as a ballerina.

'How do you mean?' I ask, stalling. Save the near-constant state of tension in my groin, I've been relaxed all day. Sort of.

'You look like you're on high alert,' she says.

'That *is* my "relaxed".'

Or at least the state of being I'm most used to.

'Yeah well, it's not the "relaxed" of a guy going on vacation with his girlfriend. You scrutinized that lobby like you suspected ninjas around every corner. Aren't you supposed to be getting these guys to trust you? They're not going to offer it up, if you don't at least *look* like you're paying it forward.'

So, *that's* what the elbow to the gut had been about.

'One day on the job and she's already a covert specialist,' I mutter aloud, taking to my duffel. I never unpack. Living out of my luggage keeps things simple if I have to leave in a hurry. But I like to double-check my inventory with every new location.

Darcy doesn't try to defend herself against my mockery. She just sits there, one long leg regally draped over the other, her palms braced on the blankets behind her.

'They know what I do for a living, Darcy,' I remind her. 'They'll expect me to be cautious.'

‘Cautious, yes. So tense you look constipated, no,’ she shoots me a pointed finger. ‘You also need to stop glowering at me.’

‘I’m glowering at you?’ This is news to me.

Darcy just raises an eyebrow.

‘You keep frowning at me like I’ve just farted in an enclosed space. You wanna try a look with a little loving, instead?’

I sigh and rub at the back of my neck. I can feel a headache coming on.

‘I don’t suppose,’ I say, throwing the lapels of my duffel back together and cinching the zipper into place, ‘you have any *positive* reviews of my performance thus far?’

Darcy’s lower lip pouts in dramatic sympathy.

‘Are we in need of a little affirmation?’ she croons.

That does it.

I stalk rapidly towards her and, bending low, cover her hands with mine. She has to lean away to avoid us butting heads and I watch that beautiful collarbone of hers hollow out as her shoulders rise and her neck stretches long and swanlike.

‘What I need,’ I growl against her mouth, ‘is a tension release.’

Darcy gets with the program quickly. The expression heats, her eyes gleam. She runs her tongue over her lips, slow and deliberate. I’m so close I can almost taste it against mine.

‘I thought you said you were relaxed,’ she challenges. That bold gaze of hers hones in on my mouth. My lips tingle under their clinging stare.

‘Of stepping into an enemy den, I’m perfectly calm,’ I explain. ‘Being so infinitely close to *you* for the last four hours on the other hand...’

‘Are you calling me stressful?’ she accuses.

Prying one of her hands from the mattress, I bring it around... and press her palm hard against the front of my jeans.

‘You tell me,’ I order.

‘Hmm...’ Darcy sighs appreciatively, stroking over the bulging denim. I feel my shaft jolt at the sensation, sparks zinging through my bloodstream. My breath catches in my lungs.

Darcy inhales, slow and deep.

‘We never did get to finish what we started last time...’ she whispers.

I groan.

‘Trust me, baby, I’m more than aware...’

But, much as I loathe to admit it right this moment, I’m also aware of something else...

Though Darcy’s lips are parting in desire and as much as her eyes burn with sensual want... her lids are still hooded. And there’s a stiffness in her frame that belies her exhaustion.

Unable to resist completely, I lean down and sip from her mouth. Sucking on her lower lip, I nibble on the sensitive flesh. I lick a gasp right off her tongue...

...and then I pull back.

‘Later,’ I promise her.

‘Later?’ she squeaks brokenly, as I push back up to my feet.

‘You need some rest,’ I say. Then chuckle at the expression on her face. ‘*Now* who’s the one glowering?’

‘I don’t like men telling me what to do.’

‘I didn’t *tell* you to do anything,’ I challenge. ‘I made an observation. Sleep or don’t sleep, it’s entirely up to you. But I’m going out to survey the hotel.’

‘Right *now*?’

‘No,’ I say with a heavy dose of stoicism, ‘after we accidentally piss someone off and try to run the wrong way down a dead end.’

Darcy gives me an equally banal look.

‘Point made,’ she concedes.

I smile at our shared sense of dry humor, before checking I have a room key in my back pocket and that my firearms are out of sight.

‘I’ll be back in a bit.’

‘Bring something to eat back with you?’

‘Wings?’

We’d never gone out to a restaurant, nor been on anything close to a date. But on the rare occasion Darcy grabbed something to eat pre- or post-coital, her go-to was always chicken she could nibble. If it was coated in BBQ, all the better.

At the idea of wings, Darcy falls back onto the bed with the sexiest moan I’ve ever heard. I have to plant my feet not to take back everything I’ve just said and mount her right here and now.

‘That sounds divine...’

Before my sex drive can twist her comment to mean anything other than food, I figure it’s best to just disengage from the situation. I nod, offer a two-finger salute, and storm straight out into the corridor.

Outside, I have to take a moment to gather my wits and my bearings.

Right on cue, as if sensing impending doom, my cell phone rings. No caller ID in my industry, but I recognize the number.

Leon Machelli’s right-hand man, Jaime.

Perfect timing. Pound to a pinch of shit (as the saying goes), his first question will be how the job’s going.

I snort softly.

Oh, fantastic, Jaime old buddy.

The guy I'm meeting isn't here, the killer I'm looking for could be hiding in plain sight with my head in his crosshairs and it's been so long since my dick last went down that I can barely think straight.

Everything's just fine. Fine and fucking dandy.

I conduct a sweep of the hotel far faster than I would have if I had following the stylish Ms. Caruso's tottering heels about the place.

Without an escort, I'm free to focus on the details pertinent to Darcy and me. Not the jacuzzis and restaurants. But the linen cupboards and janitor closets. The staff-only staircases and the laundry chutes.

By the time I've made a full circuit of the estate, I have a neat little list of potential stash locations and an active memory of the emergency exits.

In my head, I run through the blueprints Nat sent me last week, slotting the reality of each corridor and facility into place: the open terrace and pool, the upstairs residences... then the bedrooms, suites, and event halls on the ground floor. Below ground is a fully equipped gym the size of a soccer field and what can only be described as a miniature mall, including several stores I've only ever seen in Milan.

For all your urgent designer needs, I muse judgingly.

And yet, here I am, hovering outside one of those exact stores, looking over sneakers and sports shoes. There are no prices. Which is a bad sign from the outset. These are the kinds of places where, if you have to ask how much something is, you shouldn't be shopping there. But, after the third couple in a row gave my combat boots the stink eye, I decided to renege. Felix Caruso might know the real reason for my visit to *Nisí tou Chrysoú* but I'm unlikely to win any favors at his

dinner table if I look so decidedly out of place amongst his guests.

I brought my sunglasses and a pair of board shorts. I neglected footwear.

Making my choice from the window dressing alone, I head inside and try to locate the same pair of shoes among the shelves. I steer clear of a large and colorful display in the corner—there's no way in hell I'm wearing fucking flip-flops—and grab a set of light sneakers in a size twelve.

As the cashier prices up the shoes and I decline a bag, I notice a watcher loitering outside. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end and my instincts summon up a dose of adrenaline.

Male, a hair over six feet, and otherwise nondescript.

It's his lack of distinction that gives him away.

A spy who stands out is racing towards redundancy.

I use the front of the cashier's till—a reflective chrome conveniently polished to a high shine—to keep an eye on my shadow as the young woman removes security tags from the toes of the sneakers.

When the spy loiters too long, feigning overt interest in a pair of tennis flats, I reassess. Real customers don't hover. Fear of looking over-eager and accidentally summoning a pushy salesman keeps your Average Joe in a slow but perpetual forward motion. Like sharks in a tank. Go into any retail store on any given weekend and humanity follows the same current of momentum.

A skilled spy would know this.

Which makes my over-acting shadow an amateur. Or simply specialized in other areas.

Stuffing my overpriced shoes under my arm, I head back outside and immediately make for the elevators. The storefronts of the underground mall keep my stalker's reflection in full view so I'm unsurprised when he calls out.

'Hey!'

I force him to yell a second time, lest he suspect I'd already clocked him.

'Hey! You there!'

I stall with feigned uncertainty and the stranger hurries to reach me. I glance at the people milling around us and try to assess which are paying for the privilege of staying at the resort and how many are, instead, on salary. How many are armed beneath their beachwear...

And that's only considering the civvies. Staff members—any number of whom could be on the dirtier Caruso payroll—flitter about the place like ghosts; materializing behind reception desks or disappearing past private doors.

In any other situation, an audience would be some reassurance against violence. At *Caruso Chrysoú* all bets are off.

'I know you,' the spy declares as he comes up beside me.

Still wearing my shades, it's easy to hide my lack of reaction. Easier still to give the spy a closer inspection. Average looks, blue eyes, and a lanky build. His posture reminds me of the casual ease of a top martial artist.

Instead of offering to shake my hand, he gives a half-wave of introduction.

'Hector Ramirez. You're the one Felix is bringing over?' he prompts, reaching to push his over-long hair back from his face. A black stud of onyx is revealed in his left ear and his jacket parts wider. I can see the butt of a pistol under his right arm. Which makes him a leftie.

I tilt my head in quizzical interest.

'You one of his?' I ask, casually.

Ramirez nods with a greedy smile.

'Best game around, right now.'

And there it is... One sentence and I know all I need to about this mercenary.

This guy can be bought.

In it for the money and prestige, Ramirez isn't loyal to Felix Caruso but to the privileges that come with his employment "right now". Which could make him useful. Or more dangerous. Lack of loyalty for the bossman means a lack of camaraderie with other employees.

This guy would throw a fellow contractor clean under the bus if it got him in tight with the rich and powerful.

In the split second it takes me to assess the man, Ramirez's expression has shifted into a calculating sneer.

The kind that poker players try to hide when pondering their opponents' cards.

'It'll be good to have someone of *your* caliber on the team...' he says with far more emphasis than is comfortable.

'You know me?'

That grin of his deepens and I resist the urge to smack it off his face.

'Catanzaro. Nine years ago.'

His memory is too specific to be denied so I don't even try.

'I was there.' I nod.

'Some good work there...'

The comment is a trap. "Good work" is not how I remember Catanzaro. That day was one of my few but significant mistakes. A mistake that got me trapped in a very dangerous—very *public*—shootout in one of the poorer districts of the city. I took eleven lives and two bullets to the arm before Leon had shown up. His timely arrival—and refusal to leave without me—is the only reason I survived the day.

Hector Ramirez is looking at me with more intelligence than a man with that stupid earring deserves to possess.

If he remembers my presence in Catanzaro, he probably remembers who came to my aid.

So why, his eyes seem to ask, would I leave an employer to whom I owe my life? And, if I'm willing to stab *that*

particular back, how long before I try and do the same to his boss, Caruso?

And just how can he exploit that information for a better *in* with the head honcho?

This whole thing is a show of dominance. A warning that he has something damning on me that he's willing to use should I ever become a threat to his aspirations.

'You have a good memory,' I concede simply, unwilling to surrender Ramirez any more ammunition than he's already packing.

The mercenary chuckles, satisfied that his power-play has been received loud and clear. The sycophant probably has a hard-on. He's so pleased with himself.

Caruso sure knows how to pick 'em.

'And you have good instincts,' Ramirez offers condescendingly. 'Getting the lay of the land, are we?'

Again, his eyes tell me everything: "*I know you're sneaking around Caruso's resort.*"

Like a kid threatening to "tell teacher".

'Nope.' I shrug, before holding up the sneakers. I'm casual enough that it puts the mercenary on the back foot.

'Your packing sub-par?' he asks.

'So my girl says.'

The asshole doesn't seem to know what to do with that information but *I've* certainly learned a lot from our interaction.

For one thing: no more wandering the hotel alone. Not only is my acting too limited to convincingly portray a holiday goer. But, if I run into the wrong person with as tenuous an excuse as footwear, I could be facing a bigger threat than this jerk-off.

'Speaking of...' I jerk a thumb over my shoulder. 'Need to be getting back to her.'

Ramirez's lower lip juts out like he approves.

'Sure thing man. You do you. I'm sure I'll see you around on the job.'

I give a noncommittal nod and extract myself from the situation as quickly as I can.

As soon as I'm more than six feet away from the man, my lungs unclench and I can breathe easy again.

Two days, I remind myself. All I have to do is dodge assholes like Ramirez for another two days and Darcy and I will be free and clear.

Tomorrow evening, we dine with Felix. With a little luck, I'll get a lead quickly. And we'll be gone the next morning.

Gone and back to Rome, I add, stabbing the elevator button with more force than necessary.

"I'm going to be making a change, Cyrus."

As soon as we return home, Darcy makes a clean break and erases me from her life entirely.

I clamp down on the urge to fidget as the elevator ascends to our floor. I check my watch.

Nearly five o'clock. Darcy has had hours to sleep off the journey. And Felix doesn't even arrive on the island until tomorrow afternoon.

By my calculation, that's just under twenty hours.

Twenty hours remaining of whatever Darcy and I have between us.

Not enough.

Less than a day isn't enough time to sate us both on the insane sexual chemistry we feel every time our bodies lock together.

It's not enough to find closure.

But one thing is damn certain.

Closure or no closure, I'm not wasting a single fucking second of it.

When the elevator doors give a soft note of arrival and part on the upstairs corridor, I'm practically running for our room.

Before we're back in Rome, I vow, Darcy and I are going to have a reckoning.

And if that reckoning requires us to both be naked and crying out in the throes of mind-blowing release then all the better...



'WHERE THE *HELL* HAVE YOU BEEN?'

I barely stumble heading into the bedroom, fully aware that a weaker being might cower under the glare Cyrus is leveling at me.

He's sat at the little desk, his arms folded and his posture akin to a disapproving parent on prom night. His legs are splayed and his natural confidence dominates the room but his mismatched eyes are framed in dark haloes.

It's barely noon and he looks exhausted.

'Good morning to you too,' I say, leaning inside the bathroom to dump my towel off for housekeeping. I'm amused to find the one Cyrus used this morning folded damp but neatly on the counter. Bracing my weight on the doorframe, I swing back into the bedroom and deliberately ignore Cyrus's grumpiness in favor of concern.

'You sleep okay?'

He'd been out cold when I woke up this morning but for the rest of the night... I was practically comatose. Caruso could have marched his army of hired goons over the mattress and I wouldn't have known any different.

Traveling never wiped me out this badly before but, these days, the pregnancy has me ready to drop by mid-afternoon. The stress of the journey had compounded the issue and *fff* I went out like a light.

‘Not particularly,’ Cyrus growls with a hefty, extra dose of irritation. ‘Now, where *were* you?’

I frown and plant my hands on my hips. I look pointedly down at myself, clad in a black bikini and board shorts. I adjust the sunglasses perched on my head.

‘At the pool,’ I deliver with effect. ‘After sleeping so early yesterday, I was up before the sun. I was antsy and didn’t want to disturb you.’

I also needed to get away. Despite the room boasting two beds, I stirred this morning to find Cyrus sharing mine. Worse still, at some point in the night, my body had sought out the long, hard length of his. By the time the sun was rising, my head was on Cyrus’s shoulder, my breasts pressed up against his side and my legs wrapped hard around his thigh.

Warm and snuggly.

Like a possessive koala.

Being with Cyrus had always involved sex but never *sleeping* together. Not in the technical sense. Waking up beside him had been a novel experience.

A not-at-all unwelcome one.

At that moment, I wasn’t sure which was scarier: the ease with which my subconscious had cleaved itself to Cyrus’s side, or the seductive, peaceful warmth my conscious mind found waking up there.

Either way, it seemed wise to reaffirm a little distance.

‘I’m sorry if I worried you,’ I say, making my polite offering to the God of Grump in the desk chair. ‘I thought I was being considerate.’

This is, apparently, entirely the wrong thing to say. Cyrus’s frown darkens and he looks away, glaring at the bed he’s made up. I spot cornered sheets and military-precise linens.

‘A lot of that going around,’ he snarls to himself.

I frown, lost in the conversation. It’s clear that whatever’s ticked Cyrus off is burrowed good and deep.

Setting down my bag and kicking off my flip-flops, I move to his side and lean against the desk.

I nudge the side of his thigh with my knee.

‘You wanna talk about it?’

Whatever “it” is...

‘No,’ Cyrus grunts before breathing a long exhale. Some of the tension seems to leave his shoulders. He eyes me up and down. ‘You feeling better?’

‘Yeah. Sorry I passed out on you.’

‘You sick?’

Not exactly.

I shake my head.

‘Just travel-tired.’

Looking for an alternative topic of conversation (and fast!), I change my position. Instead of facing him, I move to Cyrus’s side and brace an arm on the back of his chair. His laptop is open and the screen split into four quadrants. Two of them bear grainy little squares of live footage from around the hotel. Another is a graph sparking up and down as if recording some kind of sound, and the last is a standard email inbox, empty barring a few messages marked as “Read” and pinned to the top of the screen.

‘What have you been up to?’

Cyrus shrugs casually, winces, and then rolls out his neck. He’s clearly been planted in that chair for hours.

‘Just some monitoring.’

‘Is that the hotel’s CCTV?’

My hand is barely an inch from the nape of Cyrus’s neck so it feels perfectly natural to just reach out and rub a firm thumb up into his hairline, then down along his trapezoid.

‘Mmm,’ Cyrus sighs under my touch before answering my question. ‘Yeah, they don’t know I’m in the system.’

He leans back in his chair. His chin dips to expose the back of his neck. I rub the heel of my palm into the base of his muscle and start working at a heavy knot I can feel beneath the surface.

‘You some kind of hacking whiz now?’ I’m a tad surprised that someone as reticent over text would have the tech-savvy for something this advanced.

Cyrus is purring like a giant cat under my touch. He snorts at my question.

‘Hardly. Nat did it for me.’

I keep my hands studiously working over his skin.

‘Nat?’

‘Hmm... tech support, eagle eye... I’ve worked with her for a few years.’

Her.

A foreign impulse stirs in the deepest extremities of my chest. Just an ugly tightening where my ribs join my spine.

“‘Nat” as in “Natalie”?”

Cyrus’s shoulders tense beneath my touch. There’s a lilting amusement to his voice and, unable to see his face, I wonder if he’s smiling.

‘Jealous?’ he asks.

Ugh. I want to bite the tip off of my tongue in punishment for its open whimsy. Embarrassment is a hot surge rising up the sides of my neck.

‘Just playing my role,’ I try to argue. ‘Shouldn’t a girlfriend *be* jealous?’

The tension disappears and Cyrus’s shoulders deflate. He rolls his neck again and I can’t resist reaching up to brush over his hair. He keeps it ultra-short. A buzz cut any soldier would be proud of. The strands are too short to run my fingers through but they bend and flex beneath my palm with a ticklish friction.

It's a while before Cyrus speaks again.

'I *think* she's female,' he says.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I rest my chin on Cyrus's shoulder and then tilt to look him in the eye.

'You "*think?*"' I repeat.

'I only know her as Nat. Only ever communicated by voice. Which could be going through a modulator.'

'Sounds like a real trusting relationship.'

'It's better,' Cyrus says. He uses his feet to spin the desk chair and I'm treated to the glorious view of Cyrus Alesi fully aroused. Color streaks those glass-sharp cheekbones of his, his chest is rising too fast, and a massive length is pressing up through his jeans. He reaches for me, hands settling behind my knees. His voice is heavy and thick as he continues...

'You said it yourself. If you want peace of mind, mutual leverage is as good as out-and-out trust.'

'*Aah...*' I exhale in understanding. Cyrus pulls on the back of my thighs and I follow his lead to straddle his lap. The warm breadths of his palms come around my ass and I wriggle up closer. 'So you and this Nat have crap on each other?'

'Hard not to. *Mmm...* do that again...'

I shuffle higher, gripping his legs with my thighs and pressing down hard against his erection.

Cyrus manages to continue the conversation, but his gaze is on my chest, on my bare stomach. Pressing his lips between my breasts, his words become whispers, working around sweet licks and open kisses. Fire burns along my skin wherever he touches. My heart begins to race, striking out a staccato against my ribs.

'We've worked on too many jobs together,' Cyrus says. For a moment I try and remember who we're talking about. *Nat...* the "woman" I have no right to be jealous of. 'Be it the law or opposition, we could each testify against the other. So, both sides can trust in the discretion of the other.'

I gasp as Cyrus pulls back one side of my bikini and takes my nipple into his mouth. He sucks down hard and rolls his tongue around the tip like it's his favorite flavor of lollipop.

I feel the tip swell and turn firm inside his mouth.

'Mutually assured destruction,' I conclude breathlessly.

Are we even talking about his work associates anymore? Isn't mutually assured destruction where we're headed?

For the thousandth time, I question why Cyrus wants this... Why he's so intent on keeping our arrangement in place, even when I've made it clear we're done as soon as this trip is over...

Amazing sex aside, casual partners don't hold on. Casual partners give a polite thanks and disappear into the ether.

'Exactly,' Cyrus says, his words muffled against my breast. 'Leverage works better for me, anyway...'

It kills me to distract a man so diligent in his love-making, but I take hold of Cyrus's chin, break the kisses he's been pressing to my skin, and lift his face to mine.

'Because out-and-out trust is hard?' I ask him.

His eyes, glowing with sexual heat, seem to weaken. Then break a little. As if something has cracked far behind those pretty irises.

Cyrus swallows.

'Not a lot of trust in my field.'

A heavy lump settles in my throat. Being in the army—in the *Fallskärmsjägarna*—had been hard. But I wasn't alone. I had a squadron with me. A *team*. Men and women whom I trusted to protect my back. People I protected in return by cutting all contact when I was summoned to court martial. Thus far, they've all gone on to achieve stellar careers and earn a handful of medals between them.

I stroke the back of my fingers along Cyrus's cheek and down his jawline.

*What must it be like to have all of that danger, I wonder...
All of that fear and stress... but have to shoulder it alone?*

‘And you’ve been in the game a long time...’ I whisper with compassion. It’s not a question. Cyrus moves with the kind of lethal grace built from years of killing.

‘Since I was four.’

I blink, surprised.

‘What?’

Cyrus seems equally shocked. His lips work but no sound comes out. Like he’s somehow trying to reverse engineer his confession; to suck the words back in.

His throat moves and his lips part. Only awkward silence follows...

‘Four?’ I prompt.

Cyrus exhales through his nose. His jaw hardens under my hand. His expression is one of grouchy surrender and he gives a lopsided shrug.

‘I lived with my mother until I was four. That’s when my old man came to get me and took me to the Machellis. He was an enforcer for them. Scariest man alive. Or so I thought. I grew up in all of it.’

So he hadn’t had a choice, I realize. The world of organized crime was all he’d grown up knowing.

And yet...

He’d kept his independence. He wasn’t sold to a particular family for money or loyalty.

‘You work freelance now?’

Now, Cyrus looks *really* exposed. And more than a little trapped. Emotions I’ve never seen on him before.

‘Yeah...’ He clears his throat. It sounds like an old car failing to turn over. ‘I used to work for the Machellis exclusively and then I er... I took a break. I came back a few

years later as a contractor only. Wanted more say in what I was doing.’

Cyrus knows I’m not an idiot. I can see it in his eyes as he glances nervously into mine, then turns a fixated stare on my mouth. I can spot the glaring hole in his story; the catalyst so large that it spurred him to leave the only world he knew and recreate himself from the ground up.

Pivot and change.

And whilst curiosity is biting at the backs of my teeth, I don’t dare ask Cyrus for more details. That would be going too far. The hands tracing the lines of my back aren’t as sensual now as they were. Now they feel more... seeking. Looking for some kind of comfort. I’m not sure Cyrus has noticed the change in his hold. Or the vulnerability in his stare. But another push and that crack behind his eyes might just split wide open.

A pulse is already jolting in front of his ear. A morse code call for “mayday”.

‘So...’ I change my tone to one of dark challenge. Fiery but immature.

I switch my hold from his face to his wrists. I run the tips of my fingers along the ridge of his forearms. I stroke over a soft bump, where vein passes over bone, and continue up towards the biceps. Each is well-defined, with a sharp line of shadow hugging the underside of the muscle. The thick masses of his upper arms are hot to the touch.

I lean in closer, our noses almost touching...

‘Want that tension release now?’ I tease.

The vulnerability disappears. It takes a second for my words to sink in and then it just... evaporates right out of his skin.

Cyrus’s hands tighten to grips of iron: one at my hip, clutching the waistband of my board shorts. The other has worked its way up into my hair, messing with my ponytail and shooting delicious shivers over my scalp.

‘We could have been doing just that all morning if you hadn’t disappeared on me...’ Cyrus growls. He fists my hair, guides my skull back, and exposes my neck. Vulnerable and open to his predatory desires. His lips find my throat and that heat rushes back with a greater intensity. I sigh into his touch and arch my back. My pubis shifts forward for balance and presses hard against his stiff erection. We both gasp.

‘We could have been doing it last night,’ I point out, unwilling to take all of the blame. ‘But you let me sleep...’

Cyrus seems to groan with regret.

‘I did...’ he grunts uncharitably.

‘That was kind of you...’ I point out.

He grunts again, less than impressed. At least I now understand his earlier remark about there being too much “politeness” going on...

‘Yeah well...’ he says, working up the tendon of my neck and nibbling at the sensitive cover beneath my ear. ‘If you want the gentleman act on the regular, you’re going to have to invest in some proper pajamas.’

I giggle.

I slept last night as I do most nights: in a simple tank top and lace panties. Not exactly provocative lingerie but tempting enough to torment a man honorably trying to keep his hands to himself.

‘I can wear something similar for you tonight, if you like?’ I suggest.

Suddenly, the kissing stops. Cyrus’s head jackknives upright.

‘You wanna wait until *tonight*?’ he asks, apparently choking a little on my lunacy.

My grin broadens.

There’s no sound reason for waiting. I’m not particularly prudish about sexual activity being reserved for twilight hours. Nor is it unsafe to me or the baby to be having sex.

The simple truth is that driving a man to distraction is a powerful kick. In the face of Cyrus's crestfallen expression and straining arousal, I should feel guilty for any course of action that doesn't have me on the bed, legs splayed, and ass ready to be taken. Hot, heavy, and without mercy.

But the power trip of making Cyrus wait—of tempting and teasing him past the point of all sanity—has taken hold of me and all I can do is grin, my lower lip pinned mischievously behind my teeth.

'I was thinking of going jet skiing,' I confess.

'Right *now*?!' Cyrus's eyes bug.

My smile broadens as I set my swimsuit to rights and I bounce a little with excitement. Cyrus hisses behind gritted teeth at the friction.

'I bumped into that Lana down at the pool,' I explain, quickly. 'And she mentioned all the water sports they have out by the docks.'

And I, being the adrenaline junkie that I am, had latched onto the idea and refused to let go.

How often am I going to have a chance at something like this, again?

Cyrus watches me for a full minute, tracing a heated gaze all over my body. His fingertips press into my skin, reticent to let go.

Eventually, he lets out a noise somewhere between a sigh and a groan.

'You hate the idea?' I surmise, deflated.

'No...' he sighs again, freeing one hand from my butt to rub at the furrows on his brow. Even through my shorts, I feel the loss of his warmth. 'Actually, given the surveillance opportunities from the water, doing something couple-y like that would be a good cover.'

His words are positive but his tone is still reluctant.

Latching onto his devoted work ethic, I try grinning like a loon and clapping my hands together in a pleading gesture.

‘All right,’ he finally snorts. ‘We’ll go skiing.’

‘Yes!’ I throw both fists in the air with the elation of a marathoner finishing with a personal best. ‘Victory!’

‘Yeah yeah...’ Cyrus grumbles. But I can see the hint of a smile teasing the corner of his mouth. ‘Just give me a minute to shower and then we’ll go.’

As he goes to get up, I hop back from his lap. Puzzled, I remember the damp towel in the bathroom.

‘Didn’t you shower this morning?’ I ask.

Cyrus snorts again and hitches at his jeans. The hard shape of him still pushes from behind his fly.

‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘But the one this morning was *warm*.’

‘**Y**ou should do that more often.’

I look up from securing the jet skis. Darcy is watching me with an expression I’ve not seen on her face before. It’s soft. Open. And seductively genuine.

For a moment, I almost drop the ropes. A tremor wriggles its way through my chest but it’s not an unpleasant sensation. In fact, I have no idea if the quiver is from trepidation or... something warmer.

Trying to distract myself, I focus on Darcy’s smile. On the shallow dimple that pops only in her left cheek.

‘Do what?’ I ask. ‘Nearly fall ass over dick on seaweed?’

Getting off the jet skis without accidentally kicking them into the great watery beyond had been challenging enough. Finding a spot to latch them to on the little island we’d found, without tumbling headlong over the rock face myself, had been near fucking impossible. Twice, the algae beneath my feet had played its tricks. And a chaotic scramble and windmilling of my arms had been the only solution for staying upright.

Darcy is really grinning now, vibrant laughter in her eyes.

My skin racks up a few degrees when I spot her stare lingering on my bare chest.

‘No,’ she says, coming back to my face. ‘I meant *smile*.’

‘I smile,’ I grunt, feeling oddly defensive.

‘No, you give little tweaks of your lips now and again. Today—like right now—you’re actually *smiling*.’

I’m suddenly very self-conscious of my face. Whatever expression I was making is, of course, instantly disturbed. And Darcy’s smile dissolves with it.

‘Sorry,’ she calls from where I ordered her to sit, out of the way of the slip-hazards. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything.’

Well, wasn’t that the way to kill a mood?

Congrats Alesi. Literally the most romantic spot in the Mediterranean and you managed to bum out your girl.

Only one of the many reasons Darcy is smart to be running in the opposite direction as soon as she’s able.

Choosing a pointy-looking rock, I work to secure the second line for Darcy’s jet ski and mask, watching her from the corner of my eye.

She’s perched on a select piece of rock just big enough for her tight little butt and one of her feet. Her arms are looped loosely around her upturned knee and her gaze is on the sea. Despite the shades on her head, she winces into the light, experiencing the view for all that it is, *au naturel*.

The island we’ve landed on hardly merits the name, but it’s stunning in its own right. About a mile from *Nisí tou Chrysoú*, it’s less a whole isle and more a hunk of volcanic rock jutting out of the sea. There’s no plant life, besides the deathtrap moss near the waterline. And it’s so small you’d struggle to fit more than a dozen people on its surface. Provided they didn’t topple over the uneven, boulder-like terrain. Even so, it’s a beautiful little spot of the Aegean and fetches a wide, vista view of *Nisí tou Chrysoú* to the east. A pretty silhouette of the island town, surrounded by miles upon miles of aquamarine waves. Here, the salt water is crisp in the nose and the acrid scent of the rock isn’t so much sulfuric as *earthy*... Natural and vivid.

I take a deep breath, amused when I spot Darcy doing exactly the same thing.

‘God...’ she sighs, ‘it really is spectacular. What do you think—?’

She cuts herself off. All color abruptly drains from her face and I forget to hide my surreptitious observations of her.

‘Darcy, wait—!’

Too late! She’s off down the rocky, uneven stairwell at a pace that has my heart in my throat and my asshole squeezing tight.

One wrong step, one false move...

But Darcy runs and leaps with the strength and confidence of an athlete, with power in her thighs and accuracy in her feet. Even her face is controlled, a look of manic determination in her eyes, as she rushes for a nearby ridge. One that, on the other side, tips straight down into a rushing current.

‘Darcy, not that—!’

But she doesn’t go over the edge. That’s not her intention.

She just falls to her knees at the ridgeline and pitches her head over its peak. Beneath the dull roar of the waves and hum of the wind, I can’t hear what’s happening but upchuck triggers a very particular pattern of muscle work along the back.

I can see it in her shoulders and the way her spine undulates in unnatural spasms. Darcy is throwing up.

Bigger and heavier than Darcy, my rush over the rocks is slower. By the time I reach her, she’s already vertical again, leaning back onto her heels, and washing her mouth out with sea foam.

‘You all right?’ I ask. I take hold of her shoulder and squat down at her side. She’s pale and clammy but the look of urgency on her face is gone, so the nausea itself has probably passed.

I shrug the drawstring bag from my shoulder and take out the bottle of water I brought for the afternoon. She swigs, gargles, and spits gratefully.

‘Yeah,’ she finally says. ‘I’m good.’

I glance pointedly over the ridge and Darcy grimaces.

‘It’s just seasickness.’

‘You get seasick... and you wanted to go *jet skiing*?’

Darcy glares at me but there’s not a lot of spark in it.

‘It doesn’t happen all the time,’ she says, reminding me that she wasn’t sick when we came across on the ferry yesterday. ‘It just hits weirdly sometimes.’

I’m bewildered and more than a little worried. The exhaustion yesterday, now nausea...

Though we’ve never discussed it, I know things are stressful in Darcy’s life these days. Money trouble, stress at her job...

...these changes she’s talking about.

Is she working herself into the ground over all this?

‘If you knew you might get sick, why insist on coming?’ I demand angrily.

Darcy catches sight of something over my shoulder, grins, and points.

‘Because of *that*.’

I turn to look.

On our side of the outcropping, the black rock is an uneven, rugged staircase with sharp protrusions and engorged boulders. From our new vantage point, we can see around its peaked spine and down the other side. Below us, the tides have worn away the rock, smoothing it to a glassy polish. The tides have carved out several shallow rock pools and a larger crescent-shaped water trap. Like a private, sun-heated hot tub.

The water itself is almost entirely transparent. The shadows of small fish dart about against a backdrop of tropical blue, swaying gently with the current. With each ebb and flow, white spray leaps for land and explodes into foam softer than candy floss.

‘Wow...’ I can’t help but murmur.

‘Come on!’ Darcy hurries.

Her sudden bout of sickness not slowing her down one bit, I see Darcy swinging herself up and over the ridgeline to dance her way over to the rock pools.

‘Darcy, hold up!’ I call out, her confidence somehow spiking my anxiety.

Like a gazelle, she leaps and bounds her way to a patch of even ground. I have to pick my path more carefully, bare toes gripping the edge of each stone and fingers gripping nearby handholds before I risk the next venturing step.

I finally find a spot a few feet above Darcy, plant my ass on the ground, and pull my binoculars from my bag.

Nisi tou Chrysoú suddenly comes into full view, the power of the oculars enough to knock you sideways if unprepared. From a decorative doll’s house on the horizon to a life-size painting, detailed enough to count the windows of the resort or the number of people on the docks.

‘Anything of interest?’ Darcy has come to join me. Standing on a lower section of the rockface, she folds her arms over my thigh and rests her chin on her wrists. The tips of her fingers brush against my in-seam and the warmth of her breath caresses my lower abs.

I swallow. Hard.

‘I’m assessing where Caruso might place look outs,’ I explain, trying to keep my mind on work. Cold, emotionless work. ‘And picking out some extraction routes.’

Darcy’s tone is suddenly serious as she settles her sunglasses on her face and peers up at me through their wide frames.

‘You really think it will come to that?’

She doesn’t sound scared. Just irritated. Like having to escape angry mobsters would put a real kink in her vacation.

‘Not if we play our parts right,’ I say. ‘If rumors are to be believed, Felix only has one regular hitman on the books.’

‘The guy you’re looking for?’ Darcy iterates.

‘We hope, yeah. But only one reliable wet worker for a whole mob family is a poor showing. Worse still if the one he has is loyal to the Caruso name and not to him *personally*... He’s definitely shopping. And shopping hard.’

‘So, he’s desperate for a loyal attack dog. Someone like you.’

I snort.

‘Woof,’ I say without emotion.

Darcy is grinning.

‘That’s why you’re confident in your game plan?’ she presses. ‘Because he’s desperate?’

I shrug.

‘Desperate men make foolish choices and miss key details. Like the gaps in another person’s pretenses. I’m no great actor but if the goal you want is big enough in your mind’s eye then the rest of the world doesn’t always have to make sense. You tend to see what they want to see.’

‘Like a happy couple jet skiing around the Aegean sea?’

‘Well...’ I lower the binoculars and tilt my head back and forth like I’m weighing the situation. ‘I wouldn’t say that’s entirely a pretense.’

‘My, Mr. Alesi, was that an admission of *fun*?’ Darcy gasps with dramatic flare. Her spine straightens with the effect, jostling her arms and dancing those damn fingers of hers over my skin. I’m in board shorts, not fucking speedos for Christ’s sake, but the damn things are riding up where I squat leaving my inner thigh open to the torment of her touch.

Then again, I could be wearing a full suit of fucking armor and I’d be able to feel her. I *always* feel her.

Like last night, when she’d wrapped herself around me like cellophane. Her breasts pushed up against my ribs with every breath. Every wriggle rubbed her thigh high over mine, her knee brushing softly against my now permanently stiff

dick. Her hair had been like silk on my shoulder and smelt of apples. The rest of her was lemony sweet.

I didn't know whether to eat her or rut her. The fantasy of just turning Darcy over, propping up her ass, and driving deep inside her was almost too vivid to ignore.

Especially given I'd been thinking about little else since she plastered herself to my back when I picked her up on my bike.

Visions of Darcy in the heat of arousal... on her back, her front, against the nearest wall... had haunted me all day. Then again all night.

Hell, I'm *still* thinking about it even when I'm trying to focus on active mobsters or slipping on algae.

I only held back last night because, just as my self-control was about to snap, Darcy had snuggled up closer and sighed into my skin. So trustingly and so open that, for the first time in my life, I'd felt ashamed of my explicit fantasies. I'd forced my head into a different space, closed my eyes, and prayed for an unconsciousness that didn't come until the wee hours of the morning.

But hell have I been paying for it since.

Blue balls are a damn real thing and no fucking joke.

Thankfully, Darcy chooses this moment to leave me to my recon and head down to the rock pools.

I concentrate for about ten minutes *tops* before her presence draws me back in.

I watch as she squats beside one of the smaller pools with multi-colored marine life beneath the surface. She dips a finger gently under the water to stroke the soft spines of a starfish, a childlike smile on her face. She then moves to another larger pool, spreads her legs wide across its diameter, and leans low to look at the little crabs scuttling about. Perfectly balanced, wondrously strong...

And pushing the sexiest ass I've ever seen into the air.

I curse.

Watching the tone and flex of Darcy's legs as she keeps her balance... remembering the feel of them wrapped hard around my waist and holding on through the wildest of rides... I realize there's a whole other issue I may now be facing...

Judging by the sharp intensity pulsing through my erection and the choking ache that's set up shop beneath it... sex with Darcy might now be destined to be phenomenal... but a heck of a short-lived experience.

When you've been desperate to cum for over twenty-four hours, how the shit are you supposed to keep it together when inside a woman like that?

Not a fucking hope.

Darcy is smiling when she glances up from the water and catches me watching her. Whatever she sees on my face alters her expression. The grin changes and evolves into something more private. A secret sensuality. Her body, lithe and powerful, is outlined in a glow of sunshine. Even in silhouette, I can see her nipples pressing up through the elastane of her bikini. She takes off her sunglasses, her eyes hooded and hot. She bites her lip and glances at the vista beyond. The beautiful, *empty* vista.

No one for miles.

All reminders to the contrary leave me. All warnings that I'm about to severely and prematurely embarrass myself are lost to the winds. Caruso is gone. Gabriel is forgotten.

Right now, I'm ruled but a single, commanding drive... to reach Darcy. And to show her what it means to tease, tempt and seduce a man past his Goddamn breaking point!



WHAT DID I liken Cyrus to back at the hotel that night?

Not a lion... but a *wolf*.

The vision before me is proof. Clear as day.

I stand transfixed as Cyrus hunts me across the rocks. No longer careful, his steps are rapid and sure-footed. An apex predator descending over his territory. To anyone else, the spectacle might be paralyzing: a trained killer with eyes set firmly upon his target... *Me*.

But adrenaline races, muscles tense, and I hold firm.

The trembling in my belly isn't fear but anticipation. The rushing heat through my limbs isn't flight; it's excitement. And the tingling over my skin, the tremors that send my hair on end and make me itch to my very core, is a desire more powerful than I've ever known. Even with him.

And I thought I'd been teasing only *Cyrus*? Playing with only *his* nerves, drawing out only *his* cravings?

Fool.

As he reaches my plateau, I'm practically shaking. Only a foot away from me and I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. My shades have fallen to the ground somewhere with a forgotten clatter.

I stand strong only until the last second.

As Cyrus rushes me, it's natural to pull away and avoid a dangerous collision so I take an instinctive step back. My foot hits something slick and wet. It shoots out from under me, sending me off-balance.

I've barely started to fall before Cyrus has wrapped his formidable set of arms around me. He takes my weight like it's nothing and I steady myself in his embrace. Trapped in a delicious cage of biceps and sinew, I catch my breath. The tips of my breasts hit his chest and jolts of electricity shoot down through my bones.

'My hero,' I swoon, my breathlessness fitting the part.

To hold onto my fearsome savior, my hands are splayed across Cyrus's bare back, palms pressed against long ridges in his skin.

The man is covered in scars. From nicks and gashes on every limb to two puckered bullet holes: one front and center

of his left bicep, the other six inches higher, in the meat of his shoulder.

All of them are familiar. Not simply because I've felt them before—with my fingers, with my tongue—but because I've seen similar wounds on the battlefield, embossed on dozens of men. Violent badges of honor.

The scars across Cyrus's back though... those weren't made by war. I follow the long slashes over his shoulder blades and across his spine. Each is reminiscent of a belt or a strap and all of them are old. Very old.

"I lived with my mother until I was four... my old man came to get me... He was an enforcer. Scariest man alive..."

'Don't ask,' Cyrus suddenly growls, his voice cracking like velcro. I stop my gentle caresses and take a bold grip over his ruined skin.

You're not broken, I want my touch to say. I don't see you as fragile...

'I wouldn't ask,' I promise.

'Because you don't care?' he snarls. His fingers dig sharply into my hips. I keep my expression cool.

'Because it's not my story,' I tell him. 'If you ever want to tell me, you'll do it only when you're ready.'

'You're not going to be there.'

The animosity in that sentence sends a jolt through my heart. Ever since I brought up my leaving on the plane, Cyrus has chewed on the idea without grace. Like the discontinuation of whatever this is between us is repugnant.

Yet, in all the months we've known each other, he's gone out of his way to ensure I know the score: Fantastic sex. Limited time only. Zero longevity.

Mixed signals much, Alesi?

'Then...' I say, leaning in closer and pulling his torso flush against mine...

I sigh into the shape of him. The way the ridges of his muscles mold my skin into their mirror pair... the way I can feel his heartbeat pounding through his diaphragm.

‘You’d best make the most of me while I’m here...’ I finish, with a teasing tilt of my head. ‘Speaking of which, if we leave now I bet we can snag a table at—’

‘Don’t you fucking dare.’

My giggle dies a swift death as Cyrus slams his mouth down over mine. There’s no build-up, no foreplay. His tongue invades me, finding mine, tangling...

The second I taste him, every cell in my body lights up. Every muscle screams fire. Every heartbeat pounds heat.

Fuck, who was I kidding? No foreplay? This whole trip has been *days* of it. Some deliberate, some accidental. But all of it centered on Cyrus. All of it designed to drive him to distraction, to have him blind with need.

Congratulations, Captain. Mission accomplished.

And aren’t I right there with him?

‘God...’ I gasp, when we break for air, lips clinging, hands searching.

‘I know...’ Equally out of breath, Cyrus nips at my lower lip. ‘Just remember this is all your fault.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ I deny, biting him right back.

With a growl, Cyrus literally rips the bikini top from my body and throws it onto the rocks somewhere. I have no time for startled modesty because elastane is instantly replaced with skin as he palms my small breasts.

He’s possessive, demanding... and all-consuming.

He strokes their shape, cradles their curves, and plucks at their tips.

I gasp out loud, only to be filled with his tongue once more.

And I'm sure as hell not to be outdone. My fingers are working just as fast as his, diving for the waist of his shorts.

His hands are quick to join mine. With no space between us to work his drawstring loose and half-blinded by the sun, I think he's about to help me but his fingers suddenly shackle my wrists.

I growl my protests loud and clear when Cyrus abruptly breaks away and turns to lead me down to the edge of the water trap.

Beneath the lapping tide is a steep drop, like a plunge pool. After slipping into the water and finding his feet, Cyrus stands waist-deep in the water. Half submerged, and a foot below me, he still feels the taller of us somehow. Strong and dominating with an unflinching charisma. The confidence of a man who claims mastery over life and death.

And with a body like that to boot...

Thickly padded pectorals, ridged abdominal muscles, and a clear slanting V into the front of his shorts form the striking architecture of his anatomy. A dusting of hair casts shadows beneath his navel, its silky trail then distorted and zig-zagging beneath the water line.

His skin is wet, doused in the spray of the sea and the broad flare of his shoulders is an open canvas for reflecting twinkling sunlight.

Cyrus holds out a hand to me, the digits long and thick, his forearms lithely sculpted. His bicep bulks up heavily as he reaches up out of the water...

I lose my train of thought for a second and simply drink him in. All of him.

Maybe the Greeks of old had a point about those irresistible Gods of theirs...

I'm gratified to notice that I'm not the only one staring. As I descend into the pool, Cyrus's eyes are hyper-focused. I feel him drawing the lines of my body in his mind with my every step. Forming the shape of my bare breasts and memorizing the color of my nipples.

Upon joining him in the water, he replaces his gaze with his hands, molding, sculpting... committing to memory...

For all his machismo and muscles, Cyrus touches me with the devotion of an artist. And tastes me with the reverence of a gourmet.

This time, when he kisses me, the connection is slow. No less hungry and no less forceful; he sips, he tastes, he bites... But it's at a painfully unhurried pace. I deepen the kiss. I seek out his tongue. I'm so hot that I'm ready to burst into flames. So tight in my core, I think I might cry with the need for release...

All those hours riding the high of teasing this man...

And now I'm the one ready to roll over and beg.

Gripping his shoulders, my nails in his skin, I snare my leg around his hips and urge him onwards.

Cyrus hooks his elbow under my knee and lifts my leg clear of the water. Droplets rush over my foot, down from my heel, and jingle as they hit the ebbing tide. I brace my other calf around his thigh and hang on his body, arching my back and pushing up against that hard shaft of his. Water rushes up between us with every thrust. His skin becomes slick.

My shorts are waterlogged and heavy around my waist. I hardly notice the way Cyrus shifts and pulls at the fabric. Only when the rush of cool sea hits fresh skin do I realize he's pushed aside my bikini panties.

A second later, his finger is inside me.

'Oh... *Oh, yes...*' I praise, shoving down against his hand. That finger is long and thick and my walls close down around it. I thrust harder, then slow. 'Please...'

Cyrus knows what I want. After months of bringing each other to the brink of sanity with our sexual teasing, he knows what I like, what sends my craving to its most pleasurable edge.

He knows what drives me wild.

Using one arm to keep me balanced in the water, Cyrus tilts his hand to the right angle and starts to rub hard and fast... My world instantly explodes.

‘*Shit!*’ I cry. ‘Oh God, Cyrus...’

I don’t cum. But his touch works me into a frenzy so white hot that it’s like I’m riding an orgasmic peak. One that never comes down.

With his thumb, Cyrus is working my clit without mercy. With his finger, he curls up against the inner side of that same nub of nerves and doubles the assault.

My body begins to shake. My gaze flickers white.

‘*Fuck!*’

As soon as my legs shoot straight and my toes reach for the sun, Cyrus fills me with another of those heavy fingers of his, stretching me wider and sending me higher. For a second, it’s painful: but a sweet, teasing pain that I need far, *far* more of.

I curse. I cry out. I abandon myself entirely to the sensation of being finger-fucked by a man who knows *exactly* what he’s doing. Cyrus plays me like a fine, erotic instrument. One he can make screech, scream and sing to perfect melody.

I thrust against his hand. I scratch at his back.

‘Need...’ I gasp.

Cyrus is just as out of breath, his pupils blown wide and dark, his lips parted on heavy, desperate exhales.

‘What do you need baby...?’ he drawls, getting off on his own power-trip now. I don’t care. So long as he keeps making me feel this way, he can have all the power: a benevolent, erotic god of the sea.

‘I need... I need to fuck. Oh God, I need to *cum*...’

I scream as he slams those fingers of his deeper.

‘You want it right now?’ he taunts.

‘Yes!’ I beg. Then swallow and change my mind. ‘No!’

Cyrus has both my legs in the air now, my back against a smooth slope of glassy stone, my thighs parted wide and wanton.

‘No more fucking games, Darcy...’ he warns. ‘I’m too raw to deal with that shit. This is gonna be damn quick as it is.’

With his back to the sun, Cyrus is like an epic statue of ebony. Hard and dangerous. Just the sight of him sends shivers through me.

And when he brushes past my clitoral hood and touches raw nerve those shivers become earthquakes.

‘Oh *God!*’ I cry, shudders ripping through me. ‘Do that again...!’

‘Answer me, Darcy...’ he demands. Still fucking me with his hand, he takes my nipple in his mouth and sucks down hard. I cry out.

‘I need you. I want you,’ I scramble to grab hold of those vast shoulders of his, to pull him in closer. ‘Cyrus, *please...*’

It’s all the consent he needs.

From one breath to the next, I’m flipped over. My hands slap the wet rock and my board shorts are suddenly gone. Cyrus is yanking aside my bikini bottoms, spreading my ass and—*yes!* Sinks that hot and steely length of his deep inside my body.

My vision blurs. My heart stops.

I swear I feel him all the way to my ribcage; lancing straight up my center and pinning me to the rock face.

Panting on shallow air, I try to get my knees onto the stone. I try for leverage so that I can stabilize myself and thrust back against his shaft. But the surface is slippery and I can’t find a purchase...

...But Cyrus isn’t doing the work either.

In fact, he’s gone very, *very* still.

‘Cyrus?’ I try to look over my shoulder, half-distracted by the way my inner muscles are adapting to his invasion, to his

size... How thick, full, and *complete* I feel, in this moment. I'm still panting like the oxygen has been sucked from the air. 'Cyrus what's going o—'

'I'm bare.'

The words are so rough, so animal, that I can barely translate them.

'What?' I try to blink the stars from my eyes.

'I'm not... Fuck, Darcy. I'm not *wearing* anything.'

From his deadened tone, I know he doesn't mean a swimsuit.

I can feel him inside me, raw and sensitive. Skin on skin.

He braces a hand on the rocks beside my head and starts to push, sliding deep within me and sending firework sparks along my nerve endings...

...But he's moving in the wrong direction!

I grasp his wrist, nails piercing skin. I pin my thighs together to try and hold him inside.

'No,' I pant.

'Darcy...' he growls, clearly in all kinds of inner conflict.

'It's fine,' I tell him. 'I need this. We want this.'

'What about—'

'I'm clean,' I assure him. I got myself tested when I discovered our attempts at contraception had failed in other ways... 'Are you?'

'Last I checked.'

'Then it's fine,' I promise.

'What about—'

'You can't get me pregnant.' *Again.*

'You're on the pill?'

Not anymore. And not that it did me any good when I *was*.

I don't want to lie. But neither do I want this to end prematurely.

'Trust me, Cyrus. It's fine. Please God, just finish this.'

'I...'

'For fuck's sake, Cyrus. I know you want this.' I tighten my inner muscles over his shaft in the way he loves. 'God, your dick's so hard I can feel every swollen inch... just...' I manage to twist back and catch his eye. I stare him down, giving him all the permission he needs. 'Just fuck me like we've both been fantasizing about for days. However you want it, I'll take it. Whatever you want, I'll do.'

That is what sex with Cyrus is like. So wild, you'll do anything. So amazing you regret nothing... So exhausting you're worked into a pleasure coma to rival the dead.

Cyrus's resistance holds for roughly three seconds. Two for him to process my demands. One for him to fight them.

A heartbeat later, the waters around us are thrown in every direction and the tides are worked into a faster frenzy. Cyrus has taken hold of my waist, drawn up my hips, and is plowing deep inside. Over and over... *and over.*

'Oh my—*shit. Aah... yes! God yes...*'

I plant my hands and my palms slip. I slap the rock harder. With nowhere for my legs to go, I hook my ankles behind Cyrus's ass and draw him closer that way.

The man is a machine. He thrusts like a piston, finding the exact angle for striking the front of my inner shape.

'*Mmm...*' I groan.

With every slide of friction, my core pounds. With every pounding, my bloodstream sings.

Somehow, Cyrus has his feet securely braced because he doesn't need the rock anymore. One hand has shot around my waist and down between my legs to work at my clit again. I scream in approval and brace myself against those forceful fingers.

His other hand has come up along my front, between my swaying, shaking breasts and up to my mouth. His fingers are in my mouth. His teeth nip at the shell of my ear.

‘Suck me,’ he orders.

I obey.

Like a good, and wildly turned-on, soldier... *I obey*. I suck down on his fingers. I taste the salt and the warmth. I round the knuckles and the nails with my tongue. I draw on him hard with my lips. I gasp around his hand as the rest of his body hammers away inside me, sending me higher and rushing my body to new heights.

I wondered what this would be like... I realize. I wondered if it would be different.

Knowing that the man inside me—the man bare and raw inside me—is the man who gave me my baby. The father of my child. The one to plant his seed deep within, to *impregnate* me.

Something evolutionary, something animal, loves that. It calls to him. It wants to suck Cyrus deep and never let him go.

My man, it calls.

My male. My mate.

Soon, I’ll have to shut away those instincts and bury them deep, but right now I can’t. Right now, as Cyrus claims me like he’s never claimed me before—invades me from both ends and pins me beneath his body with all the possession of an alpha male—I just submit. I surrender to the sensations. I fall into the spiral of want and need. And, in my mind, I claim this man for my own. I make him mine and mine alone...

My first orgasm takes me almost by surprise. I’ve been riding the high for so long, I almost forgot it’s not the finale.

As my inner walls suddenly clench down and begin to shake, I gasp around Cyrus’s fingers and almost choke as they press down upon my tongue. The sound that escapes me is something between a squeal and a guttural groan. I freeze up,

my ass lifting and changing the angle for a whole new wave of sensations.

Cyrus doesn't let up. He keeps going, adding friction to my shudders and the sweetest discomfort to an all-too-familiar feeling: explosive elation.

Tears pool in my eyes, my mouth stretches wide, and I lose all feeling in my legs.

The climax doesn't truly end. It ebbs and cools but the tension is still present and the coiling ache deep within immediately resets.

I thrash backward to keep the sex going, to bring the sensation back. Cyrus does it for me by rubbing under the hood of my clit and immediately setting off another forest fire within.

'*Fuck!*' I scream at the sky, muffled only by his fingers and pushing my palms hard against the rocks. This time I moan long and loud, all shame thrown to the sea, all arousal out and on show.

I can hear Cyrus grunting behind me and feel him panting on my neck. Moaning against my skin.

And still, he goes.

'My God... you're a fucking machine,' I praise, lifting my face to the sky and my ass to his assault. 'I love the way you fuck me...'

I'm surprised by Cyrus's next words. His hips never cease, he ruts me harder and faster, never yielding, never quitting. But his words are nervous...

'Baby, something...' Cyrus groans as I tighten around his member. 'Something's not right...'

Panting, I try and look back but his thrusts keep knocking me forward, upsetting my balance.

'What...' I'm jolted before I can finish my sentence. I have to try again. 'What's wrong?'

Cyrus grunts again then moans in obvious pleasure. Even as he says:

‘I can’t cum.’

‘What?’ I blink back at him.

‘I can’t cum,’ he repeats. ‘It won’t, it won’t happen. I mean...’

‘Are you hurting?’

‘Fuck no. Shit, this is... fuck me, it’s *heaven* baby. It’s amazing. The edge. It just... it’s never-ending but I... I’m not cumming.’

My grip slipping on the rocks, my breathing shaky, I try and hold myself up and keep my words even. With the right angle, I can catch the color in Cyrus’s face, the blissed-out look of pleasure-pain on his features, the sharp but beautiful agony in his eyes.

There’s no fucking way, I’m not letting him drown in that. As I’m drowning in him.

‘It’s okay,’ I tell him. ‘I’m... I’m not going anywhere...’—Shafted to the rock as I am, it would be hard to, anyway—‘I’m not leaving. Just keep going, Cyrus. Keep going until you break. I’ll stay with you. I’m loving this. It’s phenomenal.’

‘Always...’ he mumbles to himself as his hands grab a tighter hold on my waist and he shifts so that the tip of his shaft brushes a highly sensitive stop deep in my core.

I squeal and then moan my approval.

‘Always what?’ I gasp.

‘It’s always phenomenal with you. Fuck me, you make me see *stars*. You make me taste the sky.’

‘*Aah...*’ I moan as he hits that sensitive spot over and again. Each strike is keener, each stroke is sharper. I feel ready to snap apart in acute pleasure... ‘The orgasms you give me are mind-bending, baby. I’ll take as many of them as you can give me. Just keep going...’

‘Couldn’t stop if I wanted to...’

The onslaught seems endless. Every time I reach a new peak of pleasure, Cyrus tilts his hips or moves his hands and he's working an entirely new sensation into a frenzy. When I hit my limit there, he shifts again. Thrusting slow, thrusting hard. Pushing deep or rocking sharp, quick, and shallow. Throughout it all, he strokes at my clit, teases my core, and works at my breasts. He cries out in my ear, he twists my jaw to kiss me long and deep.

Then we break apart for him to thrust hard and heavy again.

Over and over.

And over...

I have no watch. No means of telling time besides the sun over our heads. And celestial timekeeping has the least of my attention right now.

I've lost count of how many orgasms I've had. Each one now an almost painful scream through my sensitive flesh. One that leaves me trembling to my very soul.

When Cyrus's thrusts finally become irregular, when he begins to moan on a pained curse, I know we're close. I'm drained, I'm bruised. I'm more than a little sore. But I'm also so blissed out that I can barely see straight.

'Let me around,' I tell him when his hands become clumsy on my hips and he starts to lose himself to the beginnings of his orgasm.

'What?' he garbles, totally gone to his own waves of sensation.

'I want to see you,' I insist.

'Now?'

'Yes, *now*,' I argue. 'I want to see you cum. Let me around.'

It's awkward and disjointed but a second later I'm on my back. One leg is wrapped around his back, the other hooked over his shoulder so he can push flush against my pelvis and reach that long, powerful shaft of his as deep as it will go.

Too sensitive to cum anymore, my body is just trembling with aftershocks, zinging with energy, and utterly spent. But that's perfect. Because without being lost in my own release, I can watch Cyrus in his.

I can see the way his chest stops moving and his breathing becomes little holds of air and quick releases. I witness the way his abs tighten so hard they throw shadows across his hard belly. How his hips begin to lose their rhythm, lose their control.

I get to watch that thick stem of his glistening in the water and slamming into my core.

'Oh *shit!*' Cyrus cries out. With him not normally verbal in sex, I know this moment is something special. Something that's rocking his damn world. 'Fuck, Darcy, I'm gonna...'

I keep my hips moving, pushing up against him and working him harder. I squeeze down on my inner muscles and his eyes pop wide.

'Fuck me, do that again!'

I do it again. And *again*.

...And I send him over the edge.

'*Fuck!*'

Cyrus cums violently, his arms trembling above me, his shoulders racked with shudders. I feel his shaking through my core and, to my huge surprise, feel an echoing aftershock. A small, sensitive, and languid orgasm, given in response to his. I sigh into the joy of it, thrusting upwards and clamping down on Cyrus's shaft until he throws his head back and exhales a silent cry of ecstasy.

Cyrus makes one, two last thrusts inside me to ride the last ripples of his release. And then practically collapses on top of me.

Neither of us can breathe. Neither of us can see straight. Our muscles don't work. And I'm pretty sure our lower regions are going to ache like hell tomorrow...

But fuck me, was that a good way to spend an afternoon.

‘Well...’ I pant, as tears roll from the corners of my eyes and back into my hair. ‘*That* was certainly worth the wait.’

Holy. *Shit.*

We lay there on the rocks for several minutes. Darcy is soft and slick beneath me. I can feel her heart beating through her chest and into mine, the two of us in rhythm.

It takes a hot minute for my brain to come back online. For it to check in with each of my limbs and all of my muscles.

What the *shit* had that been?

The best fucking sex I've ever had, I answer myself. *The best anyone has ever had*. Period.

Never in my life have I cum so hard, felt so much, and been ready to offer up my soul to have it all last just a second longer.

It was amazing. Darcy's amazing. Sex with her is...

Shit, I need to come up with another word for "amazing". But the neurons in my brain are barely firing and it's all I can manage.

The stone, though smooth, is hard against my palms and the sun is baking my shoulders but every cell in my body refuses to move. Darcy and I are still intimately connected, my dick now soft and warm inside of her.

If I could die here, die now in this moment, I wouldn't fucking care. Wouldn't regret a single goddamn thing.

Save one. The gnawing worry that's going to haunt my steps until Darcy confirms we've escaped all consequences...

No condom.

Way to fucking go, Alesi. You damn well know better.

Taking my weight onto my arms so I don't crush Darcy against the edge of the tide pool, I can't bear to lift my face from her neck. Or look her in the eye. I lick the salt from her throat and smell the warmth of her skin...

Some men wouldn't care, I remind myself as if that somehow alleviates the blame. Thousands of them. Millions. All around the world. They have sex with a girl bare-back and then walk away from every repercussion they might have caused.

But I'm not one of them. I never have been.

Sex is a fucking privilege. With Darcy, it's a goddamn miracle. And, when gifted with something like that, you take your share of the responsibility. To stay healthy. To stay safe.

Darcy made it very clear on the plane that, when this is all over, she wants a clean break from me, from *us*. To put me in her rear-view mirror and never look back.

And I've just potentially ruined that for her.

Not wanting to disturb the soft little sighs beneath me, I stifle my groan of self-flagellation, squeeze my eyes shut, and just luxuriate in the feel of Darcy's soft middle pressed against mine. To think... of her growing round down there. Swelling with my kid inside of her. My baby.

Fuck me, I begin to wonder... *Maybe this whole thing had been subconscious?*

Some twisted impulse to keep her close? Get her knocked up so she can never completely leave me?

No...

It's true that I don't want her to go. That I loathe these "changes" she wants to make in her life. But pregnancy is too extreme. Even for my fucked-up subconscious.

There's no way it would try and force me—*me!*—into the role of father.

You wanted it once...

I try to shut that shit down but I'm too tired. So completely spent in Darcy's arms that I have no mental bandwidth left to fight against the whispered reminders.

Yes, once upon a time, I... *dabbled*... with the idea of fatherhood. Of kids. Of a family that I might one day be able to come home to. One that I would *want* to come home to.

But doesn't every little kid with a shitty upbringing yearn for something more postcard? For something kinder? Something loving?

Over the years since, the "kids" question has been answered for me; just taken clean out of my hands.

When you become a contract killer—when death is *literally* your profession—you realize that getting married and settling down just isn't in the cards anymore.

"Hi honey, I'm home! Just let me wash this blood off before dinner..."

Yeah, right.

Having kids had gone the way of running in the Olympics or being able to sprout wings and fly: nothing but a fantasy.

The reality of which would be an unwanted burden on a woman who has already drawn her boundaries. Who is leaving in twenty-four hours.

Making this entire moral dilemma a fucking moot point, don't you think?

God, I'm a selfish asshole.

'You're quiet...'

The muscles of my shoulder and upper arm twitch pleasantly as Darcy drifts her fingertips over my skin. She strokes gently, soothingly. After the raw, almost aggressive, chemistry we just shared, some humanity is more than welcome.

'Everything all right?' she asks.

I have to clear my throat before I have any chance of my words being more than a jagged garble.

‘Yeah...’ I grunt, having to swallow again.

I sigh before resolutely pushing my own trauma and shit to the back of my head. Darcy needs to be my focus, right now. Taking care of her and protecting the life that *she* wants to live.

Even if it doesn't include me.

Testing out a pair of arms that feel like jello, I take a moment and then support my weight into a full press-up. Darcy stretches languidly with me, her hips tilting to hold onto mine, her arms looped around my neck. Emotive is not a word I would use to describe myself so I have to hope that everything swirling inside my head is there to read in my eyes. I try to make my tone reassuring.

‘Yeah,’ I repeat... ‘Everything’s going to be just fine. We’ll get back to the hotel and—’

‘A boat!’ Darcy has shifted, her attention caught by something on the horizon under my left arm. She twists to inspect up at the rock face above. ‘Where did your binoculars go?’

Her scanning dislodges our bodies and I slip free from inside her. The saltwater, which had felt so warm only a few seconds ago, is by comparison icy cool along my shaft. My first instinct is to take hold of her waist and fit us back together but the sound of an approaching engine has me joining the search instead.

We discover that I set the binoculars down on a plateau shelf a few feet over Darcy’s head before pouncing on her like an animal. How tidy of me.

I’m surprised when Darcy takes the binocs in hand and scrambles up onto the rocks to make better use of them. A quick pinch and flick of her fingers sets her bikini panties to rights and, for the rest of it, she doesn’t even bother. She just stands there on the isle, in the breeze, nude but for an ebony

triangle covering the apex of her thighs. No shame in her body at all.

Not that she should have any.

Darcy is stunning. Like when dressed, her naked figure maintains a certain sexy tomboy style. With small breasts, a tight little butt, and legs for days, she's more lean than she is curvy. Each of her muscles are clearly defined and toned into edges and angles that you just don't get from pilates or spin class. Instead, Darcy looks like a boxer. A fighter. Someone who earns their strength against an opponent, not on a yoga mat.

And then there's that confidence of hers. That hardened perseverance that implies her "opponent" might just be the entire damn world.

Or at least the country of Sweden.

Damn, but that's going to bug me until I find out what happened...

Rearranging my shorts back up around my waist, I look around for Darcy's but find nothing. They had been a thicker beachwear material and not meant for swimming. Which means, water-logged and heavy, they had probably sunk to the depths of the Mediterranean, ne'er to be retrieved.

I'm equally unsure where the top half of her swimsuit went.

Lifting myself from the little pool and sloshing waves of water everywhere, I relocate my carry-on bag and pull out the spare T-shirt I'd rolled up inside.

'Here.' I throw the shirt at Darcy, who catches it deftly and one-handed. Pinning the binocs between her knees, she pulls on the garment and then goes back to spying on the boat through the oculars. She adjusts the zoom dial. Then the focus.

The binoculars are complex and military-grade so she's probably messing up my lens settings. But all is forgiven when I see interesting patches appearing over the shirt where wet skin protrudes and clings...

‘You know the name of Felix’s boat?’ Darcy asks, knocking me out of my distractions.

‘Yeah.’ It had been in the background check I put together. ‘It’s *Principessa*—’

‘—*d’Oro*,’ Darcy finishes, reading the name off the hull of the vessel as it passes. She offers me the binoculars. ‘The Golden Princess? What a pretentious name. But it would appear, at least, that our host has finally arrived.’

I turn the perfectly conditioned binoculars towards *Nisi tou Chrysoú* where the *Principessa* is now docking alongside the pier.

A tall and lean gentleman in a white shirt and sunglasses is stepping out onto the wooden gangway. With his shot of blonde hair and two accompanying women draped all over him, he’s easy to identify.

Felix Caruso: head of the Caruso crime family; an active suspect in connection to forty-six outstanding murder and disappearance cases; multiple convictions for fraud and suspicions of drug smuggling, human trafficking, and providing aid to known terrorist groups in the Middle East; serial womanizer; a descendant of Italian nobility; and worth approximately eight-hundred and thirty-six million US dollars.

I suppose with that kind of clout behind you, you can call your boats anything you damn well please.

‘We should head back,’ I suggest, packing the binoculars away and scouting the terrain for an easy way back across the spine of the island and onto the jet skis.

Darcy glances at the sky, her hand shielding her eyes. Where had her shades gone?

A-ha! I find them on the ground nearby.

‘We’ve got hours before we have to meet him for dinner,’ Darcy points out. The look in her eye is fiery as all hell, whispering dark temptations of how we might spend that time... My body instantly responds. Tired and aching muscles be damned.

‘We do,’ I agree softly. ‘But there are some things I want to take care of before we meet with Caruso.’

‘Such as?’ Darcy sets her sunglasses on her head and begins picking her way towards me. Those strong, elegant arms of hers are held out to keep her balance, like a set of ivory wings.

‘Well, for starters, we need to make sure *you* have everything you need.’

That is the primary objective *numero uno*.

Darcy is frowning at me confused.

‘What?’

I shrug awkwardly and roll my eyes.

‘Dammit, I dunno what you need. Not my forte. But if you’re not on the pill, we need to see if they have a pharmacy or something. Get you that Plan B thing or whateve—’

I trail off because Darcy’s face has lost all color. All of it, just drained right out of there. Her eyes are a dull shade of misty lemonade.

For a minute, I think she’s going to be sick again.

‘Sorry...’ The word is automatic. I have no idea *what* I’m apologizing for. But, when a woman looks at you like that, you know you’ve done wrong somehow. ‘I don’t know about that shit. I just want to make sure that you’re—’

‘Yeah, I get it,’ she snaps, cutting me off. Two angry spots of pink have sprouted on her cheeks. ‘No need to explain.’

‘No, look... I just want to—’

‘I said I get it, Cyrus.’ She gives me her back and starts climbing along the same pathway I’ve been mapping out in my head. ‘Now, let’s get out of here. I’m freezing my shit off.’

Considering the balmy temperatures of the tropics, I can only assume Darcy’s sudden cold spell is more to do with the company than the climate.

Aaand that's the second time you've pissed her off in as many hours. Congrats.

Deliberately, I take a second to exhale three times. One is long. One is hard. The third is meditative.

Setting aside my frustrations, I make to follow Darcy up and over the rocks.

Someday, I vow to myself. I might actually understand this vexing female...



‘WHAT?’ Darcy asks, pausing in her ministrations to look at me through the mirror. Her reflection stares at mine as she finishes with the mascara wand and stuffs it back into its golden tube. She glances pointedly at her outfit.

‘Not appropriate?’

Shaking the tension from my shoulders, I try to erase the frown that’s etched a place for itself between my brows. Leaning against the wall, I adopt a casual stance with one ankle over the other.

‘You look fine,’ I reassure her.

Screw “fine”. Darcy looks like she’s just stepped out of the centerfold of a magazine. One that caters to bikers and leather enthusiasts.

As she bends closer to the mirror to inspect her makeup, I’m gifted with the display of that little butt of hers clad in the tightest pants I’ve ever seen. They cling to her as a second skin, looking like wet, black leather and flowing seamlessly into similar ebony boots. Accompanying the pants is a black, sleeveless shirt tied behind the neck and hanging at a deep V in the front. There is no back. And definitely no bra.

A fact that I’m going to be trying to ignore for the rest of the night.

Darcy’s hair is pinned back on one side and hangs sleek down the other. And, though she’s not wearing particularly

heavy makeup, she's done something with her palette of powders that evolves her citrine stare from simply intriguing to seductively feline.

I swallow down the knot in my throat.

'The Carusos are all high-fliers and fairly new money in the mafia game,' I tell her. 'These kinds of people all dress to the nines and then never compliment each other for fear of getting a designer wrong or looking ignorant so you don't have to worry. With enough confidence you could have probably worn anything in your suitcase.'

'Ah, but what kind of dutiful girlfriend shows up at her boyfriend's social work function in booty shorts and a Metallica t-shirt?' she reasons.

I groan.

'Metallica too?' I wince.

Darcy zips up her makeup bag with a decisive flick of her wrist and tilts her head at me. A silver cuff on her exposed ear catches the light.

'Are you deliberately trying to pick a fight?' she asks, turning to accuse *me* instead of my reflection. 'Or do you actually have *this* poor a taste in music?'

'I don't like music. Now, come on, or they're going to send someone to fetch us.' And given the number of illegal hacks my computer is currently running from our little hotel room, that would be bad. Barring a Caruso minion at the door would look more than a little suspicious.

'Wait,' Darcy laughs, marching after me into the bedroom. 'Wait, you don't like *any* music?'

'Not particularly.'

I check my weapons and their magazines before stashing them under my dinner jacket. Used to jeans, I shift my weight a little to ensure the pistol stays firmly in the waistband of my slacks.

'What do you listen to when you're cleaning the house?' she asks, a hand on her hip. She watches me lock a firearm

into its holster under my left arm and her eyes flash with interest. ‘Can I have one of those?’

‘I have a cleaner. And *no*.’

‘I know how to use a gun, you know.’

I give her a deliberate assessment, sliding my gaze along her bare neck, down through her cleavage, around the slender lines of her hips and all the way south to those sexy little boots.

‘Where,’ I ask pointedly, ‘would you keep it?’

She wriggles her eyebrows at me.

‘I’m surprisingly flexible. I could get creative.’

My lungs suddenly feel barren of air. Yet another thing I’ll be attempting to smother in the back of my mind tonight.

‘No gun,’ I insist, as Darcy glances at the bedside clock and begins shooing me from the room.

As we leave and I double-check the auto-lock, I look Darcy in the eye and try, for the dozenth time, to encourage her back behind closed doors.

‘You sure you want to come to this thing? You’d be safer in the room.’

‘Cyrus,’ she says, bringing her tone lowered to a whisper now that we’re in a public place. ‘What exactly do you think will happen? A shoot-out across the table? Come on...’

‘They’re probably going to have questions,’ I point out.

‘And I’ll answer them with a winning smile, I promise.’ She holds a hand up with girl scout piety. ‘And, if I get really stuck, I can always lean too far forward for the salt or something.’

Knowing the exact, stunning image of her breasts would form with that move, I agree that it’s a solid plan for distraction... but it also has my stomach clenching like I’ve just swallowed toxic sludge.

I wrap a boyfriend-like arm around Darcy's shoulders and turn her towards the elevators.

'Besides,' she points out, leaning naturally into my side and fitting her pace to mine. 'This may be my best chance of witnessing a confession reprehensible enough to count as leverage.'

Ah, yes. The reason for her presence here in the first place.

Somehow, I'd sort of forgotten that Darcy had her own motivations for being on the island; that she isn't actually my partner. In romance or in crime.

The reminder of which makes my muscles lax and my dick sad.

The elevator doors ping and we ride to the ground floor before stepping out and looking for direction.

'What was the name of the—?'

'The Lexington Suite.' I spot a sign directing us down the eastern hallway.

Darcy snorts softly to herself.

'What?'

I'm momentarily distracted when she starts playing with the belt loop of my pants. The touch seems absent-minded. I'm not even sure Darcy realizes she's doing it.

'The Lexington?' she repeats. 'As in, Al Capone's place?'

'Yeah.' I can feel my lip curling in levity. 'Felix isn't big on subtlety.'

'Feels like he's waving at officials,' she wonders bemused. 'Just offering up a confession and then throwing them the bird because he knows there's no evidence to make it stick.'

'That's exactly what he's doing. Men like Felix like to parade around what they can achieve. Especially when it's illegal.'

We're just a few feet from the Lexington Suite—I can see the same curlicue plaque as our room on a door directly ahead

—when Darcy pulls us to a stop. Her hand finds my chest and she stares up at me with interest.

‘Not you, though...?’ she says.

‘Not me, what?’ I blink.

‘You don’t parade.’

I have the sudden urge to crack my neck. Darcy’s stare is clear and unyielding. Like it could shoot straight through me. And it’s making me tense.

I settle for a brittle half-shrug.

‘What’s the point?’ I ask.

‘You don’t feel the need for validation from others?’

I feel my facial features shutting down. Turning cold.

Just say “no” and move on. You don’t have to answer that. Just stay quiet you asshole.

‘I learned a long time ago not to demand anything from others.’

Kudos. Nailed it.

Fuck it, we’re here now...

‘Validation, support, affection... if it comes from other people it’s a lie at worst and temporary at best. It doesn’t sustain you. So, what’s the point?’

‘Loving thyself is better, huh?’ Darcy suggests with a soft smile of approval.

My little confession feels dirty on my tongue, so I grab the easiest “out” of the conversation. I turn my grin wicked.

‘It always used to be,’ I growl softly, before leaning down and pressing an open kiss to the hollow behind Darcy’s ear. She purrs at the attention, the sound reverberating through my skin and shooting straight for my pants. ‘But you can reach places I find hard by myself.’

She slaps my arm.

‘You know that’s not what I—’

I cut her off with a swift kiss to the lips but, as a silencing technique, it backfires. Her hazy moan slips into my mouth and passes over my tongue. I swallow it down, hand coming to the back of her neck, mouth seeking more.

Darcy kisses me back, her hand running over my hair and setting off sparks of sensation down my spine. The leather of her pants is cool and buttery soft as I make a grab for her hip, intent on backing her against the wall, to get inside her mouth, her clothes, between her legs—

A pointed clearing of the throat has us both freezing and then darting apart, like necking teenagers.

Lana Caruso stands less than a foot away from us, a sparkle in her eye and a reproaching hand on her hip. The smile on her lips is painted a deep crimson.

‘Now now...’ She speaks with the prim tone of a Catholic schoolmistress. ‘I’d hate to have to ban my cousin’s honored guests from the hotel for indecent displays.’

‘Kissing’s a crime now?’ Darcy demands teasingly. I can’t squash the smug satisfaction I feel over how breathless she sounds.

So much for external validation being unnecessary.

‘Oh *please*,’ Lana jokes before fanning herself dramatically. Her nails are the same intense burgundy as her lips. ‘That wasn’t kissing, that was sex *avec* clothing.’

Darcy quickly checks that her shirt is still hanging in place and tucks her hair back behind her ear.

Lana’s smile warms with sincerity.

‘I was just on my way in,’ she says, gesturing to the Lexington. ‘You two ready?’

‘That depends,’ Darcy says, building yet more abutments under the bridge that is female bonding. ‘How scary is your cousin?’

Lana rolls her eyes. Taking her arm like they’re long-time friends, she steers Darcy towards the suite, leaving me to follow in their wake.

‘Honestly?’ She leans close, a stage-whisper in Darcy’s ear. ‘My cousin’s a court jester sitting on a throne. You treat him like the king he thinks he is... and you’ll be fine.’

I frown.

Lana’s pitch is wisecracking and her smile blithe. But there’s something... Something in her word choice or maybe her eyes... Something that makes me wonder if her comedy is all just familial ribbing at the expense of her loved ones or if there’s a grain of real hostility beneath it all...?

‘Welcome to the Lexington...’ Lana says, falling naturally into her role as the hotel manager and opening the suite door with a flourish.

Inside, my years of experience have me assess the room in two sweeps. First, to quantify the basic parameters. Second, for the details.

A cursory glance sets the scene of an expansive dining room, complete with a large and ultra-heavy table set with high-backed seating for twelve. Four of the chairs are occupied: three men and one woman. Each is as lavishly dressed and displayed as the suite itself which could have been a set from the damn Godfather movies. Deep reds and golds are the predominant color theme, with all wood grains stained to the darkest mahogany. In contrast, the sconces on the walls are hyper-modern. Little squares of glass behind which flicker light effects reminiscent of candles. An ivory glow is cast over the cream ceramics arranged at each place setting and the glass tumblers and wine glasses glint and sparkle.

There are no windows.

Old-fashioned wooden paneling runs the length of each wall and the carpet beneath my soles is dense and deep. Both are excellent sound suppressors. I spy a small, white cube hidden in the shadow of one of the sconces, warning me that signals are just as choked out here. Had I been foolish enough to wear a wire or piece, the thing would have shorted out in my ear the second I stepped inside.

Whatever was, is, or might ever be discussed in the Lexington Suite... stays in the Lexington Suite. There is no eavesdropping to be had on this place.

Classy, expensive, and surprisingly effective.

It should be the Caruso family motto.

The people already at the table look up when we enter. It's clear from their body language that two of the men had been in quiet consultation with one another on the right-hand side of the table. The man sitting at its head had been playing with his companion's hair. Her long, strawberry-blonde curls are still tumbling from between his fingers.

'Finally...' Felix Caruso sighs with drama, eyes quickly locating Lana to my left. 'I was beginning to think we'd have to send out a search party.'

Rising from his patriarchal post at the head of the table, Felix comes to greet us in person. Nearly a foot shorter than her cousin, Lana has to look up at his approach, all simpering smiles and worshipful eyes...

As he nears, Felix extends me a formal hand but his gaze is decidedly *informal* as he leers over the front of Darcy's halter top. I try to keep my annoyance out of my grip as I make his acquaintance.

'Worried our guest had run away, Felix?' Lana teases.

'Of course not,' Felix laughs the idea aside before focusing on me. His grip is hard and unyielding. The flashing light of threat in his eyes turns their emerald green to a sickly tone of nausea.

His lips curl around his threatening introduction:

'No one,' he vows, 'ever runs from *me*...'

Felix Caruso's words are out of place with the sweetly sweet smile on his face. A false welcome from a paranoid king, the smile has his teeth bared like fangs and has turned his gaze sharp as a viper.

For the first time, the reality of our situation begins to hit me.

Alone, I'm used to men like this. The threats, the bravado. The games of power and insult, taunt and negotiation...

But with Darcy...?

I can already feel her tensing under Felix's vulgar inspection.

Fuck. Too late, I realize that I've brought a firecracker to a shooting range.

No going back now...

'Cyrus Alesi,' Felix goes on to greet me personally, still playing the power game with his fingers wrapped hard around the back of my hand. 'How long have we both been in this industry? To take this long to meet in person is a sacrilege, surely?'

As I shake his hand, I'm unsurprised to find his palm smooth and supple.

Felix Caruso did not take the mantle of head of the family through violence. He did it with cunning. An accountant by trade and originally chief launderer for the Caruso's criminal

activities, Felix was also an accomplished thief in his youth. Despite being rich from birth, the man is very accomplished at wriggling his fingers into things he shouldn't and is infamous for desiring what is not his.

Including the head honcho's seat.

Like the Machellis, the Carusos suffered a shift in leadership in the last few years. However, unlike Giovanni Carlos Machelli, who had been succeeded (after a fashion) by his son, the late Marcus Caruso had no children and no heir apparent. Only a half-dozen nephews squabbling for the crown.

Felix was widely recognized as the number two choice, whilst his cousin Rafail was the known favorite of their uncle.

Until evidence had come to light that Rafail had been embezzling from his own family. Officials picked him up red-handed on his next enforcement run. Convicted of attempted murder by the Italian authorities, Rafail Caruso is currently serving twenty-five to life in a high-security unit down near Salerno.

And Felix is dining in his newly acquired hotel with a supermodel on his arm and a private yacht in the harbor.

I don't believe in coincidence.

Putting the man's resume and background search out of my head, I shake Felix's hand firmly, highly aware that he's nowhere near as soft as his moisturized digits.

A gun is not the only way to end a life. And Felix is well-versed in invisible execution.

'Come,' the man insists, clamping his other hand just above my elbow in a brotherly gesture before sweeping it grandly to include the others still seated at the table. 'I shall introduce you... Rocco, stop drinking yourself into an early grave for a second.'

The man seated furthest from Felix's chair at the head of the table sets aside his glass of merlot and leans back to level us with a critical eye. He hooks an elbow over the rungs at his back, his casual posture at odds with his hawkish stare. Like

with Hector yesterday, the languid ease with which “Rocco” moves his body is a smokescreen. Heavy muscles under his jacket and old scar breaks along his knuckles tell me he’s a boxer. The heavy family ring on the middle finger of his right hand suggests he’s either a leftie and merciful. Or right-dominant and mean. The icy expression on his face says it’s the latter.

That chill warms exponentially when his gaze lands on Darcy.

‘Rocco Benedicti-Carusio. My chief of security,’ Felix explains. ‘And a trusted second cousin.’

Chief of Security. A common enough term amongst crime syndicates. And deliberately misleading. Rocco didn’t preside over Felix’s personal protection. The security he provided was for something far more important: money. Or, at least, the recovery of it. All of my intelligence thus far on the Carusos said that they ran their set-up to a similar hierarchy and schedule as the Machellis. Which means that, as Chief of Security, Rocco is head of the enforcers. Leader of the bruisers sent after those who are behind in their payments or trading partners who slack on their end of an agreement.

Felix turns to stand more at my side, a hand on my shoulder, and gestures to the man sitting next to Rocco.

‘Beside my cousin is Mr. Vincent Omar, a long-time friend and business associate of the family.’

Rocco is stout-jawed and thickly muscled. There is no doubt in my mind that, when he walks into a room, everyone pays attention and gets out of his way. But the other man, Vincent Omar, is different. Instead of dominant threat, Omar’s aura is one of wicked cunning. Of malcontent. From his surname, his olive skin, and his pitch-black hair, I surmise that his family is probably from the Arabian peninsula or northern Africa—Egyptian, perhaps? He wears his hair over long and curling at his ears and sports a goatee that transforms his mouth from classically handsome to almost cruel.

He pins me with a gaze of stony, gun-metal grey and I instantly know: *this* is the real threat in the room.

Forget Rocco's muscle. Forget Felix's money. Vincent Omar is the one I need to keep tabs on.

The foreigner gives a nod of recognition at our introduction and I return the favor. Darcy hovers quietly at my side, just taking in the men and the way that they—Rocco in particular—are looking her over.

'Lana, of course, you've already met,' Felix continues. 'Another cousin of the family and my phenomenally resourceful assistant.' Felix reaches to stroke the back of his finger down the side of Lana's face. She smiles back at him and my stomach churns. He touches her like he might a prize horse. 'Handles this entire place herself,' Felix praises condescendingly, 'Not to mention some other more... delicate matters in the business.'

I glance at Lana's impressively short dress and equally extreme heels. All that luscious blonde hair and voluptuous beauty make sense. She has to be one hell of a honey trap for drawing in new associates or clients.

No wonder the Carusos have been scoring near-impossible trade negotiations all over the Mediterranean of late.

Felix now reverses the introductions, having succinctly forgotten the blonde seated beside his throne. Darcy gets the same blind treatment.

'Gentleman,' he says, waving a hand toward the center of my chest. At five-ten, Felix couldn't reach much higher without drawing too much attention to the differences in our height. 'This is Mr. Alesi. You may know him better as Cyrus or his more colorful moniker "The Ghost". As you already know, Mr. Alesi is here to... shall we say, *interview* for a spot on our books as the family's latest freelancer.'

Freelancer. Another encoded position. Generally meaning hitman.

'An *independent* freelancer,' I nudge stoically.

If I'm here to play a part, I must play it right. And the real me would bristle if ever my autonomy were overlooked.

Felix's eyes spark with frustration. I soften my correction with a quizzical eyebrow raise and Felix must swallow his annoyance over being corrected in front of his men or appear the childish tyrant.

'As agreed,' he confirms with a curt nod. Gesturing for me to take a seat beside his blonde friend, Felix reclaims the power in the conversation quickly. 'Though, before we can confirm any long-term arrangement between us, there are a few requirements I would like to discuss with you, Mr. Alesi.'

Mr. Alesi. Mr. Caruso. This excessive politeness and formality is giving me the itch. But I let it stand. I remind myself that it would be worse to have this asshole addressing me more personally.

'Name them,' I tell him, taking the seat I've been told to and turning out the chair beside me for Darcy.

Felix waves away my eagerness as she sits down.

'Later, later... Let us dine first. Lana?'

With a bright smile and an acquiescing nod, Lana ducks out of the room for a moment to—I assume—alert the kitchens.

A second later, two young women in uniform arrive to fill wine glasses and offer fruit juice. Darcy and I both accept the latter in lieu of wine. As does, I notice, Vincent Omar. By the time Lana returns and takes her seat beside Rocco, the conversation has shifted to casual banter. Felix and Rocco quickly become engaged in gossip over another family member. Vincent watches the exchange and gives only minimal responses from behind his drink. I notice that, every time Omar speaks, it draws the focus of the other two like a magnet.

Smiling brightly, Darcy leans around me to introduce herself to Felix's woman.

'Hello? I'm not sure I caught your name...?'

She hadn't caught it because Felix hadn't given it. Just as he hadn't offered up Darcy's to the others in the room. A small

but loud remark on how Felix viewed women. Perhaps Lana is the exception that proves his misogynistic rule.

‘Oh, sweetheart,’ Felix says, breaking his conversation to shake his head over Darcy’s efforts at politeness. ‘Inga doesn’t speak Italian. Only German.’

Darcy glances at me and I repeat her overture to the woman in German. She still looks at us with that same glazed smile on her face.

Huh.

Either Inga is recovering from a recent full-lobotomy or she is distinctly *not* German.

Like a homing bird, Lana senses social unease and swoops in to provide a solution. She draws Darcy into an exchange of compliments, swooning over her attire.

‘I could never pull off something so slinky,’ Lana bemoans with an eye of envy, despite her stunning hourglass figure.

Darcy demurrers the praise, apparently lusting for the volume of Lana’s hair.

What is it with women? I think. Forever unsatisfied with themselves, even when every man in their vicinity would voluntarily lose a limb to see them naked.

A fact that Rocco is eager to prove the moment the food arrives.

Served in the Grecian tradition, with all courses set on the table at once, meal options are vast and numerous. When Darcy peers into the nearest dish to ascertain what’s inside, Felix’s second cousin snatches his chance.

‘*Imam bayildi*,’ he says to answer the speculative look on her face. ‘I had it on my first night here. Fucking delicious if you like eggplant.’

The childish glee he takes from the mere mention of the phallic vegetable is more lewd than funny. But Darcy smiles anyway. It annoys me that I can’t read whether or not the expression is genuine.

‘I *do* like eggplant,’ she offers, ignoring the double entendre.

‘Are you vegetarian?’

‘No. Meat lover all the way.’

‘Then you should try the *stifado* too,’ Rocco says, pointing a golden, twinkling fork at the dish to his right. ‘Greek stew with lamb.’

‘Sounds as delicious as it smells.’

Rocco is shaking his head.

‘It’s good here but, if you *really* want to taste Greece, you should go down to the public market tomorrow. They bring out all the fresh baked goods, the big vats of soup and stew... I can take you down there and show you around if you’d like?’

I’m immediately irritated.

On multiple levels.

Not only is Rocco Caruso obviously hitting on the woman I’ve brought to the island under the guise of my girlfriend. But he’s doing it *on purpose*. During their discussion, Rocco’s gaze is fixed, for the most part, on Darcy. But, between one overture and the next, it repeatedly flickers to *my* face. Watching for a reaction.

Like Hector Ramirez, Rocco is testing me. Am I who I say I am? Is Darcy who I claim her to be? Can I be trusted? Just how many buttons do I have and which can be pushed to make me dance like a marionette?

I lean back in my seat and throw a casual arm over the back of Darcy’s chair. I suspect my expression is like thunder but do nothing to correct it.

‘We’ll be leaving first thing in the morning...’ I take way more pleasure than I should in shutting Rocco down. ‘So your offer, though altruistically meant I’m sure, is immaterial.’

Rocco glances at Felix with eyebrows raised. He seems surprised by this news. Sensing danger, my hackles rise and I can feel adrenaline starting to fire up my nerve endings.

Having been feeding dried peaches to Not-German Inga, Felix's attention is diverted by my comment and Rocco's summoning eyes.

‘Actually, Cyrus—I can call you Cyrus, yes?’

‘No.’

The room falls silent. Almost instantly. I didn't scream the word. I just spoke it. Without malice but without compromise.

And you could now cut the tension with one of those fancy-dancy butter knives on the table.

For a second, I wonder if I've pushed the stubborn contractor negotiations a little too far. My muscles tense. The balls of my feet find purchase on the carpet. I'm ready to lunge for Darcy and drag her from the room if necessary.

Rocco is frozen save for his hand, inching slowly beneath the lapel of his coat. Probably for the butt of a weapon.

Lana's eyes are suddenly crackling with energy, darting between Felix and me.

Darcy's hand reaches for my thigh under the table.

Even Inga can tell something is wrong, blinking fearfully and vapidly around the room.

Only Vincent seems calm. He chooses now to take a thin cigarillo from his pocket and light up.

Though assessing each of the other diners in turn, the majority of my attention remains fixed on Felix. One of his eyes has narrowed like he's solving advanced calculus in his head.

Deducting attitude from skill and evaluating my overall worth.

Altogether, the pause in conversation only lasts a second and then shatters the instant Felix decides to take my “no” in stride. His yelping bark of amusement is like a pin in a balloon, the pressure in the suite abruptly dropping from a blaze to a simmer.

‘Very well, very well,’ he agrees. ‘I shall look forward to the day in our acquaintance when we’re on a first-name basis. I see I am too eager as yet. Not a problem, not a problem... But, to the point at hand...’ Felix gets back on target as he dishes up more braised potatoes and inspects a plate of pitas stuffed with salad leaves, spring onion, and lemon-grilled chicken. ‘I believe I require you to remain here a little longer than was originally proposed, Mr. Alesi.’

‘Excuse me?’ My tone crackles with hostility and sends the pressure gauge inching back up. Darcy’s fingers squeeze my leg beneath the table.

‘I mentioned that I would have requirements before we sign this contract, no? Two, in fact,’ Felix remarks, the satisfied smile of an autocrat painted across his puss.

I narrow my eyes at him.

What are you up to, asshole?

‘And I said “name them”,’ I remind him, tired of all this play-acting.

This time, instead of dodging the suggestion, Felix reloads his dish with the finer offerings on the table and then braces his elbows on either side of his plate. He steeples his fingers together, watching me over their apex.

I’m reminded of the dominant males in the animal kingdom. Taking vast amounts of food for themselves, not because they’re hungry, but to keep resources from others. To prove that they *can*. Felix continues to only pick from his plate as he explains his so-called “requirements”...

‘My first concern, Mr. Alesi, is your potential for loyalty versus your relationship with your last employer.’

I tense and answer on rote:

‘I don’t discuss my clients.’

‘You will with me.’ Felix’s eyes have turned to angry stone. No longer simmering with playful hostility but openly threatening.

‘We are all very aware that the Machelli family was your last, long-term arrangement. And, as I’m sure you know, the Carusos and Machellis do not get along. In more than one sphere of business.’

Settling back into my seat, I fold my arms across my chest and settle in for familiar negotiations.

‘I’ve never killed a member of the Caruso family if that’s what you’re concerned about.’

It’s more or less true.

‘Always good to know,’ Felix says with a dismissive nod. ‘But not the issue at hand. I’m sure you can understand, Mr. Alesi, that—were I to take on your services—I would require a gesture of goodwill. To prove your loyalty to us over old filial connections.’

Ah. So, that’s what he’s getting at.

‘That’s not a problem,’ I agree with a simple nod.

Felix isn’t the first would-be king to want something for nothing. On several occasions, I’ve had to offer up a free kill or a surveillance mission free-of-charge, before a longer agreement can be reached. The complementary mission implicates me in one of their crimes and creates leverage on both sides.

Trust. Built through necessity.

Mutual destruction, as Darcy so eloquently put it.

Funny how so many of my working relationships rely on those same high stakes.

Just your working relationships?

Where is your lover right now, Alesi? Is she safe? Or are we bartering her safety for a little more time between her legs?

‘Good.’ Felix nods, running his thumb thoughtfully over his lower lip. ‘Then I shall consider my options for such a request...’

Trying not to let my impatience bubble up and across my expression, I press him further:

‘Your second requirement...?’

‘Is a matter you already identified,’ Felix nods. ‘Your reputation precedes you, “Ghost”. And, despite your assurances, many in my organization have had dealings with you before. From the opposing side, of course.’

‘As is usual in our line of work.’ I lean forward now, arms bracing on the table. Felix knows the way of things. Why is he bullshitting through this reasoning? What’s his end goal? ‘I’m surprised your men take things so personally, Mr. Caruso. Perhaps some harder stock are required—?’

‘Hey!’ Rocco explodes out of his seat, fists throwing down onto the table. ‘What did you—?’

‘Sit down, Rocco.’ Felix orders.

Rocco throws a hand out at me.

‘But he—’

‘Shut up!’

The room is eerily silent as Rocco lowers himself back into his chair. Lana has watched the little episode with a mask of boredom on her face. As if being surrounded by short fuses soaked in testosterone has long since lost its appeal. But there’s also a quiet twinkle in her eye. One that she lays my way and then at Darcy. A hint of approval that we’re messing with the status quo...

At Rocco’s outburst, I turn knowing eyes on Felix: *I rest my case*, I tell him silently. A shadow of a grimace passes over his features. He exhales.

‘As you can see, Mr. Alesi, my men have minds of their own,’ Felix concedes. Like a true master, however, he loses the battle to redirect the war in his favor: ‘Which is why I think it safer for all parties that we assess their overall tone at my annual festivities this Friday. *This* is my second condition.’

Friday. Two days away.

And we'd been planning to fly home tomorrow.

My stomach clenches and I search for an out.

'I thought we agreed that only a select few'—I glance around the table—'would know who I am and why I am here? I do not like my face being known to too many.'

Especially given that my identity is already being whispered around Felix's underlings. Hector Ramirez, for example.

'And it shall stay that way.' Felix vows an already-broken promise. 'I'll be announcing my consideration for taking on "The Ghost" as our latest wet worker but no one need know your face goes with the name.'

'Then my presence isn't needed at this party of yours,' I point out.

'Not at all,' Felix grins, neatly side-stepping my objection. 'But you *will* need to be here to sign contracts. Which I am not willing to do until *after* I have read the room at my event.'

I frown. My displeasure has Rocco grinning smugly. Vincent Omar continues to watch the debate back and forth, thin swirls of smoke passing over his features. His cigarillo is tainting the air with the scent of dark cinnamon.

I notice Darcy rubbing at her nose and exhaling heavily through her mouth.

Entrapping her—entrapping us *both*—on Felix Caruso's private island for another forty-eight hours is not a prospect that appeals.

'Contracts can be mailed.' I argue.

'Not by me.' Felix's conviction is hard as granite. 'I do my business in person, Mr. Alesi. I find it harder for men to stab me in the back if I'm staring them down face-to-face.'

'You have that issue a lot?' I quip, stalling for time.

'We all do.' Felix's gaze flashes dangerously. 'Would you truly be fulfilling your professional obligations if you didn't have a line of men waiting to take you out?'

I work my back molars. He has me there.

‘Now, it seems foolish, does it not, to fly home and back again only a few days later?’ Felix takes up his wine glass, returning to his jovial mask of hospitality. ‘I insist you stay and continue to enjoy the island.’

I’m tempted to say no. Or to at least blurt a string of expletives and suggestions for what he could do with his contracts... all of which would *amount* to a “no”.

The idea of taking Darcy back to Rome as soon as possible and returning alone is hugely tempting. The longer we’re here, after all, the worse I’m on edge and anxious over her safety.

But if I *don’t* take her back to Rome... I get to keep her. I delay her moving on for just a few more days.

God, I’m pathetic. Like an addict who knows he’s going to be dragged to rehab. Who’s hankering for a final fix whilst he can. No matter the danger and damage it risks to those around him.

Darcy nudges me in the side, her eyes wide and eyebrows stretched high in appeal.

I read her loud and clear but so does Felix.

‘Are you not enjoying your time at *Caruso Chrysoú*, Miss Calabrese?’ he asks. One of his fingertips is tapping against the side of his wine glass. The tick betrays his easy-going charm for the fake veneer it is. It hints at the dangerous offense lurking beneath.

The way he’s watching Darcy has my skin crawling.

In that moment, I want to rush Darcy from the room. I want to get her as far away from Felix Caruso’s radar as possible.

What the hell had we been thinking bringing her here?

One wrong word and Darcy could—

‘Not at all, Mr. Caruso,’ Darcy placates. As if she’s been acting all her life, she adopts a casual, smiling persona; a holiday goer currently seated in the lap of luxury. Tearing a

piece from the corner of her honey bread, she uses it to gesture at the table before popping it between her lips. ‘Your hotel and its services are flawless. And your island is beautiful.’ *Your* hotel. *Your* island. Clearly, Darcy knows how to schmooze egotistical maniacs. ‘We rented some jet skis this morning so that we could see it properly from the water. The experience was...’ Darcy catches my eye and, despite it being the absolute worse time for distractions, my body lights up in eager response.

‘... unforgettable,’ she finishes, with a bite to her plump lower lip.

Jesus Christ.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ Felix says, leaning back comfortably in his seat. ‘Yet, you appeared startled at the suggestion of staying longer?’

My heart is beating in my ears but Darcy is quick to charm and reassure.

‘Only because of my job, Mr. Caruso,’ she smiles. ‘I only requested a few days of leave to come here and staying longer may cause an issue with my employer.’

‘What is it that you do?’ he asks.

For a second, I’m surprised that Fiori’s report on us didn’t include Darcy’s occupation. But perhaps he thought it so beneath notice that it never made it to the page.

‘I work in a hotel,’ Darcy answers.

‘Ah, like our Ms. Lana?’ Felix smiles across the table at Lana, like she’s a favorite thoroughbred of his. My creeps escalate when Lana smiles back so naturally.

‘Oh, nothing as impressive as that,’ Darcy corrects. She lifts her chin. ‘I work as a bartender.’

This little confession makes far more of a mark on the present company than it should. Lana seems surprised, her head tilting and long blonde locks tumbling over one shoulder. Vincent Omar’s eyes narrow upon Darcy in consideration.

Rocco is grinning. Like he's just discovered that the toy he wants to purchase is on a discount.

Felix gives Darcy a comprehensive glance from her head to her toes.

'Ah,' he says with a nod. '*That* explains it, then.'

'Excuse me?' Darcy's hard attitude crackles beneath her words.

Fear shoots down my spine and this time it's me reaching for her leg. I grasp down on her thigh in a silent order, begging her to keep her cool.

'You should take better care of your woman, Alesi,' Felix suggests with his off-the-cuff prejudice. He looks pointedly at Darcy's inexpensive clothing. 'I have never met a woman who did not enjoy a shiny bauble or designer label from time to time. True ladies enjoy the finer things in life and their men should provide, am I right, Miss Calabrese?' Felix doesn't wait long enough for Darcy to respond. He just continues to blather. 'Not to mention,' he says with a darker, sinful turn in his voice. 'I find them rather... *agreeable* in other areas after being spoiled a little.'

S *mug, sexist pig.*

It's an effort of will not to openly gag; to just stick out my tongue and mimic choking on the garbage Felix Caruso is spewing. He speaks about women as if they are mindless toys, drawn to sparkling trinkets and shallow materialism.

Meanwhile, he's the one looking me up and down with derision for my lack of designer labels.

Smug, sexist, hypocritical pig.

Next to me, Cyrus is a fucking marvel. Above the equator of the table top, he appears entirely calm, his upper body open and unaffected. One arm is laid gently beside his plate and his forearm flexes with every tap his fingertips administer to the table cloth. The hand on my leg, to those opposite, would look only like a man too in love to wholly let go of his woman.

All unruffled elegance and dominant charisma.

Beneath the table, however, his grip is a vice on my thigh.

Don't rise to the bait. I can practically *hear* Cyrus's voice in my head. Like his thoughts are running through his bloodstream, out along his fingerprints, and transfusing into my skin. *Don't bite back.*

Not pissing off the man in charge of all the other big men with guns seems like the smart call.

Even if it does nearly kill me to let the asshole get away with his blatant misogyny.

I inhale softly and set my head on an innocent tilt.

‘In which case,’ I tell him, speaking slowly and deliberately. I furrow my brows in sympathy. ‘I can only apologize, Mr. Caruso.’

The table falls quiet again.

Felix’s frown darkens. He glances at poor Inga, as if she holds the translating dictionary for “women-speak”. Then, after receiving only a dull stare, turns back to me.

‘Apologize?’ he parrots.

I smile sadly.

‘You must have had a poor selection of my kind if trinkets have been your only means of tempting them to bed.’ I lick my lips. ‘I can assure you that the right woman does not need to be paid with flamboyant gifts. She only needs to see a man’s worth... to gladly fuck him into oblivion.’

There’s a long moment of stunned silence until...

Felix’s cousin erupts in a hooting laugh. He pins his tongue between his teeth and his eyes are vibrant as he stares at me with all the eagerness of a child mid sugar rush. Hungry and chaotic.

Better at reading my masked insults, Lana hides a dirty smile behind a demure hand, her manicure pressed to her lips.

Felix Caruso himself, thank God, is grinning from ear to ear.

The last of the tension has dissipated, and the table is jovial once more.

‘I like her,’ Felix declares, before running his tongue over his teeth. The gesture is incredibly reptilian. He, like Rocco, has a hungry entitlement in his gaze. ‘I’m only sorry you found her first, Alesi.’

*Sure, as if I wouldn’t have had a say in the matter?
Arrogant bastard...*

Pleased with my performance, I turn to grin at Cyrus but come up short. He's watching me with an unreadable expression. Something... questioning. Something soft.

A moment of vulnerability in his stare has me swallowing my tongue before it's replaced by a snide and prideful grin. Cyrus returns his arm to the back of my chair to stake his claim and falls back into the role of possessive mobster.

Comments are bandied back and forth, the conversation falling into the realm of crude, even as Lana and I are ignored.

But I watch with intense interest. I listen to the differences in the men.

Rocco and Felix are quick to speak of women as playthings. Possessions with no thought or feeling. Amusements if they are fiery and challenges if they are stubborn.

Cyrus goes with the flow of the conversation, his teasing comments appropriately macho. But never once are they discrediting. Never does he fall into the territory of degradation.

Again, I'm reminded that Cyrus is a part of this world but not truly one of these men. He marches to his own ethical code. Plays to his own morals.

Curiously, the dark gentleman with the goatee talks in a similar way.

'I'll agree to attend,' Cyrus finally declares when the ribbing and teasing remarks die down. 'I'll attend your party on one condition, Mr. Caruso.'

Felix lifts an eyebrow in curiosity.

'Your current assassin. The one taking care of your wet work at the moment. I want them there.'

Felix runs his tongue behind his lower lip, expanding it in an ugly undercut pout. He tilts his head questioningly.

'What makes you think we already have a hitman on the books?'

‘Fiori let something slip to that effect.’

‘Did he, now?’

Felix’s eyes flash and I can already imagine the kind of pain this Fiori is about to be in. Then again, if “Fiori” is the smarmy arse in the blue suit from the hotel, I can summon little to no sympathy.

‘If this is truly about you assessing the mood of your people over my employ,’ Cyrus persists, ‘then you should have him there. *He’s* the one who’s going to be most affected, after all.’

Cyrus is careful to face Felix whilst speaking. But, from my vantage point beside him, I can see that he’s more attentive to Vincent Omar, catching every lift of the man’s cigarillo from the corner of his eye.

‘Our current agent is already aware that we’re recruiting,’ Felix says, trying to avoid giving even an inch of ground in the conversation. ‘You’ll have no concerns there.’

‘Unfortunately, I’d like to be certain of that in person,’ Cyrus fights back, wrapping Felix up in his own conditions. ‘Face-to-face, as you say. I’m sure you can understand that, Mr. Caruso.’

‘If your freelancer is who I’m suspecting,’ Cyrus continues. ‘There should be no concerns of locked horns, I assure you. I simply wish to be sure of it.’

Who “he’s suspecting”? I blink at Cyrus, surprised that he’s tipping his hand.

Felix is frowning. The goateed Vincent has gone *very* still.

‘You think you know the identity of our current contractor?’ Felix asks with glacial care.

‘I have a few monikers in mind that I’ve attached to my theories,’ Cyrus admits. ‘Based on geography, periods of inactivity...’ He waves a hand to imply *etc. etc.*

‘And you’re entirely confident in those reports, are you?’ Felix challenges, glancing from Vincent to Lana and back again. He looks almost nervous. ‘Aren’t discretion and

invisibility invaluable to those working in your field? Perhaps your information is simply incomplete?’

‘Perhaps...’ Cyrus tilts his head with an air of mercy. ‘But unlikely.’

The tables have turned in the conversation and now Cyrus is the one in control.

‘Besides,’ he continues, ‘This is why you throw these get-togethers, isn’t it? For us all to remove some of the mystery with the buffer of numbers?’

‘And the catalyst of alcohol,’ murmurs Vincent Omar. His tone is hollow but an underlying hint of disapproval suggests he’s being equally forced to attend Caruso’s shindig.

Felix is pondering, rubbing the tips of his fingers together over and over. If he denies his condition and Cyrus refuses to attend the festivities, Omar feels primed to follow suit. But if he agrees to have the assassin Cyrus is hunting attend the event, he caves to Cyrus’s demands in front of his associates.

‘Is our current freelancer likely to attend on Friday?’ he finally asks the manager of the hotel...

Lana looks at Cyrus, then at me, before turning her smile back upon her boss.

‘I believe they’ve confirmed attendance, yes.’

Felix nods and spreads his hands in the manner of a mediator finally resolving a dispute.

‘I trust all parties are satisfied now?’ he crows.

He has reason to be smug, given the middle ground he’s attained. If the assassin has already confirmed their attendance, Felix has made no leniencies and given no ground.

In any normal circumstance, I might have rolled my eyes or muttered something about the petulant man-child and his sensitivities.

But in a room where there are more concealed guns than there are palms to carry them... a single joke about the male ego could be met with a bullet between the eyes.

Thankfully, the tail end of the meal passes without further incident. Felix has secured Cyrus's presence on the island until the end of the week. And Cyrus would now be guaranteed to meet the assassin he's hunting. Secrets have been kept and power retained on all sides.

Feeling as if we've spent the last hour navigating a labyrinth of bear traps, the tension finally leaves my shoulders when dinner is declared over and we stand to leave.

My relief is short-lived, however, when Lana and Rocco fall into a practiced step and take up sentry at the door, barring our path.

Cyrus reads the situation quickly.

'You're frisking us for weapons *now*?' he asks in confusion.

I feel my stomach drop into my feet. When we left our room, Cyrus had been kitted out like Stallone under that blazer.

'Not weapons,' Lana reassures with an apologetic smile.

'We wouldn't be foolish enough to try separating a master from his tools,' Felix adds.

Lana nods.

'We're only checking for bugs. Anything that could have recorded us.'

Oh, shit.

'Fine,' Cyrus lifts his arms, surrendering himself to a body search. 'I'm not foolish enough to try and spy on my future employer.'

Double shit.

Rocco is approaching me with far too eager an expression on his face. With hands already up at his chest, he looks like an over-eager teenager anticipating his first boob grab.

'I'm sure you've nothing to hide, *bella mia*...' he says, adopting a chivalrous little bow of contrition. 'But a job's a job...'

Steeling my nerves, I take a step towards Rocco before Cyrus's hand clamps down around my wrist. He tries to pull me back.

'If a search is necessary, Lana can see to her.' Cyrus appears totally unaffected by his own inspection conducted by the blonde bombshell now working her way down his legs and up his inseams.

Remembering Lana's loyal little smiles towards Felix, I highly doubt she'll take kindly to the little fob of plastic hidden in the ankle hem of my pants. Recalling Rocco's eagerness and how many glasses of wine he'd put away at dinner, I make a hard and fast decision.

'Baby, it's just a quick frisk,' I say, patting Cyrus's hand and disengaging his fingers from my wrist. Shifting each finger is like peeling back straps of steel. I adopt a teasing expression and a pout. 'You need to learn to *share*.'

Once free, I move in close to Felix's cousin, careful to set my hip at an angle so that it brushes up against his. I expose my neck and let my hair fall to one side in flirtatious encouragement.

'All yours, Mr. Benediti-Caruso...' I purr with a smile.

Color flooding his face, Rocco clicks his tongue like he might with a favorite pet.

'"Rocco", *por favor bella mia*...'

'*Rocco*...' I repeat with a soft nod and lifting of my arms.

Starting with following the seam of my halter top around the back of my neck, Rocco works his way down to my cleavage. At first, he brings his palms together, working the sides of his hands between my breasts and over my belly; just as police officers are trained. I'm careful to keep a soft smile on my face until he abandons protocol and presses the flat breadth of his palm against my skin.

I stifle the need to gut-punch him and just raise a teasing eyebrow.

As he works hands around my ribcage and starts to fumble down my sides, I let my arms naturally fall about his shoulders. When he bends at the knees to work over my hips and crouches to feel along my legs, I play with a few strands of this thick hair. From my lofty vantage point, I can see the corners of his mouth turning up in pleasure and he's quickly distracted on his journey south. Instead, his fingers reach higher up along my inner thigh.

I force a giggle and pin his hand between my legs.

'Just what are you expecting to find up there, Rocco?' I tease.

He leers at me from his knees.

'Just being thorough, *signorina*.'

I nudge him with my foot, my fingers still in his hair. Forgetting that he's only checked to halfway down my calves, Rocco follows my lead without resistance and rises to his feet. His hands fall to my hips.

I raise a reproachful eyebrow at him.

'You do your job any more thoroughly and we're going to have a scandal on our hands.' I jokingly glance over my shoulder at Cyrus and almost lose grip on my persona entirely.

Cyrus is watching us. His face is high in color, his jaw a hard and square slab of granite. His eyes are practically *demonic*.

Jesus...

One heated look from him and my belly is quivering with excitement. Meanwhile, the self-appointed casanova Rocco has elicited exactly zero arousal out of me, no matter how expansive his caressing.

'You never know when being meticulous could pay off...'
Rocco says to draw my attention back to him. The words are a clear invitation but I deflect with a demure fluttering of my lashes. I cock a hip against his hand and indicate my tight and limited outfit.

‘Did you really think I could hide anything else in here?’ I ask, deliberately adopting the past tense.

Rocco leans in close to whisper beneath the hum of chatter around us.

‘Mmm... I was almost hoping you had.’

Before I can reply, that broad hand of Cyrus’s anchors down on the back of my neck and spins me like a top. One second, I’m up in Rocco’s personal space and, the next, I have none of my own. I’m pulled snugly against a wide and heavy chest, long lines of familiar muscle are pressed up against my body, and a memorable, hard length pokes firmly against my hip.

With his hand still on my neck, massaging my nape and working through my hair, and his lips close against my temple, I feel Cyrus’s words as much as I hear them:

‘If we’ve satisfied your suspicions...’ he growls darkly. ‘We’d like to head back to our room now...’

Another shiver runs through my pelvic floor and I snuggle closer to Cyrus’s warmth.

‘By all means...’

I can hear the smirk in Felix Caruso’s voice but not even his gross chuckle can dampen my body’s reaction to this man. To how I want to crawl over him and slip beneath his skin... to become part of him in a way that only sex allows.

Kept pinned to his front, and then his side, I barely see anything of our departure. I’m guided by Cyrus’s hold and work to match my pace with his; to not trip over his feet. His sure steps carry us out of the Lexington Suite, across the hotel, and up through the elevator.

The entire way back to our room, Cyrus refuses to break our physical connection. One hand stays on my neck. The other works over my shoulder or my hip. It strokes the length of my bare arm or fiddles with my fingers.

He’s forced to release me only to open our door with the little plastic key card.

Rushing inside, I exhale long and hard. Back in the suite, I hadn't felt fearful. Even in the moments of panic. Adrenaline had smothered anxiety and, with each hiccup, each mini-eruption of danger, I had adjusted, adapted, and evolved.

It had been nearly six years since leaving the armed forces but, apparently, that automatic response of action before reaction still lingers.

Now, behind only a single wooden door, I can react. I feel safe enough to decompress and take a long, hard breath.

'Phew...' My gasp is half-broken by a nervous chuckle. 'Well, that wasn't the most restful meal I've ever been invited to—'

I'm cut off by another powerful grip on my body. This time, Cyrus takes me by the arm, turns me to face him, and then backs me up hard against the nearest wall. I nearly trip over my own feet and he takes my weight with his pelvis by pressing it skin-tight to mine.

I gasp and then sigh deeply into his weight, into the delicious pressure of his body against mine.

'You know,' I mutter reproachfully. 'We really need to talk about this manhandling thing you've got going on—'

'I don't like it.'

I'm cut short by Cyrus's snarl and the look on his face. The demon eyes are back. This time with an added glint of frustrated betrayal.

'What?' I blink at him, lost in the mini-frictions and micro-sensations of his frame smashed against mine.

'I don't like it when other men touch you,' he growls, sending jolts of interest through my nervous system.

'You mean Rocco?'

I can practically hear his back teeth gnashing together.

'Him. Or anyone.'

Heat surges from the soles of my feet up through my body and into my cheeks. The rush is foreign but easy to identify:

riotous and untainted joy.

I try to smother the reaction but it's too quick to catch. One moment I have equilibrium. The next, I'm basking in sunny warmth.

Being possessive is not the same as being jealous, I remind myself stubbornly. This could be a red flag, soldier, not a love confession.

I lift my chin.

'Exclusivity has never been a part of our arrangement.' I try to sound defiant but, with his weight against me and my lungs crushed, my protests just sound breathy and feminine.

'Then I'm changing the deal,' Cyrus growls, eyes burning and lips parted in arousal. The darks of his eyes have almost entirely swallowed their surrounding color. They've almost swallowed *me*.

I gulp. Then try to laugh.

'You want me to yourself?' I challenge. The idea is thrilling, even as it makes little difference to me. I've not been with anyone since Cyrus came into my life. 'For the whole eight hours that we have left?'

The smile that stretches across Cyrus's face is one of smug triumph.

'Weren't you listening, baby? We have a whole two days more than we planned...'

Right... Friday.

The truth is, I *could* leave. I could just hop on the ferry down at the docks and arrange for my own flight back to Italy. It would be a pain in the ass and the ticket would wipe out my savings... but I would still have a job when I got back to Rome.

A job you're quitting, anyway.

Remaining at *The Blue Star*, where Cyrus might continue to meet his clients, won't be possible once I start to show.

Go back now and save a few weeks of a job I'm not keeping?

Or stay and savor a few days with the man I can't have?

Neither is healthy in the long run. But I know which gives me the greatest pleasure in the here and now.

'Fine,' I agree, leaning up against the hard planes of Cyrus's chest and hooking a heel around his leg. 'I'm yours.'

'What?'

My surrender seems to have knocked some of the violence from Cyrus's face. He blinks at me, surprised.

'I'm yours,' I repeat. 'For two days. Claim me however you want. Exclusively if you like. But, beyond that, nothing has changed.'

'You're still leaving...?'

'Yes.'

'With the bartender,' he snarls.

Whoa, what?

He's lost me.

'With who?' I ask, thrown for a loop.

Frowning, I bring my hands to his face and turn him to meet me in the eye. I feel his jaw clicking against my palm. He shaved before dinner, so his skin is smooth to the touch.

'The guy behind the bar,' Cyrus says. 'The tall one. Brown hair. I saw him last time at *The Blue Star*.'

Tall guy... brown hair...?

'You mean David?' I ask, finally fitting the pieces together.

Cyrus tenses against me. His shoulders turn to granite under my hands.

'Whoever he is. He looked at you like... like more than a peer. He seemed sweet on you. You seemed... affectionate.'

I try to remember back to the last time we'd met at the hotel. First and foremost in my mind is how I'd thrown up within half an hour of my shift because a new waitress had taken the food the wrong way around the bar. The thick, buttery sweet scent of the dessert she'd been carrying had triggered a bout of nausea and David had caught me rushing for the bathroom. When I'd come out, he'd wanted to check that I was all right.

'David is a friend,' I explain. '*Only* a friend.'

'Then...' Cyrus pauses, his brow coming down in a confused furrow. 'Who was at your apartment?'

'When?'

'When I came to pick you up. The blinds were moving after you came out. I figured he was—'

'Wait!' I hold up my hands as the pieces hit me in a rush of realization: what Cyrus saw and the conclusions he's jumped to. As anger spikes, I try to push him back, to put some space between us, but he doesn't budge an inch, still pinning me to the hotel's finely gilded wallpaper. 'Wait, you thought I was leaving my... my *what*—my *boyfriend*?—in my apartment and rushing off to meet my *lover*?' I choke out. I know that our meets have hardly followed the rules of normal courtship but I can't stop the rush of hot, shameful offense coursing through my bloodstream. 'Is that the kind of person you think I am?'

'I wouldn't think less of you for it,' Cyrus reassures from behind gritted teeth. 'We made no promises to each other.'

'Is that how *you've* been handling things?' The words are out before I can nip them in the bud. 'Leaving your girlfriend to come and spend a few sex-crazed hours with me—?'

'No!'

'Then why think it of *me*?'

'Do you even *see* yourself?!' Cyrus demands, suddenly as angry as I am. 'What guy is going to resist you? What guy wouldn't offer you what I can't?'

Even in my anger, Cyrus's choice of words strikes at something deep: "...*what I can't*." Not "what I *won't*".

'And you... don't *want* that?' I whisper in the dark. God, Cyrus had been so desperate to pull me close, he hadn't even turned on the light. 'Why? Why now?'

Cyrus looks pained.

'Do I need a reason?'

'When you pull a one-eighty that dramatically, yeah, you kinda do, *sweetheart*.'

Instead of replying, Cyrus swallows hard. There's just enough moonlight streaming in past the open curtains for me to see his Adam's apple dropping dramatically. Conflict, consternation, and contrition flash across his face. I can feel his body jacking up in temperature under the pressure of so simple a question.

'Cyrus...?' I gentle my voice and wrap my arms around him. I brush a hand over the short little hairs at the nape of his neck. 'Talk to me...?'

Cyrus can't look me in the eye. He keeps his gaze fixed on my collarbone, or his lids closed as I caress the back of his head.

'I like you,' he finally confesses.

For a minute, I think my fevered imagination has constructed the words in my head. Just plucked them from the ether of fantasy. Only when Cyrus's body tenses up harder in the following silence do I realize they're real.

'You what?' I breathe, hardly daring to let those three little words sink in.

'Nevermind.' Cyrus clears his throat and tries to pull back out of my arms. This time, it's me holding fast to *him*. 'It doesn't mat—'

'Cyrus.' I grab hold of him harder. 'Say it again.'

He freezes.

'What?'

With some heavy nudging and soft pulls, I draw him back against me. I find his mouth in the dark. I fill my kiss with warmth and wonder. His returning kiss has an edge of desperation. When we pull apart, I repeat myself against his mouth, my breath trapped hotly between our lips.

‘Say.’—I nip at his thick lower lip—‘It.’—I lick over the mark I made and flick the tip of my tongue against his upper lip—‘Again...’

He swallows. I can hear his breathing in the dark and the soft slide of fabric as he wraps his arms back around me.

‘I like you,’ he repeats with more confidence. ‘Fuck it, I like having you around, okay? I like how you don’t take my shit, how you argue with me. I like how, when you’re in that crappy hotel uniform, I still want you so bad I can’t see straight, and how you whack me out even more when you’re wearing something like this. I like how you make me cum so hard I don’t know up from down. How I want to be inside you every second of every day if I could but would settle just for holding your damn hand. I really, fucking like you, okay? So, it kills me when I see you looking at other guys like you did that asshole. It shouldn’t. But it does. I can’t help it.’

Holy crap...

For a second, I can’t hold back the optimistic little voice in the back of my head. The one vein of childish hope that life experience has yet to quash. Cyrus’s words are the forbidden password, bringing free ideas previously so pent up that they explode into my head like an overflowing well:

Is he rethinking his stance on relationships? Does he perhaps want this to be something real? Would he stick around if I tell him the truth? Maybe he’d still want me? Maybe he’ll want our child?

Cyrus’s sigh is a shuddering exhale against my shoulder.

‘Honestly, Darcy...’ he breathes fervently into my neck, his words searing against my skin. ‘I want you so damn bad, that I’ll take you any way I can for these next two days.’

Maybe... not.

It takes a second for me to reign my fantasies back in.

“I’ll take you any way I can... for the next two days.”

You’re no worse off, I try to tell myself. You thought you were saying goodbye tomorrow. Two days is a miracle in itself. Don’t waste it for the sake of a foolish, momentary daydream.

With determination, I cram every witless hope to leak from that well back into hiding. I brace my shoulders against the wall, imagining it as the door I’m closing on my deeper feelings. I turn my focus on where I am. Who I’m with. And how lucky I am to steal these next few days from fate.

Lifting both feet off the ground I wrap my thighs around Cyrus’s hips and toe off my ankle boots. One. Then the other. They hit the carpet with a pair of dull thuds.

“I’ll take you any way I can”, he’d said.

I hold him fast, bring his face to mine, and whisper against his lips.

‘Then have me,’ I urge him, teasing his mouth with my tongue. ‘Have me *now*.’

Say what you like about this cryptic man. He knows how to obey instruction.

Cyrus takes my hold from his neck. With the slow machinations of a man proving his power, demonstrating his dominance, Cyrus takes both my wrists in one hand and pins them to the wall above my head. His hold splays over my wrists, my heartbeat thudding against his palm. His grip is so broad, so large, that his fingers fan out to the wallpaper and then some. He entraps me. Holds me as his willing prisoner, arms raised high, legs wrapped around his waist.

With his other hand, Cyrus claims control over our kiss. Wrapped around my neck, his fingers stretch up into my hair, his grip inescapable.

Not that I would *want* to flee.

Drawing me to his lips, Cyrus’s kiss is glacial slow, firm enough to bruise, and declaring of its dominion.

Mine, it screams.

Mine, it commands.

My woman. My lover. My kiss.

I can feel my lips swelling against his, my face flushing with arousal. The soft flesh at the apex of my hips is tight and tingling. I hug my thighs firmer around his waist and try to thrust up against the hard length in his pants.

‘Mmm...’ My moan never escapes my throat as the kiss goes on, air denied. I inhale through my nose and my chest spasms for more.

I tilt my hips and the ridge of his arousal brushes through leather to my clit. I squeal and then pant.

Cyrus barely lets me breathe before he’s on me again.

I squeeze my eyes shut, I fight to free my arms.

I’m desperate to touch.

Cyrus’s hold moves from my neck to my navel. His fingers expand across my lower belly, slipping beneath my shirt and branding the skin beneath.

I gasp and try to thrust against him again. His hand is a sweet restraint against my stomach.

‘I want this to be all about you,’ Cyrus finally says, breaking the kiss so I can breathe. ‘*Your* pleasure.’

I buck against his hold. Trying to meld my pelvis to his, to feel that delicious friction again.

‘*This*,’ I promise, rocking against him again, ‘would be pleasing to me...’

‘I know of something else.’

My wrists are suddenly free. Two vast hands take hold of my ass. I’m lifted into the air. The world spins, strong arms come around me, and I’m suddenly being laid down. Not onto the bed and its silken sheets. But the floor. Plush carpet cushions my shoulder blades and Cyrus manifests a pillow

from somewhere. Lifting my hips, he sets it under the small of my back, my hips turning wantonly skyward.

‘What’s going on?’ I ask, breathless but eager. I plant my feet, my upturned knees swaying merrily in the dark.

Cyrus’s only response is to trail his burning touch along my arms and guide them over my head again. He wraps my fingers around something—the leg of the king-size bed—then leans low to growl his orders in my ear.

‘You might want to hold on to that,’ he warns.

Shivers rush along my spine. My knees tremble. My toes curl into the thick tufts of the carpet.

Kneeling between my legs, Cyrus bends low to work the zipper of my pants. He hooks his fingers over the waistband and pulls slowly downward. My lower abs meet cool air then the slanting curves of my hips...

Cyrus presses a kiss above the soft mound of my womanhood then trails his tongue along my pelvic crease. Glancing up, he catches me playing witness and grins in the dim light.

‘No need to watch, baby. Unless you want to. Just lay back and feel this. Feel *me*.’

He pulls my pants lower, slipping them from under the slope of my ass, revealing the pale length of my thighs. I let my head fall back and fix my eyes on the ceiling. Moonlight dances over the swirls of plaster, distorting the curling gold fixtures. I feel a sweet dampness—Cyrus’s tongue—against my inner thigh. I spread my hips wide to beckon him closer.

His chuckle is like steam against my skin. My inner walls clench in anticipation. I give a shaky inhale, my grip tight on the wooden leg of the bed.

I follow Cyrus’s lead and lift my legs so that he can free me of the faux leather entirely. My limbs are ghostly pale in the darkness, my feet capped in little black nails.

Cyrus’s fingers wrap around my ankles, massage along my tendons and then stretch slowly up the backs of my legs. I

close my eyes, feeling only his fingertips reaching higher and higher. His thumbs curl around the sides of my calves. My legs are lifted higher and my heels hook over something hard and broad—his shoulders.

He strokes the back of his fingers up from my knees to my glutes, the touch so soft and endearing, until it curls towards my inner thighs. I gasp as Cyrus splays his fingers, and strokes possessively over my skin. From my knees to my apex, he caresses, pressing hard enough to part my thighs unconditionally wide.

My lungs start to spasm. My heart is in my throat. I can hear it thudding through my head and feel an echoing pounding through my lower lips.

Cyrus's breath is hot and wet as he sinks closer.

Please... I want to beg, but some instinct keeps me quiet. The slow seduction of the moment, the deliberate claiming of my body. It all feels too specific, too sacred, too muddy with open cravings. This isn't an act of sex but an act of nature. Something not to be interrupted, dictated, or disturbed: inevitable, inescapable, and irreversible.

It's only a heartbeat to wait. But that heartbeat takes an eternity as I close my eyes, sink hard into the ground, and finally, blessedly, feel Cyrus's mouth in my most sensitive of places...

'Ah—mm...' I dig my ass into the cushion, I tilt my hips towards his face. My legs fall further down Cyrus's back, my heels hooking over muscle and scar tissue.

Cyrus's lips are soft as velvet, his tongue slick and wet. With my preference for waxing, his canvas is clear and smooth and he makes full use of it. His hands are on my thighs, keeping me bare and open. He nudges my folds aside with his nose and then replaces the caress with his tongue. He licks the length of me. Works along the creases of my shape. Presses the breadth of his tongue against my clitoris.

Then he hums.

'Oh my...!'

Vibrations shoot from his tongue to my nerves and have me shaking in reaction. I gasp and I pant but otherwise shut the hell up. Cyrus doesn't need my narration to know I like what he's doing. My heels are working hard into his back, my knuckles are white on the bedframe...

And there's a thick dampness between my legs that has nothing to do with his tongue.

'You feel this, Darcy...?' Cyrus growls against my skin. 'Feel what I'm doing to you? Remember what I feel like... What it *sounds* like to be fucked by me...'

The wet noises of sex, of mouth upon lips, of tongue on flesh, are loud in the quiet of the room. They meld with Cyrus's panting exhales, my gasping intakes of air... A melody of hot, seductive arousal.

Cyrus makes love to me with his mouth over and over. He works my core, worships my lips, and comes back to my clit over and again. Within minutes I'm panting. Not long after, I'm whimpering.

I feel like I'm drowning in sensation. Flying on the high.

When he uses the tip of his tongue to work beneath my clitoral hood, I jackknife off the ground in ecstasy, the sharp and keening edge of my orgasm sparking white and black patches across my vision.

I have to bite my lip to stay quiet, a stifled mewl breaking past my teeth.

Cyrus doesn't let me come. Every time I'm close, every time I think it's nearly over—that I'll find my release—Cyrus draws back. He breathes a heavy, burning exhale across my sensitive skin and then begins to work me again. But only when he's sure not to tip me over the edge.

He drives me to the precipice, then retreats. Pushes me to the brink, then draws back.

Tears fill my eyes, my jaw hurts from gasping on restrained screams of euphoria. I dig my heels harder into the small of Cyrus's back.

‘Please, Cyrus.’ I’m not too proud to beg. Not with him. Not when it comes to this. I want what Cyrus has and he deserves every bated breath of mine. ‘Please, let me... let me finish...’

‘Don’t worry, baby...’ he vows against my swollen secrets. I suddenly regret my request as he backs away. ‘You’ll have plenty of that...’

Too dazed with banked pleasure, too fuzzy in the head to see straight, I barely notice Cyrus shucking his pants and sheathing himself in protection he doesn’t need. His hands are back on me in an instant, his grip on my hips and then my butt. He sets the right angle and then finally, miraculously, joins us together.

Cyrus enters me with absolute control and zero speed. I feel his hard length sliding past each ring of muscle, every undulation of my inner skin. I can sense the tip of his member working ever closer to my core, filling every inch of space, stretching me wide.

I exhale a long and hearty sigh of satisfaction when he reaches my furthest end. When he locks us together so completely that his hips are pressed flush to mine and I feel utterly full.

I hook my ankles together behind his impressive ass and urge him onwards.

After everything he said about claiming me for himself, after those heated looks and angry words, I’m expecting something like we had this morning. Something hard. Fast and rough enough to leave me blissed out for days.

And, despite the exhaustion already sweeping my muscles and dulling my wit, I’m here for it. I’m ready to take anything Cyrus Alesi can throw at me. With pleasure.

Then he starts to move.

His withdrawal is slow. His thrust forwards just as glacial. He braces one hand beside my head for balance and hooks the other around my thigh to open me wider.

‘Darcy...’ he whispers into the darkness. ‘Look at me.’

My eyes flutter open and I feel a heavy blush rushing into my face. Cyrus is above me. Six inches at most but enough to witness my reaction as he draws back his hips and sinks inside me again.

‘This is me,’ he groans. ‘Me inside you right now.’

Another withdrawal. Another slow penetration that fills me to breaking point.

‘How do I feel, Darcy? Tell me.’

‘*Ah...*’ I gasp as he sinks in deep again.

I try to thrust my hips back, to get him to speed up, but he adjusts his pace and keeps his momentum torturously slow.

‘Big...’ I gasp.

Cyrus is grinning in the dark.

‘What else? *Tell me.*’

‘Long,’ I pant. ‘Thick. *Tight...* Like you’re stretching everything. Like I... *Mmm...* Like I can’t take it all.’

‘You can. You can take all of me. You’re doing it.’

‘I want it faster.’

‘And I want you losing your mind,’ he says before teasing me with a kiss. ‘I want you to forget everything but me. Everything except this room. What I’m doing to you. How it makes you feel.’

‘Amazing. It makes me feel amazing.’

Cyrus teases kisses along my collarbone, sucking on the skin and taunting me with his teeth.

‘This is only round one, baby.’

Dear God...

‘How many rounds are there?’ I breathe.

‘As many as I need...’ he growls.

‘To cum?’

‘To make you scream.’

Holy shit.

Slowly, Cyrus answers my prayers and picks up the pace. His thrusts move from glacial to merely slow, from slow to eager, from eager to rapid. It happens gradually, building my sensitivities, amping up my pleasure. By the time he's working me properly, propelling his hips at his normal rhythm, I'm on the brink already. It takes only a few swift thrusts to send me over the edge and falling into a swirling orgasm so powerful it almost chokes me.

Cyrus is still as I cum, watching me release with a stare so close and so intimate that it heightens everything. Turns everything deeper and sweeter.

When I can breathe again, I'm surprised to find him still hard and solid inside me.

'You didn't...?'

'I told you, baby... this is all about you.'

And, to my disbelief, Cyrus does it all, all over again. The thick and slow love-making that sends me out of my mind with sexual impatience. Then the gradual increase, the steady build. All the way up to tensing muscles, undulating releases, and euphoric fireworks.

And then he goes again.

'Cyrus, I can't...' I'm panting as he begins his torturous pattern all over.

'Can't what, baby?'

'How many times are we going to...?'

'I told you,' he growls in the darkness, nibbling at my shoulder. 'As many times as I need... to make you *scream*.'

By my third orgasm, Cyrus has his goal. I cry out in rapture as my release tears through me. After this morning and now this onslaught of unspeakable pleasure, my inner walls are hyper-sensitive, bruised, and tender. It elevates everything. Makes every slow thrust a soothing massage, every heavy pound a lesson in pleasure-pain.

Every release a new height of intensity.

By orgasm five, I'm half-blind. By my sixth I'm ready to cry uncle.

Only on my seventh does Cyrus show any kind of mercy.

My legs have fallen to the carpet, my muscles have no strength. My inner walls are so hot and delicate that the slightest friction sparks orgasmic aftershocks along my system. Tears have flooded my temples and hair. I can't breathe. I can only sob, lost to the sensations of absolute ecstasy.

Cyrus is slick with sweat, his breath a hot panting above me, his hair slick to his brow. His eyes are like fire, the muscles of his back and legs quivering like a thoroughbred stallion in the stocks.

'Please...' I babble to Cyrus, to the Gods, to whomever. 'Please, I can't anymore...'

'Okay, baby...' Cyrus readjusts his weight above me. 'One last ride.'

'Yes,' I want him to cum. Need him to release inside me. I need that balm, that moment of reciprocity.

I can barely see, I can barely speak. I can only hold on for the madness as Cyrus sets a new pace. His pattern abandoned and his glacial beginnings lost, Cyrus doesn't wait to build his momentum. This time, his thrusts are hard and merciless from the outset. He takes hold of my hips, digs his fingerprints into my skin, and pounds long, hard, and deep. His entire length, from thick root to tapering stem draws back. Before his full shaft buries tight and deep.

Over and again.

'Oh God,' I cry, unable to stay quiet this time. 'Fuck, Cyrus...'

'One more time, baby,'

'No, I can't,' I cry. Head flailing, I abandon the bed leg and dig my nails into his ass. 'I don't have any more—'

‘Yes, you do,’ he pants. ‘One more for me. Together now.’

‘Fuck!’

We come together, the universe slipping on its axis, the pleasure ripping through my body out of this world. My inner walls shudder and cling, my body freezes rigid and then shakes uncontrollably. My vision is gone and my chest cries out for air. The next thing I know, the world is black and I’m slipping into a realm of inky nothing, feeling more sated and more complete than I’ve ever felt before...

It takes a minute for Darcy to come around. By the time she does, she's surrounded by a cocoon of fine linens and my body heat. Her back fits flush against my front. I can feel her heartbeat thrumming through her torso and into my chest; a strong and regular thump.

‘When did I get on the bed?’ she finally mumbles sleepily.

Despite the satisfied rush still humming in my veins, I find myself a little nervous over her reaction as she stirs further into the realm of consciousness...

‘I thought it would be more comfortable up here,’ I say, sliding an arm under her waist so that I can wrap her in closer against me.

‘You were the genius who decided on the floor,’ she accuses.

My nerves twitch.

‘You’re complaining?’ I keep my tone carefully even.

Darcy then makes the most glorious noise I’ve ever heard: a delicious and contented sigh, as she fits herself snugly between my arms.

‘Not for a second,’ she vows before burrowing her butt up against my groin. Had I not just spent myself to exhaustion, I’d be instantly hard again. Instead, all that my anatomy can manage are sated little sparks of energy tingling along my shaft.

Holding Darcy close, I inhale, not realizing until her shampoo hits my nose that I'm smelling her hair. Smelling *her*.

I don't recall when I became such a fucking pansy but, equally, I have no real strength to worry about it.

I have no watch but it feels like hours before Darcy speaks again. Hours in which I just feel her presence and witness her existence in the world... Feel that heartbeat against mine.

'I wasn't flirting with him,' she finally whispers, once we're long into the witching hour.

'What?' I try and corral my thoughts back into focus.

'I wasn't flirting with Rocco. At least... not in the way you were thinking.'

I don't like the subject change. As far as my post-coital brain is concerned, men like Rocco have no place here in this room. Some archaic instinct is annoyed at having its territory invaded, even conceptually. I'm stiff to budge when Darcy tries to pull free of my embrace.

'Let me just get something...' she complains, nudging at my arms.

My fingers splay possessively over her flat little belly as she stretches for the edge of the bed.

'You're coming right back?' I sigh, lamenting the inches between us.

She giggles.

'Where else would I go?' she quips before curling over the side of the mattress.

I try to hide my sharp inhale.

Where, indeed? I might have this woman now but in two days...

There's the soft swish of fabric as Darcy finds one of the legs of her pants. She fiddles with the cuff before returning to my side. This time, we're facing each other as she entangles her legs with mine. The smooth lengths of her thighs are pure

seduction over mine. And I feel the shiny little tips of her toes pressed up against the back of my calves.

I'm distracted from her fine legs when she holds something up in the dark. It's small, oblong, and inky black in the night. More concerning, it's bleeding a little red light.

'Please tell me that's not what I think it is?' I ask, my blood running cold.

'You mean a bug? Yeah. I recorded everything that was said at dinner.'

My heart actually stops in my chest. Just goes right there into cardiac arrest. My limbs numb out and my fingertips freeze over.

I snatch the little device from her as if I can retrospectively save her from suspicion.

'You can't be serious?!' I hiss, shaking the thing in her face. 'Do you know how dangerous this could be?!'

The moonlight catches her brows drawing low.

'How did you think I was *going* to get the leverage I needed against deportation?' she demands.

'I...'

Eye-witness testimony? Maybe a photo or two? Honestly, I don't know. I learn now that I've not given it much thought at all, in fact. Used to working alone, without consideration for others, I'd not factored Darcy's intentions into my own plans at all.

My fear takes on new heights, spurred by a healthy dose of self-blame.

'Fuck, Darcy...' I groan, a hand over my eyes. 'Do you have any idea what would have happened if they had found this on you?!'

'We'd have both been strung up,' she says with somber certainty. 'I know. It was a poor call on my part. I thought I was safe when they didn't check us *before* dinner.'

I groan and try to rub the panic from my features. My nose is like ice and my lips feel slack. I mutter my thoughts aloud, just to try and breathe some life back into my face:

‘Checking beforehand would allow you to make up an excuse. Caruso’s a tricky bastard. Searching after the fact leaves you red-handed upon discovery.’

Instant entrapment for any new associate who’s uncovered as less than honest.

‘I should have seen it.’ Darcy’s sigh sounds dejected in the dark.

For a moment, I want to comfort her, to tell her it’s not her fault. But my head is still stuck on the image of her summarily executed before my eyes. I have to take several deep breaths through the nose.

Darcy’s hands feel too hot against my chilled skin.

‘At least I got out of it,’ she says, affirming herself in my silence.

‘You made sure Rocco was too distracted to search you thoroughly,’ I recognize. ‘*That’s* why you were being so forward.’

‘Most of it was the drink. The idiot put away more than the rest of the table. Caruso must have a serious boner for family loyalty to put faith in that guy.’

‘Not always,’ I say. ‘He framed and put away another cousin to get where he is now. I think he likes the fact that Rocco can be easily manipulated. It worked in our favor today but, in general, men like Rocco are easier to control.’

Darcy makes a rude noise. It’s clear she has little to no respect for Felix Caruso, despite the power he wields in the darker circles of society.

‘A good leader shouldn’t need to control,’ she says wisely. ‘They should inspire loyalty.’

I agree. But I also remain quiet. What would *I* know about leading? About protecting?

I've never been responsible for anyone but myself. If nothing else, this mission is proving why.

Had I let jealousy rule me and forced Darcy to be searched by Lana, the evening would have ended with a whole lot more bloodshed.

'It was smart of you to push back at me. About the search.'

'You sound surprised.'

I shake my head against the pillow under our heads. Darcy is one of the smartest people I've met. And in my line of work, full of manipulators and calculating tyrants, that's no small feat.

'Not surprised,' I promise. 'Thankful.'

'But shit, Darcy, you should have at least given me a heads up.' Laying beside her, I brush some strands of hair back from her face. The tips of my fingers stroke along her undercut and the shorter hairs tickle my skin. 'I could have helped.'

'What about *you*?' she accuses, catching my eye in the dark. 'When you blurted out that you know who their assassin is? You won't tell *me* their name, but you admit to Felix that you have a shortlist? You nearly gave me a heart attack.'

I wince.

'I know.' My tone is contrite. 'But I needed to test a few reactions.'

'You mean Vincent's. He's the guy you're looking for, right? The assassin?'

There she goes proving that intelligence again.

'It's my working theory, yeah,' I admit. 'I figure, if he spends a lot of time in Egypt or wherever he's from, it would explain the killer's inactive periods here in Europe.'

'Still, it threw me a little when you started talking about monikers and theories.' Darcy exhales and slides in closer beneath the covers. I feel her fingertips absent-mindedly tracing the scars on my back.

"If you ever want to tell me..."

‘What if Felix had gotten suspicious?’ Darcy asks.

‘Then, I’d have gotten you out of there,’ I reassure her, rubbing my palm along her upper arm.

She snorts softly against my chest.

‘You and what army?’

Adrenaline floods my system. A testosterone-fuelled instinct roars to life.

‘I wouldn’t need an army,’ I vow. If I were the only thing between this woman and gunfire, backup would just get in the way.

Darcy nails me with her laser-pointer stare of citrine.

‘Or a teammate apparently,’ she adds.

Ouch.

I take a steadying inhale.

‘Fine,’ I agree. ‘We should work together more. Let each other in. We should be more honest.’

A shadow flashes across Darcy’s expression and her features freeze in place.

Yeah, I think. I know there’s something you’re still hiding from me.

But it isn’t a boyfriend.

Darcy had said her bartender compatriot was just a friend. And I trust it to be true.

‘I may be bad at it... Working together, I mean.’ Darcy warns.

It’s my turn to snort with a little derision.

‘I can’t imagine there’s much you’re bad at.’

‘Oh, because I’m *so* perfect?’ she challenges.

‘No...’

I’ve followed her lead with my scars, trailing my fingerprints around her temple, down into the hollows of her

neck, to her shoulder, and around to her ribs. I count absent-mindedly as the tips of my fingers trail over the gentle swells of each bone. *One rib, two ribs...*

‘Because you’re smart and tenacious.’ I explain. ‘I figure you’re stubborn enough not to back down from an obstacle. And clever enough to always find a way around it. It’s a deadly combination for efficacy.’

Clearly, I’m still horrendous at giving compliments because Darcy is frowning in the darkness.

‘Hmmm...’ she murmurs noncommittally.

Unable to read her as well as I’d like, I reach over Darcy’s head to switch on the bedside lamp.

‘You don’t sound like you believe me,’ I accuse her, as we both blink in the sudden brightness. I settle an elbow into the cushions and brace my temple on my palm.

‘I believe that you *mean* it. Which I like, by the way.’ She smiles, but then gives a more subdued half shrug. ‘But it’s hard to think of as actual truth,’ she explains. ‘My mom was smart and driven. It never got her very far.’

Five ribs... six ribs... I count as my other hand follows the valleys of her chest until my palm falls to her hip...

‘Why not?’ I prod gently.

Darcy groans and rolls her eyes. Her hair is matted and tangled over the pillow. Wild and unruly. Like her.

‘She had a fundamental flaw, my mom. The complete and utter inability to be alone.’

‘Bad boyfriends?’ I guess.

She nods.

‘A string of them. And she was an international dater too. Always loved the exotic. And she dreamed of romance in far-flung places. By the time I was ten, her chain of broken relationships had led me halfway around Europe.’

‘That must have been rough,’ I empathize quietly. ‘So, you didn’t grow up in Sweden?’

‘Nope. Just born there. Have the passport to prove it but little else. No culture, no sense of identity.’

No home.

She doesn’t speak the words but I can see them in her eyes.

I can relate to that, at least.

‘I went back there when I was seventeen, trying to find something of myself but...’ Darcy purses her lips in an awkward pout and shrugs. ‘It didn’t really work out how I imagined.’

‘You had to leave?’

She nods.

I wonder for a moment if the music she’s worried about facing back north is tied to her reason for leaving in the first place.

‘I came back to Italy. My mom’s last husband—the one she changed my surname for—had left her. She was alone again.’

Darcy gives a sad little laugh.

‘That’s why I’m not sure smarts and a strong constitution are enough to get everything you want in life. My mom wasn’t stupid. And she overcame every obstacle in her pursuit of love: language barriers, visa applications, uprooting her entire life over and over again. But it didn’t matter. She was still alone in the end.’

‘She passed away?’

‘Two years ago. Cancer,’ Darcy exhales. Short and controlled. Like she’s sweeping a thought or memory to the back of her mind. ‘That’s when I moved to Rome for a new start of my own.’

‘Why Rome?’ I ask, genuinely curious.

Darcy shrugs.

‘Why not?’

I know *that* feeling too. When your world has no roots, when your life is foundationless, everything becomes a question of “why not?”

Liberating and lonely in equal parts.

‘I’m sorry,’ I offer, unsure what else to say as a condolence.

Darcy takes another long breath. An inhale this time, followed by a calming sigh. It’s like she’s resetting her mental state.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she eventually concludes. ‘It just proves my point. If you’re so desperate to hold on to people, they eventually feel smothered and run in the opposite direction.’

‘Is that why you keep your relationships short?’ I ask. ‘Because you’re afraid you’ll chase people away? Or do you do it to prove you can be alone?’

‘Maybe a bit of both,’ she ponders.

Suddenly amused by an idea, Darcy reaches up and turns the lamplight towards me. I have to wince in the glare.

My turn for interrogation...

‘What’s *your* excuse for sticking to casual flings?’

Casual... I almost laugh. This thing between us feels anything but casual anymore.

‘Work,’ I answer, falling back on an excuse that feels so old now it’s practically shedding rust. ‘It’s hard to maintain anything meaningful when you’re never around.’

My words feel shallow compared to Darcy’s personal revelations. The guilt of reciprocity urges me to go on:

‘Not to mention I’m not cut out for permanency.’

Darcy tilts a curious gaze at me.

‘Define “permanency”,’ she challenges.

Anything that makes my heart hammer in panic and my sweat run cold.

‘Long-term commitment, marriage, kids...’ I grunt through the usual culprits.

Anything where I can let someone down.

‘Ah, right,’ Darcy suddenly pulls back and flops onto her back. As she slides down into a comfortable rut, her hair trails over the pillow like dark, tangled flames and I spy a tattoo just behind her ear. ‘I remember, now.’

I frown, not liking her tone.

‘What’s *that* supposed to mean?’

‘After this morning,’ she explains. The wave of her hand is dismissive but there’s tension in the corners of her mouth. Whatever she’s recalling bothers her. ‘You acted like the sky had fallen in, with just the *possibility* of fatherhood.’

I blink at her, surprised. We’d both requested a Plan B pill from the hotel pharmacy. And she’d taken it once we were back in the hotel room. Was she still mad about the sex this morning?

‘I didn’t mean to be melodramatic,’ I justify. ‘But I was concerned. A kid would—’

‘—be a living nightmare for you.’

‘—mess up your plans.’

We each finish the sentence at the same time. Then pause as neither answer is what the other expected.

She turns to me, surprised:

‘*What?*’

I’ve not blushed since I was a kid but these last few days with Darcy have been testing out the old faculties. Again, my face feels warm as I try to explain.

‘You said you had plans for a new life. On the plane. That’s what you said, right? A fresh start?’

‘*Yeah...*’ she draws out the word slowly.

I’m not sure how she’s not stringing together my implications.

‘So, what kind of asshole would I have to be, to screw that up for you just because I’m too fucking horny to wear a damn rubber?’

Those dark, sooty lashes of hers flutter rapidly.

‘Wait, wait... *that’s* why you were so pissed off this morning? You were mad at *yourself*?’

She stares at me dumbfounded, like this had never even *occurred* to her.

What the hell has she been—?

‘Well, *yeah*. Who did you *think* I was mad at?’

‘I...’

Darcy doesn’t seem able to piece together the rest of her thoughts, so I pivot the conversation.

‘You’re right to set your life on a different path if you’re wanting something more real than this. And I just didn’t want to fuck that up for you.’

‘Thanks...’ The word seems spoken merely on instinct, drawn from her without any real energy. Darcy is looking around the room but her stare has glazed over. Completely lost in thought.

For a while, I leave her to her reverie, curious but easily distracted by my exhaustion. I lay beside her, stroking her arm and nibbling occasionally at the ridge of her shoulder. Each time I’ve been with Darcy for the last five months, foreplay has been quick and the aftermath even shorter. Even in our most raw and interconnected moments, there’s been a barrier between us... The expectation of a speedy leavetaking. Physically we’ve been more open, honest, and raw than most couples ever are. But, as soon as the act itself is over... we’re strangers.

‘Do you ever think...’ I murmur, just blathering out loud the thoughts floating sluggishly through my head. ‘That every person in the world comes in multiples?’

Darcy sinks further into the bed and turns to look at me.

‘You mean like doppelgangers?’

I snort.

‘No. I mean like... the version of ourselves that we show to friends. And then another you reveal only to family...’

‘One for work... one for lovers...’ she says, expanding on the idea.

‘Right,’ I nod.

‘I guess so,’ Darcy says, tilting her head in consideration. ‘Isn’t that how we all operate?’

‘Sure...’ I yawn around the word. I’m exhausted but I don’t want to sleep yet. ‘But I was thinking... Do you ever wonder if you can know one version of someone so completely, maybe more than they know themselves even, and yet still barely scrape the surface of who they are? Because they only ever show that one version of themselves around you? That one of many?’

When Darcy doesn’t reply for several minutes, I open my eyes to see if she’s fallen asleep. She’s watching me with a stare that’s scarily perceptive. I feel it down to my bones.

‘Maybe,’ she agrees.

I’m surprised when she then sits up, rearranges our positions, and swings a leg over my hips.

‘On the other hand,’ she says, straddling my pelvis and bringing that beautiful tightness of hers up close and personal with my aching shaft. ‘Perhaps getting to know someone *that* intimately in one version of themselves...’ Clawing her hands, Darcy scrapes her nails gently over my lower abs. The muscles contract and shudder under her touch. My dick starts to harden. ‘...means that you learn a little more of the other editions that your partner never meant to reveal...?’

The way Darcy’s looking at me is unsettling. It seems to cut me to the quick.

Speaking of revelations...

Spreading a wide grip over one of her thighs, I reach the other up to her neck. I brush aside her hair to find that ink behind her ear. It's a rune. Something old and Scandinavian. Norse, perhaps.

'What does this mean?' I ask, tapping the tattoo with my forefinger.

Darcy smiles softly. There's a teasing in her eye but something deeper is happening behind her irises. Something almost... sad.

'You won't like it,' she warns me.

'Why?' I ask. 'Does it say "Van Halen 4 Life"?' I draw the number four in the air.

She barks an unattractive snort of laughter. But the sudden light in her eyes now overshadows everything else.

'Ha. Ha,' she punctuates dryly. 'Guess again.'

'You could just tell me?'

She shakes her head.

'It's personal.'

Taking her by the hips, I lift my ass to rub my growing length hard against her folds. She lifts her chin and leans into the motion, moaning deep in her throat.

'I'd say we're more than a little personal by now...'

'*Mmm...*' Darcy moans as I thrust up against her again. '*Ah...*'

She has to clamp down with her knees and flatten her hands over my stomach to keep herself steady.

'Sorry,' she finally breathes with a teasing smile. 'It's *very* personal. You'll have to earn that secret.'

'I didn't earn it earlier?' I tease.

She grins.

'Not the tattoo...' Her hands stroke up towards my pecs, claiming her sexual territory. 'But you certainly earned a return of services rendered...'

As she leans down, our navels brush together and the tips of her breasts flutter over my skin. She dances a whisper of a kiss over my mouth.

‘Mmm...’ I sigh into her kiss. ‘I didn’t do it for repayment.’

‘I know... But I’m curious about what it will take to bring you so high that you pass out.’ That bark of laughter makes another appearance as Darcy braces her hands on the cushion on either side of my head. ‘Look at you!’ she crows.

‘What?’

‘Looking like a fucking hero. You’re so damn proud of yourself that you did that to me, aren’t you?’

I made the woman I love orgasm so hard that she lost consciousness. You bet I’m proud as shi—

My slow and sleepy thoughts suddenly screech to a halt and then rush forward at lightspeed.

The woman I love...

The woman I... Shit.

I have no idea how I know it. Given my supreme lack of role models in this department, I should have no idea what romantic love looks like, let alone what it feels like. I have no idea how I’m supposed to quantify, categorize, or label this shit. But somehow, somewhere deep down, I know it to be true:

I love her. This phenomenal, brilliant, and sexy-as-shit badass of a woman... The realization feels, at once, completely impossible and a hundred percent inevitable.

Not to mention ultimately irrelevant.

“You’re right to set your life on a different path if you’re wanting something more real than this...”

I said it. I meant it.

Loving someone does not magically transform you into the person who can love them best or the one who can make them

happiest. Darcy wants something real from her life. Something I can't give her. So my feelings are not pertinent.

In fact, I can privately indulge them for the next two days but, after that, they can shut up and go to hell.

'Cyrus?' Darcy is watching me, a look of concern on her face.

Ah, hell.

The warmth in her eyes has my heart practically *glowing*, for fucks sake. Sapped out of my head on the discovery that this woman is the one—and probably *only*—woman I'll ever love in my life, I fail at summoning my usual stoic bluster. My tone is all wrong and I'm sure my expression is for shit but the words, at least, fall into the appropriate vicinity of casual teasing.

'Sending a woman into that kind of rapture is a heady ego trip,' I agree with (I hope) a cocky-ass grin.

'Hmm...' Darcy muses, hands trailing back down my torso.

Dammit but everywhere she touches feels like it's blistering. In a good way. A sensitive, intoxicating burn that I can't get enough of.

'I'd like to see if that's a mutually satisfying experience,' Darcy admits, biting her lip.

She shifts her hips to reveal my burgeoning erection and I moan the instant she wraps her fingers around its base. Her touch is sure and firm. Applied and determined.

'Just how do you like being touched, Cyrus...?' she taunts, riding my shaft with her hands. Up and down, skin slides over the now steely core. No half-semi anymore, dammit. I'm hard as a goddamn baseball bat.

'Do you like it when I use my hands? Or do you prefer my mouth?'

'Shit...' I groan, my head falling back against the bed.

‘Do you like how it feels inside me? Where feels better, Cyrus? Between my lips or between my legs?’

‘Fuck...’ I moan. Even with her weight over my pelvis, I thrust up against her hold. Sweat has beaded on my forehead and along my shoulders. ‘Baby, if it’s you, everything feels incredible. You can touch me however.’

“‘However’ isn’t going to cut it...” she warns me before sucking on her thumb. I watch with bated breath as she presses that wet pad of her thumb to the very tip of my dick.

‘Ah...!’

‘I want specific instructions, Cyrus... You tell me what you want, what will send you higher, and I’ll do it for you.’ Shifting back down my legs and bending low, Darcy’s lips are damn close to my shaft as she whispers. ‘You tell me how, and I’ll worship your body until you can’t see straight.’

Check, I think, already fisting the sheets until I’m white-knuckling it. *I’m already there, sweetheart.*

‘You tell me what you like,’ Darcy whispers against my most sensitive skin. ‘And I’ll have your melting...’

Bingo, again.

I feel the damp touch of her tongue on my head and nearly jump out of my skin.

‘Then,’ she whispers against my erection, eyes burning up from between my legs... ‘When I’ve brought you to the brink over and over. Never once giving you release... I’m going to get back on top of you...’

‘Yeah...?’ I gasp, totally feeling the sex talk.

Her tongue is hot as she starts to tease down towards the base of my shaft.

‘...I’m going to fit this hard length of yours all the way inside me...’

‘*Mmm...!*’ My heels are digging into the mattress. My grip on the sheets threatens to tear...

‘...and ride you ‘til you can’t breathe.’

‘*A ttento, bella mia!*’

I jump back as an old man on a bicycle hurtles by a little too close for comfort. Pressing myself flat against the wall, I knock my bag sharply against the stone and turn my toes in to save them from being smooshed under tires.

Had the wall been any lower, I might have accidentally somersaulted myself into the Aegean Sea below. As it stands, I just take a heavy bump to the small of my back.

Oblivious to any dangers caused, the old man on the bike merrily waves a hand over his head in apology and races down the winding cliffside road at a great rate of knots. I rarely shy away from an adrenaline rush but the way his wheels are haphazardly bouncing over centuries-old cobblestones has even *my* heart jumping up a few notches.

‘Crazy old man...’ I mutter to myself with a smile.

‘*Dio mio!*’ gasps a female voice from the other side of the street. ‘Miss Calabrese!’

Startled to hear my name in a foreign environment, I plaster a smile in place when I spot Lana Caruso picking her way daintily across the street. Two scooters, a VW Bug, and three men lugging a cart all stop to let her pass.

Which seems only reasonable considering the vision before them.

Dressed in white skin-tight slacks and a creamy pink blouse, Lana is somehow both demurely feminine and sexy as

hell today. With her thick hourglass figure, a tiny waist, and a shining mane of golden locks, Lana Caruso literally has a body that could—and obviously *does*—stop traffic.

‘Darcy,’ I correct her, as she tries to navigate the last few feet in her platform heels. Her toes, I notice absently, are painted a pretty hue of raspberry.

All this smarmy formality on the resort is making me itch.

‘Are you all right?’ She seems genuinely concerned. ‘He came out of nowhere!’

‘I’m fine,’ I reassure her, before inspecting my carrier from the store. ‘I think my bag took more damage than I did.’

I wrinkle my nose at the violence done to my bag—a heavy dent in the fancy cardboard—and tug at the corners to straighten out its folds.

‘You’re worried about a bag?’ Lana’s so surprised by this sentiment that she lifts her large, designer sunglasses to the top of her head so she can gaze at me in wonder.

I laugh.

‘The dress inside cost too much. I’ll be damned if they don’t let me return it because the bag is busted.’

Nisi tou Chrysoú, I’ve discovered, does not cater to those with less than six-digit salaries. The stores are all high-end labels and the goods themselves supreme in quality. In half the dress shops I tried today, I was offered a glass of champagne whilst I browsed. Back home, I’m lucky to get a plastic bag free of charge, let alone *Dom Perignon*.

Of course, the service ended up being fully reflected in the cost of the gown. Which is why I fully intend to wear it to the Caruso’s shindig on Friday and then return it, label still attached, before flying home.

No harm, no foul.

This concept obviously baffles the born-rich Lana Caruso.

‘Return?’ Lana’s button nose wrinkles in confusion... then clears entirely as her expression becomes one of sudden

discovery. ‘Oh! I see... It will not fit soon enough?’

For a second, I’m thrown by the speed at which she’s jumped to that conclusion.

I glance down at myself.

‘God, is the fine hotel food showing already?’ I joke, patting at my hips.

‘What? No!’ Lana cries, flushing with color. ‘*Oh Dio*, I’ve put my foot in it, haven’t I?’

Drawing back her lower lip in a wince, Lana looks around as if she fears we’ll be overheard.

A fat lot of chance there...

The *Strada del Molo* is a wide road built to handle the high traffic to and from the docks each morning. By now, with the sun well past its apex, the open space is light and airy but flanked on either side to create the illusion of privacy. To our right is a towering wall of traditional Grecian homes, two stories high and pressed firmly together, carved from white terracotta and limestone. To our left is the open ocean. Only a thick wall of the same platinum-white stone divides the winding cobble road from the waves of royal blue.

The few people foolish enough to be out at this hour hurry past with heads down and radars seeking the nearest shade for an afternoon snack or nap.

Even with a few crazy cyclists, the odd delivery man, and a handful of tourists, the wide thoroughfare down to the harbor feels vacant.

Still, Lana inspects the nearest alleys and the staircases down to the coast, before continuing:

‘I apologize if you didn’t want people to know...’ she says, contrition stamped all over her face. ‘I just... when you avoided wine at dinner, and you were ill when you first arrived... And the kitchen reported you avoided fat and the baked goods in the breakfast hall yesterday; I know those can be triggers for morning—’

‘—sickness,’ I finish for her, in the hopes of shutting her up quickly.

Now, it’s *my* turn to look hastily around. As the only passage down to the pier, where I’m late to meet Cyrus, it’ll be along *this* road that he hikes should Cyrus decide to meet me halfway...

That would be all I need. My secret, kept for months, exposed by a blurting blonde bombshell.

With both hands actively shushing her, my bag *clonks* against the wall again and dances to my jerky gestures for quiet.

‘Please...’ I begin to beg.

Lana is quick on the uptake.

‘Oh, you are keeping it private...’ she sympathizes.

‘Exactly. No one knows. Not even Cyrus.’

This *truly* throws the woman off. In fact, for a moment, Lana appears genuinely frightened that I’m keeping such a major confidence behind Cyrus’s back. Which, I suppose, is understandable. Cyrus doesn’t exactly present himself as a man one would be wise to deceive.

After a moment of consideration, however, a new expression lights up Lana’s big eyes and wide lips. A look that can only be described as an adoring and unabiding envy.

‘Oh wow, Darcy,’ she croons. ‘If *signor Alesi*’s behavior so far is of a man protective of his woman only, I confess myself excited to see him after he learns the happy news.’

My jaw hangs slack and I stand unsure of what to make of that comment.

A few days ago, had I heard something similar, I’d have laughed at the idea. Cyrus is a ship in the night. A fleeting wonder of sexual pleasure who arrives with a single text message and disappears before the rising sun. Hardly the image of a possessive or protective lover.

I remember the conversation I had with Lily-Anne before leaving for this trip:

“A meet?” she had said. “You make it sound like a business deal...”

And that’s exactly how it has always been between us. No emotion equals no need for possession or protection.

But, I also can’t dismiss Lana’s observations as pure fantasy. Something has changed since arriving on the island. *Cyrus* has changed.

“I like you... I like how you don’t take my shit, how you argue with me... How I want to be inside you every second of every day... but would settle just for holding your damn hand.”

Under the warm sunshine, I still shiver with heated trembles. The sensation is delicious and arousing... and a giant neon warning.

It cautions me that I’m becoming too attached; that I’m enjoying too much the idea of *Cyrus* becoming equally as attached.

Three days ago, I was firmly set on my path. Nothing could have swayed me from my choice to bow out of *Cyrus*’s life forever and raise my child somewhere outside his knowledge.

But now, every time I try to remind myself that *Cyrus* doesn’t want anything permanent and that trying to hold on as he disappears will only leave me falling painfully on my face, a new rebellious little voice speaks up.

It whispers to me that *Cyrus* believes he isn’t good enough for a long-term connection. Not necessarily that he doesn’t *want* one.

It tempts me that *Cyrus* feared unprotected sex because it would screw with my hopes for the future. Not necessarily because he loathes the idea of children.

You’re grasping, soldier... Searching for loopholes that just aren’t there.

Lana reads my thoughtful silence as an awkward lack of interest in the subject and so diplomatically changes it.

‘Speaking of *signor* Alesi...’ she segues. ‘Where is he today?’

Inspecting the docks for exit routes and vessels that can be easily stolen to escape the island... should you and your family all try to kill us, that is.

I keep my friendly smile in place.

‘The idea of dress shopping turned Cyrus a little green,’ I joke with an ultra-womanly rolling of my eyes. ‘So, I sent him down to the docks to find some guided tours of the reef.’

Lana juggles her multiple shopping bags into one hand and gestures down the street with the other. We begin to walk as we talk.

‘You’re enjoying the island, then?’ she asks conversationally.

‘Absolutely.’ *When I’m not tense as hell that someone is about to cock a gun in my direction...* ‘Thank you for your recommendation yesterday. We enjoyed the jetskis so much that I thought we might try scuba?’

‘Ooh,’ Lana enthuses, her bags clattering together as she claps her hands. Again, she somehow bridges childlike joy with vivid passion. ‘I adore scuba. Especially at night when the lights from the island light up the coral. Truly spectacular.’

What follows is an avid, and actually genuinely enjoyable, discussion of marine activities and which are the best options to explore in the summer season. For a while, I almost forget why Cyrus and I are truly on the island and find it easy to slip into the role of leisurely vacationer.

Given her knowledge base and how naturally she fits with her environment here on the island, I’m surprised to discover that Lana only took up her position at *Caruso Chrysoú* six months ago.

‘And you’re enjoying life here?’ I ask without pretense. ‘You don’t find it isolating to be on an island so small?’

I wonder about where I'll be living in a few months. Perhaps a small island off the Italian coast would be a good place to hide out and raise my baby...?

'Small, but *lively*.' Lana corrects. We've reached the main dock-side street that runs along the water's edge on the western side of the island. Up ahead is a long pier with several small fishing boats moored along its spine. Shorter docking posts and wooden mooring boxes float in the marina, also in full use. Come dawn tomorrow, the harbor will be empty, every vessel out to snag the daily catch. Now, they all sit quietly in place, tucked in for the day. At this hour, the larger, newer boats with hard and sharp bows of white plastic are the busier ones: jettisoning tourists to and from neighboring islands, delivering supplies to the locals, or hosting scuba and sailing trips around the nearby reefs.

Here, the road is busier, with tanned natives and sun-burned tourists hurrying to get out of each other's way. Lana waves an encompassing hand at the bustling activity, framed by the beginnings of a setting sun.

'Places like this, the activities on the water, the festivals, and the night markets... it never feels too quiet or out of the way here. And it's been my dream for some time to work closer with my cousin.'

For a moment, I think I see a primordial gleam in Lana's eyes but a rare cloud briefly blocks the sunlight overhead and it vanishes.

'He's... an interesting man,' I hedge carefully.

Even without the underworld secrets Cyrus has told me, Felix Caruso has made a less than favorable impression. My dislike of the man, only half-masked behind polite conversation, seems neither offensive nor a surprise to Lana. She chuckles softly at my carefully chosen words and picks a spot along the dockland wall on which to perch. I lean my butt against the stone beside her.

'I'm not surprised you find him... difficult,' she says, equally reticent. 'Especially given the way he came across to you last night.'

‘And yet you still work for him?’

It seems bananas to me that a woman as confident, independent, and clearly intelligent as Lana Caruso would put up with the arrogant prig. Even if he *is* her cousin.

Lana shrugs and works her head like she’s weighed up the pros and cons.

‘In my experience... such attitudes—particularly in men—and the reputations they create along the way tend to come more from being successful over anything else.’ She raises a wise eyebrow at me. ‘Arrogance can help beget success. Success bolsters the ego. I don’t know a single person with enough natural humility to fight that kind of upward spiral.’

‘So you just... let it slide? The things he says, I mean?’

Lana’s smile turns predatory. Proud.

‘The Carusos are good at getting what we want. Including me. I see no reason to apologize for it. So, I must accept it in my kin also.’

As Lana has been careful to omit anything about the illegalities and violence her family commits to secure their coveted successes, there’s not much in her rationale that I can find fault with.

The whole dog-eat-dog philosophy is a well-established one. And I agree with her that it takes a super-human level of humility not to let success tamper with your social ego.

‘Surely, you can understand the allure of working closely with such a man?’ Lana suddenly muses slyly. Her eyes spark with a dark delight. ‘Your *il innamorato* is a man of power, is he not...?’

A sharp and anxious pain nettles around my heart.

Until Lana placed Felix and Cyrus categorically side-by-side like that... it hasn’t dawned on me to see them cut from the same cloth.

Something deep inside mutinies against the idea.

Cyrus kills, I know that he does. He literally murders for money. By all justifications, laws, and morals, he's a "bad guy". Yet, tarring the man who said he wanted to hold my hand with the same brush as Felix Caruso feels all shades of wrong.

'I suppose so...' I evade and try to lighten the mood. 'But then, such men do not come without their challenges...' I add, prying for useful tidbits of information. 'I'd be curious if the two of them have the same personal quirks...'

Lana snorts and shades her eyes from the sun. Even with her sunglasses, she's struggling to make out my face.

'You mean like being late to his own island for guests he himself invited?' Lana suggests with a heavy roll of her eyes. 'Or flirting with everything female he can find, no matter how obviously attached she is?'

I wince.

'Yeah, your cousin doesn't seem to have a lot of impulse control in that area.'

Leaning her head back and closing her eyes against the sun, Lana makes a groan of the long-suffering.

'The number of harassment complaints I have to mediate for that man...' She makes a comical sob of frustration. 'It's too bad you didn't arrive in a few months time,' Lana straightens and glances pointedly at my middle. 'You'd have had to suffer a lot less of his unwanted attention then.'

My eyes bug and Lana is quick to correct herself, hands up and fingers trailing an invisible zip across her lips.

'Not to worry, your secret's safe with me. *Signor Alesi* won't hear a thing from—'

'*Signor Alesi*,' interrupts a deep baritone behind me, 'won't hear about *what*?'

Shit.

My heart spasms. Lana's face drains of color. I don't dare look over my shoulder at the looming specter I can feel behind me.

‘Is there something I’m not aware of?’ Cyrus’s voice drifts across the back of my neck and over my collarbone like trailing smoke. Deadly and sticky. Entrapping me in my lies.

Fuck. *Fuck fuck fuck...*

Lana’s smile is a valiant effort but even *I* can see that it’s still strained at the corners.

‘Only Darcy’s new dress,’ she assures Cyrus with a feminine quirk of her head. ‘I was asking if you’d be dressing to match the color but she insists she wants it to be a surprise. I hear you’re not much of a fashionista anyway, *signor* Alesi?’

The silence is deafening behind me and I watch as Lana’s smile slips off its anchors. Whatever stare Cyrus has fixed on her, it’s not a friendly one.

‘Well, I er... have a myriad of things to get done and the boss only gives me a day a week for myself so I should be heading on before the stores close...’

Lana shoots me a glance of utter contrition and then backs away from us like she’s just defused a bomb with only half the instruction manual. Her exit is harried and highly suspicious but I can’t exactly blame her. For all intents and purposes, Cyrus looks like a killer on his best days. When *angry...?*

I turn to face the spectacle for myself and am met with a darkly furrowed brow, locked jaw, and eyes that have turned equally icy despite their mismatched color.

‘Something I should know?’ he asks, the moment Lana is out of earshot.

I shore up my courage and set my shoulders.

‘Nothing worthy of concern.’ I try to sound casual.

‘You think a confidence shared between you and Felix Caruso’s right-hand woman isn’t “worthy of concern” to me?’ he asks, his tone dropping dangerously low.

I swallow and keep my spine straight.

‘No, I don’t. And you should trust my judgment.’

‘Why?’

The word isn't so much spoken as bitten out between his snapping teeth. And it hurts. I try not to show how much and lower my voice in case we're overheard.

'I thought we agreed to be teammates in this. To trust each other.'

Cyrus's upper lip curls.

'We agreed to be honest. Not to trust.'

Well, doesn't *that* just sum up the entirety of our relationship thus far?

And prove my neon warning light bang on.

I'll admit the situation looks suspicious as shit. And that I am, in fact, hiding something from him. But if Cyrus cannot trust that I'm doing it for a valid reason, can't trust my judgment of what he does and does not need to know, then anything real between us is ultimately doomed to fail.

Knowing absolutely every detail about your partner, after all, is not the key to a lasting relationship. The true test is trusting that you know everything you *should*.

'I don't know what to tell you, Cyrus,' I dodge with a final front of fortitude. 'Am I hiding something? Yes. Do you need to know about it? No. Whether you trust my conclusion on that is irrelevant. It's my call. Get on board or go whistle.'

Summoning up every scrap of stoic bravado I learned in the military, I give him a final stare right in the eye then turn on my heel and walk away.



FOLLOWING DARCY up the hill and back towards the hotel, I keep my gaze zeroed in on the back of her head.

I've known she's hiding something since the night I met Fiori at *The Blue Star*. Her determination to come on this trip had been odd. Her vague deportation issues had been full of mystery.

And then there's been everything since we've arrived... Like how she knew her way around those high-spec binoculars...? Or where she got that recording device she'd hidden in her pants at dinner...?

Even the way she speaks at times seems out of place for a humble bartender: her insights, her ability to pinpoint the exact crux of a situation or ask the poignant probing questions... At times, she almost sounds like an operative. Someone used to the sort of life that I was born to.

Dodging around a bright yellow VW bug parked on the side of the road, I keep Darcy in sight but myself at a distance. In my experience, when a woman as passionate as that is pissed off, you keep out of the line of fire. And Darcy is definitely ticked.

Ironic, considering *I'm* the one who should be blowing a gasket.

You're the one who left her alone, taunts a nasty little voice in the back of my head. *You're the one who let this happen...*

Still unsure exactly what "this" *is*, I try to piece together the clues:

Last night, Darcy and I enjoyed ourselves to the fullest. Like addicts, craving the feel of each other's skin, we drowned ourselves in pleasure until the first rays of sunlight had turned the sky from charcoal to silver. Damp with sweat and too heated to sleep, we'd relocated to the bathroom to cool off and clean up under the shower spray.

It had been another hour before we'd finally made it back to the bed.

In the end, we'd thanked God for the second king-size and slipped between its fresh sheets.

We'd slept late.

Neither of us stirred until nearly noon so, by the time we were ready to head into town, Darcy had suggested that we divide and conquer.

Darcy suggested...

Her argument had been sound: she needed something to wear for Felix's festivities tomorrow evening. I wanted to assess the harbor and potential routes off the island by sea. There would be fewer spies outside the hotel and, provided we left and arrived together, we'd raise little suspicion.

I'd thought it sounded reasonable. At the time.

Until I discovered Darcy loitering around the dockside with Lana Caruso.

"...your secret's safe with me. Signor Alesi won't hear a thing..."

Two half sentences. That's all I picked up on my approach. But it was enough to catalyze an avalanche of reaction: confusion, suspicion, hurt, anger... and a burning resolution to know the truth once and for all.

Two days ago, Darcy's quirks were appealing. Every time she revealed her intelligence, it was a turn-on. Each time she handled a piece of kit or talked to me on a level I could relate to, it warmed me through to my toes. Made me believe we had a connection that was more than great sex.

Now, those tidbits of memory, those fractured little pieces that didn't quite fit—no matter how appealing I once found them—have turned ugly in my head. And I'm kicking myself for letting sentimentality stay my hand from checking deeper into her background.

A woman with whom I've shared nothing personal suddenly wants to accompany me to a private island in the middle of the Aegean Sea? The same woman whom the Caruso's headhunter practically *forced* me to bring along? A woman who knows her way around surveillance equipment and thinks like a tactician?

A woman who shares confidences with Lana Caruso herself and then refuses to let me in on it?

I can't deny it any longer.

That kind of woman... is a spy.

Hurt and betrayal are quickly drowned in a sea of self-flagellation. Disgust and humiliation are fast on its heels.

See? whispers that voice in the back of my head. *Real relationships are impossible for you. Impossible for this line of work. Even women you think are yours. Who you think might come to care for you... They're all a part of the game.*

A game that I damn well know how to play, I remind myself.

If Darcy is truly in on this; if she's working for the Carusos to undermine me, to entrap me somehow, I'll simply outmaneuver her.

The idea of framing Darcy as my enemy gives me literal nausea but I swallow it back.

Just because you care for someone—hell even sharing blood with them—does not mean they're on your side. *You learned that lesson a long time ago, Alesi. Don't pussy-foot around it now.*

Nisí tou Chrysoú is a small island so the hike up to the hotel takes us only half an hour. Just enough time for me to crush sentimentality, affection, and everything else that had been growing for Darcy behind a door in my mind. A double-bolted, steel-riveted enforced door.

As we skirt the estate's surrounding wall and approach the wrought iron gates we arrived through two days ago, I jog the last few feet to come up beside Darcy. The sun has almost completely sunk beneath the horizon now, causing our shadows to stretch and loom across the hotel's forecourt. The nocturnal flowers in the driveway are pungent in my nose and my head starts to pound.

Annoyed, I take Darcy's arm with force and she gasps painfully. I can't help loosening my grip but I do at least manage to smash down my niggling reaction of shame.

'Seriously, Cyrus, this whole grabbing me thing—'

'Shut up,' I snap at her without warmth.

Darcy looks up at me. I watch her eyes grow wide in my peripheral.

‘What?’ she breathes, shocked by my sudden hostility. She nearly trips over the front step as I drag her into the hotel foyer.

Darcy, meet the real Cyrus Alesi. We apologize for the delay but he’s been away the last few days, distracted by lust and sentimental crap.

‘Ow, Cyrus you’re hurting me—’

‘Then stop struggling,’ I bite.

‘Where are we going?’

‘To our roo—’

‘Alesi...!’

I swallow back a curse and turn to discover none other than Hector Ramirez sauntering across the lobby.

Boy, do you have crappy timing.

‘Not now,’ I curtly dismiss him.

‘I’m afraid, *yes* now. I’m here to pick you up...’ Ramirez grins, apparently more than pleased to catch us in an inopportune moment. His eyes land on Darcy. ‘Are you all right, miss?’

Mary, mother of—

Would *one* man in this hotel give me a fucking break with this? The flirting and avid interest in Darcy is torture enough. Now, I’m stuck wondering how much of their attention is for a beautiful woman and how much for a comrade in need...

‘She’s fine,’ I spit at the mercenary, fearing I might crack a molar if I grit my teeth any harder.

I try to steer Darcy towards the elevators, annoyed all over again that this goddamn hotel doesn’t have a goddamn flight of stairs!

Lazy, rich-ass imbeciles—

‘Hey Alesi, I wasn’t kidding about picking you up,’ Ramirez calls out as he dogs our steps to the lifts. ‘The big man wants to see you.’

The reminder of my *actual* target has me sighing heavily and clamping a hand around the elevator’s closing door.

‘Now?’ I growl.

Ramirez shrugs innocently.

‘Says he wants to take you on a night sail. That he’s decided on that good-will condition of his. Whatever that means...’

I glance at Darcy. She’s stopped struggling to free her arm and has taken to glaring at me from the corner of her eye. Mention of the night cruise, however, has her glancing between Ramirez and me, her expression hard to read.

‘I need a minute,’ I tell the mercenary.

Ramirez looks between us, obviously entertained by the swirling tempest of tension.

‘I can give you five. But you better hurry. Caruso doesn’t like to be kept waiting.’

Fuck Caruso. Questioning Felix’s hidden agenda and securing access to Gabriel is important. But, if everything I learn is just going to be funneled back to the Caruso family or, worse still, to an unknown third party, then mitigating the threat Darcy’s presenting is the higher priority.

‘I’ll be quick,’ I grunt, letting go of the automated doors.

Through the narrowing crack, I seethe when Ramirez’s stare falls on Darcy again.

‘And you sure you’re all right, *signorin*—?’

Clunk. The doors shut firmly on Ramirez’s sweet nothings.

Darcy seems a little affected by the knight in shining armor routine and just rides the elevator with me in a cloud of tense silence.

As we disembark, I go to take her arm again and she jolts out of reach. I watch her, assess the number of exits on this floor, and then allow her to walk on ahead of me.

She doesn't try to escape. She doesn't try to break out over the upstairs balcony or rush down to the pool. Nor does she make a dash for the staff exits or private staircases (in which a spy would be well-versed). She just heads straight for our room, her head high and her stride defiant.

Her complete lack of fear is as attractive as it is unusual.

You've been caught, sweetheart. The SOP for surveillance work is to leave the second your cover is blown.

Following in her wake, I'm quick to unlock our suite and secure us both inside. I yank up the desk chair and plant it in the middle of the room.

'Sit,' I order her.

Darcy watches me with some serious scrutiny before she deigns to obey. She settles into the wooden chair, arms folded and legs crossed one slim thigh over the other. The classic posture adopted by those who have something to hide.

It annoys me that the beds are made. Housekeeping has stripped the linens that we spoiled in the night, replacing them with fresh, impersonal sheets.

'What now, my *liege*?' Darcy taunts from her seat.

Her stare is full of heated animosity... and bald resolve. The gaze of a woman who does not back down. A woman who has seen horrors and no longer fears them.

Or, who simply doesn't fear *me*.

Again, how did I not see the signs until now? How did I let her burrow so deep before realizing she's on the opposing team?

I love this woman...

Reaching for the bed, I grab those accursed fresh linens and tear off several strips of tattered fabric.

Darcy stares at me like I've lost my mind.

‘What the hell are you—oh, you have *got* to be kidding me?!’

She tries to escape but I grab her before she’s two steps off the block. Hauling her back into the chair, I hold her down by the shoulders. She’s strong and it takes far longer than intended to bind her wrists to the arms of the chair and her ankles to its legs.

When I pull away, I’m bruised in more than a few places and half impressed by the bite mark on my forearm.

‘You’re shitting me with this?’ Darcy demands, her hair falling into her eyes from her struggles and her cheeks flush with exertion. I’m a little out of breath myself.

‘I am not. Because now,’ I promise her with an eerie stillness. ‘Now, we find out who you *really* are, Darcy Calabrese...’

‘In five minutes?’ Darcy laughs, glancing at the door over my shoulder and tugging at her restraints. ‘You must be very confident in your interrogation skills.’

Anger sparks hotly, scenting something akin to a confession.

‘Is that what it’s going to take, Darcy?’ I ask, trying to cool my temper. ‘An interrogation?’

She stares up at me, eyes dark with rebellion.

‘Did you ever think...’ she poses slowly, quietly. ‘That I might have a good reason for keeping certain elements of my life private?’

‘You were the one who wanted us working more honestly,’ I point out.

‘And I *told* you that I’d be bad at it.’

‘*Meaning*,’ I argue, ‘that you never *intended* to be truthful, in the first place.’

‘Not about this, no.’

I snarl and work to keep our argument to a low volume. Too much noise and the neighboring guests might send

someone to the room.

‘And what is “*this*”?’ I demand. ‘Who do you answer to?’

Darcy sighs. Her gaze flickers towards the beds and, for a moment, I wonder if she’s seeing what I do every time I look over at that side of the room: the revels we found there.

I can still feel the creamy softness of her skin. The rough little callouses on her hands as she explores my body in return. I feel the heat of her breath on my neck. The delicious contrast of her silken hair and fuzzy undercut.

I know the taste of her. *Intimately*. I want it. I crave it...

I love this woman...

Yet, I have to remind myself over and again that the Darcy sitting in front of me is a stranger.

That cold, hard truth tears at something I didn’t know I had built deep inside.

‘Who do you work for?’ I’m ashamed to hear my voice crack at the accusation.

Darcy doesn’t seem to notice.

‘A money-grubbing middle-aged codger called Patrice Bartolini. He runs *The Blue Star* bar.’

‘You know what I mean, Darcy.’

‘Yes, I know what you *mean*, Cyrus,’ she spits. ‘But that doesn’t make you right. I’m not a spy and I’m not a threat.’

Baby, you’ve been threatening my clarity of mind since the day we met.

‘What were you paid to do here?’ I ask.

‘Nothing,’ she repeats reliably. ‘No one hired me.’

‘Then why did you target me five months ago?’

‘*Target* you?’ Darcy barks a sharp burst of laughter. ‘You’ve got to be joking. It was *you* who picked *me* up.’

My lip curls and I plant my hands over her wrists and I lean close, looming.

‘Was that your intention?’ I ask, sick to my stomach that this whole thing was a long-con. That every touch was a lie. ‘Was that your plan?’

‘Now, you’re giving me way too much credit,’ Darcy flops back against the hard back of the chair. Her head lolls over and she stares up at me sardonically. ‘Despite what you may believe, Cyrus, I’m not some temptress with a siren’s call. I’m just *me*, okay? *Just me.*’ Her frustration bubbling over, Darcy keeps talking and I let her, hoping she’ll reveal something of use. I watch the pulse at the base of her neck, waiting for a flicker; a hint at a lie.

‘You were at the bar,’ she illustrates, recalling our first encounter nearly half a year ago. ‘You looked strung out. I offered you a drink on the house. You offered me a whole lot more in return. We had sex. It was fantastic. So fantastic, in fact, that we’re still doing it. Or *were*, about twelve hours ago. Now you hear one thing,’—she lifts one finger against the white bindings, brushing at my arm—‘one moment of secrecy, and you’re ready to see me hung, drawn, and quartered.’ She pauses to breathe. ‘Did you ever think that you might be overreacting? That your distrust dial is set just a little too high?’

Perhaps.

‘Not for my line of work,’ I insist.

‘Then blame your employer,’ she snipes. ‘Not me.’

‘I’m freelance.’

‘Then blame *yourself*, asshole!’

I click my jaw in thought. We’re getting nowhere. Darcy is determined to volunteer diddly-squat and I’m not convinced I have the stomach to force her. We’re at an impasse and I’m on a timeline.

“I can give you five. But you better hurry. Caruso doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Standing back up, I take out my gun.

Color leeches from Darcy’s face.

‘What are you doing?’

Bluffing.

‘Finding a way to make you talk.’

‘By *shooting* me?’ she cries.

‘You’d be surprised how interconnected the tongue and knee-caps can be.’ I lift the weapon and aim it accordingly.

My act is satisfactory enough to have her looking fearful.

‘Cyrus don’t—’

‘What do you expect me to do, Darcy?’ I yell. ‘This entire island is a death trap waiting to spring. If I can’t trust you then —’

‘I’m pregnant.’

I freeze.

My jaw drops. My fingers go numb.

‘What?’

‘I’m pregnant,’ she repeats.

My tongue sticks dryly to the roof of my mouth.

Not possible.

‘You’re lying,’ I accuse on instinct.

She flinches.

‘Why would I lie?’

I wave the gun where it still hangs at the end of my lifeless arm.

‘To save your skin. I’d never shoot if you were—’

‘I *am*, Cyrus.’ That citrine gaze of hers is boring into me. No pretense, no lie. ‘I’m nearly eight weeks along.’

‘But we were always—’

‘Yes, we were,’ she says. ‘Apparently, my future kid laughs in the face of our precautions.’

My arm finally gives out and falls to my side. Some of the tension leaves Darcy's shoulders.

'When did you...' I can't finish the sentence. I can't seem to finish a *thought*. My brain is just a tangle of loose wires, connections broken and trailing ends dangling.

'Find out?' Darcy finishes for me. 'About four weeks after your last visit. I'm fairly regular.'

'And it's definitely—' The glare on her face has me nipping *that* question in the bud.

"Is that the kind of person you think I am?"

Darcy already said she hasn't slept with anyone since we met.

And you believe her? snarls that malicious little voice of experience. *Do you even believe she's pregnant? Isn't she just saving her own skin? Where's your proof? What if this is a con so that she can escape?*

She had that chance. She didn't run.

Maybe she doesn't have what she needs?

But what *would* she need? Me in knots? My head in a tangled mess? My sense of reason all shot to hell before I got to meet Caruso?

I feel sick.

Pressing my palms against my temples, gun still in hand, I resist the urge to scream.

'Cyrus?' Darcy's voice is suddenly full of concern.

I squeeze my eyes shut against a building migraine. I grit my teeth.

Surely, at some point, I have to trust *someone*?

"We should work together more. Let each other in. We should be more honest."

"I may be bad at it..."

I blink and stare around the room in surprise, as it hits me:

‘Wait...’ I zero in on Darcy who’s looking at me like I just grew a second head. ‘You said you’d be bad at being honest...’

‘What?’ she blinks.

‘Was this it?’ I urge.

‘Was *what* it?’

‘The...’—Dear God, I can’t even say the word—‘the *pregnancy*. Was you being pregnant the secret you were keeping? The *only* secret?’

‘Yes! Well, I mean, we don’t know everything about each —’

‘But *that’s* what Lana Caruso said she’d keep from me?’

‘*Yes!* She worked it out. Look, Cyrus, I’m not your enemy. I’m not a spy!’

I swallow hard. My heart is racing a mile a minute. Hope is a foreign and powerful force in the center of my chest.

‘I want to trust that,’ I admit.

‘Then *do!*’ Darcy begs, leaning forward in her chair, fighting against the restraints again. ‘Cyrus, trust is a *choice*.’

‘So is honesty,’ I remind her as my doubts renew their efforts and dig their claws in deeper.

Darcy winces, her eyes desperate.

‘I didn’t think you’d want to know,’ she whispers.

‘You *what?*’

How could she—?

A car passes around the forecourt outside, its headlights throwing a slice of blazing white over the clock on the bedside table.

It’s been twelve minutes since we left Ramirez in the foyer.

Shit.

‘I have to go.’ I head for the duffel bag I left stuffed behind the headboard of the bed.

Darcy snorts through her nose.

‘Oh please, you’re not seriously *going* to that meet with Caruso, are you?’

The amused light dies in Darcy’s eyes, swiftly replaced by what looks a whole lot like worry.

‘Cyrus... you *can’t*,’ she cries.

‘Can’t what?’ I shoot over my shoulder, as I stock up with several knives and extra clips for my Glock. ‘Do my job?’

‘No. Walk into something that’s so *clearly* a trap. He wants to take you out to fucking sea. You know... that popular dumping ground for murdered bodies? If this is all a setup, if he knows that you’re not really here for a job, he’ll—’

‘And how would he know that, sweetheart?’ I accuse, darkly.

Darcy’s face flushes with pink fury.

‘I told you. I’m *not* your enemy. And, even if I *was*, do you really think I’d be warning you not to go?’

‘You say that like you’ve never heard of poker.’

‘I’m not bluffing you, Cyrus!’

‘No, you’ve just been flat-out *lying* to me!’

‘Oh my God, you are the most *infuriating* man!’ Darcy’s anger is strong enough to rock the chair on its legs. ‘Look, untie me and we can talk about this.’

‘No dice, sweetheart.’ I shake my head. Now kitted out, I retrieve a balled-up pair of socks from the depths of the bag.

‘You can’t be serious?’ Darcy growls, eyeing the socks like they’re a pinless grenade. Just as she suspects, I stuff them between her teeth as a gag.

‘I *want* to trust you,’ I repeat with sincerity. ‘But until I can convince myself of the truth in all this, I need to keep you secure.’

Her gaze is a fiery contradiction; her stern brow lowered in wrath but her eyes wide with concern. Her eyes are so sincere,

so *raw*, that I have to resecure the locks on that mental door.

Don't cave. Don't give in.

Darcy struggles against the sheet ties and cries a yell of protest around the mass of cotton in her mouth but it's barely a dull moan. Reassured that she won't draw attention to her capture, free herself, or escape whilst I'm gone, I keep both key cards to the room in my pocket and leave before doubts can stall my steps.

In the hallway, I have to take a moment. Clear my head. And make a call.

'Yeah?' Jaime is quick to answer and sounds out of breath. Not to mention thoroughly annoyed at the interruption.

"I'm pregnant..."

'I'm headed to meet him now,' I say into the phone, blotting out Darcy's voice in my head. 'I'll let you know what I find out.'

'Nothing at the dinner?' Jaime checks. I hear a low moan coming from his end of the line. It's hard to tell if he's entertaining a woman or a suspect. Knowing Jaime, it could equally be either.

'Theories, nothing more,' I report, heading for the elevators.

"I'm nearly eight weeks along."

'So, you're calling me *because...*?' Jaime sounds impatient. I try to clear my head.

Get it together, asshole.

'Caruso wants a private meet. On his boat.'

The line goes quiet for a second. Then the background noises start to fade, like Jaime's stepping away from the action. His tone is more focused and less annoyed.

'What do you need?' he asks.

'Nothing. But if I don't check in with my tech guy in two hours, she's going to call you.'

With instructions to release the woman that I've left tied up in my room and to investigate one Vincent Omar.

Oh, and avenge my murder, if you happen to have the time...

'Just keeping you informed in case I *don't*.'

'Wait, Cyrus—'

I hang up the call, fire off instructions to Nat via text message, and then turn front and center as the elevator doors ding closed. When they open again, they reveal Hector Ramirez with a gun in his hand and a whole lot of pissed off on his face.

My last thought stepping out of the elevator is Darcy's voice in my head.

"I didn't think you'd want to know..."

The *Principessa d'Oro* is the largest vessel in the *Nisi tou Chrysoú* marina.

Golden inlays decorate an otherwise flawless ivory body from stem to stern. Its name, emblazoned across the bow, looked navy in the daylight yesterday. Now, it sucks in the lamplight from the docks and stares at me ominously in inky black cursive. The silver safety rails along the hull are a cool shade of iron in the moonlight, like the bars of a cage. At the cruiser's rear is an open deck, lit from the inside and surrounded by all the luxuries one might find on land: couches, coffee tables, and enough fabric comfort to defy the salty sea breeze. Inside the ship are equally rich trappings for those who prefer the shade with a darker, narrow staircase leading into the belly of the boat.

It's up from these depths that Felix Caruso makes his entrance, just as Ramirez nudges me over the railing and onto the open rear deck.

'Alesi...' Felix greets, subtly dropping the formal prefix. I'm too preoccupied in the head to worry about his power games. 'So, good of you to join me.'

Three large men, plus Ramirez and Felix's cousin Rocco, are hovering on the edge of the boat and along the pier it's anchored to. I try to keep them all in my peripheral.

'It didn't seem like a choice,' I respond, glancing pointedly at the weapon still in Ramirez's hand.

Felix eyes his mercenary with a reproachful look that I don't buy for a second.

'Then Hector must have not expressed my invitation correctly. Come, come...'

He encourages me to take a seat on the rear deck and then offers to fashion me with a drink. I decline and he fixes himself an Old Fashioned.

'I thought you might enjoy a little after-dark sailing whilst you're here?' Felix suggests casually. 'The sea, the sky... It's really as impressive at night as it is during the day.'

"I'm pregnant..."

God, was Darcy telling the truth? A kid? A *baby*?

'Alesi?' Caruso nudges when I just stare at him blankly.

For fuck's sake! Get your head in the game!

Leaning into the couch with an arm across its back, I glance over my shoulder at the sea beyond.

I activated a tracer request with Nat whilst being escorted down to the docks. Here in the marina, she'll have no difficulty reading me on satellite imaging. Too far out to sea and I might be risking her scope of surveillance. Which would mean no evidence of my death should Felix be truly on to me.

'I can see the waves and stars just fine from here,' I point out. 'You sure the view will be any better beyond the harbor? Alone?'

The pointed reminder that Felix wouldn't be the only predator out on the water has the Caruso head chuckling.

'I don't trust you either, Alesi. But fine...' he nods in deference to my suggestion.

"...trust is a choice."

Taking the seat across from me, Felix hooks an ankle over the opposing knee. The real leather of his boots gleams in the romantic lamplight.

'If you feel safer here at dockside, we'll remain.'

It's a baited question, designed to have me defend my courage and insist on shipping out. I almost bite. Which just goes to show how rocked I am.

'Lack of trust is what we're here to correct, isn't it?' I prompt, resting my head on an upturned hand as I lean back against the cushions. I keep my body language open and unafraid. 'Your condition?'

Shit, isn't pregnancy known as the "delicate condition"? My mind races through everything we've been doing on the island. The heated moments, the intense ones... then there's the stress of staying in a hotel full of thugs... me wrestling her into that chair...

Felix sighs through his nose.

'For an Italian, you are very terse when it comes to getting down to the business of a matter.'

'I'm not Italian.'

'No?' Caruso's brows rise in surprise. 'I didn't know that.'

'No reason you should...' I don't deliberately hide my personal details from the world. But having no one to share them with tends to naturally keep things from the public eye. 'Suffice it to say I have no loyalties in general. Patriotism included.'

No loyalties... what about to a kid, huh Alesi? To your blood kin? Would you be loyal to them?

'And yet you want me to believe in your loyalty to *me*,' Felix sneers.

'No.' I shake my head and Caruso tenses on his side of the boat. Shit, one wrong move here and I'll have a gun leveled at my head. 'As I've said from the beginning, I work independently. I'll be no more loyal to you than any other client. What I would like you to trust is my professionalism. I don't cross wires and I don't play both sides. My discretion lies with those who sign my payslip.'

'Ah, devout only to the great dollar...' Felix muses.

I raise a sardonic eyebrow.

‘When you have nothing else...’ I shrug.

Nothing else... Does that still hold true, now?

Felix makes that nose-sigh of his again and scans the marina. The masts of a dozen sailing boats and larger yachts reach for the sky. Like spindly, winter-stripped trees. The lapping of the water against the hull is slow and rhythmic. It should be soothing but it just reminds me of the movie *Jaws*.

Making my own assessment of the area, I spot Ramirez and Rocco whispering together on the pier. Rocco is smiling with a carefree shrug to his posture. The mercenary, on the other hand, has eyes bright with intrigue.

I tense, sensing danger.

‘All right,’ Felix finally surrenders, drawing my focus again. ‘Then I suppose what I’m about to ask of you is less about proving your allegiance to *me* and more about confirming that you’re no longer in league with the *Machellis*.’

‘I’ve told you that I’m not.’

‘And you’re smart enough to know that I would never accept your word on the matter, I’m sure.’ Felix’s silver tongue spins a merry dance. ‘Do this one thing for me and I’ll trust you enough to put you on the payroll. Forever if you wish.’

I’m so damn tired of this charade.

Screw the Carusos. Screw Gabriel.

All I want to do is get back to the hotel. Hell, to get back to *Rome*. Preferably with Darcy, bundled in bubble wrap and dragged in tow if need be.

I want her back at her place. No, at *my* place. The apartment I keep to the south of the city is little more than an empty storage space with a bedframe and a coffee machine. But it’s an address that won’t flag on any search; somewhere we can sit and talk about all of this.

“...my future kid laughs in the face of our precautions.”

My future kid.

Not *our* future kid.

I suddenly feel like Felix's mega yacht—his beautiful Golden Princess—is sinking. Just sliding right out from under my ass and dragging me beneath the waves.

Why didn't it dawn on me before?

Darcy knew about her pregnancy *before* we came here. Before we got on that plane.

"I'm going to be making a change, Cyrus. My place, my job, my... connections."

"...you never intended to be truthful in the first place."

"Not about this, no."

She never *wanted* me to know. Had I not threatened to shoot her, I would *never* have known.

She wants to leave and never look back... whispers the asshole in my head. *She'll have your baby but not you.*

And why would she? You tied her to a chair and threatened to shoot out her knees.

Oh my God...

I'm on my feet before I can stop myself.

'Going somewhere?' Felix narrows his eyes, trying to read the cause of my sudden anxiety.

Fuck.

I deliberately smooth away whatever emotion might be showing on my face and try to curl my lip into an arrogant sneer.

'If you're going to keep dancing around the subject, I'm not interested, Caruso,' I declare, trying to keep my heart rate even.

What if she gets herself free from that chair? What if she makes a run for it? Darcy might not have my resources but she's smart. Would I ever find her?

‘Excuse me?’ Felix questions.

‘I don’t stand for wasted time. I’m efficient,’ I say, trying to ignore the itching worry that Darcy might be fleeing the hotel right now. ‘It’s part of my charm. Either tell me your condition or let me go.’

Recognizing that I’m on the brink of leaving his deal in the dust, Felix finally demands:

‘I want the Machellis’ retainer rates,’ he admits. His green eyes flicker the lurid color of seaweed. ‘For the Lorenzi, Aramacchi and Don Ferrigno lines.’

That has my attention.

Lorenzi, Aramacchi, and Don Ferrigno... the three largest import/export businesses working in the Mediterranean. And the Machellis cater to them all, providing security and using the larger vessels to smuggle illegal goods in and out of the continent. They are the three major cornerstones of the Machelli economy.

Despite everything else going on, I’m haunted by the touch of human in Jaime’s voice when he asked me what I needed...

‘You want *what?*’ I ask, trying to avoid all of it. ‘Are you insane?’

‘You used to work for them,’ Felix points out, his voice suddenly becoming very dark.

The nearest and largest of Caruso’s security notes his drop in tone and takes a threatening step forward, weapon in hand and one foot on the ship’s safety rail. I try not to tense but I’m fully exposed. In the middle of the ship’s deck, standing tall and without cover or escape.

Felix’s next words are more bars to the trap...

‘And my sources say that you haven’t signed the dotted line of your resignation just yet, either...’

No...!

‘I no longer work for the Machellis,’ I promise.

‘But *they* don’t know that,’ Felix adds with certainty. ‘In fact. I’m under the distinct impression that they still believe you to be their loyal soldier.’

Felix’s stare is like a hawk enjoying the final flurries of its prey.

‘So... if you are truly cutting ties with your former employer, I want you to manipulate that oversight and get me those retainer rates.’

‘So that you can underbid them.’ And steal eighty percent of the competition’s transport avenues in one fell swoop.

My heart is hammering in my throat. My palms are sweating.

Do not draw your weapon, asshole. One wrong move, one sign of threat, and it’s all over. You draw, you die.

Darcy...!

‘What I do with those rates is my business. How you get them is yours.’

‘Fine,’ I agree. Because what else can I say? Despite the way Felix is watching me, his greed seems larger than his distrust. Perhaps the mission isn’t dead yet. Hanging by a thread, maybe, but not yet clipped.

Just twenty-four hours. Just play along until tomorrow night and you could have Gabriel...

‘I’ll get them to you,’ I promise, heading for the edge of the boat. I’ll get back to Darcy and send her home. Then I’ll stay and play Felix’s game for one more night. ‘It’ll take me until—’

‘Tomorrow night,’ Felix interrupts.

I freeze with one boot on the safety rail. Felix’s cookie-cutter henchmen are swarming too close for comfort. Ramirez is missing.

‘Excuse me?’ I ask him, a sense of doom settling in my gut.

Felix keeps his gaze forward, his posture cool and his vehemence edgy.

‘You have until tomorrow night, Alesi,’ he vows. ‘*Before the party.*’

‘You want me to dig up the most coveted secrets in the Machelli hauling trade in less than a day? You don’t think that will look a little suspicious?’

‘What do you care?’ Felix asks, his eyes gleaming like a cat. ‘You’re leaving their employ... *aren’t you?*’

I chew on my molars.

‘Fine.’ Because, again, what else can I say?

I’m barred again as I try to leave. One of Felix’s men braces a hand against my shoulder and I choke the urge to throw the fucker overboard.

‘Do not take me for a fool, Alesi,’ Caruso taunts from behind his swirling whiskey glass. ‘You or your little woman try leaving this island and I will take great joy in breaking the both of you.’

Don’t bite... don’t bite.

You draw, you die.

‘Fail to get me those numbers,’ Felix continues, ‘and I’ll make sure to start with her.’



HOT, panting, and aching from head to toe, I stare angrily at the leg of the bed.

We had such a good time together last night, old friend. Can’t help me out now though, can you?

Exhaling hard, I send several locks of my hair streaming over the carpet. The plush weave is thick and heavy against my shoulder.

After using my weight to build momentum, I've successfully thrown the chair—and myself—onto its side.

Having worked my tongue around the gag, I throw my exhale behind the wad of cotton and send the socks dancing under the bed.

'Okay,' I exhale steadily. *I have a few bruises to add to the collection but, all in all, not going too badly, here.*

The fact that I'm still tied to the chair is a serious bummer, though.

Soon to be corrected...

I eye my rucksack, tidied away under the bed. Inside is my leather jacket. In the pocket of which is a penknife.

My freedom, hidden inside a Russian doll of zippers.

No time for moaning. Onward, soldier.

Awkward shuffling and a lot of core work inches the chair as close to the bed as possible. The rest is up to dental dexterity, as I stretch my head under the bed and grab the strap of the bag with my teeth. The zip is harder, but I eventually pin it between my incisors and have it worked around the rucksack. The jacket is floppier and takes longer.

By the time I have the pocket unzipped, my jaw hurts. Taking the leather in my mouth and shaking it until my penknife hits the ground gives me neck cramp.

'I swear to God,' I grumble. *If that damn man isn't shot on that boat or already sinking to the bottom of the ocean... I'm gonna kill him myself.*

The knife pops open with a simple nose-press to its catch but it takes an eternity to pin it into place between my knee and the bedframe. Then it's just a matter of getting my wrist near the blade.

'Goddamnit...' I grunt, thoroughly regretting turning down Lily-Anne's repeated offers to take up yoga with her.

A heavy thumping on the door has me freezing in place.

What the—?

‘Open up, *signorina*...’

I recognize the voice and my blood runs cold. It’s the guy who took Cyrus to meet Caruso.

What on earth is he doing here? And where the hell is Cyrus?

Burying the urge to panic, I focus on the task at hand.

Just get free... Get free and you can deal with whatever is on the other side of that door.

I angle my arm, press against the penknife, and use my limited range of motion to shift the bindings back and forth along the blade.

‘Come on...’

A massive crash—the sound of a full-grown man slamming into a wooden door—has me jumping out of my skin. The knife slips and topples to one side, the blade muffled in the carpet.

‘Shit!’

A crack of light has broken down the seam of the doorway. The paid thug on the other side is breaking in!

More frightening still: if all pretense of friendly negotiation is now gone...?

Cyrus...!

Another heavy blow hits the door. Voices in the next room over shout in surprise.

Urging myself to focus, I stare at the frayed tear I’ve made in the sheet. I wonder how long it’ll take to realign my knife versus the time it’ll take a highly-trained mercenary to break through that door.

Fuck it.

Giving up on the knife, I yank as hard as I can against that tear, my upper arm straining, my forearm pulling back from the chair.

Nothing.

Weight hits the door to the suite with another almighty impact. This time, I can see a clear strip of the hallway beyond. At least six inches wide. An ogreish dark shape rushes the door again.

‘Come on, come on...’

I take a deep breath and think of the life inside me. The daughter I’m responsible for. The one who cannot defend herself.

I’m all she has.

With a growling cry, I pull back hard against my ties.

This time, a blessed tearing noise pierces the air. The sheet holds on until *riiip*, it pops free and my arm pinwheels over my head.

I don’t pause to breathe. With my now free hand, I scramble for my knife as fast as I can.

I’m a sitting duck stuck on the ground so I dive to free my ankles first.

Another smash to the door and the lock finally springs free. The battered panelling flies wide open and a sickly yellow light floods the room.

‘Well, *this* isn’t what I was expecting...’ A hulking shadow steps inside and kicks the door until its ragged shape sticks back into its frame. ‘But I’m not complaining...’

One ankle free!

The second is more awkward and I struggle to reach... *Dammit, I should have freed my other wrist first!* It was the wrong call.

And I know only too well how a single mistake in the field is fatal.

The mercenary comes stalking into the suite, his gait predatory and a cruel smile in his voice.

‘I knew something was up with you and this “Ghost”. People like him don’t come begging for work. Felix’s too blinded by his greed to see it.’

Ignore him. Focus!

With the knife already under the binding, I don't have time to change my mind. I work the knife hard. The fabric tears a millimeter at a time...

'So,' the hitman skirts the end of the bed and he's suddenly at my feet. I feel his shadow spreading over my shoulder, blocking the moonlight, and turning my skin to ice. A heavy cylinder locks into place in my peripheral; the barrel of his gun leveling at my head. 'I'll get rid of you. Find the evidence I need. And then have your boyfriend dead to rights. Emphasis on dead.'

He cocks his gun.

The bindings spring free.

I spin with more speed than accuracy but it's enough. I slip out of the chair and onto the carpet, throw my arm up and over my head, and send the chair I'm still attached to hard into the hitman's side.

'What the—*shit!*'

His aim is thrown wide and the soft pew of his silencer whizzes past my left ear.

The collision of heavy man and sturdy wooden chair has him toppling sideways and me dragged after by the momentum. He scrambles for his gun and I kick at his hands whilst reaching for my last bound wrist. I scratch myself in my hurry, stub my toe against his arm, and can't catch my breath. But I don't care. My only focus is freeing myself, so I can either make a run for it or go on the defensive.

Just a little more... Yes!

Breaking free, I grab the chair, now missing a leg, and aim one of the remaining wheels at the killer's head.

He ducks to avoid me, giving me the chance to dive for my knife and then rush to my feet.

'You bitch!'

He's quicker than he looks.

As soon as I'm standing, he's already vertical and re-aiming his weapon in my direction.

Training I've not needed in years kicks in and I strike out hard and fast. Hand to the wrist, drive to the elbow. A sharp and efficient disarming.

'What the—!'

Despite his shock, the mercenary is no amateur. He's quick to counter. With his gun lost, he throws out a combination. I duck and counter back. I recognize his preference for karate. He reads my background in Muay Thai. Neither of us gives any ground. Our strikes are parried and our defences tested. He avoids my strike and knocks my knife to the ground. I block an assault to my face with my forearms and feel the weight of his attack shake all the way to my elbows.

I'm at a severe disadvantage. With no room to build momentum or swing through larger kicks, my attacks are low impact, and with his size, my chances of escape are low.

I hold my own and fight for any opportunity to rush for the door.

Maybe I can outlast him. My stamina is good and his strikes are hard and draining. If I can just keep blocking, keep dodging...

The assassin works my lighter weight to his advantage, throwing heavy shots to my shoulders and head. I beat him back, looking for an opening to run...

Until I lash out too far and overextend.

One mistake, soldier.

Grabbing my arm, he has me. He hip-throws me behind him, away from the door. I land on the bed. And he lands on me.

Before I can blink, he has his hands around my throat and starts to squeeze.

I pant for air and claw at his fingers. I dig my nails into the back of his hands. I try to get my legs up between us, to beat him back with my knees...

‘I don’t know who you really are, bitch,’ he pants above me, throwing his weight into his chokehold. ‘But I don’t have time for this. I need to search this place before your boyfriend gets back.’

He’s alive! Cyrus is alive!

Adrenaline surges through my bloodstream like a power-up. Going against instinct, I let go of the killer’s hands and reach for his face. Without mercy, I drive my thumbs into his eye sockets until he howls with pain and releases me.

Gasping for oxygen, I remember not to hesitate. I throw my weight against him and send us both crashing to the ground. I straddle his body, draw back an arm, and, using gravity to my advantage, I sock him as hard as I can in the temple.

He goes limp.

Panting, I draw back for a second strike on impulse and pause, waiting to see if he moves again. A pulse flickers in his neck. His chest is still rising. But he’s knocked out cold.

Relief almost leads to collapsing on top of the asshole. Sheer disgust keeps me upright and wobbling to my feet.

Checking in with my pulse and shaking out my limbs, I double-check my body for any mortal wounds that adrenaline might have concealed in the heat of battle. Finding only lumps, bumps, and a few minor cuts, I steel myself before reaching for the killer’s gun. I then glance back at the six-foot-two thug passed out on the carpet.

Time for clean up...

I was driven down to the docks. In the cushy and plush backseat of a Mercedes XLS.

No such fucking luxury on the return journey. I'm left to make my own way back up to the hotel, headed uphill for the second time today.

I start off walking but it doesn't last.

"...I'll start with her."

Felix's threats... the knowledge in his eyes... the conniving malice in Ramirez's gaze as he spoke with Rocco...

I pick up the pace as I begin to wonder if Rocco Caruso pulls double duty, like Lana. Does he work at the hotel too? And, if so, would he know where Darcy and I are staying?

My jog becomes a run. Remembering Ramirez's absence at the pier, the run becomes an uphill sprint.

I don't think Felix would have yet ordered anything against Darcy. He was too quick to use her as a threat for those retainer numbers. But Ramirez...?

I clocked Ramirez the day we arrived; I noted his ambition and his lone-wolf motivations. If he thinks he can find something... If he thinks harming Darcy or me would gain him prestige with the head honcho...

Some deep instinct—some innate skill, honed from years of experience in this world—is now convinced: Ramirez left the pier to go back to the hotel. To find Darcy.

And you left her tied up.

With a strangled cry, I run harder, throwing all my strength into my thighs and hitting the paving stones as hard as I can.

Even flat out, my legs are no match for a speeding vehicle. No matter how fast I go, how many alleys I take, or shortcuts I rush down... Ramirez will be faster. At least twenty minutes faster.

She's dead. I choke on the idea, sweat pouring from my skin, my legs burning in the cold night. *If Ramirez went back to hurt her, you're going to be too late. She's already dead.*

They. My heart crushes, my lungs spasm. I nearly fall over my own feet. They're *already dead.*

Gasping for air, I hurtle into the foyer like a bullet.

My panic has me imagining blood running from the ceiling and the marble floor shot to pieces. But everything is normal: the squeaky clean floor, the chattering guests. The only discrepancy is the reception desk. Empty.

Panting, wheezing, I don't give a shit for the golden carriage elevators. I sprint for the desk, vault it, and shove through the door marked "*Staff Only*". I race up a staircase I've been pretending not to know about, hoisting myself faster on the handrail and leaping the last few steps. Charging through the door for the second floor brings me out at the wrong end of our corridor and I turn on my heel to speed back towards the Athena Suite.

My heart stops when I turn a corner and spot the right room.

'No...' I choke.

The door looks like it's been assaulted with a battering ram. The paint is smashed and flecking and a large crack slices across its front, down to the busted lock half hanging off the wood. It's been wedged back into its frame but the door is destroyed. Like a bulldozer has forced its way inside.

A bulldozer that, I have no doubt, had a fucking onyx earring... and a gun.

‘No!’

I sprint the last few feet and throw aside the little yellow maintenance sign propped beside the damage.

The door gives way easily under my shoulder, springs wide, and then snaps back off the wall. The lock clocks me in the elbow on the rebound but I hardly notice. I hit the lights.

The room is carnage. Both beds are rumpled heaps and the lamp on the desk has been smashed, its pieces strewn over the floor. The chair Darcy was tied to is broken and has been left to die beneath the window. An angry slash cuts deep into its padding and it’s bleeding stuffing onto the carpet.

There’s a bullet hole in the bedside cabinet.

My heart stops even as my head tries to tell me there’s no blood. No body. The room, in fact, is empty.

‘Darcy?!’ I call, half-choking on her name.

‘Cyrus?’

I almost fall to my knees with just the sound of her voice. The bathroom door cracks open and my stomach twists hard. *In the bathroom. She’s been hiding in the bathroom.*

‘Yeah, baby, it’s me.’

The door opens wider and Darcy rushes out. I have just enough time to register the gun and silencer she wields in one hand before she’s wrapping her arms around my neck and burrowing in deep.

Forgetting everything else, just for a second, I squeeze her close and breathe in the scent of her.

‘Fuck me, it’s good to feel you...’ I mutter against her skin. Her warm, *alive* skin. Loathe as I am to break away from her, I think of that bullet hole and break the embrace. ‘Come on, we need to get out of here and—’

Darcy tenses in my arms.

‘Are more coming?’

‘More?’ I ask with surprise.

Reading the scene, my assumption had been Ramirez launching an assault on an empty suite and destroying it in frustration when he found his target missing. But then, how would she get the gun? It's not one of mine...

Dread turns the blood in my veins to tar.

She hadn't been missing. She had been *here*.

'What happened?' I snarl.

As an answer, Darcy reaches back to push the bathroom door wide.

Hector Ramirez, unconscious and drooping against his moorings, is tied to the toilet. His bindings are a hodgepodge. I spot a belt, a series of cables that I suspect came from the back of the television, and more bed sheet strips. My socks are in his mouth, fastened into place with what *was* one of my t-shirts, now twisted into a rope and tied around the back of his head. Beneath his flopping hair, one side of Ramirez's face is coming out in a bruise, his nose is bloody but no longer flowing and his shirt is a mess of slashing tears, sweat stains, and blood splatter.

'What the...?' My instinct is to check his ties but I can already see several complex knots in the cabling. Clearly, Darcy knows what she's doing. 'What the hell happened to him?'

'I did,' Darcy admits, closing and locking the door on the mercenary. 'Or, to be more exact, *he* happened to *me*.'

For the first time, I notice the rough quaver in Darcy's voice. The way she keeps swallowing. The touch she makes to her neck.

I grab her by the shoulders and turn her towards the light.

'Cyrus don't—'

'Let me see, dammit!'

My pulse stalls out again as the light hits Darcy's neck. Bruises. Heavy, darkly red bruises are quickly thickening to purple. Each the length and shape of a finger. Right there on her throat.

‘He tried to...’ I can’t even finish the sentence.

‘Yeah,’ Darcy swallows, ‘but he didn’t.’

‘He could have killed you...’ My voice is so thready I don’t even recognize it as mine.

‘Cyrus?’ Darcy’s voice suddenly sounds distant... almost far away.

‘Shit, he could have... Darcy, he could have *killed* you...’ I’ve lost control of my manic babbling.

‘Cyrus? Whoa, Cyrus, you just went super white. Look, we need to sit you down.’

He choked her. He wrapped his hands around her fucking neck and tried to choke the life out of her!

I feel myself split into two minds: the first wants to barge into that bathroom and stab Ramirez straight through each of those fucking hands of his; the other is starting to shake so badly it’s like I’m having a seizure.

‘Cyrus?’ Darcy’s voice has shot up in concern. She crowds in close, her hands on my chest. ‘Cyrus, baby, your heart is beating really fast, you need to calm down. Come on...’

I don’t see it happen: one minute I’m on my feet and the next I’m sitting on one of the beds.

Is this the bed he threw her against? Is this where he tried to kill her?

‘Cyrus, listen to me...’

Did she cry? Did she beg for her life? For the life of the baby?

Dear God, the baby...

‘Is it... are they...’ I seem to have lost all control of my tongue.

‘Cyrus, I want you to breathe for me,’ Darcy’s voice is firm and warm in my ears.

Breathe for her. Who was breathing for *her* when that fucker had his hands around her throat?

‘*Listen* to me, Cyrus!’

A sharp pain hits me across the face and I’m jolted back to the present, surprised to find Darcy leaning over me with her hand raised. Did she slap me? I’ve fallen back on the bed and she’s on all fours, braced over my prone figure. She shakes my shoulders.

‘Cyrus, you’re turning blue. Watch me!’ Her lips purse on a heavy inhale. Her cheeks flair on a forceful exhale. ‘Come *on*, Cyrus....’

It takes a minute but I begin to breathe. In and out. I follow her rhythm and we breathe together. Only then do I realize that I’m drenched in cold sweat and my fingers and toes are tingling with pins and needles. Darcy has stopped sounding so far away and the room is no longer spinning.

Darcy sighs in relief, her forehead falling onto my chest.

‘Wh...’ I’m not sure how to ask what I’m thinking.

‘I think you had a panic attack.’

‘I...’ I rub a hand over my face and look up into Darcy’s. There’s a cut above her left eyebrow and her lip is split. Then there are the bruises under her jaw and the scratches on her wrist. ‘I didn’t like seeing you hurt.’

‘Apparently not,’ she smiles softly. ‘But I’m *fine*.’

I reach to run a fingertip gently over her neck.

‘I *will* be fine,’ she corrects, ‘I promise.’

‘What...’ I clear my throat. ‘What happened?’

I ask, more calmly this time. I swallow my heart from my throat back down into my chest, where it sputters and then starts to thump normally again.

‘He broke in. I was still in the chair—’

I wince.

‘Baby, I—’

‘Ssh...’ She places a finger on my mouth. ‘I do not forgive you for tying me up. That is going to take some groveling. But

I do *not* blame you for a mercenary coming through the door like a rhino. You couldn't have known that would happen.'

'I should have—'

'You. Did. Not. Know,' she interrupts firmly. 'And, if I think at any point that you're blaming yourself for it, I'm going to slap you again.'

I don't know whether to groan or laugh. Some garbled mixture of the two rolls from between my lips.

'You should hit me, anyway,' I tell her. 'I still tied you up. I still thought you were a traitor.'

Darcy's eyes are gentle. Far gentler than I deserve.

'True,' she says. 'And we'll get to that. But I was able to get out of the chair and give whoever *that is*—'

'Ramirez,' I answer.

'Wait, you *know* him?'

I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a long inhale as my body continues to fight for its equilibrium.

'Only since we got here. He's a freelance mercenary working under Felix.'

'Sounded to me like he wanted bonus points. He said he was convinced you weren't on the level and that he would find evidence to prove it.'

'That tracks,' I nod. 'He'd be out for blood if he thought it would help pad his paycheck.'

'He was expecting to find me in here but I don't think he was expecting me to fight back,' Darcy concludes with an odd little smile. It's... refreshing. Almost liberated. And possesses a serious dose of pride. Despite everything else going on, that smile touches me. Arousal and adoration shoot along my nerve endings.

'How did you know how to—?'

'I told you, didn't I?' she reminds me. 'There are things about me you don't know yet. *Not* because I'm hiding them,

by the way, but—’

‘Because we never really got to the get-to-know-you stage?’ I finish for her.

She smiles.

‘Right.’

There’s a softness in Darcy that was missing an hour ago. An openness. Perhaps she’s simply exhausted from her ordeal but it doesn’t feel that way. She seems... relaxed. The fresh, clean sense of self you find after a workout.

‘I would really like to do that, now,’ I confess.

‘Do what?’ she blinks.

‘Get to know you.’

Darcy shifts her weight onto her forearm. Her body lays along mine and she reaches to trace the shape of my temple, my cheekbone. Her touch leaves a trail of heat in its wake, and I snatch up her fingers. I press a kiss to her palm.

‘Are you going to trust what I have to say, this time?’ she asks, resting her head on my shoulder and snuggling into my neck.

‘Yeah,’ I promise her. ‘I’m going to *choose* to trust it.’

I can hear the smile in Darcy’s voice as she asks:

‘What brought this change about?’

Thinking, even for a minute, that you were gone.

‘There are worse things in this world than you double crossing me. After calculating the risk, I’d rather be betrayed than heartbroken.’

Darcy sniggers against my collarbone. The sound shudders through my bones and makes me tingle.

‘“Calculating the risk”?’ she repeats, highly amused. ‘That’s the most prosaic bit of romance I’ve ever heard,’ she accuses.

‘You’re welcome,’ I smile.

Lifting herself back up, Darcy brushes a lock of hair behind her ear. When the gesture fails to hook and the dark lengths fall forward again, I reach up to do it for her.

‘I think,’ I murmur, drinking in every angle of her face, every facet of her eyes, ‘I need you to kiss me, now.’

Darcy smiles, her nose wrinkling. Instead of cooperating with that plan, however, she quirks her eyebrow at me.

‘Don’t you think we should get rid of the unconscious henchman in our bathroom first?’

I groan, my limbs falling lifeless on the bed.

‘Fine,’ I agree, ‘but I’m doing it.’

‘I can help—’

‘No.’ My tone is final, as I transfer her gently from my torso to the bedspread. ‘You’re going to stay here and move as few muscles as is humanly possible.’

Darcy pulls a face.

‘Um, excuse me,’ she waves a hand towards the bathroom door as I stand up, ‘I think I’ve proven this evening that I’m hardly fragile.’

I pause to brace a hand on either side of her hips and lean low to steal my coveted kiss.

‘Not fragile,’ I promise against her lips. ‘*Precious.*’



THE NEXT TWO hours are something of a blur.

I catch Cyrus up on the lies I told the reception staff when they responded to noise complaints from our room and he removes the body from our bathroom before the elegantly dressed woman from the front desk returns with a replacement room key. Whether incapacitated somewhere or more permanently disposed of, Cyrus reassures me that the guy he calls Ramirez won’t be found before we fly back to the mainland. And I trust his judgment in the matter.

I *choose* to trust his judgment.

‘So...’ I begin, sitting cross-legged in the center of a brand new super-king bed. Design-wise, Room 118 is a step down from the swanky suite we’d originally been given. But it does at least have a fully functioning door and all the furnishings have the right number of legs. ‘What convinced you that I’m not your enemy?’

Cyrus shuts and bolts the door to our new residence, checks the spy hole and stuffs a doorstop wedge into place just to be safe.

‘Nothing,’ he answers, moving to check the window and double doors that open onto a juliet balcony. He doesn’t hesitate in his answer but “Nothing” is a little sparing on the details.

Happy with the security of the room, Cyrus dumps our bags beside the desk, empties his pockets of wallet and phone, and then comes to join me on the bed. There’s no computer to set up, as his laptop was victim to one of Ramirez’s deflected shots.

I wonder what kind of insurance a hitman takes out on his tech. Because Cyrus sure as hell isn’t getting reimbursed for that kit by Felix. Especially as we’d decided to keep Ramirez’s freelancing quiet from the Carusos. With less than a day to go, playing at accusations and affront felt like too much of a curveball. And it had been easy enough to convince the hotel staff that a heavily intoxicated guest, adamant that the Athena Suite was his own room, had damaged the door when his malfunctioning key had spawned a drunken rage.

‘Nothing?’ I repeat at Cyrus, looking for a little more by way of explanation.

Settling the first aid box we’d requested from the front desk between my folded legs, I poke around inside to discover a small tube of antiseptic and a cotton swab still in its sterile plastic.

Having settled next to me on the bedspread, Cyrus almost immediately takes the supplies from my fingers.

‘I realized,’ he finally explains, ‘that I already knew you were on my side.’

‘You know I have friction burns that would say otherwise,’ I joke, with a wave of my wrist. He winces and I shake my head. ‘Oh no, don’t do that. I’m teasing.’

‘But you’re not wrong,’ he groans, taking hold of my fingers and administering care to the burns first.

‘And, despite how pissed off it made me,’ I emphasize, ‘neither were *you*.’

Cyrus snorts and avoids my gaze as he frees the swab from its packaging with a slippery tugging sound and applies the antiseptic gel.

‘I’m *serious*,’ I explain. ‘In the grand scheme of things, Cyrus, we don’t know each other well enough to rely on blind faith and I *was* hiding something. We’re not exactly in everyday circumstances here. It’s dangerous and you couldn’t risk your life on the chance that I was lying. I get it.’

I hiss as Cyrus sweeps the foul-smelling gel over the torn and raw skin of my wrists. When he tenses, I seal my lips over the noise.

Cyrus is gentle as he tends to my scrapes, working steadily up my arms.

Instead of taking the “out”, Cyrus takes full responsibility with a resolute shake of his head.

‘No,’ he denies. ‘I might not know your middle name, whether you like peas or why you left Sweden. But those are just facts. I know you better than you think I do, Darcy. I know you better than *I* thought I did. It just took a jolt for me to realize it.

‘Which,’ he adds. ‘Makes me an idiot. So, you don’t have to be so understanding. You can just be pissed.’

I notice a small tremor in his touch as he doctors a graze on my elbow.

He cares, I realize. He really cares how I feel about this...

‘Honestly, Cyrus... A would-be assassin crashing through your door has a way of hammering home the severity of a situation. If I thought tying you up for a few hours would have decreased the chances of something like happening then I’d have probably gotten fancy with the knots too.’ I lock onto him with a damn hard stare. ‘Which doesn’t mean I’m not annoyed about it or angry about the situation it created. You still owe me one. But... my annoyance isn’t for you personally... *What?*’

The look on Cyrus’s face is freaking me out a little.

‘I just...’ He reloads the cotton with antiseptic and works it gingerly over my eyebrow. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever met someone who sees the world that way.’

‘Ha.’ A stinging pain shoots through my brow but I smother my grimace. ‘That’s because no one you’ve met was ever raised by my mother.’

Cyrus’s eyes narrow.

‘From what you told me, she didn’t seem the sort to pass along wisdom that profound.’

‘She wasn’t,’ I laugh, then have to pause as he dabs at my cut lip. When he pulls away, there’s a metallic, overly-sterile taste in my mouth. ‘But growing up with someone you struggle to respect... You only get two options. Learn to understand where they’re coming from and accept that your emotions, however valid, are a separate issue. Or react solely on emotion and eject them from your life entirely.’

Cyrus is quiet for a while, musing to himself as he rummages inside the first aid box. He applies a few steri-strips to my eyebrow and wraps a nasty little cut on my knuckle with gauze.

‘I took the opposite route,’ he finally says with a tone of thoughtful consideration.

‘How’d you mean?’

‘With my mother,’ he says, then snorts. ‘And my father, actually.’

“If you ever want to tell me, you’ll do it only when you’re ready...” I remember promising him that on the island. Was that truly only *yesterday*? It feels like a million years since he held me in that lagoon.

‘You said you were with her ‘til you were four?’ I probe gently, opening the conversational door.

‘Yeah...’ Cyrus says, inching a toe over the threshold. It takes more time than should be necessary for him to tidy up the first aid box and snap shut the lid. ‘She... wasn’t ever particularly strong. Every headache was a migraine, every cold pneumonia. I believed her as a kid, thinking my mum was just sickly or fragile. I thought I needed to look after her. Looking back, I wonder if it was all in her head. If she just didn’t know how to take care of herself, so every little challenge became enormous in her mind. Either way... raising a kid was more than she could handle.’

‘Your’—I’ve never heard him use the word “Dad” when talking of his sire so I follow suit—‘father came to get you?’

Cyrus nods.

‘He’d been ill. After the treatment, he couldn’t have any more kids but my old man was Italian to his core. Legacy and lineage were important to him. He’d had no need for me before but after he got sick...’ Cyrus shrugs. ‘Suddenly he had use for the kid he’d left in Munich. Ma didn’t even put up a fight.’

Cyrus absently scratches at the back of his shoulder and I recall the long slashing scars across his back. Being allowed only one child had clearly made Cyrus’s father harsh in bringing his only son up to “standard”.

My impulse is to reach out and take Cyrus’s fingers in mine. But something tells me, for a man of his stoicism, that holding his hand would feel condescending. Instead, we just sit there. Close but not touching. Just listening.

When Cyrus falls quiet, I decide that the most sensitive topics don’t always need to be put into words. So I ask:

‘That’s where you’re from? Munich?’

‘More or less,’ he says, pursing together those shapely lips of his. ‘A small town a little ways east of the city.’

Finished with the medi-kit, Cyrus dumps the little plastic box onto the floor and leans back on the bed. Just flops there onto his back as if all the tension from the day has seeped out, allowing his strings to droop and the puppet to rest.

I lay down next to him, one elbow stuffed into the pillow, one hand supporting my head. I can’t resist playing with the edge of the steri-strip that presses against my fingertip.

‘Don’t do that,’ Cyrus admonishes, plucking at my finger. I smile and ignore him, resting my other hand on his chest.

‘Have you ever gone back?’ I ask. ‘To your hometown, I mean?’

Cyrus doesn’t answer right away. His eyes stare into nothing for a moment, half-fixed on the ceiling. A tendon in front of his ear jolts beneath the skin.

‘I didn’t mean to pry,’ I apologize, backing off.

‘You didn’t.’ Cyrus clears his throat. ‘It’s fine. I’m just...’ He sighs and rubs a hand over his face. I like the way his arm flexes and muscles work along his bicep. ‘I’m just not used to talking about myself so much...’

‘I *did* go back once. But not for years. Whilst I was with the Machellis, I was like any other kid, seeking acceptance, I guess. So, going back to the woman who handed me over, not only without regret but with relief, just didn’t seem that important to me.

‘But a few years back, I...’ Cyrus takes a moment to swallow and roll out his neck. Memories are glazing his stare and darkening his features. ‘I took a hiatus from the family. Something had happened and I... I needed some time to get my head on straight. I thought then that perhaps I’d left something significant, some clue to myself, back home.’

‘Had you?’ I whisper.

Cyrus sniggers coldly.

‘Nope.’ He shakes his head. ‘Two decades on and I didn’t recognize much of the town. No one I’d known back then still lived there—my mother included. It wasn’t my home, it was just... a town. Like any other on a map.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I whisper.

Cyrus exhales in a little puff of air. He takes the hand on his chest and starts playing with my fingers. Interlocking them. Gently twisting them.

‘Don’t be,’ he says. ‘It actually helped after... After what happened...’

Tension suddenly strikes through Cyrus, turning him to stone right there on the bed. His mouth is open, trying to form words that have left him paralyzed.

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ I remind him. ‘Whatever it is, you don’t have to—’

‘No,’ he swallows but can’t look me in the eye. He keeps his gaze focused on the ceiling. ‘No, you need to know. To understand why I...’ He clears his throat and takes a steady inhale, then begins to relay the information like a report; an impersonal statement of fact. ‘I was sent to take out a trafficker on the southern coast. The Machellis gave me all the intel I needed. And they’re good at what they do. I had no reason to doubt any of it. No need to do a second sweep of the area. But really that was just negligence.’ Cyrus’s lips twist in disgust. ‘I chose to follow what I had blindly and had picked my spot. I’d lined up my shot and wasn’t going to risk losing it for the sake of a double check...’

I feel my heart thumping in my chest, my pulse rushing through my ears.

‘I er... my target, he was on a leisure break and was supposed to be driving down an open street in a convertible. I was directly across from him. A ninety-degree angle. On the other side of the street was the river, so if my shot went wide or ricocheted off the car, it would fly harmlessly into the water.’

Obviously, that wasn’t what had happened...

‘You missed,’ I guess, as Cyrus’s words choke out.

His laugh is crusty and strangled.

‘Oh no,’ he assures me, tone full of self-hatred. ‘I’m too good to miss. I just... I didn’t know that my target had his kid with him.’

Oh God...

‘He was in the passenger seat. The other side of the target. From my angle...’

‘...you couldn’t see him.’

‘I would have,’ Cyrus repeats. His fingers have balled into fists, my hand crushed inside of his. Instinctively, I squeeze back just as hard. ‘Had I done the second sweep, I’d have known. I’d have seen the boy and I wouldn’t have...’

‘He died...?’

‘Yeah. Complete through and through. Two bodies, one bullet.’ His nose wrinkles over a snarl of self-derision. ‘Like I said, I’m good at killing.’

I don’t know what to say. My heart breaks for him. For the boy. For the whole situation. I’ve seen it before in soldiers: we can be familiar with killing but never with death. Especially when it’s a child.

Especially when you’re responsible...

I rest my chin on Cyrus’s shoulder, work my now tingling fingers from his grip and try to take his hand in a more reassuring hold. I stroke along the calluses on his fingers and wonder at the lives he’s taken.

‘You didn’t mean to shoot the boy,’ I point out, knowing it’s not enough.

‘No, but I did all the same. It wasn’t anyone’s fault but mine. Which made me feel so fucking guilty that I tried to forget that it had ever happened. Just erase it entirely.

‘But... when I went back home... when I saw how my hometown was nothing like I remembered and held... well, *nothing* that I was attached to... I realized that everything in

life—people, places, things—they’re only significant if you *make* them significant, you know? They only impact you—for better or worse—if you let them.’

‘So, you made the death significant?’

Cyrus nods.

‘I left the Machellis and tried to lead a different sort of life. I worked a bunch of jobs, tried a load of different things. Nothing felt right. So, I went back to being a hitman... but with a change.’

‘The freelance thing,’ I realize.

‘Yeah,’ Cyrus strokes over the back of my hand, seeming to come back to himself a little. He blinks as if surprised to find his eyes so dry. He looks at me, a little more of his soul back in his gaze. ‘Now I make the calls. I choose my targets, I bring in the information. I triple check everything.’

‘So you’re not reliant on others... And you don’t have to trust anyone but yourself...’ I finish.

That tiny curl at the corner of Cyrus’s mouth has returned. He brushes his forehead against mine and I snuggle a little closer. He presses his lips to mine.

‘Not unless I want to,’ he says when he pulls back. ‘But like you pointed out: trust is a choice. Life is a choice. You build it on what you think to be important. What you choose to make important. *That’s* what I’m saying.’

I’m reminded of my mother. How she placed all of her significance, all of her self-worth, into whomever she was attached to at the time. And yet, I’ve been determined to follow a different path. Perhaps to my detriment.

“Is that why you keep your relationships short? ... to prove you can be alone?”

‘You’ve never found your mother?’ I ask, after a while.

‘Never,’ Cyrus’s tone is lighter, now. Like his confessions has offloaded a painful, guilty weight from his shoulders. ‘Not that I want to,’ he adds. ‘Like I said, I went the other way to you and cut both my parents from my life. I’m not interested

in understanding why a parent gives up their child. Or why someone would ignore their kid until they're of benefit to them.'

The sharp knife of guilt stabs at my chest.

'I'm sorry,' I confess.

'It was a long time ago.'

'No, I mean...' I choke on my words and Cyrus's attention sharpens. He turns to face me, properly, leaning his shoulder into the mattress. 'I mean, I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. About me being pregnant.'

I look him in the eye and something passes between us. Something intense and concrete.

'I judged you,' I admit. 'We'd both made it so clear that this thing between us isn't something real that I assumed you would hate the idea of a child. Like you said before, we were careful. We did everything right. You didn't deserve to have this mess up your life.'

Cyrus is quiet for a moment. Then he takes my hand, interlocking our fingers and sending darts of trembling pleasure up my arm.

'I said that this is casual,' he tells me. 'Not that it isn't *real*.'

My tongue goes dry and my heart thumps erratically.

'Even so,' he goes on. 'Don't you think I should have known? Even if I'm a terrible paternal choice, don't you think I deserve to know if I've fathered a kid?'

That knife digs a little deeper, twists a little sharper.

'In most cases, I'd agree.' I keep my head down and begin to fiddle with the hem of the pillow. 'But I tried to imagine my kid in the future asking me about her father. I thought that telling her you had no idea she existed was a lesser of two evils, rather than explaining how you didn't want her.' I steel myself to meet Cyrus's eye again. 'I made my decision based on what I thought *she* deserved. Not you. I don't take back that

choice. But I *am* sorry it hurt you. And that I judged you poorly whilst making it.'

Cyrus swallows.

'You keep saying "she",' he says. There's a tremble in his touch. 'It's a girl?'

I shake my head with a smile.

'No idea. Too soon to tell. I just always imagine it to be a girl.'

'And you're sure she's all right?' Cyrus's hand hovers towards my middle, suddenly shy to touch what he's so easily caressed before. 'After... everything?'

For the last two hours, I've kept my dread at bay. I've crushed it into as small a speck as I can manage and locked it somewhere safe in the back of my head. I've had to.

Now, with someone I trust stepping up to shoulder that fear...

To hear Cyrus refer to her as "she"...

It all becomes very real... and very terrifying.

'Honestly...?' My voice sounds thready and I have to clear my throat. 'God, honestly Cyrus, I have no idea.'

I let my head fall into the pillow, face first, in an attempt to smother tears. I free my mouth from the padding just enough to take deep and calming breaths.

There's nothing you can do right now, I remind myself. Nothing you can change. Don't make it worse by stressing... But the words come bubbling out of me like anxiety-poison expelled from a wound.

'I... I don't remember taking any hits to my... to my stomach. But what if I'm not remembering right? I... I'm not far enough along to feel any movement, so how am I supposed to tell?'

The only way to know for sure would be to ask a physician or read a heartbeat on a monitor.

‘Do you feel any pain?’ As I’ve turned to jelly, Cyrus seems to be steeling up. He’s lifted himself so that our positions are now reversed; me lying flat and him on his side. His eyes are focused, his hand strong on my shoulder and then soothing as he rubs my back. ‘You went to the bathroom earlier—did you have any bleeding? Hey,’—I’ve curled up tight, fear making me defensive of my belly—‘Hey,’ he says again. ‘Come here... come on...’

Closing my eyes, I feel myself pulled into a protective embrace. Sitting up against the headboard, Cyrus cradles me like an infant. The tenderness in his touch only has me falling apart all the faster.

Refusing to break down and cry, I, instead, turn into Cyrus’s chest, take a handful of his sweater and scream into the woolen weave. I take all of that stress, like a black smoggy cloud in my chest and expel it as hard as I can, just like in Lily-Anne’s bathroom weeks ago. My cry is muffled by cloth but it’s still a low roar in the room. I keep yelling even after my breath fails and my lungs spasm and the cry is strangled into a pathetic mewl. Eventually, it all fades into nothing, taking my panic with it.

Instead of thinking me a lunatic, Cyrus brushes a hand through my hair. He holds me close, his lips by my temple and a smile in his voice.

‘Feel better?’ he asks.

‘Yeah...’ I exhale the word. ‘And you’re right. No pain, no bleeding. Everything is probably fine.’ Only then do I blink in realization. ‘Wait, how do you know about this stuff?’

I twist in his lap to look up at him and am shocked to see a smidge of color riding Cyrus’s cheekbones.

‘I may have Googled on my way back from dumping Ramirez.’ He coughs awkwardly.

I can’t restrain my grin of amusement. Cyrus fails to meet my eye but is also sporting a curl to his lips. The moment passes too quickly as Cyrus falls back on his He-Man efficiency mode.

‘Look,’ he says, trying to be practical. ‘In the end, it’s your decision but my thoughts, if you want them, are that unless you feel anything is wrong, we wait and get you checked by a doctor back in Rome. If we try and see someone here, we’ll never be able to keep it a secret from Felix and I don’t like the idea of him having any more leverage over us than he does already.’

I consider where he’s coming from and recognize the additional risk. And for what? For a little peace of mind?

Eventually, I nod.

‘All right, I think that’s a workable plan—*Crap!* Lana knows!’ I grimace. ‘Do you think she’ll tell her cousin?’

Cyrus’s hand has moved to the back of my neck. His fingers work at a knot of tension along my nape. I’m reminded of my hands on him yesterday, soothing him after hours bent over a desk. I barely smother the moan his touch is building in my chest.

‘On that count,’ Cyrus muses. ‘We might actually be able to rely on female solidarity. Felix certainly didn’t know about it on the boat.’

The boat!

I’ve been so caught up in the fact that Cyrus had survived his meeting with Caruso that any other outcome had failed to register.

Way to think productively, soldier.

‘What happened out there? What did Felix do?’

Cyrus sighs and falls sideways. He takes me with him to the bedspread and we lay together. We’re fully dressed and neither of us are aroused... and yet it feels like the most intimate embrace we’ve ever shared. Both of us emotionally raw, with secrets exposed and parenthood in our future.

Whilst a thousand questions still swirl in the air around us, it’s the first time I’ve felt like we’re in this together. I press my ear to the reassuring *thump-thump* of Cyrus’s heart.

‘He blustered, threatened, and made demands above my head.’ Cyrus recounts. ‘I’ve passed the information on to Jaime and he’ll get back to me with my next move.’

‘Jaime?’ I ask, curious.

‘My contact with the Machellis.’

‘The Machellis?’

‘My real clients,’ he explains.

‘Wow, it’s all coming out now, huh?’ I giggle.

Cyrus’s arms tighten around me.

‘I told you,’ he says. ‘Honesty from here on out. You ask, I tell.’

‘And you’re good with that?’ I ask in amazement. ‘Just like that?’

‘No,’ he snorts. ‘Secrets are a habit of a lifetime and letting you in makes me itch...’

Then why would you—?

‘...but I want to,’ he finishes.

‘You sure about that?’

‘Yeah.’ The word is a vow. Calm and confident. ‘What we want in life doesn’t always come easy. And I want *you* so... you’re stuck with me. And my itchy secrets.’

Stuck with him...? As in... permanently?

Cyrus clears his throat, awkwardly.

‘You should sleep,’ he says before I can probe further. He glances over the top of my head at the clock on the bedside table. ‘It’s already three. And we have this damn party to get through tomorrow.’

Ever since Cyrus wrapped me in his arms, my muscles have given up the ghost. Like they recognise him as a thick layer of protection and no longer need to be on high alert. And after my screaming, the zany terror and emotional highs have cooled to an exhausted hollowness. Just the mention of sleep has me yawning.

‘All right,’ I agree. Better to settle everything else between us when I can see straight. ‘But I warn you now, I’m not in the mood for little cocktail sausages and the electric slide.’

Cyrus sniggers and then exhales long and deep. Almost in a sigh of affirmation. The look in his eye says that he’s just confirmed something. Like cocktail wieners and corny dance routines have helped him reach a decision so profound that it’s reworked the planes of his face into joyous acceptance.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask him what—

‘Sleep, baby,’ he tells me, stroking my hair back from my forehead. ‘I’ll be here when you wake up...’

It might be the hysteria talking. Or my post-trauma optimism playing tricks on my ears. But I swear that, as I fall asleep, I hear Cyrus adding to that promise:

‘...*always.*’

I don't sleep.

After Darcy falls into well-deserved unconsciousness, I slide my arms free, settle her beneath the sheets, and park myself in the chair across the room. The distance is a necessity.

Ever since finding her alive in our old room, I've had the barbaric urge to strip Darcy naked and lick and kiss every inch of her skin. Just to reassure myself that she's okay. Tending to her injuries had been as close as I could get but it hadn't dulled the rising urge to possess. In fact, laying beside her, talking to her, opening myself up to Darcy in ways I haven't done with... well, *anyone*... had only fed the desire into a resounding need for intimacy. For closeness.

God, I love her.

What kind of woman responds to confessions of murder and abandonment, with miniature sausages and the electric slide? And yet, somehow makes you feel heard every step of the way?

I snort to myself and then feel an odd, ticklish sensation at the back of my throat. For one terrifying moment, I think I might cry. With thanks. With relief.

I feel raw.

Confessing to that boy's death has done something to me. Not healed me, exactly. I don't think anyone should ever heal from something like that. But the wound it created in my heart

feels... clean. Exposed, yes. Painfully so. But flushed clear. The festering ache is gone, replaced with a sharp stinging that might one day start to ease...

Something deep inside tells me that the more I hold Darcy, the more I love her, care for her, make love to her... the faster that pain might evaporate.

Being across the room gives me breathing space from the urge to come apart in Darcy's arms. Space I need to get my head on straight.

Enemy territory, Alesi, I remind myself. Worry about your love life when your woman's not still sporting bruises from your enemies.

After checking that Darcy's completely out cold, I hit the second speed dial on my burner phone.

Jaime is groggy when he picks up.

'Do you have any idea what time it—?'

'Vincent Omar,' I say by way of a hello. Not willing to vacate the room and leave Darcy alone, I keep my words to a low mumble.

Jaime's voice immediately becomes less grouchy.

'Come again?' he asks, tone sharpening. I have his attention.

'Vincent Omar. He's my leading theory on Gabriel's identity.'

'Evidence?' There's a soft rushing noise, like Jaime is throwing back bedsheets and getting to his feet.

'Just a gut feeling, so far.' I admit, settling back into the chair. 'A few circumstantials.'

I hook one ankle over the opposing knee and try to ignore the tension in my shoulders. I don't like offering up a job half done.

'Not a lot to go on,' Jaime says, reading my mind. 'Your information's normally more solid than this, Alesi.'

‘Which is why I didn’t give you his name earlier. I was prepared to look into it further...’ My gaze is drawn to the bed. To the gentle sound of Darcy’s breath, ‘...but things have changed.’

‘What things?’

Everything.

“You or your little woman try leaving this island and I will take great joy in breaking the both of you.”

‘I’m stuck here another day so I might pick up something more but, honestly, I’m not chasing this anymore.’

‘You’re giving up on Gabriel?’

Jaime doesn’t sound disappointed. Just confused. He’s quiet for a moment, digesting my U-turn.

‘I’m not going to argue with you on this, Alesi. And I don’t think the boss will, either. But I’m a nosey enough bastard to ask *why?*’

I pinch the bridge of my nose and stare blindly into the shadows of the room. Never did I think I would be having a conversation like this, in the dead of night, in a random hotel room, on a tiny island in the middle of nowhere...

Then again, I never thought I’d admit what happened on that ocean road job all those years ago.

Or discover I’m going to be a father.

Or realize I could love a woman.

Well ain’t it just a night for fucking firsts...?

‘I’m on thin ice here,’ is all the explanation I can give to Jaime. ‘If I keep pushing, it’s going to crack altogether. The risk is too great.’

I can hear Jaime’s frown in his next words:

‘You’re not usually one to shy away from something just because it’s dangerous.’

I look over at Darcy.

“...I’ll make sure to start with her.”

The chair creaks as my fingers curl over the arms, whitening at the knuckles.

‘The risk is too great,’ I repeat.

I’m choosing what’s important to me, dammit.

‘All right. Well, I’ve already set up an extraction team in case you need them. And I’m working on those numbers for you to give to Caruso.’

‘They need to be believable,’ I remind him.

‘No duh,’ Jaime snorts. ‘That’s what’s taking time. I’ve got someone on it overnight so you’ll have the fake invoices and corresponding money trail online by evening tomorrow. It’ll be tight but it’ll get done.’

Well, wasn’t that going to be just a little too close for comfort? After my little *tête-à-tête* on the boat with Felix, I’m not sure I trust my gift of the gab to keep things cordial until those numbers come in...

You don’t have a choice. You let the ruse crack and he’s going to start with Darcy...

‘You better not leave my ass in the wind here, De Luca,’ I warn him.

Jaime’s snort crackles down the line.

‘Have we ever let you down before?’

I think of that open ocean road. Two bodies, one bullet.

But that’s unfair.

Plans had changed too quickly and Jaime and the Machellis had given me everything they had. It wasn’t their fault. *They* hadn’t been the one who pulled the trigger.

Instead, I think of Catanzaro. Of Leon’s refusal to leave before I was strapped, braced, and escorted out of there. I think of the times I’ve been picked up from dangerous locales or in need of fake papers.

I think of learning martial arts with Jaime when we were kids.

‘No,’ I finally answer. ‘No, you’ve never let me down.’

The question had been rhetorical, so my answer stupefies Jaime into quiet before he asks:

‘Everything okay there, Cyrus?’

He never uses my first name.

I swallow.

‘Not really,’ I admit. ‘But I’m gonna fix that.’

Not ready to confront whatever Jaime has to say about *that*, I hang up on him and immediately dial back out. Unlike Jaime, Nat answers promptly and sounds wide awake, despite the hour.

‘What’s doing, boss?’

I have to stand up. My body is aching, my muscles molding to the shape of the seat. I begin to pace back and forth across the end of the bed, like I’m on some kind of fucking guard duty.

‘I want you to do a search for me,’ I say into the phone.

‘How deep?’ Nat asks. I can already hear her attacking her keyboard in an efficient staccato of little plastic tiles.

‘Everything,’ I order. ‘Background, history, old names, old addresses. I want everything you can find. The entire story of their life.’

‘Name?’ she asks.

I take a breath, pausing beside the bed.

‘Darcy Calabrese.’

There’s a pause in the tapping.

‘You sure about that?’ she cautions.

I ignore her.

‘I also want twenty-four-hour surveillance set up on her,’ I add. ‘The works. Indoor cameras wherever she lives, CCTV tracking when she’s in public, a tracer on her phone. Everything.’

‘For how long?’ Nat’s tone is worrisome.

I stare down at Darcy’s sleeping face. At the tiny furrow cemented between her brows, even in sleep.

Forever.

‘Indefinitely. I’m doubling your pay for the trouble.’

‘Pay’s not what I’m worried about...’

‘You’re getting it, anyway. And I’m setting up an account under another name that’ll continue to pay you should anything happen to me.’

Nat has gone quiet again until:

‘All right.’ The tapping on her end is renewed. ‘So you want a full stalker mode set up on this woman. You’re certain, yeah?’

‘That a problem, Nat?’ I turn the question back on her. It’s the first time she’s ever hesitated over an instruction.

‘Nu-uh,’ Nat reassures. ‘It’s easy enough to do, boss man. I just thought I’d check you on this. Most girls don’t appreciate their beaus spying on them behind their backs. I figure you should be prepared for fallout.’

‘Fallout is irrelevant.’ I’ve made my decision. I have a plan. ‘Just get it done.’

‘Roger that.’

I hang up the call and focus again on Darcy’s soft shape in the shadows. When the urge to lean over and wake her with a kiss becomes too strong, I march myself across the room and plant my ass back in the chair. My foot bounces impatiently on the carpet. Following the steady rise and fall of Darcy’s breathing and adjusting my lungs to the same rhythm helps me calm down a little.

If the last twenty-four hours have proven anything, it’s that love isn’t enough. I can love Darcy. I can adore her and want her in my life forever. But that doesn’t automatically make me the man that she wants.

People all over the world use love as an excuse for greedy behavior, for selfish entitlement...

Because I love my child, it's acceptable to take my belt to his skin when he's not measuring up to his potential.

Because I love this man, it's forgivable to drag my daughter through an unstable childhood in half a dozen countries.

I refuse to do it.

I cannot give Darcy everything a man should. I'm never going to be someone's husband: home at six, dinner on the table, "how was your day, dear?". I'm never going to be there to take the kids to soccer practice or pick up the groceries.

I'm never going to be the kind of man a woman wants to come home to.

And I'm not about to inject myself into Darcy's life anyway, just because it's what *I* want.

But I can do *something*. I can be a father. Of sorts.

In my own way, I can be a father to my child. The kind of father I grew up wanting; one who provides, who protects.

But, to do that, I need to disappear.

Darcy can live the life she wants. She'll make her changes, move away, and find somewhere safe to raise our baby.

And I'll watch.

I'll get Nat to erase whatever Darcy's legal issues are back home. I'll get her a dozen passports so she can live wherever she wishes. I'll send her money (if she'll take it). Hell, I'll buy her a house if she'll let me. I've got a stack pile of income doing fuck all in my bank account. Why shouldn't my kid have it for whatever they want or need?

And I'll keep myself and my own desires out of it.

I'll keep my job, my enemies, and my unstable, scary world far away from the woman I love and my baby girl.

And when she finds someone new? whispers that taunting voice in the back of my head. When Darcy finds a man to love? To play Daddy to your daughter?

The creaking in the chair is suddenly so loud, it's like a crack of lightning through the room. I have to force myself to let go before I pull the arms clean off the thing and wake Darcy up.

I take a measured exhale.

Darcy is one of the smartest people I know. If she thinks a guy worthy of being in her life... then I'll have to trust and accept that.

I hear Darcy sigh and snuggle deeper under the covers.

I have no control over her, I remind myself. No right to decide her life for her.

But similarly, Darcy can do nothing about the fact that she is now the only family I have. A family I won't ever play a real part in. But one I'm equally never letting go of.



'I CAN'T BELIEVE we're doing this,' Darcy grumbles, smoothing out a few nonexistent wrinkles in her dress.

The midnight blue gown flutters around her legs and I'm treated to a slinky slice of leg on full display. The skirt is slit all the way to the hip on either side, making every sway of her hips an elegant peep-show. As it turns out, the Chinese-inspired design was also a convenient choice. Though the bare arms do little to mask some of her minor injuries, the high collar covers the worst of Darcy's bruises. The gown also suits her dark hair and brings out the yellow in her eyes.

Of course, I remind myself, that isn't pertinent to the mission at hand.

I kick such lovestruck simperings to the back of my head.

'Two hours,' I remind her, checking the clips for my guns and slotting them into the double holster strapped across my

shoulders. A one-to-one Glock-to-armpit ratio. ‘We just have to show up to this thing, give Felix his information, and get out as soon as we can, without raising any eyebrows. I’ve a boat waiting west of the harbor.’

Hopefully, the festivities will bring security down from the red alert they’ve been set at all day, allowing us to slip away undetected.

‘Have they sent the information through yet?’ Darcy asks, slipping her feet into ballet flats the same shade as her dress.

I try not to cringe. *Not yet.*

‘Jaime will get it done,’ I promise her.

Darcy nods, her lips pursing in stern consideration. She knows full well that we’re walking into a high-stakes poker game with our cards still in transit. And when losing a hand can equal losing your head...

My heart spasms in my chest.

After last time, there’s absolutely no way I’m leaving Darcy behind in our room but taking her out into a collective of mercenaries and enforcement thugs doesn’t sit right either.

‘What about the contracts you’re supposed to sign?’ Darcy asks. Having fluffed her hair and approved her own appearance in the mirror, she leans her butt against the little desk and folds her arms to wait for me.

I’ve now filled my ankle holsters and hidden a knife into the sheath inside my waistband. I’ll be leaving the bag behind so everything of import has to be clipped down somewhere on my body.

‘Felix will be too busy with the party until late,’ I tell her. ‘If we leave early enough, we’ll be long gone before he’s ready to sign anything.’

Darcy frowns, confused.

‘What about Gabriel?’ she asks. ‘That won’t leave much time to confirm his identity.’

‘That’s not important.’

Darcy's arms drop to her side, surprise knocking her head on the tilt.

'What are you talking about? It's the whole reason we're *here*.'

'Not anymore.' Right now, the only *reason we're here* is that Felix isn't letting us leave. I have a far more vested interest in getting us off this damn island than I do in the reason we came for in the first place.

'What's going on, Cyrus?' Darcy demands. 'Why the change of plans?'

I try to dodge the question but she's like a dog with a bone. Her voice is pointed and persistent, stalking me from across the room.

'*Cyrus?*'

'Because the plan is shit!' I finally grunt in anger. 'Okay? The plan is unimportant now.'

I throw the empty duffel away from me and it flops over the rumpled bedspread, like a flag of surrender. I turn on Darcy with hot agitation, shame burning in my face.

'Coming here was a giant mistake,' I confess. 'A complete waste of time.'

'A waste of *time*? You came here to find—'

'I came here to find a *killer*, Darcy,' I growl. 'I literally came to get face-to-face with a man who *murders* people for a living. And I brought *you* with me.'

Darcy flinches. Like she's some dead weight I've been dragging along. I have to hurry to explain but I'm struggling with my words. The room is like a furnace and my shirt feels like leather not cotton. I run a hand over my buzz cut and wish, for the first time in my life, that my hair was longer just so I could have something to pull out.

'Look...' I say with a heavy slice of my hand. 'If I knew you were pregnant, this would never have happened. If I knew that I...'

I stall out on the words.

If I knew that I love you. Just a few short words. One syllable each. Hardly challenging.

You know what?

Fuck it. Just fuck it.

I square myself off in front of Darcy and deliver with absolutely no romantic finesse at all:

‘I love you.’

Darcy’s eyes bug out of their sockets.

‘I love you,’ I repeat, with equal lack of eloquence. ‘Had I known it five days ago, I would never have brought you here. And it pisses me off that it took *bringing* you here for me to realize it. Now, because of my paradoxical shithead of a brain, we’re stuck in the middle of a situation I would *never* have wanted you in, and all I can do is smile and play along until I can get you out. *That’s* what I mean when I say the plan is shit. In fact, the plan is nothing. It’s forgotten.’ I hold out my hands like they’re the cups of a scale. ‘You. Gabriel.’ I weigh out each of my hands. ‘There is no contest here, Darcy. There is only one plan now and that’s to get you home safe. Full stop. It’s all I can think about. It’s all I can *do*.’

My outburst has me panting for air and Darcy stunned into silence. Her lips part. I see her tongue trying to form words...

My cell phone rings.

Despite the shitty-ass timing of his call, I feel a wash of relief when the number comes up as withheld.

Better late than never, Jaime...

I hit the receive button and put the cell to my ear.

‘About ti—’

‘*Get out.*’

My relief evaporates. My next heartbeat pumps ice shards through my bloodstream.

‘What?’

‘No time to explain—’

‘Then you’re gonna have to make some,’ I cut him off. I’m not dragging Darcy through a Caruso hotspot at high speeds and blowing our cover on a fucking whim.

‘What’s going on?’ Darcy asks me from across the room. ‘Does he have it?’

Jaime is efficient and to the point:

‘External hacker. Caught us checking shipping contracts. No reason for us to do that unless—’

‘—unless someone tipped you off,’ I finish for him.

‘And who on that island do you think they’re gonna blame?’ Jaime’s voice is harried.

“And my sources say that you haven’t signed the dotted line of your resignation just yet...”

Shit.

I catch Darcy staring at me.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asks, her eyes narrowing with worry.

We’re dead. I swallow. Unless we can break out of this mafia stronghold and escape an island full of paid mercenaries, we’re dead.

That’s *what’s wrong*.

Snapping into a familiar routine, I switch the call to my earpiece, shove my phone in my pocket, and wrench back the curtains over the balcony doors.

‘Cyrus?’ Darcy’s tone is hurried but not frightened. ‘What’s going on?’

‘We’re done,’ I tell her, throwing back the locks and heaving back on the doors. They fly open and chilly air hits me full in the face. My adrenaline races faster, returning heat to my muscles and feeling to my nose.

‘We?’ Jaime is squawking in my ear. ‘Who else is *there*?’

Oh yeah, did I not mention I brought my pregnant lover on the job? Yeah, my bad.

Fuck me.

‘Not important right now,’ I growl.

‘What’s not important?’ Darcy asks.

‘We’re getting the extraction team to you,’ Jaime promises.

‘By water. For two.’ I tell him, testing the tensile strength of the balcony railing and turning to Darcy. ‘Get anything you can carr—’

She already has her rucksack slung over her back and her little flat pumps are nowhere to be found. Instead, she’s strapped into her combat boots. When had she—?

‘Do I have time for pants?’ is her only question, gesturing to her skirt.

‘She’s not wearing pants?’ Jaime asks, momentarily distracted from the disaster at hand.

From down the hall comes the call of a male voice. The words are muffled but they sound like orders. Cold and hard orders.

We’re out of time.

‘Nevermind,’ Darcy answers her own question. ‘I’ll Chun Li this thing.’

‘Chun Li?’ Jaime is completely thrown. ‘What kind of costume kink are you into, Ales—?’

‘Get me the coordinates of the pickup,’ I bark, cutting off Jaime’s amusement. ‘If I’m not there in thirty minutes, a package will arrive in two days with instructions.’

‘Wait, Cyrus—’

‘It’s this one,’ comes a voice from outside our door.

‘Coordinates, Jaime. Now.’

And I hang up on him.

I turn to find Darcy already behind me, her lithe figure bent and her hands cupped into a foothold. She’s eyeing the balcony up and to the right of ours.

‘Well, we can’t go down,’ she remarks pointedly.

The hotel might only be a two storey building but, on this side of the property, the hill it stands on cleaves off sharply beneath us. The rocky, vertical drop evolves into a rugged cliffside that veers abruptly down into the roaring black waters below. Ocean views for guests. Fatal drop for escapees.

‘We’ll have to go up and over. Come on,’ she prompts. ‘I’ll give you a boost.’

I recognize Rocco’s voice on the other side of the bedroom door:

‘You got the key?’

‘Right here, boss.’

I glance at the balcony above us.

‘There’s no way in hell I’m leaving you here to—’

‘Oh, don’t be a moron!’ she bites back. ‘You go. Then lift me. You’re too heavy for me to pull. Now, come *on!*’

I don’t argue again.

I throw a boot into her surprisingly sturdy hold and jump for the next railing up. Darcy throws her weight behind my leg and I almost overshoot the damn thing. I haul myself over the rail, then brace my feet into the curlicue iron on the other side. I lean back up and over the railing, reaching for Darcy...

...just in time to hear the bleeping of a disengaged lock and the bedroom door shudder on its hinges as a half dozen men burst through and flood the room with muscle, cologne and a fuck ton of fire power.

Quick as a flash, Darcy presses herself against the wall and freezes in place. With nowhere to go, she's barely hidden by the doorframe and fluttering edge of the curtain.

'Where are they?' someone snarls, frustration carrying their voice out onto the evening breeze.

'Lana said they'd be in their suite.'

'Does it look like they're fucking here, genius?' growls another unfamiliar voice.

'Search the room. Bathroom too.'

This last voice is Rocco. His voice has Darcy turning to stone and my heart stopping in my chest. His words are so clear that he has to be standing right by the balcony doors.

If he takes one step back...

Holding my breath, I lean further towards Darcy. I inch slowly, fearing the slightest sound of my clothes on the railing. I wave my fingers at her silently.

She looks up at me, then at the glass doors, just a hair's breadth from her arm, like she's calculating risk.

You can't stay there, I try to tell her with my eyes alone. You've got to move, baby.

New noises are coming from the room. The thump of heavy footsteps, the stripping of bedsheets. The on-off clicking of the bathroom light switch...

Swallowing, Darcy reaches for me, stretching as thin as she can go, before taking a firm hold on my wrists.

I dig my grip in tight, brace my legs and my back, and then heave upwards. Keeping tight to the wall, Darcy uses the softer, quieter side of her boot against the stone to propel her ascent. Her lips are pressed together, her nostrils flaring. Neither of us is daring to breathe.

‘Perhaps they already went out to the party. They could be at the pool already,’ someone suggests. ‘You should call Felix and give him a heads up.’

Considering the suggestion, Rocco shifts his weight and steps backward. The curtain flares and molds to the shape of his shoulder. Then starts to slip away to one side...

I freeze in place, Darcy hanging off my arms.

Darcy doesn’t hesitate. Quick as a flash, she hooks a leg around the two halves of her skirt and crunches upwards, taking the fabric and her feet out of view. Then she holds.

And we wait.

I can see the edge of Rocco’s profile as he stands half in, half out on the little balcony. His head is lowered, his eyes on his phone. In his other hand is an automatic revolver.

Don’t turn around. Just don’t turn around...

I keep holding my breath, even as my lungs start to spasm. The tug of Darcy’s weight has the skin around my wrists screaming. My shoulders are on fire. The railing digs in against my thighs.

All I can see is the rushing inky waves miles below and their roaring foam as they crash on the rocks.

Don’t let go, I chant to myself. Don’t let go, you bastard.

Everything precious to me is hanging a hundred meters above jagged rocks, swinging bare inches from an enemy’s bullet. Sweat is threatening my grip, turning it slick. The ocean breeze sends a sharp salty tang into my nose and up behind my eyes, making them water. My shoulders have locked, unable to move.

Just. Don't. Let. Go.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ Rocco accuses and, for a second, I think that’s it. We’re dead and gone.

But Rocco is yelling at someone inside.

‘Get out, you morons,’ he growls, stepping back into the bedroom. ‘We need to search the hotel. Those spying fuckers don’t know we’re on to them. But that won’t last...’

I finally exhale. My grip cries out for release but I hold on tighter, fighting the ache in my knuckles.

Darcy looks up at me and, for a second, I’m not sure I can bring her up. My back has locked, my muscles frozen. Horror rips through me, followed by the unfamiliar sensation of panic.

Darcy reads something in my face and, with some strange intuition, begins to swing her legs back and forth. I suppress a moan as the pendulum motion rocks my arms in their sockets and brings blood flow back into my limbs.

The next second, I have her up and over the railing. The voices in our room fade as Rocco frog-marches his bozo cohorts out into the hallway.

‘Well,’ Darcy pants, shaking her leg free from her dress. ‘That was *bracing*.’

That was terrifying, I admit only to myself. To get my head back in the game, I center myself on the doors in front of us and quickly jimmy the lock.

Luckily, there’s no one inside. Just a lot of hair products, make-up, and a suitcase that looks to have vomited half its contents across the room. The air is thick with hair spray and something musky-sweet.

‘You know...’ Darcy says. Her cheeks are flushed with exertion and her eyes bright with adrenaline. She plants her hands on her hips as her breathing evens out. ‘If you’d let me have a gun, I could have shot Rocco instead of just hanging there.’

I hurry across the room to check the peephole into the corridor. We’re now a level above Felix’s goons but that

doesn't mean there aren't more nearby.

'We have enough variables to manage right now without you having a gun,' I warn her.

'Well, actually—'

'Shh,' I throw out a hand to keep her quiet, twisting to see further through the spyhole. 'Okay, it's clear. Come help me shove this thing.'

I can't pick a card-reader lock, so breaking *out* of this room is about to be a whole lot louder than breaking *in*.

'I'm serious, Cyrus,' Darcy complains in a whisper, dutifully bracing her shoulder up beside mine. 'You need to let me have something to—'

'Now!' I bark and, in perfect synchrony, we both haul back and then throw our weight into the door.

The hinge bends, the door cracks, and we have enough space to shimmy out into the hallway. Just.

Darcy dusts herself down, eyeing the broken door with a twist of her lips.

'Wow, we are wracking through those things.'

'We wanna head east,' I say, before explaining myself with a flick of my fingers. 'That way.'

'I know which way east is, Cyrus,' Darcy growls, breezing past me and down the corridor. 'We want the rear staff exit, yes?'

I frown after her.

I can feel how adrenaline and fear have leeches the blood from my face and jacked up my heart rate. No doubt that I'm doing my "Ghost" moniker proud right about now. But Darcy looks... vibrant. Active.

Alive.

It's the same hectic flush she had after defending herself against Ramirez. Like a benched athlete finally able to stretch their muscles.

With the rushing sound of activity beneath our feet, I decide that The Enigmas of Darcy Calabrese can wait until we're not running for our lives and I bury my suspicions in the practicalities of escape.

Catching up to her, I pull Darcy behind my left shoulder and hurry onward, aiming for a staircase on the eastern wall to the rear of the hotel. The blueprints in my head remind me that it's a winding, square-based flight that comes out by Housekeeping. From there, we can head across roughly twenty meters of industrial kitchens, through a security door, and down one last staircase to reach the underground garage.

Bonus points: one of my go bags is hidden in the cleaner's closet off the kitchens.

The route is clear until we reach Housekeeping.

The first floor, the corner flight of stairs... all empty. Only the usual bustling sounds of an active hotel dog our footsteps. But, when we dart across a staff-only corridor and slip into the kitchens, Darcy is quick to snatch hold of my jacket and haul me behind a giant refrigerator. I spot the problem immediately, reflected in its chrome finish:

Four men. All of them, as big and impenetrable as mountains.

Three are perched at a table directly between us and our exit route. The fourth is more impatient, pacing the aisles of glistening silver appliances. His gun is out and the flick of his wrist sets the barrel tapping rhythmically against his leg. Like the others, the fourth man is huge and shaped unfortunately like an orangutan, sending the pistol a whole lot closer to his knee than seems natural.

Sliding to the other side of the refrigerator, I spy the cleaning cupboard about eight feet to our left, the other side of an open countertop.

At the crook of my finger, Darcy and I drop to all fours and I lead us across the tile and around the workspace.

I freeze solid when a hand strokes the curve of my ass.

I look back around my elbow and Darcy is wiggling her eyebrows at me, smiling with possessive glee.

Really?! I send back at her silently. Now?!

She shrugs, entirely unrepentant, and continues forward. I blow my moral high ground by noticing how one of her thighs has slipped free of her skirt and is on full, stunning display.

For fuck's sake... I'm already sweating through my shirt. Any additional heat is supremely unhelpful.

Mind on the task at hand, Alesi.

We reach the closet and, little mercies, the door is facing away from Caruso's hounds, so no one notices us slipping inside. As soon as the door is shut, with its rubber seal tight to the frame, I turn a look of disapproval on Darcy and her flirtations.

She holds her hands up in surrender.

'A girl only has so much self-restraint,' she whispers.

The closet is gloomy dark but a cut-out window in the door offers just enough light to see a distinct lack of apology on her face.

For a moment, I'm reminded of our last meeting at *The Blue Star*. The pantry closet off the kitchens... the light through the porthole. It all feels oddly cyclical. And yet, nothing is the same as back then. Least of all, me.

I roll my eyes at Darcy and march around a trio of floor buffers. Behind them are a series of cardboard boxes marked "Hand Sanitizer" in scrawled Sharpie.

'Is it just me or are you a little frazzled for a professional?' Darcy asks, positioning herself at my feet. Her arms folded and her tone surprised.

'Is it just me or aren't *you* a little exuberant for an amateur?' I counter.

Most people would be falling apart by now. Crying or in hysterics. The worse our situation gets, the more at-home Darcy seems to be.

‘Is “grump” just your standard mode of operation?’ she teases.

‘This isn’t how I operate on *any* level,’ I admit, pushing aside the boxes and reaching for an old toolbox. Dust still litters its handle, which tells me I chose my hiding spot well.

‘Oh *right*,’ Darcy suddenly drawls in realization. ‘Sharpshooter. Not used to being caught in the crossfire?’

‘Not used to being caught, period—’ I stall to a halt.

On the other side of the toolbox, my hand has hit open air.

‘What’s wrong?’ Darcy says, suddenly getting serious.

‘It’s gone.’

‘What ha—?’

Darcy’s boots scrape over stone as she spins on the spot. I yank myself back out from the shelves and jump to my feet beside her. We both stare in frozen uncertainty at the figure stepping out from the shadows.

Lana Caruso looks half-ready for a red carpet event. Her hair is blown into Hollywood elegance and her face made up with exceptional care. Diamonds glitter in her ears. The rest of her looks almost drab by comparison: just a pair of jeans and a simple white tee. The shirt, I notice in a moment of bewilderment, has a line of daisies prancing along the hem.

With an elbow anchored to her waistline, Lana’s hand is raised like a Parisian balancing their champagne flute. From one extended finger hangs my bag of ammunition, passports, and go-cash.

More significantly, in her other hand is a Ruger Redhawk. One of the most powerful handguns in the world.

And she has it pointed directly at Darcy’s head.

My heart sputters in my chest.

‘Not to sound all blockbuster villain,’ Lana croons, ‘but... “Looking for this?”’ She dangles my bag from her manicured finger.

‘Hands up,’ she adds when we both stand unflinching.

The blonde is handling the Ruger like it’s an old friend; a more-than-familiar extension of her own arm. I remember those callouses on her fingers. The ones that give her away as a practiced marksman.

What was it Felix said at dinner...?

“Handles this entire place herself... Not to mention some other more... delicate matters in the business.”

“Delicate matters...”

I grind my teeth so hard that pain lances through my molars.

Fucking idiot. Because of her looks, I’d marked Lana as a honey trap. A negotiator. But, staring at her now, my mistake is plain as fucking day. I read how she’s aiming the Ruger, not for Darcy’s dense frontal bone in the between-the-eyes shot all amateurs aim for, but for the eye socket... The swiftest route to an instant death.

Lana’s no diplomat or negotiator. And she’s sure as hell no hotel manager.

She’s a killer.

I try to take a step to the left, to cover Darcy, but Lana jolts her weapon in warning. I root my feet to the floor, hands coming up in surrender, as instructed.

“‘Gabriel’, I presume?” I ask.

Lana says nothing to give herself away but her nostrils flare and there’s a small flicker to her eyelid.

‘You have me impressed,’ I offer, with a friendly tilt of my head. I shuffle my weight from one hip to the other, to mask an inching shift in Darcy’s direction. Lana’s eyes narrow. ‘Not a lot of women in this game.’

Those big eyes, framed in a thick fan of lashes, flash blue fire in the shadows.

‘Not at our level, anyway,’ she agrees. A thread of smugness is woven into her words.

‘So, the hotel thing...?’ I ask, stalling for time. I’m quick on the draw but not as quick as her finger will be on that trigger... There’s no way I can get my weapon up without some kind of distraction in play. ‘That’s just a cover?’

‘No,’ Lana takes a step forward and to the left, re-aiming her weapon. Any ground I’ve made to cover Darcy disintegrates. And the look in Lana’s eye says she knows it. ‘I run this place. And a few others.’

‘For Felix?’ Darcy asks with a tone of disbelief. ‘The egotistical prick who looks at you like you’re his thoroughbred racing hound?’

I tense. Attacking the master Lana seems devoted to might not be the best—

But Lana’s perfectly painted upper lip trembles. Like she’s repressing the urge to curl it back in disgust.

Interesting...

Perhaps her acts of worship towards Felix Caruso are just that: an act.

‘I have my reasons,’ she says cryptically.

‘Do you also have a reason to kill *us*?’ Darcy challenges.

I’m measuring the distance between myself and Lana, wondering if I can charge her. Lana’s markedly smaller than me. If I can tackle her, I can get control of her gun then draw my own. Worst-case scenario, if she got a shot off, I’d already be between her and—

‘No,’ Lana says.

To our surprise, Lana suddenly lowers her weapon. She even tosses my bag over. It hits me full in the chest, knocking the wind out of me.

‘No,’ she says again. ‘I have no desire to kill either of you.’

Darcy and I speak at the same time:

‘What’s in it for you?’

‘What are you after?’

Lana looks between us, apparently amused.

‘*Match made...*’ she mutters before shaking out her mane of golden locks.

As Lana checks the porthole of the closet door, I consider drawing my weapon. But, given we’ve only just managed to bring *down* the chance of flying bullets, this seems a foolish step backward.

Better to hear her out...

‘Look,’ Lana says, turning back towards us. ‘I’m only interested in one thing. You give me a name and I’ll pretend I never saw you. You screw me or rat me out to Felix and I swear to God, I’ll hunt you both down like you’re the last pair of Jimmy Choos on warehouse clearance, you understand?’

I do not. But the gist is clear enough.

‘What name do you want?’ Darcy asks.

Lana turns her gaze on me.

‘I want whoever you used to find and track me here.’

‘You want *wha—*?’

‘I’ve been doing this a long time,’ she cuts me off. ‘I know what I’m doing and I know how to cover my tracks. Yet, you knew “Gabriel” was working with Felix. I want to know how and I want to meet the person who figured it out.’

So you can do what? Improve your work-stealth?

My expression—or more likely the absence of one—doesn’t fill Lana with confidence and, the next moment, her weapon is back up.

I’m just as quick, drawing my Glock and leveling it at her head.

But Lana has leverage that I don’t. She turns the barrel of the Ruger onto Darcy, who puts her hands back up with a sigh.

‘Told you I should have a gun,’ she grumbles under her breath at me.

I tighten my grip on the Glock, not yet ready to surrender. I align the barrel with my forearm, keep my head low for sightline, and rest my finger over the trigger.

‘I can always hand you both over to Felix,’ Lana warns, ‘and get what I want in a far bloodier way.’

We hang in the balance for a second. Maybe two.

My mind is rushing with calculations.

The Ruger has a harder recoil and Lana a slimmer wrist. In this small space, I’m more likely to hit my target than she is. But am I willing to risk that? Not to mention, her weapon has no silencer. The noise would draw the Orangutan and his cronies right to us...

I exhale and grind down on my back teeth. I hold up both my hands.

‘All right,’ I surrender. ‘All right. I can put you in contact with my intel guy.’

‘I want a name.’

‘I don’t *have* a name.’

Lana cocks the gun. I dive forward a step, putting myself in its path.

‘I swear it!’ I promise her. ‘I *swear* it to you! I don’t know her real name.’

‘Her?’ Lana seems surprised.

‘He *thinks* it’s a woman,’ Darcy interjects from over my shoulder with one raised eyebrow.

‘I can put you in contact with her,’ I promise. ‘I can give you a referral so she doesn’t radio silence you. I can make it happen. Just please... *please*, put down the gun.’

Lana waits, her demeanor calm and confident, her expression considering. Her eyes drill into mine then trace every plane and angle of my face. I feel like I’m being x-rayed for signs of dishonesty.

I only breathe again when Lana slowly lowers the Ruger.

‘Fine,’ she agrees. ‘Then I’ll be in touch in a few weeks. You’ll give up your contact then.’

‘Where will—’

‘I know your Rome address. If you’re not there when I visit, I’ll find you.’ Her eyes flick from mine to Darcy’s, then down toward Darcy’s navel. ‘All of you.’

I don’t realize I’ve taken an aggressive step forward until Darcy has me by the arm. Suddenly, I’m breathing through my nose. My chest is heaving. My hands are fists of fucking fury. The plastic of the Glock’s grip squeezes hard against my palm.

And I hadn’t even felt myself move.

Lana, in the face of my torrential rage, seems momentarily spooked and then amused.

‘See?’ she says, smiling at Darcy. ‘I told you it would be something to behold...’

I don’t know what the fuck Lana’s on about and I don’t care. Darcy has one arm wrapped around my shoulder and has her other hand stroking at my neck, my face.

We’re lucky my instinct wasn’t to start shooting, or this whole thing could have escalated back up to fatality levels.

Lana might be letting us go now but there’s no doubt in my mind that, if we didn’t have something to offer her, we’d be leaving this closet in body bags. This is, after all, the woman who took out Alexei Machelli, heir and son of a mafia don.

Leon isn’t going to like you letting her go...

I squash the bubble of guilt deep. Right now, I can only stay true to one loyalty. And she’s standing by my side.

Lana takes a step back to review the window again, her breath steaming on the glass.

‘All right,’ she says, with a nod to herself. ‘Wait five minutes and then follow me out...’

‘The guards—’

‘Will be gone,’ Lana promises. She then levels her gun on us again like a pointing finger. ‘But you renege on our agreement and this is going to play out a whole lot differently in Rome.’

Lana darts back out into the kitchens, leaving her threats and expensive perfume lingering in her wake.

Almost immediately, the full pressure of Darcy’s body comes up against me, her breasts pressing up beneath my shoulder blade, her thighs flush to mine. Her breath is hot and heavy against the back of my neck.

She’s holding on to me so hard, I’m surprised she’s not branding her fingerprints into my skin.

‘Okay,’ she sighs in a long, drawn-out exhale. ‘New rule. No standing in front of bullets with more protection than our skin. You scared the crap out of me diving in like that.’

I don’t know whether to laugh or groan but somehow, by now, it feels perfectly logical that Darcy would be more freaked out over something *I’ve* done... than of a bullet taking off her head.



LANA WASN’T LYING. By the time we slink back into the kitchens, the guards are gone and I sense Cyrus taking a steadying inhale of relief.

As we hurry across the now eerily quiet kitchens, I marvel at the man’s cool.

It takes an exceptional level of skill and mental discipline to work a rifle. The distance, wind velocity, climate, environment, obstructions... Not to mention the fact that most human targets don’t just stand there static, waiting to be shot. It’s a whole lot more than a simple point-and-shoot.

But it’s also a talent honed from a distance. On a good day, I wouldn’t expect Cyrus to be within six hundred yards of his target.

And here he is, nose-to-nose with them, his most deadly assets rendered useless.

Because of me.

Cyrus busts open the far door and I follow him down a spiral flight of stairs. Even without a weapon, I keep my sights set behind us, watching his six and taking the stairs backward.

It hasn't escaped my notice that it was *me* who insisted on coming here. *I* was the one who forced Cyrus's hand.

When he met Felix on the boat, Cyrus could have taken the opportunity, then. He could have heard Felix's outrageous offer, decided not to push his luck, and gotten the hell off this island then and there. He'd already been at the harbor.

Instead, he'd come rushing back to the hotel like a bat out of hell, fearing for my safety. Then, instead of sneaking away himself, he stuck around, waiting for the best opportunity to evacuate us *both*.

Cyrus is here because of me.

"Here" now being the *Caruso Chrysoú's* subterranean garage, littered with expensive cars and even fancier bikes.

Assuming Cyrus would prefer a high-speed sports bike, I'm surprised when he sets course for a Tesla, pressing his cell phone to his ear.

'I need a hack,' he says into the phone.

He reads off the Tesla's make, model, and number plate to Nat and, almost instantly, the car comes alive.

I'll give Cyrus's work-wife one thing: she's damn fast.

'Let me drive,' I say, hurrying for the front seat.

Cyrus hesitates.

'You won't let me have a gun,' I point out. 'So, I'll drive. You shoot.'

Deciding this is the best of a series of poor options, Cyrus takes the passenger seat.

I could just tell him the truth: that I know how to field strip his weapons as quickly as he does and that I had the highest marksman grade in my unit. But eccentric confessions have a way of reading like lies, especially in desperate situations. And we don't have time for me to prove my point. Instead, I jump behind the wheel, switch the car from auto-drive to manual, and slam it into reverse.

With a spin of the wheel and a heavy hand back into first gear, then second, I spin us around the parking lot and shoot down its eastern perimeter to mount the exit ramp.

'Holy...' Cyrus mutters.

For a second, it's like daylight. The bulbs of the external lights high overhead are trained on the exit and explode across my sight as we reach the open air. I don't slow down. I just drive blind for a heartbeat, blinking splotches of funny colors from my vision.

Speeding around the hotel, the front gates come into view and loom increasingly larger: tall, imposing... and made of heavy iron.

Cyrus has transferred his call from his phone to his earpiece.

'Nat!' he cries as I put my foot to the floor.

With little-to-no engine noise from the electric car, I can almost make out Nat's voice on the other end of the line:

"Gotcha covered."

To the great surprise of the approaching guardsmen, the electric gates click unlocked and begin to fall open.

'Slow up and I can take out the—'

I speed up.

We scratch up one of the headlights pretty good as I high-speed-wiggle our way through the still-opening gates. Then I swing us out on the drag and to the north: inland.

Despite our escape plan hinging on a boat near the harbor, Cyrus says nothing of my choice of direction. Which tells me

that we're of the same mind: I've been theorizing his plan since he chose the Tesla over the nearby Suzuki Hayabusa.

Motorbikes, after all, don't drive themselves.

'How far do you think we need to get?' I ask, punching buttons on the central console. The navigation screen lights up and politely asks where I would like to go this evening.

The hell away from here...

Cyrus has twisted in his seat to get a better look out through the back.

'A little further than we were already planning,' he growls, eyes trained on the road behind us.

I glance in the rearview mirror, see nothing but the back of Cyrus's head, and adjust the wings instead.

Four large SUVs are speeding along the road behind us.

'Fuck,' I mutter. 'They were quick.'

'Felix must have had them on speed dial,' Cyrus sighs, flopping back into the passenger seat and reaching for the dark canvas bag Lana had thrown at him.

From inside, he takes out a series of cylinders and metal connectors. I flick on the internal light so he can see better.

In less than a minute, Cyrus has converted a series of harmless-looking metallic shapes into an assault rifle. I recognize it as the long-barrel variant of the FN SCAR. Best at 550 yards.

I glance in the mirrors again at the SUVs. Then ease off the gas. Their headlights grow larger and larger as I calculate the distance best I can in the dark.

Cyrus is busy opening the window and setting up his shot, one arm and the side of his head hanging from the car. I drift us over the center line, bringing his barrel at least generally in line with the cars behind. Everything else, every variable and element of a long-distance shot is now down to Cyrus.

It's not a shot I would want to make. Least of all hanging out the window of a moving perch.

Bang!

The first SUV swerves crazily across the road, one wheel no longer pulling its weight.

Bang!

The second of our pursuers, having nimbly dodged its fallen brother, takes a heavy shot to the windscreen. Glass flies everywhere, glinting in the headlights and the front wheels turn sharply, implying a slumped—now dead—driver. The car careens in a sharp right-hand angle, straight off the road.

Bang!

The third SUV takes the hardest fall.

Whatever Cyrus hits, human or machine, has the car spinning sharply and falling over its corner wheel. Rocketted into a wild spin, the SUV is thrown into the air, over and over again, before pirouetting like a top. The headlights flash bright over dark trees then shoot up to be absorbed by the night sky. Pieces of sheet metal spray across the road. Something hard hits our back window with a heavy smack and a spider web of cracks...

The road is left blocked and our last pursuer has to hammer on the brakes to save himself from a fatal collision.

I hit the accelerator equally hard and the Tesla shoots forward into the night...

The deception is simple. Which is what makes it elegant.

As soon as we're a few miles beyond the SUV carnage, I bring the Tesla to a safe stop.

'There's a field a mile south of the northern coastline,' Cyrus tells me, as he vacates the car. Stripping off his jacket, he attaches a strap to his weapon and settles the rifle over his shoulder.

'Good place for a rescue chopper, you mean?' I catch on, inputting the information into the car and then jumping out onto the side of the road.

Cyrus nods.

'Or at least, that's what Felix will think when he Googles where his car's at.'

His *car*?

I check the number plate as the Tesla pulls out and drives away solo:

"FC01 BSS."

No doubt he was going for "Boss", but I think the BS is far more than appropriate.

'Which way, now?' I search for Polaris overhead, having lost track of my internal compass. Apparently, I'm out of practice.

Never lose your bearings, soldier. You lose where you're at and you'll never find where you're going.

Cyrus has no such rust to shake off. He points with confidence out to our left.

‘We’ll hit the coastal road if we head that way. Boat’s twenty minutes from there.’

‘Distance?’ I ask. Cyrus is suddenly behind me, placing his jacket around my shoulders. My bare arms are chilled and my fingers are starting to numb out, so I don’t argue. Even tropical islands get cold at night.

‘Mile and a half,’ he says, ‘as the crow flies.’

Good thing I changed my shoes...

The hike takes us nearly an hour in total. A mile and a half isn’t so far in theory. But throw in the pitch-black sky above and the untamed forestry below and, in practice, it all becomes a little more challenging. Most of the branches I avoid with ease but, every so often, one strikes out from the shadows without warning. Uprturned roots underfoot seem eager to wrap around our toes and pull us over. With each new noise, we pause, listen, and assess. With every glint or flash of light, we duck behind the nearest rock or tree. Gentle breezes funnel into miniature gales between the trees and howl loudly in my ears. The frigid cold bites through our clothes and tries to freeze my knees stiff.

In short, it’s a fairly miserable trek and neither Cyrus nor I talk through it. We just focus on putting one foot doggedly in front of the other.

Cyrus is right in his estimations. By the time we hit the coastline, we’re a mile and a half from where the Tesla left us behind. After that, it’s twenty minutes to the dot until we hit a private cove hollowed out from the cliff face. Even in the darkness, the white paint job of a small motored sailboat gleams up at us from the waters below.

How Cyrus arranged for it to be sitting there, I have no idea. But I’m damn thankful. My toes are starting to blister

and my body aches from top to bottom. I'm practically moaning at the sight of that boat.

'Oh, I could kiss you right now,' I squeal, hurrying for a little sign that points toward a beachside footpath.

But Cyrus is never one to let an opportunity pass. He snatches out a hand in the dark, grabs my wrist, and pulls me in for that kiss.

His lips are cold but his tongue warm. One thick and firm arm curls around my waist to hold me nearer and I reach up my own along his back. His rifle knocks against my forearm and a zing of excitement lights up my tired nerves.

When he finally lets me go, Cyrus is breathing heavily, his eyes are hooded and his mouth reluctant to break away. His lips linger, clinging to mine.

'We'll finish that back home,' he finally says.

Home...

The word means little to Cyrus, I'm sure. It's just a turn of phrase to him. But the natural way it rolls off his tongue softens something inside me. Warms it, melts it, and sees it seep into every lonely corner of my being... full.

Not whole. For there was never something missing from me as a person. But *full*. Like Cyrus saturates and completes what I already possess.

'Come on,' he says, taking my hand and leading us down the indicated footpath.

The route is a little treacherous and hard to navigate in the dark but, after the woods, it's practically a cakewalk. We reach the beach—no sand, just a field of smooth pebbles—and rush towards the waves. Without a pier or dock to moor to, the sailboat is anchored a few meters offshore.

'You can swim, right?' Cyrus asks as we both hit the wash at full speed. The shallow waves fountain around us and we hurry through the surf.

'Little late to be asking, don't you think?' I shout over the noise of pounding water. We're up to our thighs now.

‘I thought that was typical for us?’ he calls back.

A bark of laughter jolts from my chest and I realize I’m a little hysterical. A common reaction on missions when you’re almost home safe.

And one you know not to trust, I remind myself. *It’s not over until it’s—*

A gunshot rings out over the cove, echoing off the rocks like an explosion.

Cyrus falls into the water and, for a second, my heart stops. But he appears a moment later, swimming towards the boat and reaching back for me to follow.

He’s not hit.

Triathlons aren’t really my workout of choice but I have a strong and steady front crawl that has me streaking after him.

We pull ourselves up onto the deck as a second shot rings out. There’s a heavy *thunk* of the bullet hitting the hull of the boat.

I rush to check it’s not left a gaping hole in our floating vessel but Cyrus is like lightning. His hand wraps around my shoulder and gently but firmly shoves me down into the helm cockpit and out of sight. He then takes the wheel, starts the engine, and gets us up to high speeds as quickly as he can.

‘You know how to drive this thing?’ I check, pulling myself back up to standing. The look Cyrus shoots me is aggressively black. It’s clear he wants to shove me back down but he needs both hands to operate speed and direction.

‘Well enough,’ he calls over the roar of the engine.

We’re quickly out of range of the cliffs but, as we turn out into the open water, we have a different concern.

‘Er... Babe?’ I warn, eyes set on the island that we’ve now put decided at our rear. ‘We have a new problem!’

Cyrus glances back over his shoulder and curses.

A boat is on our tail. A *speedboat*.

Looking out across the open water, Cyrus checks his phone and then angles us toward whatever coordinates Jaime has sent him. He then navigates a winding path, working us around and between a series of outcroppings, including the island with my favorite erotic lagoon.

I look back out behind us.

Whilst the larger speedboat is forced to take the longer way around, it's not long before it's back in range. And, suddenly, it's open season on Machelli spies.

The first shot hits the rim of the boat and pings up towards the mast somewhere. The second flies wide entirely. The third catches the front of the helm, barely inches from Cyrus's hands.

'Shit!' he curses, dodging out of the way and taking up his rifle. A series of shots in their direction has the speedboat realigning itself and their guns holding fire. But it also has us drifting and swaying dangerously on the water.

'Give me that!' I demand, reaching for the rifle. When Cyrus, on instinct, pulls the gun out of my reach, I dive for the holster under his arm instead and free one of his Glocks.

'Hey—!'

'Get us straight!' I cut him off, bracing my feet and leveling the gun at the enemy.

For a moment, it's as if the world slows down. The boat under my feet isn't a rocking turbulence but a predictable ebb and flow. The winds throwing hard against my outstretched arms are just a steady pressure on which to lean. The hurrying figures in black aboard the speedboat don't scurry but lumber in slow motion about the deck.

I take a slow inhale, absorbing the movement of the world around me in my knees and shoulders. I keep my sight flowing straight down the line of the barrel.

I exhale.

I shoot.

My target spins like a top, taking the slug in the shoulder and knocking clean off his feet. *He'll live.*

My second shot hits the driver of the boat clear through the neck.

He won't.

'Darcy, you need to get down!' Cyrus calls over the ringing in my ears.

'Hold on!'

'You're out in the open!'

There are two more men on the deck. One of them, I recognize in a gleam of moonlight, is Rocco Caruso.

'Darcy, *now!*'

I aim true but, as I pull back on the trigger, the boat hits an undertow and the bullet flies a few inches wide. I only clip Rocco in the ribs.

Big mistake.

The next thing I know, I'm hurled backward by an almighty punch in the chest. It throws me clean off my feet and I tumble back beside Cyrus. My spine hits the console and my vision goes all funny.

Something like a roar comes out of Cyrus, as a white-hot agony finally registers in my chest.

What the crap—?

I feel the boat lurch beneath me, and blink to see Cyrus's shape blotting out everything else. Several rounds of gunfire are muffled and oddly distorted in my ears.

I've been shot before. Twice in fact. But one was just a grazing flesh wound and the other was in my leg. It had been painful as all hell but I'd been able to compartmentalize and carry on back to my unit. This was—*is*—entirely different.

'Darcy!'

Cyrus sounds like he's coming from the wrong end of a long tunnel and I try to shake my head. I really need to get my

ears checked.

And the misfires shooting across my eyes are equally annoying.

‘Darcy, talk to me!’

What does he want to talk about? I wonder with sudden hilarity. The weather?

How about all the secrets I’ve been carrying because I’m too much of an idiot to realize they’d be safe with him? Or how I’ve spent my entire life believing that loneliness is akin to quiet contentment? How I’ve mistaken *calm* for *happiness*?

‘Darcy!’

Maybe he just wants a reply to his love confession.

I never did answer him did I?

“I love you... There is only one plan now and that’s to get you home safe... It’s all I can think about. It’s all I can do.”

The blasting of guns has stopped. I don’t know why. Perhaps we’ve ridden the waves out of range. Perhaps Cyrus has shot the last two men on the boat.

Perhaps the speedboat got a flat tire.

For some reason, I find this uproariously funny. But it hurts to laugh, hurts to smile... hurts to breathe.

‘Darcy, baby...’

Hands are on my face, turning me to face the sky. When did I close my eyes? *That’s silly...* I try to open them.

I’m on the deck too, slumped against the main control console, but I don’t remember sitting down.

‘You’re gonna be all right,’ Cyrus is saying. Which seems a fairly lofty and bold claim if you ask me. ‘Baby, you’re gonna be *fine*.’

I scream as searing pain erupts through the top left of my chest, pounds through my shoulder, and then pours like lava along my arm. Or at least, I think I scream. I do in my head. I

don't actually *hear* much besides an ugly gargle. I taste bloody iron on my tongue.

Ugh.

I blink and a blurry image swims into view:

Cyrus. Knelt before me. Shirtless.

For a second I wonder if I've slipped into full hallucinations until I realize he's pressing his wadded-up shirt to my wound.

His features are so contorted they look misshapen. His eyes so full of pain, it's like *he's* the one who's shot.

Maybe he is.

I try to ask if he's all right, but Cyrus shushes me.

'No talking,' he tells me. 'No talking but stay awake for me, all right?'

No, I need to talk. I'm certain of it. There's something I need to tell this man. This powerful, deadly, and out-of-his-mind-with-panic man...

I open my mouth but he shushes me again.

'*Ssh*, baby. It's gonna be alright. Jaime is seven minutes away. Just hold on for me and we'll get you fixed up. Come on...'

Seven minutes. Cyrus and his punctual accuracy...

I try to take a deep breath but it catches in my chest and doesn't want to come out. I try to count out the seconds to keep myself conscious.

I don't doubt Cyrus but it sure feels like a whole lot longer than seven minutes to me.

Long or short though, Cyrus is there. He talks to me. Sitting there, on a boat, in the middle of open water, presumably with a neighboring vessel of corpses just floating nearby... Cyrus talks to me.

He tells me about his place in Rome. Says how he wants to take me there. He talks about getting someplace new. Of

buying *me* a place. He tells me how happy I'm going to be, how I won't have to worry about anything...

By the time I'm drifting in and out, the darkness creeping in on all sides, Cyrus sounds choked up. He talks about our little girl, says how she's going to be a ballerina. Or a soccer player, or an astronaut. He doesn't care which, just so long as she's healthy.

And the entire time he talks, all I can think is...

He keeps saying "you".

He keeps saying "you" and "she".

'Darcy?!'

I feel large hands taking me by the shoulders and shaking me hard. Curiously, it doesn't hurt.

Nothing hurts anymore.

'Baby, don't you fucking dare. Don't you leave me!'

Not once, I think, as the world fades to inky black. Not once in all these fantasies Cyrus is weaving... did he ever say "*us*".



MOST PEOPLE LOATHE the smell of hospitals. But I kind of like it.

As I sit up on the gurney, bare toes brushing the flagstone floor, I glance around the room, breathing in the familiar scent. L'ospizio di Santa Maria-Eugustina is a private hospital with several wealthy benefactors—the Machellis included. But it's not the shiny, high-tech equipment or crystalline white sheets that catch the wandering eye. It's the arching, majestic ceilings overhead and iron brackets ensconced in the walls. The hospice is built inside a refurbished church and, whilst the building itself is no longer in religious practice, many of the nursing staff are real, genuine nuns from a nearby convent.

It's absolutely nothing like any medical facility I've attended before.

But it still smells like a hospital.

It still reminds me of the times, post-debrief, where I've visited my team, or been visited myself. Times when we were all just thankful to be alive.

Perhaps that's why I've never had a problem with hospitals. In a past life, hospitals weren't for the dead, but for the lucky.

I rest a hand over my lower belly.

This time, I have two reasons to be thankful.

'Well,' I say, with a hand over my stomach. 'If you can fight through two forms of birth control and my chronic adrenaline spikes, I suppose a bullet's just child's play, huh?'

Whilst it's taken nearly a week for me to carry my own weight again, tests have revealed no adverse effects to the pregnancy at all.

'Like mother like daughter,' says a sweet voice from the doorway.

Sister Valentina is an initiate nun, putting her in an odd little headdress and pettifor instead of the full habit. She's also a fully registered nurse, a lover of all things Julia Roberts, and by far my favorite member of the hospice team. She's been assigned to my ward for at least three of her shifts in the last five days. I've been hoping to catch her before being discharged.

I grin at her approach.

'Doc says I'm fit to go,' I announce, even though she has my chart in her hands.

Sister Valentina smiles right back with a nod.

'So I see,' she agrees, before taking up a little white envelope from amidst my notes. 'I've got your discharge papers here, and I printed this out for you if you'd like it?'

I take the envelope from her and peer inside. Gasping, I scramble to pull out the blurry black-and-white image of a sonogram.

I stare at it with trembling hands for what feels like a decade.

Sister Valentina smiles harder.

‘How about we get you some shoes?’ she suggests.

‘Shoes...’ I repeat sluggishly, not truly paying attention. My head is on one track and one track only.

That’s my baby...

I have upon my person two socks, two shoes, and a brand new coat (I have no idea where it’s come from) before I can jolt back out of my trance.

I slip the sonogram inside its envelope.

‘I wouldn’t put that away,’ Sister Valentina encourages. ‘I’m sure he’d like to see it.’

‘He?’

She frowns.

‘Your boyfriend?’

Boyfriend... For a minute, I literally don’t know who she’s talking about. There’s only one man who would care enough to come pick me up and “boyfriend” is just a too wildly quaint term for him.

‘I er... I don’t have a boyfriend,’ I say. Technically, I’m not wrong.

‘Er... does *he* know that?’ Sister Valentina laughs as she takes back the signed forms for my release. ‘He’s been waiting forever.’

‘He’s been here all day?’ I ask, shocked.

She looks at me funny.

‘He’s been here all *week*,’ she says. ‘I thought you knew that. Sister Mary-Joseph had to let him use the staff showers because he wouldn’t—’

I'm out the door like a shot.

Still surprisingly shaky on my pins, I hurry as best I can down an impressive corridor of beautiful architecture and finely framed artwork. None of which I give two shits about. I'm more interested in the signs; the little, modern, modestly printed signs that will lead me to the waiting room.

The speed of my feet isn't quite up to my head's standards and, by the time I hit the reception desk in the waiting room, I'm light-headed and have to take a couple of long, deep breaths to steady myself.

I scan the room and, as any good soldier does, hone in on my target with speed and accuracy.

Cyrus is seated in the far corner sandwiched between a stack of unread magazines and a potted plant. His six-foot-plus frame looks ridiculous, squeezed into a tiny plastic chair, and a bundled-up fleece has slumped down behind his shoulders. Like he might have been using it as a pillow against the wall.

Now, Cyrus sits slouched forward, his elbows on his knees, forearms locked upright and his head on his hands. His eyes are downcast and his back solidified into a graceful, greaving slope.

Unkept, unshaven, and absolutely rigid, Cyrus looks like he's been in that little seat since the dawn of time.

'Cyrus?'

His head comes up so fast that I'm surprised he doesn't give himself whiplash. Another second and Cyrus is across the room, hands on my shoulders, my neck, my face.

'Are you all right?' He croaks the words, his voice rusty and unused. 'What about the baby? Is she all right? Is she healthy?'

One warm palm drifts down to my waist, the other to my hair. He changes his mind and brings them both around my rib cage like he's ready to catch me if I fall.

'I'm not family,' he growls darkly as he strokes. 'They wouldn't tell me anything.'

His touch is fluttering. Infinitely gentle. It's sweet but it's also diluted. I crave his real touch. I hunger for the hard, strong pressure of his arms. The embrace I know to be all Cyrus.

I dart forward, wrapping myself around him and pulling him in tight against me. It's like jabbing a hot poker into my shoulder joint but I ignore it. I breathe in Cyrus's scent and feel his body against mine. *This* is more important.

'I'm fine,' I tell him. '*We're* fine.'

Cyrus seems to sag against me and then sway a little.

I spy the fleece-pillow, fallen onto the chair behind him. How much sleep had this man gotten in the last few days?

'I have a confession to make,' Cyrus murmurs into my neck.

I wriggle closer.

'Is it the kind of confession I'm going to like?' I tease. But I feel him shudder against me.

'I doubt it...'

Oh boy...

'I ran a background check on you.'

I freeze.

'Oh.'

That's it. Oh.

I'm not really sure what else to say to that, unsure whether this is a helpful shortcut to necessary conversations... or a grievous breach of my privacy.

'You were in the military,' he says, pulling back enough to look me in the eye.

'I was...' Again, I speak with no tone to my voice. Just bald fact.

'In the *Fallskärmsjägarna*,' he says, getting the pronunciation surprisingly spot-on. 'Isn't that like the Swedish marines?'

‘Something like that.’ I’m not sure where this is going but I suspect the destination will decide how mad I am.

‘You had an active parole out for arrest,’ he says.

‘Yeah I know, I—*Wait... Had?*’ *As in... past tense?*

‘I got rid of it.’

‘You what?’ I blink at him, feeling decidedly untethered in this conversation.

‘I had Nat expunge the records.’

‘They’re going to notice that!’

‘But they’ll have nothing official to replace them with. We got everything.’

Cyrus’s expression is just as careful, just as controlled, as mine. As stony as he ever was. But I can read him better now. I can see the flicker in his eyes, the way he swallows...

He fears my reaction.

‘I...’ I literally have no words. I can only blink, staring at the front of Cyrus’s shirt. It’s not the same one from the boat—a garment that I hope has been relegated to a trash bin somewhere. This one is a t-shirt that looks pulled from the hospice’s Lost and Found. It has a slogan on the front about trout fishing.

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Cyrus says.

I go to argue but he cuts me off. His hands are hard on my shoulders and are setting off waves of pain through my chest. But again, what’s happening here feels more important than my injuries...

‘I read the reports, Darcy,’ Cyrus reminds me. ‘You did what you thought was right.’

I shake my head.

‘I disobeyed orders.’

We’d been assigned to one of the southern, more violent provinces of Afghanistan. On a covert mission in cooperation

with the US Army. We'd been given a target. A terror unit masquerading as a simple family household.

Except... they hadn't been masquerading.

'You did what I always wish I had,' he says. 'You didn't just follow blindly. You made a different call. And it was the *right* one. Those people were innocent and you saved their lives.'

'And screwed myself and all of my team in the process.'

I know what he's saying is true. But simply being right doesn't erase the repercussions of my choice.

We'd been brought up on treason charges. Charges I couldn't even be mad at. Charges I still don't wholly disagree with.

Right or wrong, information or no information, the military—*any* military—does not function with insubordination. There has to be a pecking order. If every shot, every death is on the choice, and the conscience, of the one who pulls the trigger, no one would be able to sleep at night. I might have saved the lives of that family. But I had risked the sanctity of an institution that would not—*could* not—fall from grace.

It would, instead, hang me out to dry.

I couldn't blame them for that. But I also couldn't allow it.

So I'd run.

'That's why you were so intense about all of this,' Cyrus says. 'If you'd been deported, you'd have been imprisoned. And you thought I wouldn't be there for our baby—'

'Which I was wrong about—!'

'But it's what you *thought*,' he reminds me. He wraps his arms around my waist again. 'So you couldn't risk leaving her alone. You've done all this for her.'

Goddammit, I will not cry.

I fiddle with the front of Cyrus's shirt, the warmth of his chest seeping into the backs of my knuckles. I squeeze my

eyes tight, draw back my lips against the urge to sob, and nod my head.

This time when Cyrus takes hold of me, it's nowhere near as coy. Taking my lead, he pulls me in closer. I feel every plane of muscle along his torso pressed up against mine, every line of strength in his arms caging me in. I snuggle deeper and try to absorb his presence, his scent. I feel him taking long and measured breaths against my neck. Together, we just stand.

I take it back... I think, recalling that night in the hotel. *This is the most intimate embrace we've shared.*

Which makes it the perfect moment to say:

'I love you.'

Cyrus freezes against me.

'I love you,' I repeat. 'And I'm sorry I'm so late saying it back to you. I knew it long before you told me.'

'You... I... wait, *what?*'

I grin against his chest. Cyrus sounds like he's rebooting. Like he can't compute the idea that someone might love him. When I pull back to look him in the eye, I see it written all over his face.

'But I...' he stammers.

But I'm not worthy of love.

But I'm a killer.

But I'm a criminal.

But I killed a child...

Whatever reason is digging its claws into Cyrus's heart, it's painted clear as day on his face that he doesn't think himself worthy of affection.

'Hey,' I say, squeezing my arms around his waist and bringing his attention back from wherever it had drifted to. 'Remember what you said a few days back? About how we all have different versions of ourselves?'

‘Yeah...?’ Cyrus makes an audible swallow. Those beautiful mismatched eyes of his bore into mine. The rest of the waiting room, the hospital, seems to melt away.

‘Well, I agree with you,’ I tell him as we stand in our own little universe. ‘About how we can know only one element of a person but, if we know it well enough, we start to see the rest? Hints of things we didn’t intend to show?’

Cyrus’s eyes burn. His lips part in wonder. I can practically feel the energy, the hopeful optimism zipping about beneath his skin. He swallows again.

‘What do you think you saw?’ he asks.

‘Not *think*,’ I correct him. ‘*Know*. I *know* who I saw. I know who I *see*.’

Even though it has my shoulder screaming bloody murder, I reach up to put my arms around his neck.

‘I see a phenomenal man. A talented executor of his profession,’—his eyes flash at my careful choice of words—‘a trusting and devoted friend. And a loyal lover. I see a man who will make a protective, supportive, and loving father—’

‘But I—’

‘Who *deserves*,’ I continue, shaking his shoulder to shut him up, ‘to be a father. If only because he has paid the price of his mistake for years.’ Guilt, I know, can be the most painful of punishments.

‘*And*,’ I finish, ‘...the man I want to love. Forever, if I can.’

The vibrant, brilliant, *joyous* light I felt in Cyrus’s body is suddenly shining out of his eyes. For a second, everything is right with the world. Every piece is falling into place, every desire is about to be fulfilled...

But his expression suddenly dims, replaced with painful regret.

‘Darcy, I’m not the one to give you what you want,’ he chokes. ‘I’ll... I’ll give you everything you or the baby needs. I swear it. I will. But I... I can’t be someone who—’

‘What is it you think I want?’ I demand of him with a laugh and another shake. His arms wrap tighter around my middle. ‘Who do you think I *am*, Cyrus? You think I want some nine-to-five office worker, home for dinner at six and saving stodgily in his lucrative investment portfolio?’

Cyrus lets out something between a laugh and a sob, then clears his throat.

‘I do actually have one of those.’

‘You know what I mean!’ I thump him in the arm. It’s a testament to how tired the man is that he actually flinches. ‘I’m hardly Betty Crocker or some 40s housewife. If I’m not that kind of woman, what makes you think I’d want that kind of man?’

‘What kind of man do you want?’ The hope is back. Blooming hotter and brighter than I ever thought possible.

‘You! You dumb asshole!’ I shout, thumping him again. ‘I want you! I want someone who challenges me, someone who excites me. I neither need nor want a knight in shining armor to protect me. I want someone who will fight my battles *with* me. Who’ll stand beside me on the front lines, not expect me to cower in the back.

‘I want someone smart, who is going to confront me when I’m being an asshole and will take it when I tell them the same. I want someone who lights me up like a goddamn furnace every time he touches me and who makes me feel safe when I fall asleep.

‘I. Want. You.’

I’m out of breath. Practically panting.

... and I’ve made myself the absolute center of attention for every single person in the room. All eleven of them. Seven patients, a doctor and three nurses. Twenty-two eyes trained on the both of us like we’re the cliffhanger ending to *Days of Our Lives*.

Oops.

I'm not normally one for embarrassment, but I feel myself flushing red hot.

Cyrus tugs at the collar of his shirt. He clears his throat.

'Um... okay,' he says, then winces at his own lack of ceremony.

I giggle.

'Come on,' I nudge him towards the exit. 'My release papers are all signed and I want to go.'

'All right...' Cyrus glances around us, like he's looking for something to carry, something to do. The man is nothing if he isn't a pragmatist. His fingers curl and uncurl like they need a purpose.

So I put my hand into his.

'Here,' I say holding out the little white envelope with the other. 'Carry this for me.'

Bemused, Cyrus takes the envelope and follows me out of the hospice and into the sunshine.

I have no idea what day it is, much less the time. But I suspect, from the heat, it's midafternoon.

'What is this?' Cyrus asks, waving the little envelope. I find it curious that, for all his stoicism, he hasn't even blinked at the hand-holding.

'Our future,' I tell him. 'If you want it.'

Frowning, Cyrus opens the envelope one-handed. He thumbs out the image inside and nearly drops the damn thing.

For a full minute, he's frozen there on the curbside. Just staring.

'You said something on the cliff...' I say, when I'm worried he might be atrophying in place. 'Before we got on the boat...?'

'Mmm?' Cyrus doesn't look up from the photograph. His eyes are glued to it. Memorizing every splodge and blurry line.

'You said you were going to take me home.'

Something in my tone draws Cyrus's focus. I sweep my hair back and tap the tattoo behind my ear.

'The rune?' I say. 'That's what it means. It means "home". It's what I want for my life. What I've always wanted.'

Cyrus swallows. His fingers tremble in my hand.

'I told you already, I'm not the—'

'I'm not talking about bricks and mortar and a white picket fence, Cyrus.' I pull him in close and fall in love with him all over again when he's careful not to squash the sonogram between us. 'A home doesn't have anything to do with walls and a roof. It's about the people inside it. I want someone who I can trust. Who I can rely upon. Who will love me.'

'I will,' Cyrus vows. He keeps looking between me and the picture of our baby. 'Baby, I will. Whatever you need. Fighter, lover, parent, whatever. I can't promise I'll get any of it right,'—he swallows nervously—'but I can promise I'll fight harder than anyone else.'

'Oh yeah...?' I tease, feeling my world settle comfortably on its new axis. An axis with two poles inside of one. 'Because you love me?'

'Because I love you,' he repeats, like a vow. 'More than anyone has a right to love someone.'

'*Hmm...*' I glance up at him thoughtfully, a finger to my lips. I wince awkwardly. 'Does this mean we're in a real relationship now?'

Cyrus snorts.

'Dear God...' he groans in terror.

'It'll be *fine*,' I breeze at him with a laugh. 'You're good at adapting remember? And our first date is in the bag now. It wasn't so bad.'

Cyrus looks at me like I'm a lunatic.

'You got shot,' he points out.

Automatically, I shrug. And then have to wince at my error. Cyrus brings a hand to my bandages peeking out from

beneath my coat. He brushes the gauze gently with his thumb. His eyes are dark, full of shadowy regrets.

I, on the other hand, have none. This last week broke down the wall between us. It gave me Cyrus.

‘Small price to pay,’ I promise him.

‘No...’ he growls, leaning down towards me. He pulls back the lapel of my coat and presses a kiss just above my wrappings. ‘This is never a price to pay.’

I smile, remembering his words back on the island...

‘Because I’m so “precious”?’ I ask.

‘No,’ he shakes his head, stroking the lines of my face with his fingertips before leaning in for a kiss. ‘Because you’re *everything*.’

EPILOGUE

Over the next year, my life was overhauled and rebuilt into something beautiful. Whilst Lana made good on her threat to show up in Rome, she was equally true to her promise of disappearing. After getting what was promised her, she vanished into the ether. It was the last we saw of any Caruso for some time.

Not long after that, Cyrus and I moved north, taking a house in Bolzano in South Tyrol. Nestled amongst majestic mountain peaks and crystal-clear lakes, it's the kind of place where the air is so clear that it lights you up from the inside out. Our town has no cinema and no shopping malls. No gun store. But it has everything that matters. Everything raw and vibrant about life.

It's here that we had our child. Sonea Alesi was born to the world angry, squawling and thoroughly put out by the entire process. For months she was a persistent, wrathful noise, only quieting when cradled in Cyrus's arms. Something about his presence or his smell, had her falling into sleepy tranquility, her pudgy little fingers reaching for his warmth.

As Sonea grew, our life became no less chaotic. But all the sweeter for it. After many late-night conversations and careful discussion, we decided to send our daughter to a residential school. The finest and most secure facility we could find. When she's away, Cyrus and I work, sometimes separate but often together. After a tense period of adjustment, Cyrus, Nat and I now operate as a team. Though I take the front line work solo, I'm never alone on a mission. I have a guardian angel in

my ear and a protective Ghost keeping me forever in his crosshairs.

Four times a year, all missions are put on hold. Sonea returns home and we're always there. Without fail. We take her to hockey practice and go hiking as a family. We suffer through her flute recitals, less proud of her musical talent than we are of her refusal to accept so we decided on a limitation. Sometimes, we do nothing at all. We just are. As a couple. As a family.

As the years go by, I try to remember the smaller moments. The sound of Cyrus's breath in my ear when I'm on assignment. The look in his eye when we watch our daughter streaking across a hockey pitch... The way he texts me when nearly back from assignment:

"I'm home."

Our life is, admittedly, a hodge-podge. A patchwork of different worlds. Some are violent and dangerous. Some are soft and tender. Nothing matches. It's all just a unique mess of details. But every one of those details is ours. It turns out that Cyrus was right. The important things in life are what you choose to make important. What you choose to love, trust and put your faith into.

THE END

IF YOU ENJOYED 'ONE SECRET', then you will love book one of the Machelli Family, 'One Chance.' Freya witnesses Leon's brother's shooting and he forces her to drive his dying brother to the hospital. His father believes he killed his brother and the two are forced into hiding while they track the true killer.

[CLICK HERE NOW to get 'One Chance!'](#)

I'M on the run and trapped with the son of a mob boss.

I was an unwilling bystander to a mob hit and the victim's brother forced me to take them to the hospital.

Even held at gunpoint, I can't deny that Leon is the embodiment of lethal allure.

But his father, the head of the Machelli family, believes Leon killed his brother and wants us both dead.

Now I am forced into hiding with him while he tracks the true killer. I don't know if I can trust him, but I know I can't resist him.

When he looks at me his eyes burn with what I can only describe as....*hunger*.

Beneath his ruthless façade there's an unexpected tenderness, but he has secrets I should never know.

Maybe this dangerous man can save me, in more ways than one, if we can stay alive long enough for justice to prevail.

[CLICK HERE NOW to get 'One Chance!'](#)

SNEAK PEEK CHAPTER 1

The parking lot reminds me of a prison.

Each column, supporting the next rung of the multi-story structure, cuts through the dull, early morning light. Pillars of inky black that send the sunrise streaking across the concrete. Stripes of harsh contrast. Like bars on a prison window.

I shiver, snuggling deeper into my winter coat. The soft squeak of my sneakers echo as I pick up the pace, hurrying for my car.

Yesterday evening, the parking lot was full of Carnivale-goers. Vehicles had filled the building and lined the streets. People had swarmed the alleyways and amassed in the palazzo courtyards. Every open space of Palermo had become a rush of color and noise.

Now, at five in the morning, the streets are quiet and the parking lot is empty. So empty, in fact, it's creepy.

The season doesn't help.

It's February. And even Sicily, home of balmy Mediterranean zephyrs and radiant sunshine grows cold in the dead of winter. Now, the gray light of the rising sun has brought a brother: an eerie breeze that rolls through the seventh floor of the parking lot to sneak beneath my scarf and shoot chills down my spine.

The zip on my coat broke last week so I pull the wool panels tight around my torso and fold my arms to keep the lapels in place. My gloves are fingerless so I shove my hands up into my armpits to keep them warm.

My camera bag bumps against my hip.

Since leaving the elevator, I'd kept my eyes downcast, my concentration on the concrete. I focused on the sound of my shoes and how my exhales were pluming white in the cold.

As I look up, however, I grind to a sharp halt.

My bag swings wildly. Little pieces of gravel crunch beneath my shoes.

Looking out across the floor, I can see two cars. One is my rented Bianchina, tucked against a pillar on the western side of the building. Pale blue, the light of dawn has bleached it to a bone white. The second car is over in the eastern corner, the other side of a row of pillars. Dark and sleek, I know instinctively that it's excessively expensive.

But, as far as I'm concerned, the car can go hang.

I'm more preoccupied with the dark shape next to it.

Oh, God...

I've never seen a dead body before. But I've watched enough tv shows to recognize the sprawled shape of a fallen human being.

I hesitate. I look around the parking lot.

It's probably just a drunkard, I reason. Someone who partied just a little too hard and has passed out.

I can't see much of the figure. Just the ruffled, central line of a dark jacket caught over slumped shoulders. And five white specks of upturned fingertips where his arm is caught awkwardly at his side. Otherwise, the body lays in a shaft of darkness, only his smart loafers peeking into the light.

It's the loafers that give it away.

Hardly party footwear.

Shit.

Swallowing, I hurry over to my rental. Without central locking, I have to use the key in the door to open it before throwing my equipment onto the back seat. I then stand there, hanging on the wide door and trying to peer through the darkness.

You can't just leave him there, Harrison. You have to at least check if he's alive...

Double shit.

Swallowing harder, I start to step around the door, pushing it half-closed behind me. Its hinge creaks in the darkness and an echoing noise has me freezing in place. I strain my ears against the quiet...

...a shuffle, the jingle of keys, the curse of a deep, male voice.

As a shadow moves over the body on the ground, I hear the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked.

Oh, holy—

Yeah, no. Definitely time to leave.

I scurry to get back in the car, practically launching myself into the seat.

Bang!

The gunshot rings out through the parking lot, loud and sickeningly hollow.

I scream and scramble for the door handle.

By the time the second shot rips through the air, I've slammed the door shut and plastered my hands over my mouth.

Shouting: not the best plan!

This is how you make headlines, Harrison. "American post-grad, Freya Harrison, goes missing abroad. Last known location, the scene of a fatal shooting."

I rush to grab my seatbelt as if the thin strap of woven plastic will work as a bullet guard. I drop the clip twice, my hands are shaking so badly.

Just get out, my head screams. Just put the car into gear, your foot to the floor, and get the hell out.

I struggle with the key. I fumble with the gear shift.

It feels like an age before the engine roars to life—

Thump-thump!

A pair of hands hit the hood of the car.

I scream and hit the accelerator. Forgetting to release the clutch, the Bianchina roars to life but goes nowhere. The hood rises up like it's bucking against the stranger now planted in its path...

...a stranger I can only half see.

A streak of light crowds in from beyond his left shoulder revealing a dark, matte suit and a silk shirt. His arms bulk beneath the fabric. His chest is a wide expanse of black. The same streak of gray sunlight catches the stranger in the jaw and over the bridge of his nose, turning his profile crooked and menacing. His pallor looks off and sickly. For the rest, I catch only a glint of brown eyes and slanting, ebony brows.

His lips are moving but I miss the words entirely, turned deaf by the roar of the engine.

Some idiotic, automatic response has me easing off the gas so I can hear better and the engine stalls.

‘Shit!’ I mutter.

‘Wait!’ the stranger repeats himself into the sudden quiet. His voice is deep and hoarse with emotion. He practically growls his Italian... ‘Wait, please...’

‘I...’ I stumble for something to say as I fumble inside the car.

I want no part in this...? I swear I didn't see anything...? I won't tell the police...?

Please, don't kill me...?

Yet something is holding back my tongue along with my instinct to run. I hesitate to get the car back into gear.

‘Please, I need your help. My brother...’ The stranger glances back over his shoulder; towards the other car... and the body.

‘I’m sorry!’ I call through the windshield, my self-preservation kicking back in as I try to work the shift into first gear.

I like to think I’m a good person. For the most part. I really do.

But there’s playing The Good Samaritan and then there’s playing The Idiot.

And this guy is very possibly—*probably*—a murderer.

And I’m a witness.

Those headlines start rushing through my head again.

“Freya Harrison was just twenty-eight years old when her parents reported her missing after she failed to catch her flight from Palermo International...”

When I look back up through the windshield, I’m staring down the barrel of a handgun. I nearly crap myself.

I’d scream if my chest hadn’t spasmed into stillness, air trapped in my lungs.

I ease off the pedals and the car lurches into another stall.

The stranger neatly sidesteps the jolting chassis and reaches to yank open the door.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, still in Italian. Then says something my phrasebook translation can’t help me with. His gestures are clear though: he wants me out of the car.

Terrified, I struggle with the seatbelt and clamber out of the car.

The next thing I know, a long-fingered hand of iron is wrapping around my arm and dragging me across the parking lot faster than my feet can manage. I jolt. I stumble. I finally remember to inhale.

‘What—’ I choke on my words, changing my question. ‘Who are you?’

He doesn’t answer. Which is good, I realize belatedly.

He tells you who he is and suddenly you’re a witness, dummy. Stay quiet. Stay ignorant. Don’t look him in the face... and he might just let you go.

My heart is thumping in my chest and hammering in my ears.

I almost scream again when the dark stranger pulls me around one of the parking pillars...

...there are now *two* bodies on the ground.

‘Oh, God...’

The one I’d seen first is in the same position he was a few minutes ago. From this approach, I can see his face. His eyes are open and glazed. They stare blankly out at the underside of the pricey car that I can now see is a BMW.

I feel the rushing urge to vomit.

‘Here,’ the stranger yanks me away from the corpse, effectively redirecting my thoughts.

I’m pulled down to the floor beside the second body. This one isn’t dead. But he’s not exactly thriving either.

Like the stranger, the man on the ground is wearing a suit. High end with hints of a tuxedo about it. Whilst the stranger is in black on black, his companion—his brother as he claims—is wearing a white shirt and dark bow tie. An unfortunate choice, given the pool of scarlet that’s rapidly blooming across his chest.

Again, my gag reflex starts up and my mouth fills with saliva. I swallow hard and try breathing through my nose.

At least the shock of seeing a shooting victim is effectively distracting me from the fact that I may be about to join him. I keep my eyes on the man’s ragged breathing and away from the gun pointed at my head.

The poor man is staring at me with a handsome face full of fear. Bubbles of blood are pooling at the corners of his mouth.

‘We...’ my hands dance nervously across the man’s chest, before bunching up one of his lapels, ready to press it down upon his wound. ‘We have to put pressure on the wound.’

‘You are English.’

The stranger says it like a statement, not a question. But I correct him anyway.

‘American,’ I say, without thinking.

Good going, Freya. Any other personal information you want to dish out to the homicidal Italian?

Before I can create a firm enough seal on the wound, the body beneath my hands is jerked upright.

‘Wait—’ I cry.

‘We need to get him to a hospital.’ The stranger’s English is accented but perfectly clear. ‘Get his legs.’

‘What are you—?’

‘Get his legs!’

With his hands under his brother’s armpits, the stranger has to angle the barrel of the gun to keep it pointed in my direction, poking from beside the prone man’s pectoral.

I hurry to grab his ankles.

At five-five, I'm hardly a short woman, but Stranger is a behemoth of a man and nearly a foot taller still. As high as I can lift him, Tuxedo is still held at a sharp angle between the two of us.

That's good though, right? I think. Isn't a bleeding wound supposed to be kept elevated?

Then again, that was about keeping the bleeding above the heart, right?

What was the protocol when the bleeding was *from* the heart?

Something tells me it's not: drag the man around and throw him in the back of a vintage rental.

'You should call for an ambulance,' I puff, out of breath. It had been a while since I did any cardio.

'No phone,' he says, not sounding anywhere near as out of breath as me. 'And we don't have time. The shooter could line up another shot while we waited.'

'The shooter? *You're not the shooter?!'*

Stranger doesn't dignify my stupid outcry with an answer.

The world seems to tilt under my feet and I stumble in my hurry to get back to the other side of the parking level. My head goes on the swivel, looking for another figure in the darkness.

Since seeing the barrel of his weapon leveled at my head, my survival instincts had pinned the man before me as the biggest immediate threat.

I heard a gunshot. I saw a gun. It had been simple math to attach one to the other.

But now, sense is starting to enter back into the equation...

Why would the man shoot his brother and then threaten a complete bystander to help him carry that same man to safety?

It didn't track.

Unless someone *else* was responsible for those gunshots.

And the stranger just happened to be equally armed.

Which doesn't exactly frame Stranger and his brother as complete innocents in all of this.

Oh my God, this is so how I die.

Don't think about it... I chant to myself. *Just don't think about it.*

'Open the back,' the stranger orders as we reach my car.

I fumble to follow orders, push my camera bag into the footwell and then help to get Tuxedo into the back seat. He's not as tall as his brother but we still have to fold his legs up against his chest in order to shut the door.

Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe it will help stem the bleeding...?

I enter autopilot as I jump into the front seat and fire up the engine for the third time.

The stranger takes shotgun.

I shudder. Bad choice of words.

'Get us out of here and go left at the exit. Then east on *Via Dante*. Break any and all traffic laws. You obey a speed limit and I'll shoot you.'

My palms slip on the steering wheel, and my nerves set my teeth chattering but I do as I'm told. My foot hits the accelerator, the squeal of tires echoes through the building, and I take the spiral descent down seven sloping flights faster than any driver should.

But I value my head more than I do the rental's wing mirrors.

The Bianchina shoots out onto the street as I spin the wheel to the left. Then we hurtle toward *Via Dante* and out across town.

With the small part of my brain that's not concentrating on my real-life efforts of *Grand Theft Auto*, I wonder why

Stranger didn't simply take the driver's seat for himself. But, as I speed away, Stranger peers through the windows with weapon raised. He trains his gun on the building adjacent to the parking lot as we pass. Then turns in his seat to keep the rear view under surveillance.

Clearly, he feels his talents as a marksman are more necessary than his skills behind the wheel.

Not. Comforting.

Swallowing, I decide I don't want to know any more detail than that and keep my gaze fixed forward.

Only when we're four blocks away from the multi-story does Stranger relax.

And, by "relax", I mean turn all of his tension away from outside threats and redirect it to inside concerns. His gun now leveled on me, he adjusts the rearview mirror so he can watch his brother in the reflection.

As we careen down *Via Dante* and I take a hard left onto *Libertia*, the rising sun hits us full in the windshield. I wince before my co-pilot quickly draws down both visor shades. I glance to my left.

Again, only his lower face is lit now. His jaw, hard and sharply angled, tightens to granite as his stare diverts from the road ahead to his brother in the mirror and back again. A pulse hammers just in front of his ear.

He's worried... I think. He's worried for his brother.

When he catches me staring, I snap my attention back to the road.

Libertia is a fairly new road with smooth asphalt and clear direction. But the stranger quickly points me down another street, this one old and cobbled. The little Autobianchi barely copes, bouncing over the uneven terrain and setting my teeth on edge. Stranger has to grip the back of my seat to keep from hitting his head on the roof.

I'm tempted to check on the patient behind me, fearing the worst, but it takes all my concentration to direct us around

parked cars, old dumpsters, and the occasional abandoned bicycle.

The streets are littered with debris from Carnivale. Streamers, torn pieces of balloons, and food wrappers are scattered over the flagstones.

Who cares if he's worried? I grumble in my head, downshifting to navigate a hairpin turn at the end of the street. *This is a man holding you at gunpoint, Harrison!*

‘What’s your name?’

‘What?’

The car swerves a little under my shock before the stranger points me down another back alley. I freak a little when I realize it’s a one-way street...

...and we're going the wrong way down it!

Thank God the roads are practically empty.

I’m not sure which has surprised me more. The way his low voice seems to fill the little car, turning the air around us hot and oppressive... or his actual question.

‘Your *name*...?’ he repeats, in a tone that seems to question my intelligence.

I bristle.

Not everyone operates at their finest when under fire, asshole!

I consider giving him a false name but what good would that do me? I’m barely holding on to the last of my rationality as it is. Keeping up a ruse on top of that would probably be asking too much of my terror-stricken brain. Besides, there have to be thousands of American girls who share my name, right?

‘Freya,’ I tell him, pushing bangs of wayward hair back from my face. The wool of my gloves turns the strands static. I feel them shoot off in all directions.

‘Pleasure to meet you, Freya,’ Stranger growls.

The greeting is so absurd as we bounce haphazardly through the cobbled streets that it makes me snappy.

‘Yeah, well. Can’t really say the same.’

For one very unsettling moment, I think I catch a smile pulling at the corner of Strangers’ mouth.

It makes me braver than it probably should.

‘Any chance you’re going to tell me *your* name?’ I ask, completely forgetting my own advice on ignorance.

‘Take the next left and then an immediate right,’ Stranger said by way of answer. ‘The emergency room is at the far end of the parking lot.’

Emergency Room. Right. *You have a dying man in your back seat, Harrison. Priorities, here. Names can wait.*

To everyone’s surprise, my own most of all, I shoot the Bianchina across the parking lot at high speed and pull into a swerving halt behind an ambulance, right in front of the ER entrance. Patients and staff hovering on the curbside scatter like pigeons out of the way.

Had I been anything but an adrenaline-drained mush pile by now, I might have taken great joy in my action-movie-style landing.

The sun has almost fully risen now, yellow sunshine gleaming off the hood of the car. But the words “*Pronto Soccorso*” over the entrance still glow in red and white neon.

‘I’ll get a nurse,’ I call, slamming on the parking brake and rushing from the car.

I don’t pause to ask permission or check anyone else’s opinion on the matter. I just run for it.

Bursting through the automatic doors, I suddenly recall that my Italian is rudimentary at best but desperate cries and lots of arm waving bridge the language divide. Two nurses and a paramedic who’d already handed over his latest charge to the hospital staff follow me back out into the rising sun, a gurney pulled in their wake.

The stranger works with the paramedic to get Tuxedo out of my back seat, then rushes alongside the medical staff who hasten to get him inside. His gun has disappeared somewhere and his attention is on his brother. He answers questions in rapid-fire Italian as the gurney rattles through the automatic doors and onto the ward.

Call me an idiot, but I follow.

Looking back, I know that was my one opportunity to run. To just get back into the car and speed back out onto the streets of Palermo. I could have just returned the car to the rental place (sans my deposit with Tuxedo's blood now all over the back seats, thank you very much) and disappeared into the tourist population of the city.

But I didn't.

Something human in me pulled me after the gurney, following in their wake.

When I reach the ward, Tuxedo has already been shifted to one of the beds. A nurse is reading out his BP and other stats, another is reeling off the medications he's preparing to put through the IV. A third is standing with the stranger, a chart and pen in hand.

For a moment, I'm struck a little dumb.

Despite staff members rushing left and right, the beeping of machines, and the distraction of crashing trolleys and equipment, it's the first time I've been able to truly look at the man in front of me.

My first thought is that I'd been right about the suit.

Matte wool over a shirt of muted silk. All in black. I'm no fashionista but I can recognize the cut as expensive and have seen similar designs in the windows of Gucci and Giorgio Armani. Carting a body around and then riding in a rental not much bigger than a Coney Island bumper car had done nothing to diminish its style.

The stranger wears his designer threads like he wears his own shadow: with a natural indifference that speaks of money. And a lot of it. Which seems only natural considering the rest

of him: the shoes are high-end, the two rings on his right hand look like they might be platinum and a titanium watch is peeking from under his cuff.

Even his haircut is upper-crust; his thick, ebony locks trimmed shorter in the back and left a little longer in the front. They might have been styled away from his face earlier in the night but now they hang loose, a little sweaty and disheveled.

Already tall and broad, the thick hair he keeps brushing back from his forehead tops the stranger out at six-foot-four, if he is an inch.

To make matters worse, he's astonishingly good-looking.

His features are so symmetrical, so attractively formed, that they'd have been called pretty if not framed by a sharp jawline, high cheekbones, and a dominant brow. Similarly, his nose is a fine and unyielding detail that balances the femininity; turning sensually curved lips and long eyelashes into something alluringly masculine.

Screw "good-looking", I correct myself.

The man is a masturbation fantasy come to life. Latino edition.

I had to hand it to the nurse taking down his details. Despite being confronted with a dark and deadly Hugo Boss model, she is holding to her professionalism. Only the rising blush in her cheeks is giving her away.

I can't exactly blame her. The stranger had held me at gunpoint and even *I* can't deny that he's seriously *fine*.

Speaking of that gun and all it entails... Why are you still here, Harrison?

'No...' the stranger is saying to the nurse, with a soft shake of his head.

My rough Italian can work out that she's confirming whether the brother is allergic to penicillin.

'Alright, that's everything for now. I just need to know your name and details, sir?'

I had been about to turn away. I swear it. I had felt the inclination building into intention. I had been about to turn away and head for the door.

The nurse's question, instead, has my feet growing roots.

Spotting me standing in the middle of the open hallway, amidst the chaos and hubbub of emergency care, the stranger fixes me with a stare of warmest, russet brown. As he answers, it's like he's answering to me, and only me.

"I am Leon," he says, his eyes burning with a golden edge. 'Leon Giancarlo Aversa.'

His stare is magnetic. Potent.

Nothing could have torn me away from it.

Save the harsh and singular tone of Leon's brother... as he flatlined.

[CLICK HERE TO READ 'ONE CHANCE'](#)