



A DARK  
MAFIA  
ROMANCE

*Obsessive*  
**DEVIL**

BB HAMMEL

# Possessive Devil

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*A Dark Mafia Romance*

BB Hamel

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# Trigger Warning

This book contains graphic descriptions of sexual content, explicit violence, some mild drug use, and past trauma. These scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth experience, but may be triggering for some readers.

Read at your own risk.



# Chapter 1

## *Grace*

**H**e's there, just in the other room: the guy from my nightmares. I'm about to get myself killed, but I'll take the bastard down with me.

I pull out a small plastic baggie filled with white powder, shake it a couple times, open the zip top with shaking hands, and pour the stuff into a cut-crystal glass of obscenely expensive whiskey. I stir until it dissolves before I shove the baggie back into the waistband of my skirt—there's nowhere else to hide it, not when I'm wearing barely more than a plunging crop top that's essentially lacy underwear and a skirt that only just grazes the bottom of my ass—and for weeks I've been coming to work with it hidden in my tiny little uniform, which has been like torture for my already-frayed nerves. I thought about keeping it shoved down my top, but I realized quickly that too many men stare at my chest and get a little handsy, even if I'm supposed to be off-limits, and the chance of someone noticing it were way too high.

I'm trembling as I heft the heavy lacquered wood tray with its pristine green felt center and the drink glistening in the middle and look around the quiet janitor's closet. Mops, buckets, racks of supplies, a utility sink, and not much more. My little haven when work gets too bad and the only place I know I can be alone for a few minutes, away from the leering guys eye-fucking me to death and the catty dancers annoyed whenever a drink girl steals some attention away and the bartenders with their quiet, judging boredom.

Life isn't always roses, but I've suffered indignity and disgrace in peace like a good quiet girl is supposed to, and now I'll get my chance to make some noise and fuck shit up and let everyone know just how I feel about getting walked on and slapped around and strangled my whole life.

Bass thumps through my bones from the front of the club. If anyone catches me in here with a drink tray bound for the back room, I'm totally screwed, no matter how often I sneak in here. That's beyond against the rules and there would be way too many questions, so I take a couple deep breaths, whisper a little prayer, and step out into the dark back hall.

Nobody's around. I straighten my clothes and put on my game face—it's the look of a girl that knows what she's doing and isn't afraid of anything, even though my brain's currently screaming *oh my god Grace oh my god don't do it Grace don't do it you absolute psycho* which isn't exactly easy to ignore, but my game face hardens me and makes me think I'm someone else, someone stronger and sharper and better, someone that's not from the back woods of West Virginia with pine sap in her veins and scars etched into her skin, and it gives me the false courage I need to keep moving forward.

I march past the bathrooms where a small gaggle of other drink girls stand gossiping with each other. I wave to Ginnie and Kia and they wave back, though Juniper throws me a dirty scowl—she's hated me ever since one of her favorite clients started preferring me over her, which wasn't my fault, I even told the guy I wasn't interested in stealing him away, but he's a persistent asshole that tips really well. He keeps saying I'll break down one day and give him a special dance, but I definitely won't, although I haven't expressly said that yet—better to let him have some hope and keep bringing me those hundred-dollar bills.

And anyway, I'm not here to make friends—I'm here to lose them.

“You on the back rooms, Gracie?” Ginnie asks, a pretty white girl with big red hair and a perky attitude.

I nod and pat the tray. “Got a drink for three right now.”

Kia chews her lip and glances over her shoulder before leaning closer. She's extremely pretty, with dark hair, long lashes, smooth brown skin and an easy smile. "Lucky girl, I knew I shouldn't have switched. You know who's in there, right?"

I know exactly who's in there.

I know every detail about him, everything I've been able to find at least—I know his face, his weight, his height, his wife's name and how many children he has, I know what he's been accused of doing and how many men he's allegedly killed, I know he's allergic to strawberries—not bad enough to make him choke to death unfortunately—and that he hates the Rolling Stones but loves the Beatles and thinks Type O Negative is the greatest band on the planet.

I know the bastard better than I've known anyone in my life, except for maybe Riley, and she's lodged so deep in my bones that my inner voice is *her voice*, whispering to me all the time, keeping me up at night, keeping me grounded and out of an early grave.

"Just some rich guy," I say instead like I haven't got a clue, smiling in a way I hope suggests I'm very confident but also kind of dumb.

Juniper rolls her eyes. "Sometimes I really wonder how you manage to make it through a day without getting hit by a car, you're so damn stupid."

"Don't be a bitch, Junie," Ginnie says and leans toward me. "Just be careful with this one, sweetie, okay? And don't be surprised by what you see in there." Her face falters slightly and she chews her lip. She was one of the first girls that was kind to me when I got hired all those months ago and when I was adjusting to life in this place, where morals are flexible and sins are a prerequisite to having fun. "You'll be fine though. Just give him whatever he wants."

My eyes widen. "He's not gonna try to pressure me into—"

Ginnie shakes her head and forces herself to smile. "You'll be fine. Better get going though if that's for him."

I frown at her and pretend to look nervous—which isn't hard, since I'm a bundle of anxiety at the moment—before I turn and march off down the cheap red carpeting beneath the dim orange overhead lights. I hear Juniper say something nasty back there and Ginnie snaps back something sharp, and I smile to myself—I don't know what I did to win that girl's loyalty, but I love her to death for it.

Sweat glistens on my skin and drips down my back. I hear voices from the front of the club—patrons talking to whatever girls are currently dancing for them, and the smell of lavender and body glitter, sweet and silky, drifts through the air. A girl laughs, slightly shrill, definitely fake, and a deep rumble of a man's voice answers her. I'm so attuned to the sounds of Crystal Lake that I catch almost everything, it flows over me and through me, and I can picture what's happening—Monique grinding her hips in some frat guy's crotch while his friends laugh and toss singles, or Sarah bending backwards while she rolls her pelvis in the face of a drunk businessman while he shoves tens into the waistband of her thong, letting his finger graze the soft skin inches away from her freshly smoothed pussy.

All this happens around me, but I'm focused on room three and what's beyond its closed door.

I hear nothing inside—it's one of the truly soundproofed rooms in the place which is why he's in there—and I'm shaking as I stand outside of it. As soon as he came in through the front door, I knew he'd end up inside that room, and I practically begged Kia to switch with me—she'll work the floor and I'll work the privates—and that might be a problem. But that's an issue for future-Grace to worry about.

I tuck a strand of my shoulder-length, curly auburn hair behind an ear, straighten my skirt, make sure my tits are in position, and take a deep breath before I open the door a crack and step inside.

The lighting's all reds and purples and gives everything an otherworldly vibe like I stepped from our universe into something dripping with velvet. A pole stands at the far end and a pretty blonde named Rainwater slides down it upside-

down, completely naked, her tanned skin taut and glistening with oil, her little perky breasts shaking slightly with the tension of her muscles as she spins around in an incredible, graceful arc. I know strippers are seen as low-rent and classless or whatever, but I'm always impressed at just how athletic some of these girls are and what they can do with their bodies. Rainwater is one of the best, she's like an acrobat as she glides and spins and twirls, contorting herself, making her trim, lean legs seem to shift and sway and dance in the air.

To the right, a large black leather couch is set up facing the pole. Another girl dances in front of it, with cloud-pale skin, long black hair, and an incredible ass, her top still on and her bottoms basically nonexistent as she twerks her hips with her hands above her head. I catch her eye and Raven grins and winks at me, and my stomach twists as I look at the man sitting on the couch, and the girl kneeling before him.

He's bigger than I expected. I mean, I knew he was tall—easily over six feet—but he's brimming with muscles and a dark, dangerous aura oozes from him like smoke. I catch glimpses of tattoos that disappear into an expensive suit. His dark hair's cut short and slicked back, and he's staring down at the girl before him as she takes his cock and sucks him deep into her throat.

I stand frozen for a beat. Sunshine's got dark blonde hair and amazing boobs—one time I asked her if they were fake and she proudly puffed out her chest, shook her head, and said, "Sweetie, these puppies are corn fed and all natural," and I liked her ever since—and she strokes the man's cock with a loving smile as she looks into his eyes with an amazing feigned reverence, an act good enough to win a freaking Oscar.

I know the girls do this stuff. I've walked in on it four or five times over the last few months since I started working at Crystal Lake, and I don't know why seeing Sunshine sucking the guy's cock makes me pause with shock. Maybe it's the look in his eyes—almost bored, like he can't wait for it to be over—or maybe it's that Raven's taking off her top and getting down on her knees and joining in, sloppily licking his shaft as

she takes him into her mouth, her big lips wrapped around his tip. His dick's big and it stretches out her mouth as Sunshine starts to lick his balls, and the guy grunts once—before looking up and meeting my eye.

Time stops. I can't move my legs. Raven's working his tip, sucking hard and fast, and Sunshine's happily licking at his balls and shaft, and the guy's looking at me with a curious frown, and some voice in the back of my head's telling me to run away, run away, he's going to hurt me if I don't *get the fuck out*, but I can't move my legs. He's a predator, a beast, a monster from the darkest forests, the kind of creature that only exists in stories and fairytales, except this one has been reborn into the gigantic body of a deadly man that apparently needs two gorgeous strippers to pleasure his massive cock.

He gestures at me. "Drink."

That breaks me from my stupor. I hurry over and lower the tray as Sunshine glances up. She grins and strokes the guy's shaft while Raven sucks him faster, bobbing up and down with a surprising grace, and I wonder where the hell she learned to do that—I feel a momentary spark of jealousy at her technique. They don't even hesitate when I get close since this is just part of their job, after all, and I've seen both of them doing stuff like this before though never at the same time.

The guy takes the drink. He tosses a folded-up fifty-dollar bill onto the tray and my heart races wildly as I straighten, about to leave, but I can't stop staring as he brings the glass to his lips and takes a long drink.

Time stops. The earth ceases its rotation. I can't pick up my legs because they don't work anymore. I stare at his full lips as he licks them and swallows, and he frown's ever so slightly, looking at the glass with a curious expression, and I'm positive he knows what I did and I'm about to be caught and killed in the most brutally horrible way imaginable, he's going to rip off my skin and make me eat it all and only when I'm suffering peak levels of agony will he finally put a bullet in my head—except Sunshine seizes the moment and takes the guy's cock all the way into her throat which elicits a surprised grunt from his masculine mouth, and it's like the drink's totally forgotten.

He takes another long sip and I turn, hurrying out of there like my life depends on it.

Because it does.

I shove the fifty into my waistband with the empty plastic baggie and stand outside of the door with the tray against my chest, breathing hard, freaking out. More sweat stipples my skin despite the fact that I'm basically naked and the air conditioning is pumping hard.

Never in a million years did I picture myself in an outfit like this working at a strip club like Crystal Lake, but here I am, doing things I would've said were impossible a year ago, all because my life came to an end ten months back and I'm still dead, barely more than a walking shell of the girl I used to be, and she's never, ever coming back.

Which is why I can take these risks: even if I fake it and end up murdered, just another dead girl for some podcast to investigate, it won't really matter because the girl I once was, the girl with some semblance of naivete still intact, with some innocence and purity and all that good-girl bullshit, that girl's long gone.

Normally right about now, I'd go check on my other rooms, and I can't risk looking too suspicious, so I force myself to go through the motions. I take orders, fetch drinks, and time slips past: five minutes, ten, fifteen. Finally, twenty minutes after first poking my head into room three and handing over that drink, I'm in the hallway with anxiety coursing through my body like teeny tiny little sledgehammers in my veins when Raven comes stumbling out with a wild and terrified look on her face.

She runs over to me, her top clutched against her breasts, and she grabs my arm with her free hand. "Gracie, Jesus fuck, you gotta come quick. I think he's dead."

I nearly scream.

"Dead?" I manage the word like I'm giving birth to it. I force it from my throat, and all my plans swirl around in my skull, mixed up and half-formed, but I force myself to focus on the



plans I've thought about endlessly ever since I came to this club ten months ago and devoted my life to this moment.

If he's dead then everything I've worked for, all my sacrifices, all those leering, pervy dickheads and their grabby hands, all those nights spent watching girls strip and guys throw money and the endlessly empty debauchery of it all, all those hours spent sitting around my sad, lonely apartment dreaming of this night, this exact situation, all of that would be for nothing.

"I don't fucking know, can you just come on?" She drags me along behind her and I stumble after.

Sunshine and Rainwater are hovering over him. His cock's put away though it looks like it was hastily done—his shirt's poking out of his unzipped fly—and Sunshine's checking his neck for a pulse.

"Let me see." I push into the group and force myself to concentrate. I need to take control of this or else it's going to spiral out of hand and I won't get what I desperately need. I press two fingers against the guy's neck—it's surprisingly warm and covered in stubble—and there it is, his pulse, slow but steady. His chest is rising and when I lean close to his mouth, all my instincts telling me to stop, to run, to get away, the monster's going to bite my throat out, I feel his breath on the soft skin of my cheek.

"He's not dead," I say and bite my nails. "I think he's asleep."

"His fucking dick was in my mouth," Raven says, pacing back and forth. "We were sucking him off and he was saying all this fucking shit to us about how we're worthless cunts and all that shit, and his voice got all slurred and whatever and his dick started getting soft and I just figured he was drunk or on something, you know, but then he just sort of passed out. What the fuck's wrong with him?"

"Drugs," Sunshine said, nodding to herself as she got her clothes back on, though they didn't do much to cover her up. "Definitely drugs."

"I didn't see him take anything," Rainwater says, frowning at the slumbering guy, and I want to tell her to shut the fuck up.

I try to keep myself together. “Weren’t you dancing?” I ask her.

“Well, yeah, but—”

“He could’ve done something when we were busy sucking him off,” Raven says like it makes total sense, even if it doesn’t. “You were working the pole, girl, you didn’t see shit.”

God, right about now I love Raven with all my heart.

The glass of whiskey’s sitting on the end table next to the couch and it’s almost entirely empty. My heart does a stutter-step—well, shit, no wonder he passed out like that. I didn’t expect him to drink it all and put in a pretty massive dose, enough to make a rhino pass out, but no time to worry about that now.

“You know who this guy is, don’t you?” Real fear in Sunshine’s voice. She’s terrified, they all are, and I am too, except I’m trying to use my fear to help me focus. “If he’s dead or ODing or whatever, we’re gonna get blamed, and you know what’ll happen, right?”

I nod to myself as if I’m having an idea and stand up straight. I’m shaking but I hope they don’t notice in the low light and with all the stress floating around.

“Okay, here’s what we’ll do,” I say and my voice is strong like I’m sure of myself, even if my knees are weak and my chest feels like it’s packed with ice. “You three go into the changing room and act like you’ve been there the whole time. I’ll deal with this guy and make sure he doesn’t die since I took some paramedic classes when I became a lifeguard like forever ago.”

“But won’t you get in deep shit when he wakes up?” Sunshine narrows her eyes at me, although Raven’s already walking to the door. I make note of that—apparently Raven has no qualms about throwing me under the bus and I no longer love her. Oh, well, short-lived.

“Calvino knows I don’t dance so he won’t suspect me. If he spots you three hovering around his brother, he’ll think it was

one of you right away, especially with the lipstick smeared all over his dick.”

Sunshine grimaces. “That’s a fair point.”

Rainwater stands and walks to me. She puts a hand on my arm and frowns like she’s concerned. “Are you sure, Gracie? You’re really gonna take the heat?”

I give her a brave smile even if I don’t feel brave. All I want is for them to get the hell out of here and let me do what I came here to do all those months ago, but I have to keep playing this out if I want to survive what comes next. I can’t let any of them suspect I have any motives beyond being a good person.

Even if I am so far past *good* at this point that I don’t know what I am anymore. Sinner? Broken? All of the above and worse.

“Calvino likes me, don’t worry. He knows I’m just a simple country girl.” I grin at her and put on my West Virginia accent, really laying it on thick. “He knows I wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Rainwater smiles back even if she doesn’t seem convinced, but she follows Raven out the door. Sunshine’s next and she hesitates before touching my hand.

“You’re a good one, you know that, Gracie? Too good for this hellhole.” And then she’s gone, hurrying after the others. I wait a second until they’re out of sight before I close the door and turn back to the slumbering bastard on the couch.

Sunshine’s wrong.

I’m not a good one.

I’m so far from a good one that I’ve done laps around my old church-going self and come out the other side more jaded and much angrier than I ever imagined I would be.

But that doesn’t matter. I can worry about morality later, after I’ve taken care of what I need to do.

I take several deep breaths, steady myself, before I walk over to my man and stand above him like a vengeful angel.

Asleep, he doesn't look so bad. Peaceful almost, like a big slumbering bear. It's easy to imagine he's not dangerous when he's not conscious, without that spark of anger and death in his eyes, but the moment he regains consciousness will be a goddamn reckoning and I better hope I'm not around for it.

I drop to my knees and lean against his bulk, shoving him to the side so I can reach his back pocket.

He grunts and stirs. He takes a massive breath and licks his lips and his eyes flutter open and for one horrible moment, I think he's about to say something as he looks at me, eyelids fluttering, pupils half-focused, but he only grunts and slumps sideways, mumbling to himself. "Charlie, you look like shit, your hair got fucking short," he grumbles and I recognize his wife's name on his heavily slurred tongue.

I grab the wallet from his back pocket and open it. His driver's license stares me in the face and my heart does strange backwards leaps: Vince Manzini, six-foot-three, brown eyes, brown hair, aged thirty-eight based on his birthday, which was apparently three weeks ago—happy birthday, Vinny, my boy. There's a couple hundred dollars in twenties and fifties, some scraps of paper, and a few credit cards. I pocket the scraps but leave everything else.

I fish the phone from his pocket next. My breath's coming fast now and I'm riding on the edge so fast I don't know if I'll crash or take off and go soaring. My life could tip either way, and I'm terrified, but I have to do this—I have to do it no matter how hard or how dangerous, because to turn back now is to spit in the face of Riley, and I can't do that, I won't do that, not when she remains the one thing grounding me to this otherwise miserable and crumbling world. Thinking about my cousin lights a fire in my chest, a raging hot fire that melts away the ice-cold nerves as I try to unlock the old iPhone model—probably a burner—but he's got a passcode, of course he's got a passcode.

I grab his wrist and raise his limp thumb to the fingerprint scanner on the bottom button, and just as the phone clicks and the screen flashes to home, the icons populating like a wave,

hope flooding me and maybe, just maybe, I'm going to do this, I'm going to actually do this for real—

The door opens and a man steps into the room.

I go very still and look over.

Vince's hand is still gripped in mine, his giant paw-like fingers pressed against the phone button. I release him and his wrist drops and he grunts and mumbles something, still very much asleep, and rolls over on his side getting more comfortable.

I grip the phone against my breasts, covering the screen, and stare into Calvino's eyes as he closes the door behind him.

Calvino's like his brother, but different. Same dark hair, same dark irises, but he's harder, sharper, with higher cheekbones, a square jaw, and more tattoos. He looks like a man sculpted from ash and thunder and put into this world to do nothing but break hearts and take what he wants, and rumors suggest that's exactly what he does, like he's leaving a wave of pleased and damaged women in his wake every time he walks into a room.

Anger is etched all across his body as he looks at me and my heart's racing and my brain's glitched-out and overloaded with fear and I should do something, say something, try to explain what I'm doing, but what can I say that would make this okay? I'm holding his brother's phone in my hands and using his unconscious thumb to unlock it, I'm definitely way past the line of anything remotely normal, and now I'm going to die.

This possibility occurred to me when I came up with this plan but only in vague what-ifs, and now it's staring me in the eyes like a hurricane and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Calvino takes a step closer. He's big, so big, rippling with strength and about an inch taller than his brother. He looks down at me, glances at the phone pressed against my breasts, and I swear I catch a gleam in his eyes as he looks at my body, and slowly he tilts his head.

"Is he alive?" he asks, which is not what I expected him to say. I'm stunned and too surprised to talk, but quickly gather myself and nod once.

"Asleep."

“And is that his phone?”

I look at the device in my hands. Can I lie right now? Probably, but he'll see through it.

“Yes,” I say.

“Get up.”

I stand and take a step away from the slumbering Vincent.

Calvino advances on me and I keep going, back and back and back as the big monster looms above me like a velvet rope twisted into a noose. He radiates a strange, collected calmness that's incredibly menacing but in a quiet way, like he doesn't need words to get across what he wants, the world should simply know what it owes him. Where his brother is all brash and loud and intense, Calvino is a self-contained world of darkness and I've never been able to get a peek past his many defenses.

Until now, at least. The anger that bubbles off him like mist on a cool morning is so deliciously terrifying that I drop his brother's phone and watch it bounce a few feet away. Calvino ignores it as I slam up against the wall behind me.

He grabs my wrists, faster than I thought possible, and grips them hard enough to make it hurt as he lifts them up above my head.

I suck in a shocked breath. One of his big palms is large enough to hold me tight like an iron manacle around my supple flesh.

“Why is my brother asleep and why are you going through his phone? Who are you, Grace? Who sent you?”

“I'm nobody,” I whisper and it's true, I'm nobody to him. I'm not a part of their world or at least I wasn't until my life was shattered by a phone call one year ago. “Nobody sent me. I'm just looking for answers.”

“Answers.” He purrs that word. A terrifying shiver runs down my spine. He controls me now and there's nothing I can do to escape from the bulk of him as he keeps me pinned and helpless against the wall. I feel the heat of him roll into my

skin and I'm not sure if I'm afraid or if I want him to tighten his grip.

He looks at me like he wants to bite my lips before he rips out my throat.

“Answers about what?” he asks.

“Your brother and his business. My cousin, she's gone, and I needed answers. He has them.” The story's jumbled in my fear and panic. I can't get it out, can't say it straight.

He tilts his head, considering. “Hold still.”

“Hold still for what?”

His other hand moves up my body. I suck in a shocked breath as he grazes my bare thigh and pats along my stomach. He stares into my eyes as he does it like he's searching for something and I release a pathetic whimper, half from pure agonizing terror and half from the thrill of him touching my skin like this. Something must be seriously wrong with my brain if I'm thinking about him peeling my clothes off right now when I should be more worried about him cutting open my veins and bleeding me out.

He touches along the waistband of my skirt until he finds the folded-over fifty his brother gave me along with some other tip money—and the empty plastic baggie.

I nearly curse. I should've thrown that fucking thing in the trash but I was too afraid of someone finding it. He holds it up toward the light and squints at the tiny bit of powder residue.

The door opens again as Calvino stares at me with utter anger and curiosity.

Diego strides into the room. He's tall, like Calvino, with dark hair slicked back, light brown skin, and sparkling green eyes. He's always got a smile on his face, and right now's no exception. His black shirt's rolled up to the elbows and the tattoos on his forearms make the twisted, corded muscle look like blocks of hardened ink as he turns to sleeping Vince and releases a snort.

“Is this why the girls are hiding in the back like a bunch of scared chickens?” he asks and looks over at me. “You need a hand with that one?”

Calvino shoves the money and the empty baggie in his pocket but doesn’t release me and doesn’t look back at Diego. “Take her to my place.”

“Wait,” I say as my brain spins with a million different possibilities. “You don’t have to, I mean, we can just talk. I can explain, I swear.”

Diego approaches and crosses his arms, still smirking. “She’s in deep shit, isn’t she?”

Calvino’s voice is like a melting icicle in my ear. “You’d better pray he wakes up, little thief.” He yanks me by the wrists and shoves me at Diego, who grabs me and locks my arms behind my back. Pain lances up into my shoulders as he jolts me side to side, not bothering to be gentle. I don’t try to struggle—I can feel his iron grip and I know it would only end up with me breaking a bone or dislocating a shoulder and the pain’s bad enough to make my throat tighten and seize.

“Should I get Vince’s guys?” Diego asks casually like this sort of thing happens all the time. “I bet they’ll want to talk to this one.”

“Let me handle them.” Calvino takes off his tie and walks to me. He loops it around my face and tightens it until the world drops to blackness and I can’t see a thing. “Leave her in my room. I’ll talk to her after I’ve cleaned up this mess.”

“Whatever you say.” Diego releases a soft laugh. “Although honestly, Calvino, if you wanted the girl, you could just take her here and now.”

A terrified moan escapes my lips and I can’t see how Calvino reacts, but his voice is like a shotgun blast in my brain.

“If I wanted her, I’d have her already. Now get her the fuck out of here and take her out the back. I don’t need more questions.”

Diego says nothing else, only drags me away and I go stumbling after him.



## Chapter 2

## *Calvino*

“Jesus, what the fuck happened?” Vince rubs at his face as I sit on the couch beside him. It took a little coaxing, some light slapping and shaking, but I managed to wake him up with minimal problems.

As far as I can tell, there’s no lasting damage, and I’m not sure if I’m relieved or deeply disappointed.

“You fell asleep.” I hand him a glass of water one of the other drink girls brought over—another attractive redhead named Ginnie, though she’s not pretty like Grace. None of the girls are, they’re much too jaded and exhausted, they all lost that spark a long time ago, but it somehow still lingers inside of little Gracie.

“Last thing I remember, those two fucking strippers were sucking my dick. The pale one and the blonde one, what are their names?”

“Raven and Sunshine.”

“Yeah, that’s it. They were doing good work too, but then—” He stops and shakes his head. “Everything’s fuzzy.”

“You okay, brother?” I lean forward with my elbows on my knees and stare into his bleary eyes. “You on anything right now? You seeing a doctor about something?”

He glares at me and shakes his head. “You know I’m not on a damn thing and I’m as healthy as ever. Don’t look at me with that paternal fucking stare. Don’t forget that I’m the big brother here.”

I smile and shrug, leaning back again. “Whatever you say.”

He stands, staggers a bit, but catches the end table and steadies himself before he walks around the room, pacing back and forth, shaking out his hands and rolling his neck, waking himself up.

“Fuck, I feel like I might pass out again. Where are my guys?”

“Diego’s going to send them back.”

“I think one of those bitches slipped me something.” He pats himself and finds the phone and the wallet I shoved back into his pockets. He counts his money, finds it’s all there, and curses softly as he puts it away again, shaking his head like he has no clue what’s going on. “Didn’t steal anything though.”

“I think you got lucky,” I say, crossing my legs. “You might want to see Dr. Mitchell and find out what he thinks about this little episode though.”

“Might not be a bad idea if I can be discreet about it,” he says, staring into the distance past the stripper pole and into some imagined future that’s playing out in his brain. I smile to myself, wondering what story he’s spinning to make this all okay again—overworked, overtired, too busy and too stressed, that sort of shit.

He’ll rationalize this away and won’t think about it again, so long as I remain calm and don’t make it seem like it’s a big deal.

Even if it’s a massive fucking deal.

“That’s settled. I’ll go find Diego and make sure your guys come get you. Maybe you should take it easy tonight.”

Vince waves me off. “I’ll find them myself.” He shakes his head again and rubs his eyes. “I feel like I just woke up from a goddamn coma.”

“Go get some rest.” I stand up and walk to my brother. He nods to me as I squeeze his shoulder and slap his back. We’re not a hugging-kissing-comforting sort of family, so that’s about as much as he’s going to get.

Not like he needs more. Ice flows through Vince's veins and he'd sooner break my neck than say he loves me, and frankly, I feel the same damn way.

"Don't tell Rella or Susi. I don't need them worrying."

"Your secret's safe with me, brother."

He seems relieved and nods once. Weakness is the enemy of a man like Vince, and he can't afford to show an ounce of softness or frailty. That's why he won't question my explanation and won't press too hard: he's terrified that I'll spread the story of him falling asleep with his dick in the mouth of a stripper, and that would be catastrophically bad for him and the family.

If his enemies heard that he was falling asleep while two women sucked him off in the back of a strip club, they'd start pushing at the boundaries of his organization just to see how much they could get away with. Vince has to project strength at all times, not only to keep his position as the Don of the Los Angeles mafia, but also to make sure his enemies don't get bold enough to make trouble.

It makes him tough but it also makes him weak and brittle, and it's not hard to use his fear against him to get what I want, so all I need to do is push at the right buttons to make him dance exactly the way I need.

I shadow him into the hallway. He seems unsteady, but he walks back through the beaded curtain and into the main section of the club, and I wait only a few moments before I turn and start toward the back door. I pass a group of chattering drink girls on the way—they're always standing around in packs gossiping and talking shit on the customers—and I catch the eye of Juniper, a brunette with big eyes and a terrible attitude. I'm not sure why I haven't fired her ass yet.

"Tell Martin he's got the club," I say as I walk past. "And if Diego comes back, have him close without me."

"Whatever you want, Calvino," Juniper says giving me this ridiculous fuck-me smile.

I don't break stride. My head's spinning and I keep seeing Grace down on her knees in front of my unconscious brother using his thumb to unlock his phone with a look of pure determination in her face, and the fear that flickered into her expression when I pinned her against the wall, and the way her body seemed to stiffen as I touched her exposed flesh, that fucking top designed to show off her large beautiful breasts, that skirt sewn to tantalize and tease her luscious little ass, and the way my own pulse raced when my fingertips grazed along her soft legs and brushed along her hips at her hip bones. I've noticed Gracie before, quiet little Gracie, pretty little Gracie with her deep auburn hair curly and shoulder-length, pink lips, wide hips, and luscious breasts, but I never gave her more than a passing thought—I've never had time to consider her.

Until tonight, when she drugged my brother and tried to break into his phone.

What would drive a girl to do something so blatantly suicidal?

My blood buzzes with desire as a smile breaks across my face. I've been living in a fog of boredom and rage for nearly eight months and this is the most interesting thing that's happened in a long time. I need to unravel her—I have to find out what the hell she was thinking, who she works for, what she wants, everything about her.

I need to crack her open and break her.

I step out into the parking lot, get behind the wheel of my black Range Rover, and drive fast toward my penthouse apartment.



THE APARTMENT'S QUIET AS I STEP INSIDE AND TOSS MY KEYS on the small entry table. Above it, an oil painting of a rolling countryside with a tiny farmhouse in the distance, barely more than a blob of red and white paint, hovers like a window into another world where there isn't pain and suffering and blood around every corner. I run my gaze down the brushstrokes for a moment and try to clear my mind before I force myself to

head back toward my bedroom, my heart pounding a slow but rough rhythm. I know what's waiting for me, and I suddenly feel like I can't approach it, like if I go into that room, I'll have to shoot the girl in the head and the idea of blowing her pretty little skull to pieces twists my stomach, something I haven't felt in a very long time.

Pity, or desire? Or a combination of both? I can't tell, and I'm not sure I want to know either way. I had to steel myself against these feelings a long, long time ago, but they're still inside, buried down deep below the madness and lust and hatred, but lurking there like an ancient sea creature waiting to wake up.

There's a part of me that yearns for my humanity and another louder part that knows I'll never have it again, and don't deserve to walk in the light even if I could.

I open my bedroom door and find her lying on her side with her knees brought up to her chest, her ass almost entirely exposed, the mound of her delicious pussy covered only by a pair of black lacy panties, the tiny skirt a worthless bunch of fabric up around her waist, and her hands are tied behind her back, bound tightly.

I can't take my fucking eyes off her and almost miss the note tacked onto the top drawer of my dresser with a piece of tape: *Enjoy her. Diego.*

His idea of a fucking joke.

I rip it down and crumple it and Gracie sits up, frowning, the tie still bound tightly across her eyes. "Is someone there?"

The fear in her voice makes my blood pulse quicker but I don't answer. She struggles to sit up and one strap of her top falls down over her elbow, revealing even more of her breasts, nearly a hint of her hard nipple, and I wonder if she's excited to be lying in my bed on my soft sheets with her hands tied behind her back—but no, she's likely wondering if I'm going to murder her tonight.

Which is a fair question, and I haven't decided the answer yet.

She's alluring, like a tiny red-headed fairy, no more than five-foot-three at most and curvy in the best possible ways with creamy thighs and full lips and big innocent eyes that always stare around Crystal Lake like she's never seen a strip club before in her life. Which, based on her resume, it's extremely likely she hasn't. I wonder for the millionth time why I ever hired a girl like her, with no experience waiting tables anywhere, let alone at a club like mine, with good grades and a nice smile and a wholesome look.

Maybe I wanted to ruin her. Maybe I wanted to get her dirty.

I walk toward the bed. She shuffles back and her skirt shifts down, covering her again as she reaches the headboard and leans against it. Her mouth opens, lips parted, tongue pressed against her little white teeth and I'm losing my fucking mind, staring at this girl tied up in my bed—and why do I give a shit about her? Why do I care that she's defenseless and mine for the taking if I were into that sort of thing? Gracie is beautiful, but I've seen beautiful before, I've had beautiful, conquered it and owned it—beauty holds nothing for me now, it's only empty looks, it's skin-deep nothing.

No, she has something else. I'm not sure what yet, and maybe her intense draw is the key to why she drugged my brother and why she was breaking into his phone.

"Please, if you're here, just say so." She's breathing hard. Her breasts rise and fall in rhythm as I stand at the end of the bed. I could reach out, grab an ankle, and pull her over.

Instead, I only say, "Hello, Gracie."

She starts, looking around. "Calvino? Is that you?"

"I'm home." My words are like a velvet purr in the back of my throat and I watch a shiver run down her body, either the chill of impending death or the toe-curling thrill of potential pleasure—the two things aren't so different.

"Diego said if I waited and didn't make a mess then you might not hurt me."

"Diego says a lot of things. Did he tie your hands behind your back?" It's a stupid question. I know he did. He set her up and

presented her like a present for me, like the rope keeping her tied up is the bow, and all I need to do is unwrap her to make her mine.

“Yes, he did, and he said I should be quiet and wait, so I that’s what I’m doing.” She’s desperate to make sure I know she’s cooperating.

I walk around to the side of the bed. “Don’t move.” She stiffens as I reach out and push her to the side slightly so I can release the length of black cord Diego used to bind her tight. The knots are good, but easily removed from the outside, and soon she’s rubbing her wrists and pulling off the blindfold, blinking at the sudden dim light from the overhead bulbs.

I walk slowly back to the end of the bed and she tracks my every move. I love those eyes, so wide and green and lovely, and I wonder how many men she’s destroyed just by looking at them with that too-cute gaze. I wonder if I’m about to be one of them, and the idea makes me smile.

“It isn’t what you think,” she says quietly, staring at me with fear. “What happened earlier.”

“What do I think?”

“I wasn’t trying to rob him. I wasn’t going to keep his phone or anything else.”

“That’s good, although the alternatives might be worse.”

She grimaces like I’ve slapped her. I stand still, staring, waiting for her to explain, and I don’t think she’s far from breaking. I’ve done this before—sometimes silence is worse than talking, and people rush to fill the quiet like their words might make all their misdeeds somehow better.

But they never do.

Words are shovels, and people are their own best gravediggers.

“I need to find someone,” Gracie says finally, sounding desperate, and I can’t blame her—this situation is about as dire as it gets. “I think your brother might have something to do with her disappearance, and if I can just figure out how she’s connected to him and what he knows then maybe I can bring



her home. That's all I want, okay? I just want to bring her home. I don't care about anything else."

Tears fill her eyes. I watch as one rolls down her cheek, fat and glistening, and I'm not sure if she's the best actress I've ever seen or if she really is this insanely naive and stupid.

"Riley," I say quietly and she perks up.

"My cousin. That's right."

"That's what you said back at the club. Your cousin, Riley. She's the one that's missing?"

She nods eagerly. "That's all I want to know, where she is and what happened to her. I don't care about his business or your business or anything and I never meant to hurt him, I'm just desperate, that's all."

"Let me understand something." I come around the side of the bed again, moving slow and languid, my every step sending a flinching fear through her body. "You drugged the Don of the Los Angeles mafia—"

"It was just sleeping pills, I swear."

Nice of her to admit it.

"—and you stole his phone, unlocked it with his unconscious hand, all to find your missing cousin?"

"Please, I know it sounds crazy, but it's the truth."

"Did you pursue a job at my club just so you'd get this chance one day?" My eyes widen a bit at the idea. She's been my employee for something like nine or ten months now, which means her foresight and planning and dedication is shockingly impressive—very few people in this world are capable of such a task. I can only imagine the suffering she's been through coming to work every day knowing her boss is the brother of the man she suspects stole away her cousin, or whatever it is she thinks happened.

"Yes," she admits quietly, almost meekly, staring down at the covers in that fucking outfit, and the contrast between her submissive frown and that sexpot body is nearly too much to bear, but god, there's nothing meek about this girl, there can't

be. Even if she has a wholesome streak despite all that skin showing, no normal person can put themselves through what she's done and come out the other side still whole.

I should kill her.

The thought strikes me like a high-speed train. It nearly obliterates me—nearly shatters me to bits. Because I don't want to end her life, not at all, I'm too fascinated by her right now to want that, but this girl is dangerous.

She drugged my brother and stole his phone. She embedded herself in my club for *months* waiting for the chance to slip sleeping pills into his drink.

That takes cunning and strength, and I learned a long time that the best way to survive in a world filled with snakes is to kill any vipers lurking in your house. And my god, this girl is a viper, poison-fanged and sparkling and hungry for blood.

"I'm not a threat to you," she says, almost as if she can read my mind, and she turns to stare into my eyes, still crying, those long tears rolling down her cheeks. Why the fuck do they make me feel bad for her? I don't feel bad—I don't even feel pity—I can't afford to feel a damn thing right now. "I only wanted to find some information, that's all, I swear. I'm just some girl from West Virginia, I don't know anything and I didn't mean your brother any harm, I just wanted—"

"Stop talking," I say and she snaps her mouth shut. I should let her go on but I can't stand to hear another word. I take a deep breath and rub my face, and my mind's fractured in half, one part of me screaming that I need to kill her and do it fast before I lose my nerve, and the other half pleading for her life if only so I can keep listening to her honeyed words and gaze on that gorgeous, tight little body.

A sick thrill runs down my spine and I walk away from her.

"You'll stay here tonight," I say as I reach the door. "If you try to leave, I will personally hunt you down and put a bullet in your head. If I can't find you, then my brother will, and I promise he'll make it hurt much more than me. I'll decide what to do with you in the morning."

She's quiet as I turn the knob and open the door, but she doesn't let me walk away and I wish she would.

"Why are leaving me untied?" Her voice is tear-flecked and meek.

I shake my head. "You have nowhere to go. You'd be stupid to try to get away, and I have a feeling you're not stupid, Gracie. You'll stay the night, and you'll hope I've decided not to slit your throat over breakfast."

"Why are you doing this?" She's whispering and I can barely hear her, but I don't turn around and I don't move closer, because I don't trust myself right now. I'm not sure if I'm going to hurt her or kiss her and I don't want to find out which.

"Because I'm the kind of man that indulges his curiosity. Good night, Grace."

I step into the hallway and close the door behind me.

This is a mistake. I know it as soon as I'm alone. I should go back in there and strangle her until there's no light left in those green eyes of hers but I know I'm not going to do it, not now that I've stepped out of the room and left the moment behind. There's no turning back.

I hate her for drugging my brother. I despise her for joining my club and using me to get close to him. I loathe a liar and can't stand anyone that would try to use me for their own personal gain, especially to do something that hurts my family.

But I want her just as much and I can't quite rectify these feelings.

I'll push them aside and wait to see if the morning brings clarity, even though I know it won't, and I'll only tangle myself deeper and deeper in the mystery of who Grace is and what the hell she really wants.

# Chapter 3

## Grace

The first time I ever left West Virginia was three years ago to visit Riley's apartment in LA. She lived on the edge of Hollywood in a rundown complex in this tiny studio that was barely more than a closet with a sink. I woke up snuggled in bed with her and remember clearly how she stretched and yawned and grinned at me and said, *Get up, Gracie girl, we gotta go on an adventure. You haven't seen a goddamn thing in this world but I'm gonna show you.*

That was the best week of my life, and in retrospect I should've known it—Riley took me all over LA, to dinners she probably couldn't afford, to hiking in the foothills, to sitting on the beach, to drinking at a real bar with more beer options than just Miller or Coors.

It was a world of grit and glamour, a world I never dreamed of, and Riley was the embodiment of it all, even if she was barely more than a struggling actress waitressing at a coffee shop to pay her bills between going out on auditions, and it didn't matter that she barely had food on the table or a roof over her head, to me she was perfect.

*Get up, Gracie girl.* I can still hear her voice in my head, the voice that constantly whispers in the dark whenever I close my eyes as I stare at the strange ceiling and curl my toes into the unfamiliar silky-soft sheets. *Can't stay in bed forever. Gotta live your life, right?*

"If you were still here, what would you do?" I whisper the words like Riley's going to appear and answer, but that won't ever happen and I know it, so I sit up and take stock.

I roll out of bed, stretch, and wonder why the hell I'm still breathing. The room's simply furnished with a bed, two nightstands, a bureau, a bathroom, and a small closet filled with spare linens. There aren't any clothes in the drawers, unfortunately, so I'm stuck in my outfit from last night which feels extremely risky and leaves me basically naked, but it's better than nothing.

*Better get to it, girlie.* I take a deep breath, walk to the door, open it up, and step into the hallway, and instantly the smell of freshly brewed coffee hits me like a drill bit to the forehead and I'm drawn to it like a zombie hungering for brains. I think of what Calvino said the night before: there's nowhere for me to run, even if I wanted to try to escape, there's nowhere to go and no amount of praying will keep me safe from a devil like him.

I shuffle down the hall, and only in the light of day do I realize how nice the place is—all hardwood floors with paintings hanging on the walls, tasteful decorations, modern and clean, lots of earth tones. I knew he was rich—he owns a string of nightclubs, strip joints, and restaurants all over the East Coast, though I have a theory that half of them are fronts for his brother's mafia, but I have no real proof of that—but I didn't realize his money was quite so lavish.

The main room is split between an upscale living area with a fireplace, a TV hung over the mantel, enormous floor-to-ceiling windows with a gorgeous view of downtown LA, and a gourmet kitchen, currently occupied by the man himself, wearing a pair of tapered black joggers that hug his finely toned lower body like dew on a leaf and a short-sleeved white shirt that shows off his muscles and the tattoos etched into his skin. I stare as he finishes cooking a stack of pancakes, pours himself a cup of coffee, and turns.

He spots me standing there—and smiles.

It's the grin of a predator.

I freeze and don't know what to do. I feel so exposed like I'm standing outside in the middle of traffic completely naked, and even though my body's covered, or at least the important bits

are tucked away behind thin layers of fabric—I know nothing stands between him and me, and if he wants to take me, he can.

I shiver at the idea as my nipples stiffen. I can't tell if that's fear or desire, or a combination of both.

He puts his plate and mug down on the counter and gestures. "Coffee? Something to eat?"

"Uh," I say, because how the hell am I supposed to respond in a situation like this? I drugged his brother with sleeping pills and now he's offering me pancakes like we just went on a really steamy Tinder date or something and this is nothing more than the walk of shame the morning after some hot sex.

Except there was no hot sex, just a death threat.

"Don't worry, Gracie. If I wanted to kill you, I would've done it by now. So please, sit down, have some coffee, get something to eat, and we'll talk."

"Right, we'll talk." I blink rapidly as he strides past me and sets himself up at a nearby table, leaning back in the chair with an arrogant smile on his face.

Heart pounding, hands trembling, I find a mug in a cabinet—his selection of dinnerware is shockingly normal for a man that probably spends half this life killing people, but what did I expect, hollowed-out skulls like he's some Viking warlord?—and pour myself some black coffee. I walk over and sink into the chair opposite him, curling in on myself to try to give myself a hint of modesty even though there's none to be found, not right now, not when he walked in on me last night curled up in his spare bedroom with my hands tied behind my back and a blindfold covering my face.

That would be bad enough, but I'm pretty sure he got a full-on glimpse of my panties, and that's basically the most mortifying thing imaginable.

"Do you know how long my family has been involved with organized crime in and around Los Angeles?" he asks like it's the most natural question in the world, even if it is utterly psychotic. I could be anyone in the world and he just admitted

to the one thing he's never supposed to say out loud—which means I'm never, ever going to escape from him, not alive at least, and the idea sends a sudden jolt of panic deep down into my core.

I'm a dead girl walking.

"I have no clue," I say and cover my terror by drinking some coffee.

If he's aware of my fear, he doesn't show it. "Generations," he says casually, waving a hand. "It's in my blood. And in all that time, I've never, ever heard of anyone doing something like what you did to my brother last night." He laughs to himself as if it's the funniest thing in the world. "The idea of someone drugging the Don of the LA mob is the most obscene thing I can imagine, and yet you did it, Gracie darling. You little thief. A feat like that takes daring and guts, and I'll admit, I'm impressed."

"Thanks?" I say, shaking my head. "I'm not sure what's happening right now."

"I'm complimenting you." His eyes give a dangerous gleam as he leans forward and grins at me. "You can take a compliment, can't you?"

"Usually, no, not really, and especially not when I'm at the mercy of the guy giving the compliment."

He nods to himself. "You are at my mercy, aren't you? I can't imagine what that feels like but I suspect you don't enjoy the power imbalance."

"What's going on right now, Calvino?" My head's spinning and I can't tell if he's toying with me for his own sick pleasure before he inevitably kills me or if there's a point to all of this insanity.

"I'm wondering if I should keep you as one of my dancers. I dreamed about it last night, you know, your body glistening with that fake glitter shit, your tits bare and your nipples hard. Maybe I'll make you my private stripper and build a pole in my living room. Every night I'll come home and command you to dance for me, to take off every stitch of clothing until



you're entirely naked, until your pussy glistens and drips with need. Maybe I'll turn you into my toy, little Gracie. Maybe I'll fuck you until you scream and beg me to keep you forever."

I take a long sip of coffee and holy shit, it's really hot and burns my tongue, but my core's tingling with wild excitement at the prospect of him *owning me* and *fucking me* like I'm his little plaything. Yes, that's insane, definitely insane, entirely unhinged, but he's looking at me like he truly wants to do it, and some part of me believes he just might.

*Come on, Gracie girl, what's wrong with a little adventure?* Riley's voice again, but I'm not sure even she would think it's remotely rational to be entirely turned on in a situation like this.

But holy shit.

"You can't just... you can't just kidnap me," I manage to say, which is lame but it's all I can get out.

"I can and you know it." He casually takes a bite of his pancake and it's like the most sensual thing I've ever seen.

How does this guy make eating pancakes look sexy as hell?

I must be the one that got drugged last night because I'm out of my damn mind.

"I don't think you're the crazy serial killer Buffalo Bill type, and since I'm not dead yet, my guess is you have a plan for me. One that doesn't involve turning me into a sex slave."

His eyebrows raise. "You wouldn't be a slave, Gracie. You'd be a willing participant."

"I doubt that very much."

"Perhaps I'll just leave you tied up in my extra room then. I'll come and go as I please."

"That's not better. That's actually much worse." My heart's racing and I'm about to freak out. "Are you just messing with me?"

His smile is maddening. "Why would I do that?"

“Because you’re a psychopath and also I drugged your brother last night.”

“That’s a fair point. Except the part about me being a psychopath.”

“You haven’t exactly proven me wrong yet.”

He grins and leans closer. “The fact that you’re free and not dead suggests I have some measure of empathy, however small.”

I grimace and look away. “Okay, that’s true. Can you tell me why you haven’t hurt me yet? This is driving me insane. Why are you acting like everything is normal?”

He runs a hand through his hair and I admire the hard line of his bicep as he tugs it slightly, tilting his head, his forearm flexing.

“I haven’t killed you yet because I think I have a use for you.”

I run my finger around the rim of the coffee cup and feel the heat raise up along my skin. “Other than tying me up and, you know, whatever.”

“Fucking you senseless? Are you unable to even say that?”

“I can say it.” I’m blushing like crazy and I’m stupidly embarrassed. “I just choose not to.”

“Jesus, Gracie. You work in a strip club. You’re dressed like a cam girl that right now. You can’t even say *fucked senseless*?”

“I’m not going to be goaded into saying something I don’t want to say.” Although I probably should, considering my life is very much in his hands right now, but I get the feeling he’s toying with me and teasing me and riling me up just for fun. It’s not a bad idea to play along.

And I also don’t want to say it.

“You’re a fascinating little thief.” He leans back and studies me and I feel like I might spontaneously combust from the heat of his stare. “But yes, my use for you has nothing to do with your body. Not exactly, anyway.”

“What do you want?” I force myself to meet his gaze even if I’d rather dump his hot coffee in my lap just to spare myself the indignity of letting him eye-fuck me into oblivion, and maybe to hide the evidence of just how dripping wet I am at this moment, which is wildly inappropriate.

Apparently, I’m capable of being turned on even when my life is on the line—something about the fear and danger mixing with the excited pleasure to create a heightened awareness beyond anything I’ve experienced before.

It’s extremely inconvenient and I wish I would stop it.

“I’m going to make you an offer. You’re free to deny it, but if you do, I can’t promise that I’ll leave you alone, not after what you did.”

“Sounds like I don’t have much of a choice. What’s the offer?”

“I can’t go into details—don’t give me that look—but the basic idea is this. I need you to pose as my girlfriend so that you can find a piece of information I want. In exchange, I’ll help you find your cousin, and I won’t kill you.” He pauses for several beats of my heart while he sips his coffee and my head’s a dizzy spectacle of conflicting thoughts. “This is your one chance, Gracie. Take my deal and do this job for me and I’ll give you what you want and let you go on your merry little way. You can go drug some other mafia boss for all I care. I’ll even give you a day to think about it. But if you turn me down, I can’t promise you’ll be safe.” He leans back and crosses his arms over his chest and I want to scream.

This isn’t a choice. This is fucking blackmail.

I can’t deny him and he knows it. I’m at his mercy, and even if I wanted to turn around and walk, he’d never allow it—he already said way too much to let me leave still breathing. The only shot I have is to trust that he’ll uphold the bargain after I do this job, whatever the hell it is, and pray I can make it out alive on the other end.

And maybe, just maybe, for argument’s sake at least, maybe he really will give me what I want, what I’ve worked so hard for, what I’ve sacrificed for and fought for. I’ve come this far

and done more in the past few months than I ever dreamed I would, and this isn't all that much further.

I can play girlfriend. I can cozy up to—whoever, I don't know—and find out whatever he needs. I can be his little spy if that's what it takes.

I was willing to drug a mafia Don. So why not pretend to date his brother?

"I want to think about it," I say even though we both know there's no real question here.

He shrugs and sips his coffee again. The man is maddening and it's like his every gesture is designed to elicit the maximum amount of rage from my body.

"You'll work tonight and come stay here again after your shift. In the morning, you'll give me an answer. Do you understand?"

"I understand." I move from side to side in my chair. "Uh, but one more thing."

"Don't get greedy. I'm already being generous."

I can feel my cheeks flushing as I tug on a loose curl, pull it straight, and release it again.

"I need fresh clothes." I feel like a little fucking kid asking my mom for new jeans for school and it's absolutely humiliating.

"Don't worry, little thief. While you're living under my roof, I'll take care of you." He takes another bite of his food and gestures with his fork. "I suggest you get something to eat. I'm going to work you hard while you're mine."

I shiver and turn away. I don't doubt he will.

# Chapter 4

## *Calvino*

I sit at the bar of Crystal Lake scrolling through messages on my phone, a glass of whiskey at my elbow, the pounding sound of pulsing music making my skin jump and crawl, as Raven works her body and dances on the main stage. A group of drunk guys on a bachelor party weekend throws small bills in her direction, and Raven suctions them up and makes them disappear into her tiny thong like a fucking pro.

“Slow night tonight,” Diego says as he stretches and sighs, leaning his back against the bar, clutching a beer in his right hand. He takes a long pull and sighs. “I’m surprised to see the girl back on the floor.” He eyes me sideways and my jaw flexes. I don’t need his shit tonight.

I grunt at him. “Don’t worry about her.”

“Hard not to worry after what I saw.”

“Forget you saw anything, that’d be safer for everyone.”

Diego chuckles. “Come on, Cal. What the fuck are you playing at?”

I force myself to grin at him and shrug, releasing some of my pent-up anger. Diego’s been my friend since high school and there’s nobody in this world I trust more—except I can’t tell him a thing about my plan, not without taking some risk, and I’m the sort of man that controls the situation and bends risk to my own needs, not the other way around. I refuse to be at the world’s mercy, riding time and circumstance like a piece of mindless flotsam.

“Just trust me when I say the girl’s on a tight leash and whatever you think you saw last night didn’t happen.”

He shrugs again, drinks his beer, and sighs. “She is one lovely piece of ass though, but have you heard that accent? She’s like a fucking hillbilly. Oh, yeah, she tries to hide it, but sometimes it’s like she’s talking with her mouth full of fucking pebbles. And I swear, a couple weeks ago I saw her blushing at some dirty talk from one of the customers like she’s never heard it before. Where’d you find that one again? It’s like you picked up the most sheltered coal-miner’s daughter possible and tossed her into the bear’s den slathered in honey.”

I release a breath from my nose and try not to let him see the tension in my body. I hate the idea of some asshole saying something filthy to Grace, and I don’t know why—she’s not mine, not in the least, and it was my choice to squeeze her into a tiny top and even smaller bottoms and put her back out on the floor when what I really want is to keep her tied up in my room.

I wasn’t lying when I said those things this morning, even if I know I need to keep my darkest, worse impulses and demons under control.

I truly want to destroy her. I want to ruin her and steal away whatever innocence she has left.

But first, I need her help.

The wily little thief. That clever fucking snake. Anger and desire war beneath my skin and I struggle to keep it from overwhelming my brain.

I’m saved from having to tell Diego to fuck off by one of the drink girls, a needy little brunette named Juniper. She bounds over, tits out like she’s desperate for me to stare at them, and pretends to pout as she crosses her arms over her stomach—pushing her tits together even more. She might as well beg me to stare at them.

It’s a little fucking much.

“Calvino, can I talk to you for a second?” She glances at Diego and her face twists into a sneer. “Alone, please?”

“Juniper, darling, why are you such a simpering bitch sometimes?” Diego rolls his eyes at her. “Seriously, the way you throw your tits around whenever you’re near Calvino is pathetic.”

“You’re such a flaccid cock, Diego. You ride his dick—”

“Enough,” I say, rubbing my temples, not in the mood for their bickering. “Diego, go check on the girls in the back for me, make sure everything’s on schedule.” He doesn’t need to do that, but I don’t feel like hearing them fight. “Juniper, what do you want?”

Diego gets up, flips Juniper off, and stalks away smiling.

Juniper glares after him then turns her attention to me. She grins big and bats her fake eyelashes as I look past her and watch Gracie drop off a drink to a couple of guys in denim jackets. One of them says something and the other laughs, and Gracie smiles that fake plastered-on smile all the girls do when some asshole goes a little bit too far, and I feel a spike of hatred in my guts and I’m not sure who it’s directed toward—

“Calvino?” Juniper gets a little closer. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Shit. I wasn’t listening. “Repeat it again for me. Music’s fucking loud.”

“I was asking, you know, I’ve been thinking, maybe I can try dancing? If you really want me to?” She bats her eyes again and I only stare.

“Why the fuck would I want you to dance?”

She steps back as if I just slapped her across the face but it’s a valid question—why the fuck would I need her to dance? Juniper’s hot enough in a boring sort of Uggs-and-Starbucks kind of way, but I’ve got plenty of dancers and no need for her.

“I was just thinking, I don’t know, I’d strip if you wanted me to.” She looks like I just picked up her school lunch and stomped on it.

My god. She might as well throw her pussy on my face for all the desperation leaking from her pores.



“We’re all full for dancers right now, Junie.” I look past her and spot that guy saying something to Gracie again, but this time he’s got her by the wrist and he’s grinning big, and Gracie’s tugging back—but Oscar the bouncer hasn’t noticed yet. The customers aren’t supposed to touch the fucking drink girls, even traitorous little thieves like Gracie. “Excuse me. I have to take care of something.”

I get up and brush past Juniper, leaving her stunned and pissed off, but that’s not my problem. She’ll pout for a few days but she’ll get over it eventually. Despite how much of a bastard I just was, Juniper’s a decent employee—she shows up on time, does her job, and generally doesn’t make problems, and oh, yeah, she doesn’t drug my fucking brother—but her neediness is one of the least attractive things I’ve ever seen. Still, I’ll have Martin give her a fucking ten cent raise or some shit to smooth that little mess over.

Gracie looks up as I approach. Her face turns from scared and angry to just plain terrified, and I loom over the denim-clad asshole with my arms over my chest and stare at him. His friend notices me first and nudges the guy. “Mikey, bro, you should, uh, let her go.”

“Let her go? I was just about to tell her what I’d do on our wedding night. It’ll be fun, darling, listen, so I’ll get you a massive case of beer—”

“If you don’t let my waitress go before I finish this sentence, I’m going to break your wrist and shove a glass of whiskey so far up your ass you’ll puke it back up, do you understand?”

The guy drops Gracie’s wrist and turns, something sharp on his lips, anger in his eyes—and the moment he spots me, all that evaporates as he pales and looks down at his hands.

“Shit, uh, sorry, uh, sir. I didn’t mean—”

I lean closer and smell the gin on his breath. “Get the fuck out.”

The guy leaps up. “Sorry, we’re going.” He darts past Gracie, high-tailing it to the door with his friend right behind him. They hurry past Oscar, who looks over with a startled frown,

and I give him a look like, *I'm doing your job for you, asshole*, and he has the good sense to seem a bit sheepish, the lazy bastard.

“Thanks,” Gracie says, staring with me with those big innocent eyes. How the fuck did a girl that looks like she belongs in a church choir end up working at a place like this?

How did she end up drugging my brother?

“Just doing my job.” I turn to walk away, but she speaks over the music.

“You don’t have to stare at me all night, you know. I’m not going to run away.”

I turn and, against my better judgment, I advance on her with a mixture of anger and pure dripping lust in my heart. “If I want to stare at you, little thief, I’m going to eye-fuck you until you’re dripping wet and pleading with me to finish you off. Do you understand?”

“Asshole,” she hisses, taking a stumbling step backwards and looking around like someone might help, but this is my club, my rules, and I get to do whatever I want in my house.

“I’m glad you get me. Have you made up your mind about my offer?”

“Not yet. Asshole.” She glares heated death and it makes my cock twitch. That rage is sexy as hell, giving her good-girl vibe a sharp, wicked, twisted edge.

“Then keep thinking, do your job, and stay fucking quiet.”

I turn and storm off, returning to my spot at the bar. Juniper stands nearby taking an order, but all the while she’s staring at Gracie like she wants to walk over and scalp the poor girl, and I can smell a problem brewing but fuck both of them.

Diego returns after a few minutes and I’m busily drinking the hell out of my whiskey while staring at my phone like I might crack the screen with my gaze.

“You good, Cal?”

“I’m good.” I turn to him, my jaw locked in anger. “I need you to find everything you can on Grace.”

He blinks in surprise. “You want me to do a deep dive?”

“Where she grew up. Her family. Everything. And I want it all by tomorrow morning.”

“Jesus, Cal, that’s not enough time. I’ll be up all fucking night.” He looks at his watch, shaking his head. “It’s already eight.”

“Get me as much as you can and do it. I’ll pay triple.”

“It’s not about the money,” he says with a dramatic sigh. “I have a social life, you know.”

“Forget your social life.”

“Yes, as always.” He gives me a mocking salute. “Whatever you want, boss, but I can’t promise I’ll be thorough.”

I sigh and finish my whiskey. “You know I appreciate your work.”

“And I know you’re a miserable little ball of stress and rage just waiting to explode on the first asshole that steps out of line. I assure you, it won’t be me.” He grins, bumps my elbow with his, and stalks off into the night.

I really do need to get better at managing my people.

# Chapter 5

## *Grace*

I'm exhausted after work and I keep seeing the vicious, rage-fueled glare on Calvino's face as he told the handsy customer to leave me alone. He's never done that before—normally, it's up to whatever bouncer's on duty to come over and help, which is hit or miss since half the time they're too busy watching the dancers to notice anything—and the fact that he came over at all has to mean something.

Maybe he sees me as a good investment and nothing more, like another one of his clubs—or maybe it's something more.

Exactly *what* that something more is, I have no clue, and I'm not sure I want to find out.

He gives me a ride back to his place and we don't talk in the car. He's busy staring out the windshield doing his best to ignore me, even though I'm brimming with questions and want to know what's going to happen to me, but I keep my mouth shut. I haven't decided what I'm going to do about his offer yet, even though no real alternatives have presented themselves.

“Goodnight, little thief,” he says once we're inside—the first words he's spoken to me in hours. He disappears back into his room and closes the door, which I take as a dismissal.

I head into the guest room. Bags of clothing are piled on the floor next to the bed, some designer stuff from Chanel and Prada and Fendi, but also basics from Gap and J. Crew and Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein and Aerie. I change out of my smutty club work outfit and pull on a simple pair of leggings

and an oversized black t-shirt and curl up in bed without bothering to shower the smell of body glitter, alcohol, and sweat off my skin.

In the morning, my whole life will change.

No matter what I decide, my path is going to radically diverge from where I thought I'd be right now. Either I'll take his offer and join him in whatever mad quest he's on and become his spy or whatever else he wants to use me for, or I'll decline and find out what the consequences will be. I can't imagine either option will be any good, and I can't stop the tears I feel welling up in my eyes.

God, I hate crying. Even back in West Virginia sitting in the hallow of a downed tree hiding from my stepfather as he screamed my name into the black forest, even then I didn't cry. But now I can't help it.

Riley never wanted this for me. I remember sitting in the woods with her back home, deep in the pine forest that stretched along the empty land between my mom's squat little rundown house and Riley's family trailer, and talking about what we wanted from life. Even when we were young, Riley wanted to be an actress, *or anything that'll get me the fuck outta this rundown piece of shit hellhole*, she'd say with a huge smile and laugh, and that was my cousin, so full of life and excitement and energy that it was sometimes hard to take.

*What about you, Gracie girl? You gonna stay in the foothills your whole life, marry some drunk dickhead that hits you as much as your stepdaddy does? You gonna have his dickhead babies and waste away like your momma?*

I never had a good answer back then, but I did have dreams: good grades, community college, West Virginia University, and finally graduate school somewhere far, far away. I wanted to run as far and as fast as I could from Momma and The Fist aka Momma's second husband aka my stepfather Todd The Drunk Fucking Prick. I started calling him The Fist to Riley after he punched me so hard it left an outline of his knuckles on my cheek just under my right eye, and Riley raged and raged and raged and threatened to call the cops. I calmed her

down by saying nobody would ever believe Todd was actually the world's worst superhero The Fist in disguise, and she laughed at that but it was never okay, never, ever okay.

She would've hated this. She would've been so angry that I threw myself into this lair of devils just to chase after a rumor and a hint of her, and she would've been so angry if she knew that I was trapped by Calvino and at his mercy. She wanted so much more, dreamed so massively huge, glitter and glam and happiness unending, but that was never me.

I had boring dreams, normal dreams.

I pictured a clean, safe place to live. I pictured fast internet and plenty of food and all my bills paid up on time. I pictured quiet, and no more The Fist to give me shit, and no more Momma to come stumbling home drunk each night.

My dreams were black and white, but Riley dreamed in color.

And no matter how hard I try, I'll never be her.



I CAN'T SLEEP.

I toss and turn thinking about my cousin and yearning for her so damn bad it hurts until I give up around three and walk out into the hall. It's quiet and I sneak into the living room, but just as I'm heading toward the couch and the big windows and the mindless safety of the TV, I stop moving and stare.

Calvino's sitting in a chair in front of the fire, looking out at nothing, at the black night. I'm about to turn and head back to my room, but he's looking at me in the reflection in the glass, his eyes locked on mine.

"Come here," he says just loud enough for me to hear.

I hesitate. It's late and he's drinking, and I know only bad things happen when it's past two in the morning, but I don't have anywhere else to go. It's either toss and turn and rage about the past or go talk to the man that holds my life in his hands.

“I didn’t think you’d be up.” I drift over and sit slowly down on the couch across from his chair.

He studies me and swirls ice in his glass. “I haven’t been sleeping much lately.”

“I know what you mean. I can’t seem to quiet my brain.”

“Does that happen to you a lot?”

I shrug a little and pull an absurdly soft blanket into my lap. Despite the heat rolling from the fireplace and the warmth of California mid-summer, I feel cold all the time, ever since Riley went away.

“Only when I have a life-or-death decision hanging over my head.”

He smiles and laughs softly as he takes a sip. “That happens to me more often than you’d think.”

“Considering who your family is, I believe it.”

“Not always because of them actually. I manage to find my own trouble now and again.”

“Have you made a habit of kidnapping employees?”

He smirks at me. “Only the ones that drug my brother.”

I grin awkwardly and run the blanket between my fingers. “Are you close? You and him?”

His smile fades and he shrugs as he looks at the window again. “We were when we were younger.”

“Do you have more siblings?”

“Two younger brothers, Damon and Jason, and two younger sisters, Susi and Rella. We’re practically a brood at this point.” Another long sip and a look like he’s remembering something he doesn’t want to. I know that look well, it’s permanently etched on my face.

“Wow, so that’s, what, six of you? I didn’t have any siblings growing up so I find it hard to imagine what it would be like living with five brothers and sisters.”



“It was about as hard as you’re picturing, but also a lot easier than you realize. People get used to their situation and their lives become normal, so it wasn’t anything special for me to have so many brothers and sisters. Really, it sounds lonely to grow up an only child. Do you ever wish your mother had more kids?”

I quickly shake my head. “Not at all.”

“Why not? Family’s important.”

“Depends on your family. Momma would’ve only been more bitter and regretful if she’d had more babies and who the hell would’ve raised another one? Probably would’ve been me.”

“I take it your mother wasn’t an active parent.”

“Momma’s a drunk that married a piece of shit car mechanic named Todd. There’s a reason Riley ran away from West Virginia and came out here.”

“Is that why you ran away as well? Or are you here only because of your cousin?”

I go silent as I watch my reflection in the window. I look exhausted and I wonder when I started to seem so tired, like I’m older than my twenty-two years.

“I don’t know what I’m doing anymore.”

“You ever think about what you’ll do if you catch up to her?”

“I haven’t planned far in advance in a long time, if I’m honest. But I will say, if I ever do catch up, it won’t really matter anymore.”

He studies me carefully. “You sound like you’ve lost already.”

I wave that way. I’ve lost more than he realizes. “What about you? There’s some job only I can help with, so I’m guessing things are complicated in your life right now.”

“In a way,” he says, still watching me closely, studying me like I’m his favorite painting hanging on a crisp white wall. “But my life’s always been complicated, whether I want it to be or not. Circumstance of my birth.”

“Your circumstance doesn’t seem so bad to me. Where I grew up, people would’ve killed for a blanket this nice, much less for all this.” I gesture vaguely at the luxurious apartment.

He only shakes his head. “Things don’t matter as much as you think they do, little thief. It’s all just illusion and posturing. It’s all part of the game.”

“Must be a fun game then. I lived in a single-story house in the middle of the West Virginia foothills in the middle of freaking nowhere. Riley grew up in a trailer with a snoring dad, a pill addict mom, and three dogs. All we ever had was each other and the woods.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You don’t strike me as the outdoors type.”

“I’m not.” I shift and adjust my weight, leaning toward him slightly. “But sitting outside in the wind and rain’s sometimes better than getting yelled at by my drunk mom.” Or punched by The Fist for doing not much more than breathing the same air as him.

He doesn’t speak, only purses his lips as he considers me for a long moment before he finishes his drink in two long gulps. He releases a sharp breath and puts the glass down on a side table before he shifts his weight and leans forward, elbows on his knees.

“Have you decided what you’ll do yet?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. I have until the morning, right?”

“You have a few more hours, yes.”

“Then I think I’ll wait until the very last second to make up my mind.”

He laughs but doesn’t take his eyes off me, like he’s trying to get some hint of what I’m thinking, and what I’m thinking is I’ve told him way too much about myself and I’m exhausted just being around him, but for some reason I don’t want to get up and walk away. Maybe because of the way his eyes roam down my legs or maybe it’s the handsome tilt of his chin or the slope of his nose or his dark and intense eyes, but whatever it

is, I'm stuck to this chair and unable to do the smart thing and walk away.

"I want you to do something for me." He sits back slightly and puts his hands on his thighs. "Stand up and come here."

I frown warily. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing you can't stop. Now stand up and come here."

I don't like that pushy tone, but I also love the commanding way he glares at me, and I find myself slowly getting up and bridging the several feet between us. He watches me the whole time with an odd, intense hunger.

"Sit here." He gestures at his lap and I feel a shiver run down my spine, one of fear mixed with exquisite delight.

"You said I can stop if I want, right?"

"You don't have to sit if you don't want to, but you have a difficult decision ahead of you and I think I can make it easier. So come here, little thief, and sit in my lap."

I hesitate, head spinning. If I do this then I've officially lost my mind, but I can almost see the logic in what he's proposing—he wants me to pretend to be his girlfriend, and the only way I can do that is if I can stand being physically close to him. It doesn't get any closer than sitting in his lap.

I drift a step, then another, and wonder if I'm damning myself, but slowly I sink down and feel his arms wrap around me and the warmth of him floods over my skin as I nestle myself in his lap.

His legs are strong and powerful beneath my ass and I feel a wild thrill being inches from his lips as he tilts his chin up toward me. He brushes my curls back behind an ear and smiles softly, almost sadly, like he's thinking of something that hurts him and I wish he'd tell me what it is. I wrap my arms around his neck, feeling stiff and strange and awkward, my heart racing wildly in my chest, but I nod once and glare at him.

"Is this what you wanted?" I ask.

"Almost," he says softly as he puts his hands on my hips and pulls me closer. I feel something thick and hard press against

me—is that his stiff cock?—but before I can understand what’s happening, he leans forward and brushes his lips against my neck.

I nearly moan. I definitely whimper. It’s not my finest moment and I am absolutely, insanely mortified about that crazy noise I just made, but he kisses my jawline and I’m buzzing with wild and reckless lust, and my nipples stiffen and the soft wet spot between my legs starts to tingle with an incredible need, and his lips move closer and closer to mine, and I’m thinking this is stupid, this is so stupid, but there’s another voice urging me on, begging me to do it, *kiss him Gracie, just kiss him, for once in your life do what feels good instead of what’s right*, but he stops with his lips at the corner of my mouth and I’m about to scream.

He grips my hips tighter and holds me there, and yes, yes, that’s definitely his very hard, very large cock pressing against my ass.

“You look absolutely terrified right now,” he whispers with a smile on his lips. “Do I really scare you so badly?”

“You could kill me whenever you want. It’s hard to forget that fact.”

“That’s true, but you already know I want you. I need you, Gracie, my little thief.”

My breath comes faster, my chest rising and falling, and I am extremely grateful that I got changed after work because if I were still in my work clothes, there wouldn’t be much between this ravenous wolf and my bare skin.

“I don’t even know what you want me to do yet.”

“Something only you can manage. Something I can’t do on my own.” He kisses the corner of my lips again and my mouth parts, opening for him, my tongue against my bottom teeth as I suck in a gasping breath. “Are you really so scared, Gracie, or are you pulsing with something else?”

“I’m just wondering why me.”

“Because I have leverage.” His hand moves up my back and I release another one of those absolutely pathetic whimpers.

“Because you’re clever and bold.” His fingers lace through my hair and *pull*. I groan in surprise and pain as the sharp tug sends a jolt of clarity down my spine: this man can tear me to pieces. “And because I want to own you, dominate you, fuck you, and leave you moaning, shaking, and pleading for more. This won’t work if everything between us is fake, but looking at you now, your heart racing, your skin flushed, your lips parted, I think there’s a part of you that wants all of that too. I think you’re scared, yes, but you also want me to fuck you into mindless oblivion, and that’s all you can think about, isn’t it? That’s right, good girl. Part those lips for me.”

God, what the hell is wrong with this man? What the hell is wrong with *me*?

Because he’s right, he’s absolutely right, I’m ripped down the middle and my halves are at war: one side wants to run the heck away and the other wants to strip off my leggings and stay right here in this man’s lap forever. One side despises him, the other wants to get destroyed by him. Two Gracies existing in the same body, and I don’t know which one I am or which one I’ll be, but I do know which one I need if I’m going to survive.

I need the Gracie that used to run away from Momma’s house to sleep on Riley’s floor just to survive another night of drunk and angry The Fist. I need the Gracie that slapped Jimmy-Jay when he pulled down her pants at recess in sixth grade and made his nose bleed. I need the Gracie that cried herself to sleep but never, ever gave up, especially when things looked bleakest.

That’s the version of myself I need to be.

So I lean into his fist. I let him pull my hair. I let his cock stiffen against my ass, proof that he’s not bullshitting me, that even if he’s keeping things back and not telling me the full truth, he’s not lying when he says he wants to drag me down into sweet blissful destruction.

I put both my hands on his chest and I can feel his heart racing beneath the thick slab of muscle. I bite my lip and nod once,

tugging against his grip on my hair, sucking in a sharp breath at the pain.

“You want to know the truth about me?” I ask him quietly, and he nods. “There’s only one thing I give a damn about, and that’s my cousin. I’ll do whatever I need to do to survive this, and if that means kissing you and liking it, then I guess that’s a sacrifice I’ll have to make.”

He crushes his lips against mine. I pull in a breath through my nose as his lips dominate my own, his kiss like an invasion, like a feral animal, his taste flooding me with whiskey and wood smoke and copper, and I kiss him back like my life depends on it, because it does, and because it feels so fucking good to be touched like this, to be kissed like I’m desirable, like I’m the center of his world. I move my hips, grinding my ass against his cock, not thinking, only acting like that wild and free Gracie that’s never really existed before but might exist now, and I smile at the soft grunt of pleasure he gives me in return.

His fist tightens as he bites my lip and breaks off the kiss, and I want him to keep going, I’m so damn lost in this.

“That’s a good girl,” he whispers softly, kissing my neck, before he releases my hair and pushes me away.

I stumble to my feet, staring at him in confusion. He’s smiling, breathing hard, and his eyes are like knives aimed at my throat.

“Go get some sleep before you do something you’ll regret,” he says and picks up his glass in a white-knuckled grip. “In the morning, I’ll ask what you want, and if you say the right thing then I’ll tell you what the job is.”

“And if I say the wrong thing?”

“There are a lot of dead girls in Los Angeles. One more won’t matter.” He looks away toward the window and the lights of the city, and I turn around and get the hell out of there.

I don’t look back. My lips are numb and bitten. My body tingles with the kind of unbridled want and ache I’ve never felt before and never imagined I’d ever experience, and as I close

the door to my room and lock the handle, I don't know if I was acting or if I simply let myself really feel for the first time in a very long time.

# Chapter 6



## *Grace*

I wake up only a few hours later alone in the strange bed with odd dreams still swirling through my head: Riley sitting at the top of a pine tree throwing acorns down at me and laughing and laughing as she sings, *Calvino and Gracie sitting in a tree, F-U-C-K-I-N-G.*

I wait for the face of my cousin to fade from my mind before I get up, pull on a fresh shirt, and slip out into the main room. I expect Calvino to be asleep, but of course the smell of coffee hits me and I find him standing in the kitchen, awake and already facing the world. Does this man ever sleep? Apparently not.

He stands next to the coffee maker sipping from a mug. He's shirtless and his skin glistens with a thin sheen of sweat, his muscles hard and bulging and incredible, his tattoos drifting along his chest and abdomen. Bird's wings flutter along his side and a skull with a knife through it covers one pec, its eyes seeming like they're laughing at me. I can't stop looking at him as a smile spreads across his lips.

"You're up early," he says like a purr.

"Did you even sleep?"

"Told you last night. I don't sleep much these days." He tilts his head, studying me. "Have you been thinking about our conversation?"

Yes, I've been thinking about it, I've been freaking dreaming of that kiss and tasting it on my lips over and over, obsessively delving into all the little details and driving me insane.

“A little bit.”

He smirks like he doesn't believe me. “And have you made up your mind?”

“Yes.” I raise my chin and stare him in the eye. My heart's racing, and I know I'm about to leap down into a black pit and never crawl back out again, but what other choice do I have? Become another name for some true crime podcast to obsess about or fight for my cousin and my life.

I say, “I'll do it,” and I try to sound confident, even if I'm not.

He nods as if he knew I'd say that and I cross my arms over my chest, protectively covering my breasts from his gaze and I think of that kiss the night before for the thousandth time, and wonder if maybe that was the dream—but no, I can still taste him on my tongue and feel his hand in my hair pulling hard and claiming me. That was real, so real it left a mark in my brain like a hot brand.

“Are you going to tell me what we're doing now?” I ask as he drifts past me and walks to the windows. I grab a mug and fill it before I follow.

He doesn't look back, only stares out at a foggy morning, uncharacteristic clouds drifting across the sun and casting gray light across the buildings and the palm trees. He rolls his neck and I feel a thrill as I stare at the chiseled muscles in his back and down along his shoulders. This man has no right to exist, no right to be so sinfully gorgeous and so absolutely horrible at the same time.

“Eight months ago, my brother became the Don of the LA mafia,” he says as if he's talking to someone else. I stand very still, sipping the piping hot coffee, and try to focus on his words and not his body, which is surprisingly hard. “There was an accident, a fire in one of my family's vacation homes. The whole place burned to the ground, and my mother and my father didn't make it out alive.”

I chew on my lip as nerves spike into my gut. “I'm sorry,” I say quietly, not sure what the appropriate response is considering I'm not talking to a normal human right now, but

I'm guessing that's about right. Even a man like him must mourn the loss of his parents, especially in something as brutal as a house fire.

He makes a dismissive gesture. "My father was a bastard and I won't miss him, but my mother deserved better. I remember my dad would always call her his wonderful lady, wonderful lady, and I always thought if she was so wonderful, why the hell did he treat her like garbage? Like she worthless. But he was right, she was a good person, the only decent person in my life. She deserved a life without her husband and a decent retirement in her old age. But she got neither of those things."

"Were you close with her?"

"I was closer with my mother than with anyone in this family, but she's gone now. That night, there were two other people in the house, and both of them survived." He turns to look at me, his face twisted into a visceral snarl. "My brother and his wife."

I let that sink in as silence drops over the room. His brother, the Don of the mafia, was there the night his father died. I can feel the implications crawl along my skin.

"Where do I come into this?"

"There are no coincidences in my world. There are only heartless schemes and blood and pain, and I refuse to believe that my mother burned in that house by mistake. I refuse to believe it, not when my brother and his wife escaped and survived and flourished because of it. What I'm asking of you is simple, little thief. I want you to get close to Charlie, my brother's wife, and find out what really happened."

I take a step back and let it wash over me.

I'll pose as his girlfriend and enter his world all so that I can ingratiate myself with a woman I've never met and don't know at all. He thinks I can somehow find out her secrets and learn the truth about his mother's death, which I assume he can't do on his own since his brother and the wife will never tell him. He thinks because I was stupid enough to drug his

brother that I'll be reckless enough to press Charlie for information.

"It's too much," I say, shaking my head. "That's way too much. It'll never work. What if Charlie hates me? What if she realizes what I'm doing? This could go so wrong so easily."

"I don't think it will," he says and comes toward me. I flash back to the night before—sitting in his lap, his hard cock against my ass, his lips on my throat—and stumble away. He passes by without so much as a glance or a touch and stops beside the kitchen island. "Charlie is isolated. My brother's lifestyle forces her to keep her social circle extremely small, and I believe she's desperate for another female friend. Especially now that she has a young child to watch. I think if you approach her the right way, get close to her, tell her something about yourself, then she'll give you the information we both need."

"This is insane." I shake my head, heart racing. "I can't do this. You want me to manipulate her for you."

"These aren't good people." His voice is cold and hard. "You have to understand that. Charlie comes from a long line of killers and thieves. Her people run Seattle and they don't do it by giving out hugs and candy."

"This is your brother we're talking about. What happened to being protective of him?"

"I'm protective of my family, but only to a point." He looks back as I can see the pain etched in every line of his face. "My mother's dead, and I have to know why. You're going to help me, Gracie, or you're going to sink to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and stay there. Do you understand now? You've come too far and I won't let you turn back." He picks up a manila folder on the counter and flips it open. "One-Ten Taylor Lane, Pineville, West Virginia. Mother's name is Lucille, married to a man named Todd Martins for the last fifteen years. Gracie Murphy, twenty-two, kept your father's name which is interesting though I suspect I know why. You went to Pineville High School, got decent grades, went to West Virginia University after doing two years at a local community college,

but it says you dropped out your senior year.” He looks up, frowning slightly. “Should I go on?”

I’m standing there and I can’t move, I can’t lift my legs, can’t raise my arms. The coffee mug’s steaming hot in my hands and even the burning heat doesn’t do a thing to break through the sudden fog that descends over me after hearing my rushed biography read out loud like that.

Pineville is a distant memory and a recent nightmare, and now it feels like it’s following me wherever I go, and I’ll never escape the mountains or the forests or the stink of rotting particleboard or the moldy, mildewy showers or the crumbling walkways or the weeds that grew in profusion all around my mother’s house.

“Where did you get all that?” I finally manage to whisper.

“Diego did some research.” He snaps the file shut. “This is only from a single night of digging, but you are who you say you are which wasn’t a guarantee. Should I have him keep going?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “You don’t need to do that.”

“What about your cousin? Should I have him look into her?” His eyebrows raise slowly and I feel a slow, horrible stab in my guts.

He’s going to find out, and when he does, I’m not sure how he’ll react.

“Please,” is all I can say.

“Then you understand.” His eyes blaze. I understand. He owns me—wholly, entirely, without reservations. He owns me whether I like it or not.

“I’ll help you.” I squeeze the mug hard and gather my courage, what little there is left. “But you have to swear you’ll help me in return. I’m not getting involved with this stupidly suicidal plan if I’m just going to be left screwed in the end.”

He smiles, almost beaming, and tosses the file aside. “I promise, little thief, you’ll be screwed, but I’ll give you what you want in the process.”

I glare at him. “You don’t have to be a dick, you know.”

“I know that, but it’s fun. What do you say? Are you my girlfriend now?”

“I’ll play your game if that’s what you mean.”

He walks forward toward me and I watch him coming like a freight train speeding along the tracks. I step back and back until I bump into the window. He takes the mug from my hand, places it down on a table, and grabs my other wrist, pinning it against the glass above my head, and I can smell him, the musk on his skin, and see his cocky, horrible smirk as he moves closer, my other wrist pushed up behind my back.

I resist the urge to groan because I won’t give him the satisfaction of knowing that I like this despite the pain and fear, or maybe because of it.

“First rule of being mine. You will do as I say. You will obey. No more talking back. No more mouth.”

I give him a little smile. “But you like my mouth.”

He bites my lower lip hard and I gasp in surprise. “Yes, I do, but mostly when it’s wrapped around the tip of my cock and sucking nice and hard.”

“God, you’re an asshole. That’s never going to happen.”

He smirks and clearly doesn’t believe me. I’m not sure I believe myself.

“Rule one isn’t only for my pleasure, little thief. It’s for your protection. If I tell you to do something, I need to know you’ll do it no questions asked. We’re about to crawl into the pits of hell and you’ll burn to ashes if you can’t listen.”

“I’ll do my very best. What’s rule two?”

He smiles and breathes me in like he’s loving my perfume. “Rule two is you will not try to run. I need to trust you and you have to trust me if this is going to work.”

“It’s hard to trust a man that wrenches my arm behind my back.”

“Bullshit.” He brushes his mouth along my throat. “If you wanted me to stop, you’d say so.”

God, what a prick. Again, he’s not wrong, but he’s definitely a bastard.

“Is that all? You just need me to be a smiling, compliant doll, right?”

“A charming doll, but yes, that’s right. My doll. Get close to Charlie. Find out what happened that night. The full story, no bullshit. If you make that happen to my satisfaction then I swear to you, Gracie, I will help you find your cousin.”

I stare into his eyes and for the first time, I believe that he’s telling me the truth. The only problem is that little phrase, *to my satisfaction*—I can see that being impossible or nearly impossible, but I’ll deal with that another time. One more problem for Future Gracie to worry about.

“You have a deal then.”

“Good. Shall we kiss to seal it?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You always have a choice.” And he presses his lips to mine, his tongue in my mouth, and a moan escapes my throat as I kiss him back, pinned and at his mercy like the night before but better, the sunshine breaking through the gloomy clouds and glaring on my back, his hands hard on my wrists, the kiss like a hurricane on my spine, an atom bomb of want and pleasure rocking along my skin.

He breaks it off and releases me. I stand there with my fingertips against the cool glass as he strides away and I stare at the way his muscles work, rippling like stones in a pond, and the melting heat between my legs suggests this isn’t going to be easy, god, no, it won’t be easy, but if I’m smart and more than a little lucky, I might get what I want.

I just might have to kill for it first.

# Chapter 7



## *Grace*

I thought that becoming Calvino's fake girlfriend would mean I didn't have to work anymore, but no, I was very wrong about that.

What it really means is I can't go back to my own apartment and I can't tell anyone the truth about my situation, which is as lonely as it sounds, stuck in a home that's not mine, wearing clothes that aren't mine, dating a man I can barely stand and who clearly sees me as nothing more than a tool with tits and a pussy. But if he's using me then I'm using him right back.

The afternoon shift at Crystal Lake isn't the best, but at least Juniper isn't working and I get to split the tables with Kia. She winks at me as I bend over and take orders from a couple of older guys that stare at my chest, and even though my outfit's basically designed to show off my boobs and it's nearly insulting for them *not* to look, I still wish every once in a while they'd make some eye contact.

The day goes like that. I bust my ass for bad tips, make some jokes with Kia, watch Monique and Sarah dance, and let the time pass. Martin, the manager, a short bald guy that's perpetually nervous and twitchy, corners me near the bar around five and shoves a stack of money into my hands.

"What the heck is this?" I ask, staring at the tight bundle of hundreds. I watch the bartender Bradley practically salivate at the sight and quickly tuck them into my meager top, right between my boobs, which doesn't stop him from looking, unfortunately.

“Boss wanted me to give you that.” He shakes his head like he’s mystified. “I don’t know what you did to that man, but he’s got you working afternoons for a while, and now he’s throwing cash at you like you’re the freaking Pope selling free passes to heaven.”

“Maybe I’ve just got a great personality.”

He chuckles and punches my shoulder. “Yeah, you’re great, kid. Definitely likes you for the jokes, not for the tits and ass.”

“You’re such a creep, Martin.”

“I know, doll, I know, it’s why I’m a manager at a fucking strip club. Anyway, Calvino’s waiting for you in private room three, so bust your hump and go say hello. And make sure he knows I gave you that money. I don’t want him giving me shit.”

Bradley drops a whiskey on my tray with a wink and I roll my eyes at him as I hurry into the back, waving to Kia as I go so she knows where I’ll be. My shift’s nearly done and it’s the lull before the night rush, so she won’t be too slammed if Calvino keeps me busy with something else.

My heart’s racing when I step into the private room. I don’t know why—I can’t be sure if it’s him that makes me feel this way, or if it’s that I haven’t been back here since the little incident with his brother a few days ago. My palms sweat as I approach and set the glass down on the small black coffee table.

He looks up from his phone and raises his eyebrows.

“Martin said to tell you that I got this.” I pull out the wad of cash. “What’s the deal?”

“Spending money,” he says, still staring at me. “Did you get my message?”

“I don’t have a phone on the floor, remember?”

He snorts and picks up the whiskey. “I thought all you girls ignored that rule.”

“Apparently, I’m the only decent person in this whole place then.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” He sips his drink and tilts his head. “We’re going to dinner tonight.”

I go very still and a million things rush through my brain, but only one thing comes out of my mouth: “Why?”

He laughs and takes another long sip like he needs the stuff to get through a conversation with me. Ass. “You’re my girlfriend now. I take my girlfriends out to dinner.”

“Have you ever had an actual girlfriend before or do you mean the girls you fuck and never call back?”

“The girls I fuck and never call back. But you get to be the rarest of them all, the girl I don’t fuck and yet am stuck with.”

“You make it sound so wonderful.”

He rolls his eyes and gestures at a long black garment bag draped over the arm of the couch at the far end. “You need to get dressed. Can’t have you out looking like that.”

“We’re leaving now?”

“In a little while, but I’m letting you end your shift early. Go tell Kia and get your ass back in here.”

“Give me the dress, I’ll change in the back.”

He stares at me with a wicked smile. “No, little thief. You’ll get changed right here where I can see you.”

A flush creeps into my cheeks and I glare at him. I take a couple deep breaths and keep myself from saying the first thing that comes to mind (*like fucking hell you will, you goddamn pervert*) because I know I’ll only dig this grave that much deeper if I let myself go off. He knows exactly what he’s doing and he’s very aware of how I’m supposed to respond, but I’m not going to give him the pleasure.

This game is about getting what we want—and it is a game, no question about it. The power struggle between us might be the difference between him half-heartedly trying to help me with Riley or going all-in when he gets what he needs. I can complain and whine and let him know that, yes, he gets under my skin, and yes, he pisses me off, or I can pretend like I don’t give a damn and mess with him right back.

I turn on my heel and leave.

Bastard. That stupid freaking bastard.

Kia doesn't seem surprised when I tell her I'm clocking out. "Lucky bitch. Six drunk college kids just came in and I'm pretty sure they're too young to drink."

"Is Bradley gonna serve them?"

"Of course he will, there's nobody else in here and he wants a tip. At least he better serve them." She sighs and looks at the ceiling. "They're going to grab my ass, Gracie. I just know they're gonna. And I'm gonna yell at them." She pauses and closes her eyes. "The second time. The first time I'll let it slide."

"Got to make those tips." I grin at her. We've all been pinched and squeezed and harassed and at this point it's become a running gag—more of a coping mechanism than anything else.

"You're damn right I do, girl. Anyway, have a nice night." She hurries off and I watch her go, almost jealous. Some stupid part of me would rather get my tits ogled and my butt slapped by a bunch of drunk twenty-year-olds than have to strip in front of Calvino, but such is life.

He's sipping from his whiskey when I return to private room three. I say nothing as I grab the garment bag with Dior emblazoned on the front from the couch, unzip it, and reveal a gorgeous black dress, A-line with a pleated skirt and a plunging neckline covered by dark lace. I frown at it for several long moments, working up the courage to put it on while he simply stares and sips from his drink like I'm the dinner entertainment.

I hate this.

I've never gotten changed in front of a man before. Back home, I'd lock my room and stay really quiet whenever I had to put on something else—because The Fist, that pervy asshole, would try to watch, and somehow it'd be my fault like I'm the one that wanted to tempt my disgusting stepfather into staring at my teenaged body.

But this doesn't feel like it did back then—this feels extremely different.

I turn my back. Let the asshole try to force me to face him. He says nothing as I take off my top and toss it aside. I can feel his eyes on my shoulders and spine and I know he's catching a glimpse of the sides of my breasts as I take off my skirt, leaving myself in nothing but my heels and black lacy panties. My cheeks are burning crimson as I hurriedly step into the dress and pull it up my body, going from bent over to standing.

I swear I hear a grunt of utter pleasure as I get it on over my skin, and that grunt is absolutely everything. It sends a lightning flare of excitement into my core. That grunt is pure dripping lust, pure desire-drenched need, and it's not a sound I ever expected to hear coming out of Calvino's mouth, much less because he's admiring my body.

I look over my shoulder and he's *staring*. I've never seen a person look so intently before, like he's studying every inch of my skin, every blemish, freckle, mole, curve, and it's disorienting and exciting.

The dress itself is gorgeous and fits me perfectly. I brush my hair over my shoulder and force myself to smile at him.

“You going to sit there and watch or are you going to zip me up?”

I want to puke, it's so cheesy, but god, it works. He gets up and comes toward me, staring hot fire at my lips, and he gently brushes his hand across my back like he's afraid he'll snap me in half as he slides the back zipper up. I shiver and he runs his fingertips along my upper back, along the nape of my neck, and his lips find my shoulder in a gentle kiss—followed by a hard bite.

I gasp and twist away. He grins at me, vicious and wild.

“Well done,” he says, smirking huge. “You look gorgeous, you know.”

“Asshole, that hurt.” I rub the spot and clench my teeth together. “That was almost a nice moment.”

“Glad I fucked it up then.”

I'm seething but I force myself to get over it as I smooth out my skirt. "I'll be honest, I expected something much more... revealing." Despite the low neckline, the dark lace does a good job of covering most of my chest, though a good bit of my ample cleavage still shows.

"You're a girlfriend, not a mistress." He turns away and picks up his drink. "You should know the difference. Or perhaps not. I don't know how men treat their women in Nowherefuck, West Virginia."

I say nothing because the only relationships I ever saw back home were miserable and gray, and I'd rather get pawed at and bitten by this monster than spend my life being beaten and abused in some trailer while high on meth and opiates.

"When are we leaving?" I ask instead, changing the subject.

"Right now." He picks up his jacket and slides it on over his tight white dress shirt. "Shall we?" He offers me his arm.

I grudgingly accept it and force a smile on my lips because here we are, boyfriend and girlfriend, going out on a date for the first time.



I TAKE A LONG DRINK OF WINE AND TRY TO PRETEND LIKE I don't notice all the people staring.

"Is it always like this?" I ask, taking a small bite of a lamb shank braised in Guinness with lentils, pearl onions, and rosemary jus. It's like an explosion of flavor right in my face and I'm reminded of how there's a whole world beyond anything I've ever experienced before created and catered toward men with money and power and influence, just like Calvino.

He shrugs and sips his drink, another whiskey, absurdly expensive. Fortunately, he owns the restaurant, so money doesn't matter, not that it would either way.

"Not always but it's rare that I come out with a partner."

“They’re watching like you’re a celebrity though.”

His lips tug sideways. “You’re saying I’m not?”

I lean forward, smiling back, letting his gaze linger on my mouth. God, I like when he looks at me like that.

“I’m saying you’re the brother of a gangster that owns a bunch of clubs and restaurants. You’re not exactly on the cover of *People*.”

“I could be if I wanted.”

“Do it then. I’m sure the accompanying puff piece would be hilarious. *Ten Ways to Make Your Enemy Sink into the Ocean: An Interview with Calvino Manzini*.”

“I’d focus more on my restaurants than my family business, but that’s an interesting angle.”

“I’m just saying, you’re not famous, so why all the staring?”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. His smile fades as he pushes around his strozzapreti—house-made pork sausage, tomato passata, Tuscan kale, chili, fennel, pecorino Romano, insanely delicious—before shaking his head.

“In certain circles, I’m notorious. Not famous exactly, but well known. It’s hard to hide in this world now and everyone seems to want to know about my business and my family, so some people are more aggressive about it than others.”

“Are you saying there are fucking mafia *stans* following you around?”

He grimaces and shakes his head. “No, more like tabloid bottom feeders, and they truly are the lowest of the low. They stalk me because they know I won’t kill them whereas anyone else in my family will.”

“Why won’t you? Seems like something you’d do.”

“I’m the clean one. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

I give him a sharp glare. “Don’t patronize me, asshole.”

“All right then, little thief. I have three brothers, and all three get their hands dirty. A long time ago, my father decided that

having one brother outside of the family business, doing something legal, would be beneficial for everyone. I'm that brother. I'm the clean one. I run a legal, above-board business and I stay away from the filth as much as I can."

"I find that incredibly hard to believe."

He shrugs and leans back, studying me. "I don't expect you to believe, but I do expect you to accept it."

"There's that asshole bossiness again."

"You need to understand something. When I take you home to my family, they're going to try to pick you apart and rip you to pieces all for fun. If you can't even accept the most basic things I'm telling you, how can you expect to survive that?"

I glare at him and sip my wine to cover my frustration. He has a point and I hate that I just stumbled into this trap. There's no reason to be so combative, except for I like doing it—I like pushing back against him just to see how he'll push back, like a little game of tug of war, except the stakes are so much higher.

"Fine, you're the clean one. I believe you. What, now I can do whatever I want and you won't kill me?"

His lips curl. "I won't kill a bottom-feeding tabloid scumbag, but I will break you if I need to, little thief. Who's going to miss another girl from West Virginia?"

"I love it when you talk like I'm nothing more than human garbage." I twirl some hair around my finger and bat my eyelashes at him. "Really gets me hot."

He laughs and shrugs. "Anyway, those assholes have their uses, like this for example." He leans forward and talks softer. "Now smile like you're having fun and laugh like I said something funny. Remember, Gracie, you want to fuck my brains out. You're dripping wet just thinking about how I'm going to use your body when we get back home. Fucking laugh."

I show my teeth in a snarl and laugh much too loudly, and he sneers at me and I hate him for it but love the anger that



ripples beneath the surface. Our conversation is a fencing match, back and forth, parry and riposte, attack and defend.

The night goes like that. We discuss safe topics: the club, the city, movies and TV. We have a similar taste in shows, which surprises me—I sort of figured he'd be more into the blood and guts stuff, but he enjoys sitcoms and *Ancient Aliens* as much as I do. Despite that, we spend half the night bickering, he sneers and glares and I roll my eyes and pretend to laugh, and soon he's whisking me away into the night again.

His driver is parked out front, waiting, but Calvino pauses on the sidewalk. He pulls me toward him and I'm surprised as my hands fly up to his chest and he holds my waist tightly.

"Smile, Gracie," he whispers, "and kiss me back like you want to suck my cock as soon as we're in that car."

He buries his mouth against mine. I struggle for half a second until a flash goes off somewhere nearby and I realize what he's doing. The bottom feeders are hungry and he's giving them a meal, and quickly I succumb to the kiss, tasting him, letting him take me and hold me, and I don't have to fake it.

This is the easy part, kissing him, because this is the only part I like.

Everything else?

God, he's a bastard and an asshole.

But he's a bastard and an asshole that can kiss me like he was born to bite my lower lip.

We break apart and I'm flushed and breathless, dizzy from the wine and heady with desire.

"Good girl," he whispers, running a thumb down my lip as his other hand grips my ass tight.

Another flash. Fucking hell. That picture's going to be on some mafia-*stan* blog and plastered all over B-tier gossip rags in an hour.

"Anything else, master?" I blink rapidly, looking in his eyes, fluttering my eyelashes, playing up the innocent coquette.

It works. He looks at me like he wants to suck my clit until I scream.

“That’ll be all for now.”

He slaps my ass again as I climb into the car.

Fucking prick.

# Chapter 8

## *Calvino*

I let the whiskey scald my throat and warm my belly as I roll my shirt sleeves up and flip through the dossier spread out on the black coffee table in front of me. The pulse of Crystal Lake's club music pounds just outside private room three and Diego leans back in his seat, chewing on a straw and taking small sips of straight gin.

"Thorough," I say, nodding to myself. "Very thorough. I assume there's nothing else."

"She's exactly what she appears to be," Diego says with a shrug. "Boring, small-town girl. I got you what I could. College transcripts, high school transcripts, names of her associates. Hell, I even talked to her fucking middle school art teacher. Gracie Murphy is an average girl from a nowhere town."

"And yet here she is," I murmur to myself, looking at a photograph of Gracie from high school: her red hair's longer and she's wearing sweats with the school logo on them and smiling big as she holds up a track baton and drapes her arm around another girl that looks vaguely familiar. "Is this the cousin?"

Diego cranes his neck. "That's her. They overlapped in high school for two years and ran track together."

The cousin is pretty, though not like Gracie. I find it hard to imagine this was the girl that came to LA trying to make it, but no wonder she ended up gone, just another dreamer sucked up into the bleak orbit of this failed and rotting town.

“I’ll admit I’m disappointed, but also relieved.”

“What’s your game with her, Cal?” Diego watches me like a hawk. He’s too clever and it’s obvious I’m up to something, but I haven’t told him the details yet. Nobody knows about my suspicions, nobody at all, because to voice them out loud is to put that out into the universe, and I can’t take the risk, not until I’m sure.

“She’s my girlfriend,” I say with a wink and a smile. “Isn’t that enough?”

“The only long-term relationship you’ve ever had has been with your right hand and your dick, so yes, I don’t believe you one bit.”

“I hate to disappoint you then. And I’m a lefty.”

“Well, whatever you’re doing, I hope you’re being careful.” Diego stands up and shakes his head. “She’s boring as boring gets. Though I will say, there’s some dark stuff in there. The stepfather apparently isn’t a great guy according to some rumors I heard floating around.”

“How bad?”

“Pretty bad. And her mother’s not much better. I spoke to her on the phone and she was a little bit rough, to put it lightly.”

“Very good work.”

“I do what I can.” Diego grins at me as he walks to the door. “I just hope you don’t destroy her in the process, although I wonder if you even could. This girl’s dangerous considering what she did to Vince.”

“I know that.” I meet his gaze. “But we agreed we weren’t going to talk about the sleeping situation anymore.”

He mimes zipping his mouth, locking it, and throwing away the key.

The door opens and Grace sticks her head into the room. She looks at Diego then at me and smiles awkwardly, holding her empty drink tray out. “Came to see if you boys need anything.”

I quickly gather up the dossier and shut the folder. “Diego was just leaving.”

“Ah, what a great friend. Don’t you just love when he dismisses you with such disdain?”

Gracie grins at him. “It’s just nice to know I’m not the only one he does it to.”

“Hang around Calvino long enough and you’ll start to think you’re a masochist that loves the pain.”

“Could be I’m starting to learn a little bit about myself already.”

Diego laughs at that as he disappears past Gracie and into the club. She watches him go before she shuts the door and turns to me.

I let my eyes roam down her body. God, that fucking outfit is obscene—low-cut top that barely covers her tits and a skirt that’s more like a dishtowel than functional clothing. Before all this, I barely ever noticed her, but now she’s like a spotlight beaming in my face. She glares right back, very aware that she’s exposed, and my mind flips back to her changing in front of me and the muscles in her back, her smooth beautiful skin, and the glimpse of her breasts and her hard, pink nipples, and the taste of her when I bit down hard.

“You did well last night,” I say, holding up my phone. “While we didn’t exactly make a huge splash, my sisters both texted demanding to know who you are.”

“What did you tell them?” She seems nervous and puts down the tray.

“I told them you’re nobody, which is what I’d say if you were somebody. Congratulations, they want to meet you.”

“That’s good, right?”

“That was the goal, yes. But meeting them will come later, after we’ve had a chance to sit down with Vince and Charlie.”

“Shouldn’t we do the whole family first?”

I shake my head and pat the couch, gesturing for her to sit down. She hesitates, but sinks slowly onto the edge of the cushion, sitting with her back straight like she's about to bolt at any second. I know it doesn't say anything good about me, but I love the tingle of terror she gets when she looks at me.

"No, I need to introduce you to the Don before the others. If it were my father and you were truly my girlfriend, I would've done that already. But since it's my brother, I get to pretend like I'm doing this against my better judgment."

"There's too much politics in your family. Mine was fucked up but at least it was simple."

I let out a breath and shake my head. "All families are fucked up in their own way." I unlock my phone and flip to the pictures. "My parents owned a sprawling ocean-front mansion complex down in Long Beach. That passed to my brother, and most of my siblings still live there. It's sort of like the heart of our organization these days."

"Wait, all your siblings still live in the same house? Seriously?"

"It's a big house." I frown at her and shrug, turning the phone around to show her an exterior shot. Her eyes widen with surprise. "Susi's twenty-four and Rella's twenty-six, so the girls are still young. Damon and Jason just like being there. And Vince comes and goes as he pleases. But once you see the inside, you'll understand."

She shrugs like she doesn't believe me, but she knows better than to tell me I'm wrong. Instead, she nods at the dossier. "More files on me?"

I put my phone away. "Diego's very good at his job." I give her a stare that means *don't keep pushing this shit* and she lets it drop with a fake noncommittal shrug. I can tell she wants to ask more, but I don't want to go into that right now.

"Dinner was the easy part," I say as I toss the dossier to the far end of the couch, away from her view. "You realize that, right? All you had to do was sit there and pretend to like my company, but even that seemed hard."

Her jaw works. She does that when she's pissed. "You don't exactly make it easy to be around you."

"Too fucking bad. This is how it'll go and if I start acting like someone I'm not, it'll be goddamn obvious to any one of my siblings. You need to start accepting that I am what I am and learn to play the game."

Her anger slowly dissipates as she takes two breaths. She's very good at controlling her feelings—I've noticed her pausing before answering more than once, which means she thinks about what she's about to say before she blurts it out. That's a very good talent, and I wonder if she learned it from living with an abusive stepfather and an addict mother. Must've been hard, trying to survive life with those two, and I can only imagine all the different things she's had to learn just to get through the day.

"I can play, Calvino. Maybe I just like to play rough." Her voice is soft and teasing like she's trying to pretend to be a flirty girlfriend.

I smile and feel a sharp thrill. I know she's only acting, but I like it when she tries to push my buttons.

"All right, little thief. If I kiss you, what will you do?"

"Kiss you back and smile like your lips are the greatest things in the world."

I feel a rumble of lust roll into my core and I struggle to keep it under control.

"If I grab your ass and whisper in your ear, 'This is all mine, princess,' what will you do?"

"Smile and push you away, but secretly I'll like it."

"And if I drag you into the bathroom to fuck you senseless?"

"I'll have the good manners to excuse myself politely from your family, and to come very quietly on your big fat cock."

I release a growl from the back of my throat and she stares at me, eyes wide and blinking as I move closer to her. She doesn't inch away, only sits there, ramrod straight and tense all



over like she's not sure if she should run or scream for help or wrap her thighs around my face and let me take her heaven.

"You're learning," I say gently as I reach my hand up and grab her hair, pulling her head back. "If I make a joke, you laugh like you think I'm the funniest man in the world. If I tell a story, you listen like you can't wait to hear what's happening next. You'll ask my brother questions about his little boy, Emilio, and you'll ask him about old movies and sports, but you'll never mention the family business. You'll be demure and kind and you'll take my fucking abuse with a smile. Do you understand?"

"I understand you want me to be someone I'm not," she says, glaring into my eyes now, her facade cracking. "And yet you want me to accept you as you are. Shouldn't I get that as well?"

"No," I whisper and shove her back against the couch. She gasps in shock as I pin her with my body, pulling her hair tight, my lips against her throat. God, I want to bite and tear and make her scream right now—and instead, my free hand moves down her chest, between her breasts, down her tight stomach to her skirt.

I yank the hem up roughly and she releases that sexy fucking whimper like she's terrified but so turned on she can't help herself.

"No, little thief, that's not how this'll work, because I'd never let myself get anywhere near a girl like you." My fingers slide up between her thighs and her breathing's hard and ragged, her pulse racing like wildfire. "You think I'd get involved with a too-cute small-town girl like you? You think I'm dumb enough to let my dick lead me to a gorgeous little sexpot with pouty lips and an ass that's screaming to get spanked? A girl that'd never seen shit in her life and doesn't know a goddamn thing about the world but looks like she can fuck me straight to heaven?" I press my fingers along her soft, warm slit, and fucking hell, she's *dripping wet*, absolutely fucking soaked through her panties.

I knew she liked this but I had no clue she was sopping wet for me already.

“Calvino,” she whispers, biting back moans. “You shouldn’t. We shouldn’t.”

“We shouldn’t what? That’s what I mean, Gracie, little thief. You pretend like you’re in control of everything, but really you’re afraid of your own body.” I run my fingers down her pussy and she moans despite herself. I can see the anger in her eyes warring with the pure lust and desire. “You want me to get you off right now, don’t you? You want me to fuck you raw and deep and make you scream and make you beg. Have you ever had an orgasm before? Don’t answer that, Gracie. Have you ever been fucked? I don’t think I want to know. You need me to shove you down on your knees with your dripping cunt in the air and make you beg me, again and again, before I finally slide myself deep inside your tight, soaking pussy. You want me to take you, control you, destroy you, wreck you, but you’re too scared to ever admit it.”

“Fuck you,” she hisses, and I bite her lip, shove her panties aside, and slide two fingers deep into her pussy.

She gasps in surprise as I push them deeper, rolling them around, and she melts into a low, deep, animalistic moan as I pull them out and tease her clit. She’s shaking, trembling, and I crush her with a kiss as I work her clit in soft amazing circles. She bites my tongue, my lip, and I kiss her ear, her neck, before I shove her back hard, drop down on the floor in front of her, and rip her thighs open.

“Calvino,” she gasps. “Fuck, what are we doing?” I love the shock and those pretty wide eyes, and in this moment, I am absolutely sure I have her pegged: she’s a virgin, a pure, fucking virgin.

I shove her panties aside. Her pussy is pink and glistening with desire as I pin her wrists down at her sides. She’s staring at me, pretty lips parted, eyes burning with want and lust and she can barely control herself, barely understand herself, because she’s never been with a man like me before. She’s never wanted like this before, never hated so much before.

“This is what I mean,” I say before I lick her lips top to bottom. She moans and shudders. “I’d never be with a girl like you, Gracie. You’re so fucking repressed and so filled with self-loathing and so inexperienced that you can’t even accept it when I’m down on my knees sucking your clit and licking your pussy. It doesn’t matter how fucking hard I get when you pout and push your tits together for the customers and walk around with those incredible, gorgeous legs. God, you taste delicious, and you have no clue. So no, Gracie, I’d never be with a fucking girl like you, but you’d better convince me that I’m wrong.”

I lick her then, suck her and eat her and feast on her, keeping her wrists pinned down as her moans get louder and louder. She’s heaven, she’s incredible, and I can’t stop, I need to taste her, need to hear her say my name like that with those amazing fucking whimpers, *Calvino, Calvino*, she’s so wild with pleasure that she doesn’t know what she’s doing anymore, and I hate her, god damn, do I hate her, but I want to make her come so bad I’d rip this fucking world into pieces just to make it happen.

Her back arches as I release one wrist and slide my fingers deep into her pussy. Her eyes are wide and she grips my hair like she wants to fucking kill me, and I slide my fingers faster, in and out of her slick pussy, staring into her eyes.

“Come for me,” I say, not breaking eye contact. “Come for me, Gracie. I want to taste your first orgasm, you repressed, gorgeous good girl. Show me you’re worth my fucking time. Come for me.”

“Fuck,” she moans. “God, I fucking hate you, Calvino, and don’t you dare stop.”

And she gives me what I want.

She comes, her back arched, her legs twitching, and I lick her through it, I taste her coming and I growl with delight. God, she’s so fucking beautiful, her breasts shaking, her gorgeous little pussy slick with my saliva and her desire, and her face is red and her eyes are glassy and she’s breathing hard, and

slowly I bring her down through the orgasm until she's nothing but a puddle of floating pleasure there on the couch.

I lean back and admire her. Beautiful, gorgeous Gracie. I lean up and kiss her and make sure she tastes her pussy on my tongue. When I'm finished, I bite her lip.

"Good girl," I whisper. "God, you're such a good girl, Gracie."

"And you're a fucking prick," she says with a smile.

I slide her panties back into position. "Don't change these," I say as I sit back and sip my whiskey. Her taste and the whiskey mingle on my tongue. "I want you to think about me the rest of the night."

She groans as she shimmies and fixes her skirt and top. "I still have to work after that?"

"You think I'm going to be easy on you? No, Gracie, that's not happening. You're a good girl, but you're not that good."

She takes a deep breath—calming herself—and glares death.

"You know what I'm figuring out, Calvino? The second I find myself starting to soften toward you is the second I should hate you the most. But I don't care how much of a prick you are, so long as I get what I want in the end. Thanks for making me come." She stands and grabs the drink tray. "And for the record, you're right, that was my first orgasm." Her cheeks are burning red and my cock's so hard it might break. "I hope you're proud of yourself. You didn't have to be a dick about it, but you can't help yourself." And she storms out without another word.

I watch her go and a grin spreads across my lips.

No, I'd never be with a girl like Gracie, but I've been missing out.

# Chapter 9

## *Gracie*

I fight to make it through the rest of the shift with my cold, wet, ruined panties, the smell of sex in my nose, my own taste mingled with his lips still on my tongue, and the memory of that orgasm ringing in my ears.

The first orgasm I've ever had.

Which only makes it worse. He's such a piece of shit and yet he can make me come like that, despite him being such a bastard during the whole thing. And why even bother? Why do that, why get me off like that, other than to prove he can? It's some power trip game with him and I despise him for it.

And yet he remains my only hope, which only makes it so much worse.

The memory of the orgasm buzzes around my body as I force myself through the motions of waitressing. I catch him watching me more than once and I flush red remembering his mouth between my legs and the incredible, back-bending, life-altering, world-shattering explosion of pleasure that ripped down my spine as I came like a thunderclap right into his mouth. God, it's humiliating and exhilarating, and all I want is for him to pin me down and do it all over again.

At the end of the night, I'm in the changing room with all the other girls. The dancers are putting on their normal clothes and cleaning off makeup, the drink girls are stripping out of their work outfits and putting on something relatively modest for their commute home (or their night out), and I find myself

alone toward the back with Juniper as the place starts to empty.

Juniper ignores me at first and I'm not really thinking about her. I'm too busy thinking about what Calvino's going to do to me next and if I can even survive another full-on pleasure assault like that again. My mind's a feast of different poses, situations, and pleasures, and I'm surprised when Juniper says my name and snaps her fingers like I'm her hired help or something.

"You know what I think, Gracie?" Juniper stands at the end of the room with her hands on her hips and I look around wondering if anyone else is seeing this shit—but there's nobody else around. I was too busy having wet daydreams about that asshole Calvino to notice that I let myself end up alone with the one girl in this whole place that hates me more than he does.

"I'm not sure I care," I say as I throw my backpack over my shoulder. "Sorry, I gotta get going." I go to hurry past her but she blocks my way.

"I think you're a gold-digging whore," she says while staring straight into my eyes like a lioness challenging for her preferred mate. Her lips pull back in a half-smile, half-sneer.

I definitely don't need this crap right now, and I certainly don't want to get into it with Juniper all because of Calvino, but it doesn't look like I have the option. The room's relatively small, with a few benches and some rundown lockers, and the only exit's right behind her.

"It's not like that." Although it sort of is. I'm not digging Calvino for his money, just his connections. "Can you please let me past?"

"I know you're staying with him. Everyone's been gossiping about it behind your back, but they're too nice to say it to your face."

"If there's one thing you're definitely not, Juniper, it's nice."

She grins and laughs like she couldn't care less that I'm glaring hell at her. "God, Gracie, you pretend like you're this

nice, quiet girl from a small town, but we all know you're a greedy bitch. You get the best tips, the best customers, and now you need to suck Calvino's dick too? Why don't you just fuck back off to your stupid little pathetic coal-mining town and marry your brother like your mom did?"

I try to dart past her. My heart's racing and anger rolls down my spine and if I have to stand here and take this abuse, I might do something stupid, so I try to get past her, but Juniper's fast. She slams herself into me, knocking me sideways, and I nearly trip over a bench before I right myself against the wall. Juniper looks shocked that she just basically tackled me sideways, but she gathers herself, marches a step closer, and slaps me so hard across the face I can hear her fake nails clicking along the inside of my skull.

My head jerks back and my hands fly up to my mouth. I groan and lean forward as Juniper stands over me, breathing hard. Pain lances down my jaw and my cheek stings and, my god, I can't believe she just hit me—and based on the bewildered and rage-fueled look in her eyes, she can barely believe it herself.

"Don't be stupid, Gracie," she says and I note the hint of fear in her tone, like she's wondering if she just made a mistake by slapping the girl who's living with her boss. "You know what kind of man Calvino is. He's gonna get sick of you soon and then where will you be? Walk away from him now and let someone else have a shot."

"You're sick in the head, you know that, Juniper?" I straighten up and glare at her, setting my shoulders, ready to break her stupid nose if she makes another move toward me, hands curling into fists, muscles tensing for a strike.

Riley taught me how to punch, how to make a fist the right way, how to lead with my knuckles, how to turn my shoulder and hips. She taught me so I could fight back the next time The Fist tried to slap me around, but it never worked out that way. It doesn't matter how hard I can punch if the person I'm trying to hit is twice my size and ten times as mean.

But Riley, she wouldn't give up, she kept on trying to teach me how to defend myself, teach me how to fight.



And now I wonder how much of that was bullshit. How much of it was just her trying to make me feel strong when everything else in my life was trying to show me just how weak I really am.

“I’m not crazy,” Juniper says, seething. “I’m realistic. I can handle Calvino. You can’t. So back the fuck off.”

The door opens suddenly and a body fills it. Diego frowns into the room, running a hand casually through his hair as he studies Juniper for a long moment. She drops the angry act and smiles sweetly at him, tilting her head like she’s a good little puppy seeing her master for the first time, and I hang back rubbing my face.

“Everyone okay in here?” Diego asks.

“Just fine. Gracie and I were having a chat.” Juniper looks back at me and her smile gets bigger, almost manic. “Right, sweetie?”

“That’s right,” I say because if I admit to Diego what Juniper was just trying to do, I’m not sure what’ll happen to the girl. Calvino could shout at her, fire her, or kill her, and none of those options would surprise me at all, so better to stay silent and make sure the stupid girl doesn’t get herself murdered.

“Whatever. I don’t care what you’re squabbling about.” He waves his hand at Juniper dismissively. “You, get out. I need to speak with Grace.”

Juniper bats her eyelashes at him as she goes. “Tell Calvino I still want to dance whenever he wants to let me.”

Diego rolls his eyes and gestures for her to hurry. She throws me a death stare as she disappears into the hallway.

“Lovely girl,” he murmurs once she’s gone. He looks back at me and strokes a finger down his chin thoughtfully. “Anything you want to tell me about that?”

“No,” I say, meeting his gaze. I move away from the wall and gather my things again.

He snorts. “Smart girl, but come up with an excuse for that red mark when you see Calvino later. Otherwise, he’ll see right

through you since you're a shitty liar."

"What do you want, Diego?"

He moves away from the door, deeper into the room. His face falls, no longer light and joking. "I have a simple question and I expect you to be honest with me." He steps closer and his voice lowers. "Does he know yet?"

I frown at him, confused, a hundred different possibilities flitting through my mind. "Does who know what?"

"Calvino," Diego says, sounding impatient. "Have you told him the truth yet?"

"He knows everything he needs to know." I stare at Diego and feel a bit of unease bubble up in my core.

Diego holds my gaze, not moving. He's a handsome man, light brown skin, full lips, dark eyes, angular and lean, and obviously very clever. I don't know much about his relationship with Calvino aside from the fact that their friendship goes back a long way and Diego appears to be Calvino's only real confidante. Diego is like a mystery to me and I can't pin down why he hangs around Calvino all the time, taking his orders, doing his dirty work.

"Like I said, Gracie. You're a bad liar."

My jaw clenches as I take a couple calming breaths. "Tell me what you're talking about and stop being so damn cryptic."

His smile is condescending and makes me want to pull a Juniper and slap him in the face.

"Your cousin, Riley. She's not missing, is she?"

I go very still.

I see Riley's face in my mind like a ghost: Riley crying, her makeup smeared and black; Riley with a big bow in her hair and a gleam of wild excitement in her eyes on her sixteenth birthday; Riley with a fat bruise on her lower lip from when she got in a fight with a girl at school. The thousand permutations of Riley, my cousin, the only person I've ever truly loved, swirl around and through me, and I don't know

what I would be without her and her memory—I'd be nothing, I'd be hollow, I'd be empty.

“I told him she's gone,” I say quietly, too quietly.

“Tell him the truth, Gracie. Tell him soon before I do. The only reason he doesn't know already is out of respect for you, and because I figure he might kill you if you weren't completely honest about everything, so I'm giving you this chance to save your life. Don't be stupid and waste it.”

He turns and leaves the room. I watch him go before I crumple sideways and lean against the lockers with a metallic thump, my head pounding with pain, my jaw aching from where Juniper slapped me as hard as she could.

God, Riley, why couldn't this be simple? Why couldn't any of this be easy?

I squeeze my eyes shut and see her face smiling in the leaf-dappled sunlight in the forest between our houses.

I'd do anything for that smile again.

But Diego's right. I have to tell Calvino the truth. Or at least tell Calvino the whole truth.

Because Riley really is gone, and she's not coming back.

# Chapter 10

## *Grace*

I emerge from my room four days after our first dinner date wearing a form-fitted black Givenchy dress with lace up the center showing a slight hint of my breasts, the skirt draped down along my curves, and I have to admit I look freaking hot. My makeup is on point, my earrings are absurdly expensive, even the rings on my fingers sparkle like I'm made of diamonds. All of this appeared in my room this morning with a little note: *Wear this for me tonight.*

I smile at Calvino and spin around twice and hold out my hands as he watches me with a tilted head.

"Well?" I ask, grinning huge. "How do I look?"

"You look fucking perfect," he says and I feel a shiver of excitement run down my spine. Maybe I look so good he's going to be nice for once. "I didn't know you could clean up so well." Maybe not.

"Asshole." I'm smiling though as he offers his arm and leads me to the car outside. He's wearing a gorgeous suit and his hair is slicked back and he smells musky and fresh like a hint of cologne and soap. It's heady and intoxicating, and I feel good for the first time since that night in the back room with Juniper and Diego.

The driver takes us across town to a small, expensive Italian place Calvino owns, one of his more intimate venues. We park out front but before I can step out, he puts a hand on my thigh and holds me still. I feel a sharp bubble of something like want pierce down through my guts and tingle between my legs, and

I wonder how the hell I'm going to make it through this night in one piece.

"Remember, your job is to make Charlie like you. I don't care if Vince thinks you're a prick or not. Charlie matters."

"Understood, boss." I tilt my head, frowning slightly. "Are you nervous right now?" He's fidgeting slightly, and he never fidgets.

"I'm not used to putting my life in another person's hands."

For some reason, that makes me smile, which is sort of sick, like I enjoy the thought of his discomfort. "I think that's the first time you've been truly honest and vulnerable with me."

"Don't get used to it."

I laugh lightly and lean toward him. I don't know what makes me do it, but I brush my lips against his in an almost-kiss, and he seems surprised by the intimate gesture. I haven't been able to get his touch out of my head, not since he got me off in the back room, and tonight I feel loose enough to give in to some of my stupid wants and needs. It's hard to try to avoid him while also living in the same apartment, especially considering he loves walking around shirtless after a hard workout, glistening with sweat and looking like a freaking sex god.

He's temptation made flesh, but I keep thinking about Diego's warning, the words running through my head. I haven't been able to broach the subject yet, but I've been thinking about how I'll do it since that night.

Vince and Charlie are already sitting at the best table in the house, a little private booth at the far side of the small space, away from prying eyes and ears. Vince stands as we approach and Calvino shakes his hand, and Vince is grinning at him before he turns to introduce himself to me—but there's a strange moment when our eyes lock and his face falls.

I stiffen and don't move. I hold my hand out in the act of introducing myself properly but a sudden horrible thought occurs: what if he remembers me going through his things? He did almost wake up once and mumbled something about his

wife, Charlie. What if he remembers it and seeing my face like this is going to trigger his memory?

For several beats of my heart, I think I'm dead, I think he knows and he's going to cut my throat and I probably deserve it, but then he's smiling and shaking my hand with a firm grip.

"You work at the club. He didn't tell me you worked at the club. That's how I know you." I relax and release a held breath. Right, he's seen me around the club before, so that's how he's rationalizing everything. Hopefully, he doesn't notice my tension, and if he does, I hope he chalks it up to normal social anxiety.

"Apparently, he's embarrassed of me," I say and look at Calvino like he's the center of my whole world.

"He has nothing to be embarrassed of," Vince says and turns to introduce me to his wife.

She's tall and thin with blonde hair and big blue eyes. She's almost willowy, but she has a kind smile, and she gestures for me to sit on her side of the booth. I climb in and the boys get themselves settled, already talking about what they'll eat and drink as Charlie leans closer to me.

"I have to admit, I'm surprised to meet you," she says, her eyes sparkling. "But it's a good surprise."

"Why's that?"

"Calvino never brings girls around. And I'm not exaggerating when I say that, I mean literally, never. You're the first I've ever met, although I've heard whispers of others. I always assumed Calvino treated women like new suits: fun for a while, but eventually they don't fit perfectly anymore."

"I'm not sure how I should feel about that if I'm honest."

"Well, you should feel both proud and a little nervous, but you know how Calvino can be, kind of an asshole." She laughs and puts her hand over her mouth. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"No, I totally get what you mean. I think 'asshole' is an accurate description and about as kind as he deserves."

She laughs harder and nudges against me. “I like you already.”

I grin at her as Vince orders a bottle of wine and the night begins in earnest.

Any hint of discomfort Calvino might’ve felt in the car is completely gone. He seems at ease as he talks about the food and the alcohol, and since he owns the damn place, the chef himself comes out to go over the menu. I chat with Charlie about the Manzini family, about Vince and Calvino, but also about his other siblings. It’s easy and comfortable, and I find myself genuinely liking her.

“They’re sweet girls,” Charlie says about Rella and Susi. “Young and a little spoiled, but they’ve been really welcoming. Damon can be tough, like Vince and Calvino, but Jason’s much more...” She trails off, waving a hand in the air.

“Normal?”

She laughs, nodding. “Normal. Nice. Gentle. Almost like a regular human.”

“And not like a grumpy murder robot.”

“Exactly, but you can’t always choose what you want. Unfortunately, I seem to be attracted to the grump.”

“You and me both.” We touch wine glasses together and drink, and I catch Calvino smiling at me out of the corner of my eye.

Food comes and Vince tells a story about him and Calvino stealing a car when they were just kids one time and how their father had to use his connections to get them out of jail. Calvino tells a story about Vince breaking into the high school bully’s house and setting the kid’s underwear on fire. All their stories from their childhood involve either crime, violence, alcohol, or some combination of the three. Charlie looks adoringly at her husband, and I try to mirror that look when I gaze across the table at Calvino.

I find that it’s not too difficult: despite being an asshole, he’s extremely nice to look at.

I excuse myself once the meal’s winding down and head toward the unisex bathrooms. As I’m about to step inside, a



hand grabs my hip and another presses over my mouth, and I release a soft, shocked scream as panic slams into my skull—Vince following me, maybe he knows, maybe he’s going to hurt me for what I did to him—and someone shoves me forward as the door slams shut and the light snaps on.

I whirl around about to scream and punch someone right in the freaking throat—and find Calvino grinning at me.

“What the hell are you doing?” I hiss at him and try to slap his chest, but he catches my wrist, shoves me back against the wall, and buries his mouth against mine.

I gasp into that kiss and struggle, but his body pins me and he’s not letting me go. I kiss him back then bite his bottom lip hard enough to make him grunt with pain as his grip on my wrist loosens.

“What. Are. You. Doing?” I glare at him, his eyes inches from mine. I think I can taste his blood on my tongue.

“Quiet,” he says softly and kisses my throat. “Vince is waiting outside. I wanted him to see me follow you in here.”

“Is he supposed to think we’re fucking?”

“We can do that, if you’d like.” He reaches down and shoves my legs apart.

I gasp and slap his chest. “Stop it, we’re not having sex.”

“You don’t want your first time to be in a restaurant bathroom? It’s a nice bathroom, very classy.”

“I’m not talking about my virginity with you.”

“You admit you’re a virgin.”

I take a deep calming breath and stare into his eyes. “Yes, okay, asshole? Are you happy? Is this really the place you wanted to have this conversation? I’m a virgin. Okay? Will you leave me alone now?”

I expect him to release me like I’m made of rotting meat or like I’m glowing with green radioactivity—I’ve never liked the fact that I’m a virgin, but there were never any guys worth being with back in West Virginia and so I never bothered to

get close to any, and anyway Riley always encouraged me to wait for someone I actually gave a shit about instead of throwing myself at the first willing dick.

But instead of running away, Calvino's lips only tighten into a strange snarl and he looks at my chest and my mouth with a wild desire.

Ah, shit, that backfired.

"You drugged the Don of the LA mafia but you've never slept with a man before? You're a strange girl, Grace Murphy."

"There wasn't much opportunity in my tiny West Virginia town, unless you're into drunk date rapists and inbred assholes, so leave me alone, okay?"

"I most certainly won't leave you alone." He kisses me hard again, despite me struggling slightly. "You're supposed to be mine, remember? Mine to do with as I please."

"Not in reality."

"There's nowhere else but reality, Gracie."

"You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean better than you think. You've been dreaming about that orgasm since it happened, haven't you? Ever since I got you off, you can't get it out of your head. You want more and now you're sure I can give it to you, but you're scared, aren't you?"

"Go to hell." I glare at him but he's right, he's so right, I've been obsessing about it constantly since it happened.

His fist moves up into my hair and grabs it tight. I stifle a moan—I don't actually want his brother to think we're fucking in here.

"Don't worry, little Gracie. I can show you how to be a good girl. I can make you all mine, if only you'll open your pretty mouth, spread your gorgeous legs, and let me take what I need."

I shove him back and glare. "What part of *go to hell* don't you understand?"

“Gracie,” he says, smirking that devilish grin, and I love the way he says my name like he’s pleading but also praying. “You really do fuck me up, you realize that?”

I feel a thrill pulse through my skin. I love the idea of turning him on and making him want me, even if he makes me want to run away screaming at the same time. It’s war inside and keeps on raging every time he’s around.

“Too bad. Remember how you want me to make friends with Charlie?” I glare at him and push him again, and this time he releases my hair. “Well, what would she think if we really were having sex in the restaurant bathroom while out on a double date with her and your brother?”

He sighs and shakes his head. “I hate when you make sense.”

“Yeah, I know. So please kindly fuck off and let me pee.”

“Whatever you say, little thief.” He grabs me again, moving fast, and shoves me against the wall, reminding me all over again of the vicious power of his body and the intense, dangerous possibilities he contains, both for pain and for pleasure. “You’re doing so good tonight, good girl.” One hard kiss and then he’s gone, slipping out of the bathroom, leaving me alone.

I stand there, heart thudding in my chest and trying to understand what the hell is going on. One second, Calvino barely pays attention to me—he’s been actively avoiding me for days now—and the next he’s feasting on my mouth and praising me like I’m an angel sent to fulfill his every desire. I can’t tell if he hates me or if he melts whenever I’m around, and it’s driving me crazy trying to figure it out.

But I rejoin the table a little bit later and the rest of the dinner goes great. I chat some more with Charlie, share stories about back home (good ones only), and ask her plenty of questions about herself (raised in Seattle, lived in LA for ten years, met Vince at a club, real love story there). By the time we’re back outside, I feel buzzed enough and happy enough to give her a little hug, and she grins at me.

“We’ll do this again soon,” she says. “You’ll have to come to the Sandtrap so you can meet all the others.”

My eyebrows raise. “Sandtrap?”

Calvino groans and Vince laughs. “It’s what we call the Long Beach house,” Vince says, nudging his brother in the ribs. “I’m not surprised he didn’t tell you. It’s a stupid name.”

“Our father chose it,” Calvino explains.

“They’re just being silly, it’s a really lovely house. You’ll come soon and meet everyone?”

“So long as my boyfriend approves,” I say, smiling at him, and Calvino winks.

We say goodbye and I climb into the car with Calvino. The driver heads back to his penthouse, the privacy shield rolled up like we really are out on a date. Calvino watches me in silence for a couple of minutes with a little smile on his lips and I glare back at him, heart racing, sweat stippling my skin. I think of his mouth on mine, hands on my hips, and my confession in the bathroom—and I hate what I have to do now.

I’ve had two glasses of wine and I’m feeling loose but not drunk, and the way he stares at me makes my legs cross.

“You really are beautiful, Grace,” he says quietly. “It’s strange, but I find myself wanting to introduce you to my family. I was dreading it before, but now I wonder. You might actually survive this.”

“Calvino,” I say, looking down at my lap. I can’t meet his gaze. It’s too intense and my shame burns so bright and hot in my cheeks.

“Don’t worry. I’m not getting attached. Only you did so well tonight that I think you can handle more, and I want to give you more, my little thief. My good fucking girl. Although you’ll have to get used to me following you into the bathroom and trying to fuck—”

“Calvino,” I say again and look up. “I need to tell you something.” Fear spikes then, replacing the roiling lust that

filters along my flesh every time he says those words, *good girl*, like he owns me.

He tilts his head, his smile fading ever so slightly. “What’s that, little thief?”

“It’s about my cousin.”

Whatever happiness and contentment lingering between us drifts away and evaporates into the air. He shifts in his seat, sitting back and watching me carefully as he strokes his fingers down his chin. He was open and relaxed a moment before, but I watch him put his walls up and strap on his armor, and I know this is the Calvino I’m most familiar with.

“Go ahead. Tell me.”

“Riley’s dead.”

The words fill the car and tears spark into my eyes. I don’t know why, I haven’t let myself cry over her in a long time, but they come unbidden and unstoppable, and all the hours of mourning and self-hatred and anger fill up my chest as he stares at me, his face a mask of unfeeling nothing, while I’m a bottomless well of grief. Riley, poor Riley, dead and gone and buried and never coming back, no matter how hard we look.

We’ll never find her, because I already know where she is: in the cemetery back home, her gravestone decorated with lilies, her favorite, and my tears.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” he asks and his voice is like a drill slamming into my skull.

“Because it’s not easy to talk about. I loved her more than I’ve ever loved anyone, and she’s gone. I didn’t come out here to find Riley, I came out here to find the guy that killed Riley.”

His breathing becomes faster, more ragged. He’s glaring at me and I feel his hatred like a tongue shoving down my throat. I’m nearly choking on it, or maybe that’s just the tears that won’t stop spilling, but either way his stare is oppressive and I don’t know how to wiggle away from it.

“Someone in the Manzini mafia killed her, didn’t they?” He’s quiet, but he’s burning with rage. “You want revenge. That’s

what this is about. You lied to me.”

“I want truth. And yeah, maybe I want revenge too, but can you blame me? Someone killed her, Calvino. Some guy she was dating in your brother’s mafia, she told me all about it, the guy was a real piece of shit and he killed her and now—”

His hand shoots out and grabs my wrist. I gasp in surprise as he squeezes hard and stares into my eyes, his jaw tight with anger and his eyes wide and wild, and for the first time since this all began, I feel a sudden pulse of utter terror because this man could break me right now if he wanted to.

“I thought we’d be finding a stray girl, not hunting a murderer. What you’re asking for is much, much more complicated than I realized.”

“I just want to find the guy. I don’t care if you help beyond that. Whatever happens next doesn’t need to involve you at all.”

“And then what? You’ll find a way to get justice?”

I glare at him, feeling some of my sorrow turn to anger, diamond-sharp like his. “Goddamn right I will.” I rip my wrist away from his grip. “I should’ve told you and been totally clear from the start and for that I’m sorry, but your brother knows who killed her, I’m sure of it. That’s all I want to know, the name of the guy that murdered my cousin.”

He looks at me with a sneer. “Do you know anything about him?”

“All I know is she started seeing him a few weeks before she was found with bruises all over her throat like someone tied a rope around her neck and strangled her to death. They found her body on the beach, tossed there like trash, and sent her home to West Virginia to be buried. She was so happy in the days before she died, Calvino, she kept talking about her new guy, her new guy, *he’s a little dangerous but he’s a lot of fun*, that’s how she described him. Now she’s fucking dead, and I want to know what happened. I need to know.”

He stares at me and says nothing. The car pulls up to the apartment building and Calvino sits, his body tense, and I can

practically feel what he's thinking, he's wondering if he should cut his losses and kill me now, but Riley's dead already so what's it matter if I go join her in whatever's after this? She went first, so I won't be afraid. I'll be brave and get revenge, or I'll die in the process.

"If you ever lie to me again or hold something back, all of this is over. I will tell Vince what you did to him and I will personally bury your corpse in the desert. Do you hear me, Grace?"

He doesn't look at me as he says it, almost as if he can't bring himself to meet my gaze.

"I hear you, Calvino."

"Good." He gets out of the car and walks away.

After a moment, I follow and keep distance between us. I rub my wrist where he grabbed it and still taste him on my lips, and I wonder how we'll come back from this, if there will ever be that same spark I felt in the car again, but I don't care. It's not about that and never was.

I wipe the tears from my face.

Riley's dead, and I want revenge, and that's all that matters.

## Chapter II



## *Calvino*

**G**race lied to me.

Her admission in the car after that double date hit me hard in two different ways: first, I hated that she misled me or at least didn't tell me the whole truth. If I'm going to do this with her, I need her to be utterly honest, even more honest than she is with her fucking doctor—things might get dangerous, and I don't know how we can get through if I don't believe she'll do the right thing. I should've realized this sooner—she'd been vague about her cousin from the start—but I wanted to take her at her word. I wanted to establish trust.

But second, and worse than that, I hate that I feel this so deeply. I hate that I care way beyond a simple partnership, way beyond a basic alliance and a mutual pact. I care because it's *her* and I want her more than I should. It's stupid and dangerous and I never let my emotions get mixed up in business, but here I am, raging against my little thief because I feel like she personally betrayed me, even if I understand this is just part of the game.

Over the next few days, I work her ragged. She goes into the club in the morning and stays most of the night, pulling double shifts, and if she wants to complain, she smartly keeps her mouth shut. I lurk around, watching her from afar, hating her so much I can barely keep my stomach from emptying all over the bar.

She lied to me.

“She didn’t *exactly* lie to you.” Diego watches me with a frown as I finish my second whiskey of the night four days after the dinner with Vince. My phone’s been blowing up since then with texts from him practically begging to get together again, since apparently Charlie was so smitten with Grace, but I haven’t replied. I’ve been too busy avoiding Grace like the plague despite sharing an apartment together. It’s not easy, but I manage.

I should be ecstatic that my plan’s working so far, but I’m not.

“Explain to me how she didn’t lie.”

“She said she wanted to find her cousin.”

“She knows where her cousin is. She knows exactly where the girl’s buried.”

“Yeah, okay, true, but come on. Can you really blame her for holding this one back?”

I lean toward him, lips curling up. “Don’t act like you didn’t know too, you little snake.”

He grins sheepishly. “It was her mistake to fix.”

“And she came clean. Good for her.”

“That counts for something. You’re a scary bastard, you know that? She was probably worried you’d rip her head clean off. And honestly, I’m a little surprised you didn’t. You have a soft spot for her, don’t you?”

I grunt at him and lean back. I catch sight of her serving drinks, and even though she looks worn and tired, she’s still somehow radiant, and I hate that I keep staring at her despite how much I’d rather forget this whole thing and move on. But my phone vibrates with another text from Vince (*bro, seriously, Charlie wants you to come to the Sandtrap, please stop being a prick and come over, or at least send Grace*) and I can’t quite let this go.

We’re too close. Grace performed admirably that night—much better than I ever had a right to believe she would.

I should be happy, but I’m not.

I'm fucking miserable.

"I'm having a hard time trusting her now, and this little game of ours involves a lot of trust. I'm not sure how we're going to recover." I slide the empty glass toward Dustin the bartender and gesture for another.

"And what exactly is your game?" Diego asks. I give him a flat stare and he sighs. "All right, fair enough. But maybe think of this from her perspective, okay? You're a total stranger, and a terrifying and dangerous stranger on top of that. She started out misleading you and by the time you two started whatever it is you're doing, she was in too deep. But she eventually came clean, right?"

"I'm not sure why you keep defending her." Dustin hands me a fresh drink and I suck half of it down.

"Frankly, I'm not sure either, but you seemed almost happy for a little bit there. It was extremely unlike you."

"If I was happy, it wasn't because of her." Which is bullshit and we both know it.

"Whatever you need to tell yourself. I'm on your side no matter what you choose, but personally, I like the girl. I think you could do much worse."

"We're not actually together," I say and swirl my drink, watching Grace as she walks across the room like she's gliding. "I'm not *doing* anything. It's only a job."

"Whatever you say." Diego slaps my back before he gets up and walks off with a wave. I watch him go, cursing under my breath the whole time. That bastard knows me better than anyone in this world and he can see right through all my self-deceptions and justifications.

Why the hell am I so angry?

She doesn't owe me anything and she never did. So what if she misled me about the exact nature of her cousin's disappearance? Dead is as good as missing, and I can hunt down a killer as easily as I can find a runaway girl.

Only finding the killer will be much more complicated—especially since she'll want to get revenge on the guy. If he's in the Manzini family like she thinks, and he's a made man, I won't be able to do a damn thing against him without Vince's permission.

But why do I need to help her beyond finding him? She's a big girl and can make her own decisions, even though I know that whoever she's after is a dangerous killer already and likely won't hesitate to end Grace's life as well. The idea makes my blood boil, and that's the problem.

I feel protective of her. I feel like I own her.

And yet she lied to me.

I grind my jaw in frustration as my brain goes back and forth, back and forth. I should've seen this from the start since all the signs were there, but I was too busy lusting after her to think straight. God, what a fucking nightmare. My cock was too hard and no blood was left for my brain.

It's a mess. There's no clear way out and I'm not sure what I can do to fix the situation. Every time I think about wiping my hands of this and walking away, I catch sight of her bending over, laughing, smiling, looking gorgeous in that ridiculous drink girl outfit, and I can't bring myself to turn my back on her.

By the time I finish my drink, it's late and Sunshine's on the pole. She twirls in slow, lazy circles, contorting her back and legs and hips, and I should be entranced by her movements—but all I can do is watch Grace wipe down a table and bus away the empty glasses. When she stops at the bar and says something to Dustin, she glances in my direction and I swear I catch a hint of pink in her cheeks like my simple gaze is making her blush, and I can't take this shit anymore.

It's torture sitting here while she's prancing around the club doing her damn job and acting like nothing's wrong, when everything's fucking wrong.

As she tries to get away, I stand up and stalk to her elbow. She's startled when I grab her arm and stare down into her

eyes, and I'm vaguely aware of the other girls watching—Juniper, Kia, and Ginnie—but fuck them and fuck Gracie too.

“What are you doing?” she asks, looking up at me like I'm about to break open my jaw and swallow her whole.

“We need to talk.” I pull her along behind me as I stalk to the back.

“I have tables. There are customers— wait, hold on Calvino, you can't just—”

“We need to talk,” I growl again at her through gritted teeth and all but throw her into private room three. I'm breathing hard as I slam the door shut and lock it tight with a solid clunk.

Grace looks afraid. I can't tell if I like the fear or if it only makes me even more pissed off as she takes several steps backwards toward the pole, trying to put distance between us. She bumps up against it and drops the empty tray onto the floor with a soft thunk on the thick carpeted floor.

“What's going on?” she asks and I watch her breasts rise and fall in rapid succession—she's fucking terrified right now. She thinks I'm going to hurt her, but oh, my little thief. She has no clue what I want to do to her, and it's so much worse than simple pain.

Pain is fleeting. Pain comes and it goes, flitting in and out like the beat of a drum. Pain can be good and it can be horrible, it can intensify pleasure and it can dig down deep into bones and drive a person absolutely mad—but pain doesn't last beyond the borders of its sensation.

What I want to do will seep into her like a poison.

“You lied to me.” I spit the words out like they're rotten meat. “I don't want to hear an excuse. I want you to admit it.”

She watches me carefully, lips parted, her little tongue pressed against her top teeth, and I feel a jolt of want ripple through me at the sight of her pink skin, at her big eyes, at her curly auburn hair, at the long lines of her legs and her hips and, fuck, this girl drives me to insanity. Anyone else and they'd be out of my life already, but she gets a second chance because of this intense unwanted *need* that courses through my veins.

“I lied to you.” She says it quietly while looking at the floor. She’s submissive, meek, so unlike her normally fiery self like I’ve bent her over my knee, spanked her raw and red, and broken her to pieces. I take a step closer. “I made you think Riley was missing instead of dead. I don’t know why I did it, but once it was done I was too afraid to fix things so I just didn’t say a word. I lied to you and I shouldn’t have.” I take another step closer. Fuck, she’s so sexy when she’s acting all contrite. Her chin raises up and her eyes meet mine and there’s a sharpness to her gaze that suggests she isn’t only afraid—there’s a wave of rage buoying her right now and raising her up.

Like she knows damn well what she does to me.

She continues: “But that doesn’t change anything. It was stupid of me not to clarify right away, but our arrangement doesn’t have to change. I can help you, Calvino, and you can help me.”

I advance until I’m within arm’s reach of her and stop. She’s so small and soft and beautiful, like a moonlight-dappled rose, and I could so easily pluck her from the earth and break her if I wanted.

It should be simple to toss her aside and find some other way to get the information I need, especially now that my trust has been damaged. It should be so easy forget her and move on. I don’t need her, not really, not in a big, cosmic sense—there are a million girls like Gracie I could use to get what I want.

But none of them would be Gracie.

It’s *her* keeping me restrained. Whatever magnetic pull she has over me makes it impossible to get away, and now that I’m standing inches from her while she’s wearing that outfit and breathing hard and looking at me like she’s either going to cry or fuck me or stab me or maybe all three at once, I know I need to make this right, even if it fucking hurts to swallow my pride.

“You will never lie to me again.” I speak quietly, intensely. I need her to understand this is the most important thing in the

world right now. “You will never mislead me. You will never withhold information. You will be completely honest, Grace.”

“I promise,” she says and her voice breaks slightly. “I’ll tell you everything. I’ll never lie.”

“If I catch you lying, I’ll kill you. This isn’t an empty threat and this isn’t a game. I won’t risk my own life just so you can keep playing me for a fool. Do you understand?”

“I understand.” She stares like I’m the only man in the world. “I messed up, Calvino. But I won’t make that mistake again.”

I release a pent-up growl in the back of my throat, more like a groan of utter lust, and step forward, crushing the distance between us. She gasps as my hand comes up along her throat, across her cheek, and into her hair as I press her tighter against the cold metal of the stripper pole. She moans when I kiss her neck and chest, when I bite her collarbone and finally find her lips with my own, breaking her with a kiss so sweet and deep I feel like I’m lost in her.

She kisses me back with a hunger. I can feel her starving, naked need as her tongue enters my mouth and my own invades hers. I bite her lip and pull her hair and I dominate her, I take her and own her, because I need her to know that she’s mine, she’s all fucking mine, at least for as long as we’re working together.

No more lies. No more bullshit. I slide my free hand down her breasts, across her stomach, and caress along the hem of her shorts before I slip down beneath her panties and cup her soaking pussy.

Mine. All fucking mine.

She gasps in surprise. Maybe she didn’t expect this, but I’ve been dreaming about it ever since I got my first taste. I’m wild for her, insane, psychotic, hard as steel and aching with a pulsing need as my cock twitches madly. My fingers tease along her soaking folds and I tease her clit in circles as she moans into my mouth, whimpering when I slide my fingers deep into her slit.

“I’ve been so fucking mad at you, Grace,” I say as I kiss her neck and fuck her pussy with my fingers. “So goddamn angry. I keep picturing pinning you down and fucking you so hard you scream my name and lose your damn mind in the process. I keep thinking about dominating you, taking you and making you suck my cock until you swallow every fucking drop. I want to destroy you, Grace, and I want you to love every minute of it.”

She moans and digs her fingers into my back. I tighten my grip on her hair as I roll my fingers over her clit faster before fucking her deeper. She’s soaking wet, dripping down onto my palm, so slick that it’s like diving into the ocean, and god damn, does it feel good, her moans and sexy little whimpers, her pouty little lips and her lust-filled eyes. I need her more than I’ve ever needed before in my life, and I can’t stop myself as I keep going, faster and faster.

But she reaches down and grabs my wrist. I’m surprised when she pulls my hand back—and drops to her knees.

“Little thief,” I say, my voice a growl, and she unbuckles my belt. She spreads her legs—

And puts a hand down the front of her shorts.

My cock’s diamond-hard at the sight of her pouty lips falling open with pleasure as she touches herself and takes out my thick cock.

“We’re in this together,” she says as she strokes my cock and begins to move her hand along her own slick cunt faster. “You hear me? We’re in this together, Calvino.”

“That’s right, little thief,” I say and she takes me into her mouth. It’s like a sudden flash of a lightbulb going pop as pleasure bursts into my brain and she takes me with her sexy little tongue rolling laps around my cum-dripping tip. I groan in utter ecstasy as she sucks me nice and slow at first. She’s moaning as she does it, working herself with her fingers. “Keep touching yourself. Slide your fingers deep inside and roll them in slow circles before you find your clit again. I want to hear you moan with my cock down your pretty throat. God damn it, Grace. You don’t know how beautiful you are right



now, down on your knees with my cock in your mouth, moaning while you suck me hard and deep.”

She moves faster and faster, her tongue and lips like heaven as my shaft is drenched with saliva. She can barely take me, I’m so thick and long, but she tries anyway, a beautiful girl struggling to fit my cock down her throat but game to try anyway, whimpering and panting. I grab her hair and push her down before I pull her back and kiss her.

“Look at you, dirty girl,” I whisper as she takes control and sucks me faster again. “Look at you sucking my cock. You’re a filthy girl, aren’t you, Grace? But you’ve never been more beautiful than right now, feeling pleasure from your own fingers while giving pleasure with your gorgeous mouth. And you feel perfect, Grace, you filthy fucking girl. You feel so incredible. I want to come down your throat and make you swallow it all. Can you take me, Grace? Can you be a good girl?”

She moans as her fingers roll along her slick clit, faster and faster, and I can’t take much more as I growl and fuck her pretty mouth, losing my mind to the moment. I come in a massive orgasm, in an explosion, in a nuclear blast, and she keeps going, licking and slurping and taking it all, swallowing every drop as she moans her mindless bliss.

My ears are ringing and my head’s buzzing but I grab her, stand her up, and rip down her shorts. She gasps as I drop to my knees and bury my mouth between her legs. She wraps one thigh around my neck and I lick her fast, sucking and teasing and eating, and god, she’s amazing as she rolls her hips and pulls my hair. “Keep going,” she moans. “Oh, fuck you, Calvino, keep going you fucking bastard.”

She comes and it’s heaven, it’s perfection, as her body tenses and spasms and her head tilts back, her eyes rolled skyward, wordless moans on her lips. I lap her up and growl through it, and when she’s done, I pat her ass and stand to hug her tight and kiss her. “Good girl,” I whisper, biting her lip. “Very good.”

“Is this how it’s going to be then?” she asks, blinking rapidly.

“Every time I make a mistake you’re going to do that?”

“Make you suck my cock? That’s right. I think it’s a fair punishment.”

“Not exactly a good deterrent.”

I laugh gently and smack her ass hard then squeeze it tight. Fuck, she is firm and gorgeous, and I feel myself stirring already.

“Get yourself dressed and back on the floor,” I whisper, kissing her neck. “Tomorrow we’re going to the Sandtrap to meet my family.”

“You’re so romantic. You drag me into a back room and do *that* to me, and now it’s all business again.”

“Don’t pretend like this is anything but business, little Gracie.” I bite her shoulder and help tug up her shorts. I bite her lower lip and look into her eyes. “But business can feel good sometimes.”

She shakes her head and pushes past me. She grabs the fallen tray and disappears back out into the club.

I watch her go, pulse hammering in my neck, and a deep unease fills my bones.

# Chapter 12

## *Grace*

The massive white and tan gates slowly slide back to reveal a curving stone driveway that leads up to a fountain and a massive white house with dozens of windows, huge columns, and the ocean spreading out beyond it.

“Welcome to the Sandtrap,” Calvino says with a slight smile as the driver parks the car out front and kills the engine.

“Holy crap,” I manage to say. Calvino laughs and gets out and I have to hurry to keep up as he strides to the front door. I don’t have time to process the overwhelming absurdity of the place—all the wealth and power and prestige it must take to buy a freaking mansion on the coast of California and the balls it takes to flaunt that money so blatantly.

A girl’s waiting at the top of the main steps. She’s got long, dark hair, thick dark lashes, and a big grin as she throws her hands up in the air. She’s extremely pretty—and I can see the slight family resemblance to Calvino and Vince.

“There he is, the man himself.” She grins and gives her brother a quick hug. “I’m not going to lie to you, Cal, I didn’t think you’d show.”

“What, and never hear the end of it from you and Susi? Where is she, anyway?”

“Getting drinks out back with Charlie. Hello, you must be Grace.” She shakes my hand with a wide, confident smile, and brushes her hair from her face when the wind picks up. She’s wearing simple white shorts and a light blue top that makes

her tan skin practically shimmer in the late-morning sunlight. “I’m Rella, Cal’s oldest little sister.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say and suddenly feel a stone lodge itself in my throat. Is this what his entire family looks like? Calvino and Vince are both handsome enough to be male models, but I figured the other kids might’ve gotten normal genes—but apparently not, because Rella’s absolutely gorgeous. She has a down-to-earth vibe about her, like although she’s standing in the doorway of a twenty-million-dollar home, she’s just another girl greeting her brother’s girlfriend.

“Come in, come in, let’s go for a tour, shall we?”

“Who else is here?” Calvino asks as we step into an entry hall with marble floors and a chandelier that looks like it would fit in at a high-end jewelry shop in Paris. Paintings hang on the walls, plants burst from giant pots and planters, and light streams in from high windows. It’s like something from freaking Pinterest.

“Susi and Charlie are outside with Vince and Jason.” She gives Calvino a look. “Damon hasn’t shown his face here in a few days.”

“What happened?” Calvino sighs like this happens all the time.

“The usual. He got into an argument with Vince and now he’s going to hole up in that little shack of his and not speak to anyone for a month.”

“The shack she’s referring to is a five-million-dollar beach-front property,” Calvino says as he puts an arm across my shoulders. “Damon’s not exactly living in squalor.”

“Everywhere’s squalor compared to the Sandtrap,” Rella says, grinning huge. “Although I hate the name.”

I laugh a little and nudge Calvino in the ribs. “Does everyone hate the name?”

“Everyone,” he confirms. “But we’ll never change it. Family tradition and all that.”

Staff bustles around as Rella peels me away from Calvino and steers me through a dizzying series of rooms: a movie theater, an ocean-view office complete with a desk filled with computers like some investment banker lives there, a big gourmet kitchen where a nice young girl covered in tattoos and a head scarf is making lunch (“That’s Olive, the cook, she’s fucking amazing, you’ll love her”), down past a sitting room, a living room, a den, and up a back staircase to the second floor.

“I know it’s a bit much,” Rella says gesturing at an oil painting that’s probably worth more than I’ve ever seen in my entire life. It depicts a capsized boat burning beneath a midnight moon. “Calvino says you’re not from California originally? Don’t worry, pretty much nobody is.”

“West Virginia,” I say though I didn’t hear her actually ask. “Small town, used to be a coal-mining place. You know, lots of hills and trailers and such.”

“So that’s the accent.” She nods and smiles sweetly at me. “I can see why Calvino likes you.”

“What, because of my accent?”

“He’s got a thing for girls with accents. He was with this British chick that I think was related to the royal family for a bit, and then this like Norwegian princess, she was absolutely nuts though, and then this girl from Texas, her dad was an oil baron, real asshole, you know the type, red face and too fat and all that stuff? Anyway, here are the rooms—” And the tour continues, but I feel like I was kicked in the chest and I can barely breathe.

Calvino dated other women and Rella knew about them? Charlie said he never, *ever* brought girls home, but if his sister knows those girls then maybe Charlie was wrong? My head’s spinning, and I’m not sure why I feel this sudden surge of jealousy as I’m shown a string of beautiful rooms, one with nothing but a piano and other random instruments, another filled with art and painting materials, another strewn with cushions (“Susi jokes that this is the fuck den, which is gross because Mom and Dad used to spend a lot of time in here. I’m

pretty sure they just watched TV”) and endless bedrooms. The whole place is like a museum, except it also smells like crisp ocean air and clean linen sheets, and it’s pretty much paradise.

Oil barons and royalty? How the hell am I supposed to compete with that? I’m a small-town girl from Nowhere, West Virginia, with nothing to my name but a messed-up past and a lot of self-loathing issues, and I’m supposed to be with a guy that’s used to royalty?

*You’re not really with him, girlie, don’t forget it.* Riley’s voice is in my head again, giving me the cold, hard truth. I need to remember that, because otherwise I’ll fall victim to this fantasy and forget that she’s right, I’m not really with Calvino, and I’m only here to do some digging.

Rella takes us back downstairs and out back. There’s a gorgeous bright blue pool with an outdoor cooking area, a patio with a big beige overhang, a stone fire pit, lots of fancy seating and lounge chairs, and several people sitting down next to the water. I recognize Vince and Charlie and Calvino, which means the others are Susi and Jason.

Susi stands and greets me, and Rella passes me off to her. Instantly, I’m assaulted by a perky little dirty-blond girl with big eyes, a huge smile, and an amazing figure that I’m actually sort of jealous over. Jason looks like his brothers, tall and broad and muscular, but he’s a bit quieter and only gives me a smile and a nod as he sips from a glass of something brown.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Charlie says, hugging me, and I’m pulled down to join them by the pool, a drink deposited into my hand, and Susi and Rella proceed to ask me a million questions about my life. I do my best to answer although it’s hard not to feel like I’m in the middle of a deposition in a courtroom and one wrong thing can send me to jail forever. But no pressure.

“Did your dad actually mine coal or is that a really rude thing to ask?” Susi says, grinning at me huge, and I don’t get the sense that she’s being insulting—I just think she’s incredibly earnest and says whatever comes into her head.

“No, the mines closed a long time ago, and my dad ran off when I was two. My mom married my stepdad and he was an auto mechanic kind of guy, although he bounced between shops a lot. He’s an asshole.”

“We know all about assholes in this family,” Rella says, nudging Calvino. “Speaking of which, anyone talk to Damon? Is he really going to stay away and sulk all day?”

“Damon’s not coming,” Vince says with a scowl. “Hate to break it to you, sis, but he’s not as interested in grilling Calvino’s girlfriend as you are.”

“I don’t know why,” Susi says, bouncing slightly in her chair. “I mean, we’ve heard rumors about him allegedly dating other women, but we’ve never actually *met* any of them.”

I feel a little spike of excitement in my stomach, which is almost as bad as the jealousy—I shouldn’t care that I’m special enough to bring home and that I was all worried over nothing. I’m only here because it’s a job, not because Calvino actually cares about me, though I catch him watching me and smiling a little bit like he’s enjoying the show.

“Maybe let’s not talk about my past relationships,” Calvino says casually. “I mean, my current girlfriend is right here.”

Rella waves a hand in the air. “Those girls are dead to me now. All we care about is Grace.”

“Oh, Grace, you *have* to tell me about your high school. Was there a cheerleading team?” Susi beams at me as she sips a margarita.

“The girls were homeschooled by private tutors,” Vince explains. “They didn’t get the typical American upbringing and Susi’s going through a phase.”

“It’s not a phase, I just want to know what normal girls went through is all. The tutoring was such a drag.”

“It was all bullshit, if you ask me,” Rella says. “Sure, it’s nice to never have to take the bus, but I don’t know. We missed out on a lot.”



“I always wanted to be a cheerleader,” Susi says wistfully, and I could easily see her fitting in with a squad. She’s beautiful and outgoing and easily would’ve run any high school she attended.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” I say with a little shrug. “I played tennis but that’s about it. My high school was pretty small and boring, honestly. Everyone knew everyone and it was all just a bunch of horny teens sleeping with each other, drinking down by the quarry, and getting into fights.”

“Sounds like a dream,” Susi says with a deep sigh. “Like a TV show.”

“Sure, except everyone’s a lot uglier in real life and nobody ever actually leaves town.” I laugh a little and shake my head. “I’m being too cynical, but I guess I was one of those people that didn’t love high school.”

“I didn’t either,” Charlie says, sounding bashful. “I had a tough time back then.”

“Really?” Vince seems surprised. “You’re so gorgeous and outgoing. I would’ve thought you’d have the school eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“I was a late bloomer,” she says and stands up suddenly. “Grace, want to go for a little walk down to the beach? It’s a gorgeous day and I could use the exercise.”

“I’d love to,” I say, making sure I don’t glance at Calvino although I can practically feel his excitement.

Rella and Susi both invite themselves, and the group splits up by gender. I take off my shoes and enjoy the feeling of sand between my toes as we walk leisurely along a path between the dunes that ends on a crisp white-sand beach.

We chat about easy stuff like the Sandtrap and what it was like growing up with the boys until Rella slips her hand through my arm. “So, Grace, how did you meet my brother?”

“At the club,” I say a little evasively since we never got our story straight—which in retrospect was extremely stupid.

“Really? When you were working?”

“He hired me, so I guess that’s how we met. And then things just sort of, you know, progressed.”

Rella frowns at me. “You guys didn’t meet before that?”

I bite my lip and look toward the ocean, my heart racing, and I realize I’m missing something. I don’t know what Calvino told her and I try to search my memory for any hint of what he might’ve said—but there’s nothing.

“That’s how I think we officially met,” I say, which is a pretty good non-answer and seems to satisfy Rella enough that she shrugs and lets Susi change the topic to more questions about a typical high school experience. Charlie helps answer those to take the pressure off me as we stroll down to the water and along the edge of the waves.

I let the wet sand stick to my feet and the ocean soak my soles. The girls chatter and I feel comfortable and at ease for the first time in a while, and I can almost forget what I’m here to do. But on the way back, I find myself walking with Charlie a bit behind the two younger girls, and I’m suddenly reminded that I need to fulfill my promise to Calvino.

“I’m curious, what were Calvino’s parents like?” I ask as casually as I can, but I notice Charlie flinches slightly and looks toward the water.

“His father was tough,” she says quietly, speaking into the wind like she wants her words to blow away. “Benvolio was a hard man, and I guess you have to be to run their family business. His mother, Letizia, was lovely though. She was all smiles and laughter and basically she was the light of the family. I think they’re a little darker without her.”

“Rella and Susi seem nice.”

“They’re really good people, but they’re a bit—” She grins at me, brightening. “I think ‘sheltered’ is a good word here.”

“That’s putting it mildly. What’s with Susi’s obsession with high school?”

“She’s going through a phase where she’s mad about everything she missed, I think. Don’t let it bother you too much, she means well.”

We rejoin the boys ten minutes later and I want to ask Charlie more about Calvino's parents, but I notice Rella talking quietly to Vince near the grills, and both of them look over at me with squinting eyes and big frowns, like they're saying something bad. I feel a shiver run down my spine and I hurry over to Calvino, who's leaning back in a chair.

I crouch down next to him, put my hand on his leg, and smile big. "Can we talk?" I ask him as quietly as I can though I'm sure Jason notices.

"Sure we can," Calvino says lazily. "Come on, let's go inside." He winks at Jason and leads me through the back door and into an empty, cavernous living room off to the left, away from the staff and any eavesdroppers.

"What did you tell Rella about how we met?"

He frowns slightly, arms crossed over his chest. "We met at the club. I told her the truth."

"She acted like we might've met some other way." I pace back and forth, tugging at my hair. "It really freaked me out. Then I saw her talking to Vince, and they were both staring at me—"

"Hey, Grace." He catches my wrist and pulls me toward him. "Go easy. You're spiraling."

"I'm not spiraling." I shove myself away and glare at him, arms crossed over my chest, heart racing. "I'm just not built to be a spy, okay? I know you caught me doing something crazy but that's not really me, I don't do stuff like this. I feel like a fake and a liar, and I'm talking to your sisters and Charlie like I'm a normal person, but I'm not, I'm a cheat and a fraud and —"

"Grace." He says my name sharply and comes toward me. I stagger back, but he catches my waist and pulls me into him and I suck in a sharp, gasping breath as I look up into his eyes.

"Take a beat and try to calm down," he says quietly, eyes like stones threatening to crush me. "Don't act like you can't do this all of a sudden. This is what you signed up for."

"Calvino—"

“No, don’t try to tell me this is too hard. Don’t you get what’s happening? Susi’s whole high school bullshit, and Rella’s I-don’t-care attitude? They’re testing you.”

“Come on, that can’t be true.”

“It’s definitely true. They want to see how you react to them. They’re mafia girls, Gracie, they’re used to living on the edge all the time and it’s impossible for them to trust anyone. This is what we all do.”

“You’re talking like they’re bad people, but they’re not. And anyway, Charlie would’ve said something. She would’ve warned me.”

He sighs and runs the back of his knuckles down my jaw. “Mob wife,” he says quietly. “She’s just as bad as Sus and Rell. But they’re not bad people, not at all, only they find it difficult to genuinely open up to strangers. You just need some time, is all.”

I chew on my lip and look back at all those interactions. Rella seemed a little strange about her questioning, but it could’ve easily been discomfort or nerves or something like that, and Susi did seem like she was messing with me sometimes with some of those questions, like when she wondered aloud if sleeping with your teachers is frowned upon (Charlie assured her it most definitely is everywhere but in romance novels).

“I did find something out,” I say suddenly, brightening a bit as his hand moved down to my hips. “I asked Charlie about your dad and she seemed really evasive about it, like she didn’t want to talk about him at all.”

“That’s a start,” he says with a slight nod. “Charlie and my father never really got along. I remember she’d leave the room if he so much as came near her, especially toward the end in the last few months before he died.”

“Interesting,” I say as I glance toward the windows and out at the ocean. “I didn’t realize her relationship with him was so strained.”

“It was strange, honestly, but I just figured she couldn’t stand him. Frankly, Dad was an asshole.” He laughs to himself and

releases me. “Come on, we’ll have lunch and then get out of here. Just another hour.”

I release a pent-up breath as he heads out the back door and rejoins the group. I linger for a moment, wondering why Charlie would’ve hated the father so much—it could’ve have been only because he was a bastard. She married a mafia asshole herself, after all, so she had to have been used to that macho bullshit.

Charlie laughs at something Vince says, but she doesn’t lean toward him—and barely even looks in his direction. There’s something strange here, something I can’t quite figure out, and I want to consider it longer but Susi spots me and waves for me to join them, so I plaster a smile on my face and head back to my spot and my drink and act like Calvino’s the best man in the world and everything’s normal, even if nothing is normal, not even close.

# Chapter 13

## Grace

Working at Crystal Lake feels strange ever since I started this thing with Calvino.

It's not that I mind working—actually, I kind of like having a job that doesn't involve lying to Calvino's family all the time, and putting in hours makes me feel productive even if I'm just ferrying drinks, flirting with drunk guys, and pushing my tits together for tips.

Calvino's always watching me when he's around, and all the other girls give me a wide berth—except for Juniper, of course, who goes out of her way to make my life as miserable as she can by mixing up orders for me, stealing crap from my locker, giving me constant dirty looks, and calling me a *slut whore* under her breath whenever she's nearby. Clearly, she's super stable and mature.

But the strange part is, the other girls aren't the same anymore, the ones that I thought were my friends. I used to be able to laugh and joke with Kia and Ginnie, but now they treat me like I'm a total stranger and they're always careful to keep their distance. It's like now that my thing with Calvino is widely known, I've turned into a leper and a pariah.

“What do you want me to do about it?” Calvino asks a couple nights after our visit to the Sandtrap. “You want me to force them to be your friends?” He smirks at me over his drink. “I can be your daddy if you ask real nice.”

I glare at him. “No, asshole. I want you to stop coming around so much. Maybe they'll forget that we're, you know.”

“Together? Fucking?”

“Together. Sort of.” I mumble that last part. “I don’t have any close friends in LA and it was nice to spend some time with the girls, even if it was at work.”

“There’s nothing I can do about it, little thief. If I tried, it’d only make it worse.”

“All I’m asking is you don’t sit there and stare at me all night. You think anyone’s gonna talk to me with you looking like you’re about to murder them?”

“I don’t look like that.”

“You definitely do. You have this thing when you’re thinking and you’re glaring around you like you’re about to light the place on fire and it’s pretty off-putting if I’m honest.”

He looks amused as he sips his drink. “That’s good to know, but I’m still not going to help.”

“God, you’re such a prick.”

He laughs and I’m about to tell him off some more when Kia comes running over. She hurries right up to Calvino and stands there looking a bit frazzled. “Your brother just walked in,” she hisses and looks over her shoulder.

Sure enough, there’s Vincent for the first time since that night I gave him sleeping pills. Calvino’s smile turns to a deep scowl as he stands up, finishes his drink, and looks at me and Kia. “Get the back room ready and tell Sunshine and Raven they’re needed.”

I’m taken by surprise and don’t censor myself. “Seriously?”

Kia looks scandalized and terrified as she stares like a rabbit from me to Calvino.

Calvino’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Don’t make me say it twice.” And he walks off without another word to greet his brother and the three men that came in with him, three big guys covered in tattoos and clearly hiding guns beneath their dark jackets.



“Come on, let’s get going,” Kia said, sounding nervous. “God, I hate when that guy’s in here. His fucking goons never tip and they all want free lap dances.”

“I can’t believe he’s doing this,” I say, not looking at Kia, staring hate at Vince and Calvino. “I mean, seriously, what the hell?”

“Gracie.” Kia grabs my arm. “I don’t know what little drama is playing out in your head but that man’s extremely dangerous and we were just told to do a job. I think we’d better do it, right?”

I grind my jaw but force myself to turn away. I can’t get Kia in trouble just because I want to burn this entire place to the ground, so I follow her and we prep the back room, put out some drinks, get the lighting right, fluff the pillows, make sure everything’s clean and such, and by the time Kia’s gone and I’m putting on the finishing touches, Vincent appears in the doorway.

He stands there smirking at me with a cold smile as I step aside and let him enter. “Your room is ready, sir,” I say, glaring at him and not even trying to hide it.

Sometimes I think I really do have a death wish.

“Thank you. What was your name again?”

I roll my eyes. “Funny.”

“Oh, Grace, I almost didn’t recognize you with your tits out. I’m surprised my brother lets you still work here considering you’re his girlfriend. Calvino doesn’t seem like the type to enjoy it when men stare at his woman’s body.”

I grimace slightly and make note of that—it might be worth mentioning to Calvino in the future if we want to make our relationship feel more authentic. But sometimes I get the feeling Vincent’s very wrong about that—and Calvino actually *enjoys* watching me get pawed at and slobbered over, like he enjoys knowing others want me and can’t have me.

“I like working, but thanks for your advice and for staring at my chest, you pig. Are you only nice when Charlie’s around?”

“Pretty much. But she’s not here, is she?” He looms over me, grinning huge, and I wonder how far this bastard would take this if I kept pushing him.

“No, she’s not, and maybe you should—” I’m about to tell him to go fuck off and die when Raven hustles past me, takes Vince’s arm, and leads him over to the couch as she coos and flirts and says how much she missed him and his big hard cock.

I roll my shoulders to ease some tension and get the hell out of there before I do something stupid.

Back in the main room, Vince’s guys are sitting right next to the stage while Monique dances. They’re throwing singles and laughing loudly and drinking too much, and I can tell Monique hates them with a passion, but she’s a pro and doesn’t let it stop her dance. Sunshine passes me on the way to the back—she grins and winks and I know what she’s about to do with Vince and Raven and it fucking sickens me.

I think of Charlie on the beach smiling at me like the world is perfect while sunlight slants down through clouds and lights up her smile, and the way she sat on the arm of Vince’s chair and kissed his neck and he patted her side and hugged her close against him. For a little while, I thought they looked like a real couple, like they genuinely loved each other, and I forgot all about what I saw that night in private room three.

Two girls on their knees sucking his cock.

And they’re about to do it again.

I find Calvino at the bar. He’s sipping on another drink and texting someone, and I march right over to him, practically smoking from my ears I’m so damn mad.

“What the *fuck*, Calvino?”

He doesn’t look at me. “What’s wrong now?”

“Your brother is in the back room getting his dick sucked and you think everything’s okay?”

Slowly he puts his phone down. Dustin the bartender hurries to the far end of the bar like he wants to avoid this conversation

as much as humanly possible, and I can't blame him: the look Calvino gives me drips with acid, scorn, and anger.

"Since when did you give a fuck what my brother does?"

"Since I met Charlie and realized she's a nice girl. Don't they have a little boy together? Are you seriously letting this happen?"

He takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out. "There's something you don't understand about this situation."

"No, you don't understand, asshole. Your brother's in there *cheating on his wife and the mother of his child* and you're sitting here texting like nothing's going on! What is the matter with you? Seriously, Calvino, you need to—"

He stands suddenly and grabs my arm hard enough for it to hurt. His fingers sink into the muscle and his lips pull back into a snarl and I'm reminded again that I'm not playing with normal men. These are monsters, barely tamed wolves.

"Watch your fucking mouth," he says softly but with a solid menace. I catch Ginnie giving me a sympathetic frown, and Juniper looks like she's about to do jumping jacks and cartwheels from pure joy. "Come with me."

He drags me off the floor. I want to struggle, but the bastard's strong and anyway I'm kind of terrified of him right now. I mentally curse myself for letting my temper get the best of me as he yanks me into private room one and slams the door shut, barely cutting off the thump of the music as he whirls on me.

"Don't you ever talk to me like that in front of the others again. Do you understand?"

"Calvino—"

"No, don't *Calvino* me. I'm the boss of this place, and if any of those girls talked to me like that, I'd teach them their place without hesitation or mercy. You will respect me and I will not tolerate such blatant disregard for my authority. As it stands, you're supposed to be my girlfriend, so I won't drag you out there by the hair and spank your ass raw in front of the entire club, but I will do it back here."

A thrill shoots through me as I back away. “Cal, wait, hold on,” but he advances on me until I slam up against the wall. I try to push him but he grabs my wrists and yanks me around, turning me so that my face is against the cold painted drywall and his bulk pushes up against me, his cock against my ass, and I release a whimper when I realize he’s half hard already.

My god, does this guy get off on being a fucking asshole?

“How can you stand it?” I ask him as he looms over me, pinning me tight. “You know Charlie.”

“Vincent is the Don,” he says as he releases my wrists with one hand and pulls my hair instead. I gasp and groan as his other hand moves down the small of my back and tugs up my skirt, revealing my lacy panties, and I bite my lip hard as I look over my shoulder at him.

“Doesn’t matter. You still shouldn’t be a part of this.”

He yanks my panties down. I moan in surprise as he cups my pussy and growls in my ear. “You’re dripping fucking wet, Gracie. Are you sure you actually care about Charlie, or are you only pissing me off so that I’ll punish you?”

“Don’t be a dick. I care about Charlie.”

“I can’t do a goddamn thing for her.” He kisses my neck and I whimper. “Vincent is the Don and that comes before and above anything else. Even if I’m not technically in the family, I know better than to fight against their rules. If he chooses to murder one of my girls, there’s nothing I can say. There’s nothing I can do for Charlie.” He bites my shoulder gently. “But I can do something for you.”

And then he spanks me.

It’s a total shock. I release a yelp and stare at him, eyes wide, mouth open. His palm smacks against my bare ass once, twice, three times, and the sting is tight and hot on my smooth skin. He rubs the spot he hit and purrs against my chin as his fingers slip between my legs and begin to tease my soaking wetness. Despite myself, I moan as pleasure and pain mingle.

“Fuck, you asshole, warn me next time,” I say, digging my fingers into the wall and trying not to scream his goddamn

name, it feels so good. “This doesn’t, ah, god, fuck, this doesn’t fix anything, you prick. Your brother’s in there, oh, Jesus, you bastard, he’s in there cheating on his wife and you’re a part of it.”

He spanks me again. Three times in quick succession and I try to scream in shocked pleasure and pain but he covers my mouth and buries his fingers into my dripping cunt.

“The Don does as he wishes, just like I do as I wish with you. I can’t tell him to stop, just like you can’t tell me to stop. That’s how the world works, my little thief.”

I moan into his palm as he spanks me again and teases me more, alternating a little pleasure with a little pain until I’m a mixed-up mess of wet hot want and knee-shaking desire. I’m trembling, panting, mindless, brainless, dripping for him and moaning, and I hate how easily he can manipulate me, how he can take my body and drive me to complete meltdown, all because I’m like clay beneath his hands, pliant and giving and moldable. He brings me to the edge and backs me off, and I know tomorrow I’ll have a big hand-sized bruise but I don’t give a damn, I want him to hit me, to hurt me, and to make me come so hard I can’t breathe.

“I think you’re beginning to understand,” he whispers as he pulls my hair and fucks me with his fingers. “This is how the world works, my beautiful little thief. There are those with power and those without, and we learn how to obey.”

“So that’s it? You obey?”

“As much as I have to.” He covers my mouth and spanks me hard enough to make me scream before he drops to his knees and licks me from behind.

The sudden contrast of the pain and his soft tongue drives me wild, and I’m wiggling my hips and trembling as the pleasure builds and builds. He licks me and teases me from behind and, fuck, it’s filthy, it’s so wrong, and I come like a lightning storm as he laps me up and eats me and growls with delight as he does it.

When I'm finally back inside of my body and no longer buzzing among the clouds, I lean against the wall and breathe hard. He kisses me gently, smirking, and pulls my panties up.

"I still think this is fucked," I say quietly, but I'm too spent to truly fight.

"I understand. You like Charlie and you don't want to see her get hurt. But believe me, she knows Vince is here, maybe not the specifics of what he's doing but in general she understands the situation. He fucks around, but he always comes back home."

I reach out and grab his wrist. He looks at me with a curious surprise as I draw his hand to my lips and run his finger across my mouth. "And what about you? Do you fuck around?"

"Grace," he says, a low rumble.

I take his finger into my mouth. I suck slow and smile at him, rolling my tongue in circles, making eye contact as I do it.

"Come on, Calvino. Tell me the truth. Do you fuck around too, just like Vince? If this was real between us, would you expect me to be okay with you getting your dick sucked by two other girls?" I bite down gently and he chuckles as he stares at my mouth with pure desire. I know what he's thinking and I want him to picture me down on my knees with his thick cock between my lips, sucking him fast and deep into my throat as my breasts shake.

I love the look he gives me: pure and complete lust, like he's losing his mind and doing all he can to keep his hands to himself. I love that I have power over a powerful man, even if it's only to make him want to fuck me so badly he'll do anything I say. It's exhilarating, letting him stare at me while I suck his finger and tease him and make him wild with excitement, and I can only imagine how hard his cock is right now.

"I am not my brother, little thief." He pulls his hand away and grabs my hair tightly. "You need to understand that. Just because I play my family's game doesn't mean I'm like them." He stares into my eyes and I'm not sure I believe this man is

somehow above the muck and grime of his family's debauchery—even though I want to.

But what does it matter?

We're not real. Whatever we have is all for show, only a job, although it doesn't feel like that when his lips are against mine and his fist is in my hair. No, it feels like there's something more happening, like despite what he says, there are feelings growing between us that neither of us want or can handle.

I won't let myself go there. I won't let myself get distracted by this man's lips, his touch, his pleasure and his pain.

"Now I need you to get back to work. I'll have one of the other girls deal with my brother." He steps back and I'm surprised by the concession.

"I guess I can pretend like he's not back there."

"That's for the best. And don't mention this to Charlie. It'll only hurt her."

I look away and wonder if he's right about that. Doesn't she deserve to know that her husband is cheating on her with multiple women at once? Though I can imagine how the details would sting.

Calvino might not be able to cross that line, but I'm not bound by their family rules the way he is.

Vincent's the Don, but he's not my Don.

I get myself together and Calvino squeezes my ass when I walk past and I feel a little jolt of aching pain, and I wonder what else I can do to earn another spanking like that, or if I can even survive another.

# Chapter 14



## *Grace*

**T**hat weekend, several days after Vince's visit to the club, Calvino takes me back to the Sandtrap. "Charlie's been asking for you to come over. You're going to have to get her cell number tonight so she can stop bugging Vince about it and ask you directly."

I smile to myself and I have to admit it feels good to know someone wants to be my friend. "She's a sweet girl. Why's she all mixed up with your brother, anyway?"

Calvino snorts as he gets out of the car. We meet at the base of the steps and he drapes an arm across my shoulders. "You see, sometimes good girls like very bad boys. There's something about the charm of a man that can rip off your own arm and beat you senseless with it. Though Charlie comes from her own sort of darkness."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Her people are connected like we are. She's familiar with the mafia code and how a mob wife's expected to behave."

I roll my eyes. "You're always talking about that sort of crap like you really want your women to be quiet and obedient."

"You think we're joking about it?"

"I think you talk a big game but you like it when I call you on your shit."

"You're not my wife, little thief, and you're not really my girlfriend." He leans down and bites my ear gently. "So be very fucking careful."

I shiver as he leads me into the house, through the main foyer, and out onto the back patio where Charlie's sitting with Vincent and the cutest little boy I've ever seen in my life.

He's got light hair like his mother, curly on the top and buzzed on the sides and back though it's thin and downy like baby chicken feathers. He hops out of Charlie's lap where he was all snuggled looking at a book and comes crawling over to Calvino, throwing the book aside like it's nothing.

"There's my boy," Calvino says, grinning, and catches the little guy up in his arms. My heart nearly freaking breaks watching big, bad Calvino hug his little baby nephew and tickle the tiny guy until he laughs and starts hiccupping. "Grace, this is Emilio."

"Hi, bud," I say and poke at his belly which makes him laugh and hiccup some more. He's got wide, dark eyes and an easy smile with little baby teeth like Chiclets. "How old are you?"

He only babbles and grins at me.

Calvino laughs. "That's right, big guy, you're one." He puts Emilio down, and the little guy immediately crawls back to his mother. "He's going to be walking in no time."

Charlie comes over and greets us and Vince isn't far behind. We're served wine and a cheese plate by two staff members in black and a nanny comes out to scoop up Emilio. "This one's bedtime," the woman says, an older lady with curly dark hair. "Say night-night."

Emilio squints and says, "Night-night," or something that sounds like it, and does the most adorable freaking wave in the world. Charlie kisses him and the nanny carries him inside.

"He's our miracle," Charlie says, smiling and watching the pair of them disappear. "We had so much trouble getting pregnant." She talks quietly and doesn't look back. I glance over at Vince and he's watching his wife with a strange expression—one of anger instead of joy. It's confusing and I don't understand what would piss him off in a moment like this, but Charlie doesn't seem to notice or care. "We tried so hard for so long until one night it all just came together, and

now Emilio's here. We're truly blessed." She turns around with tears in her eyes, blinks them away, and laughs. "God, I still get emotional over it. Should we drink?"

"Let's drink," Vince says, pouring Charlie more wine.

I glance at Calvino, not sure what the hell to make of that, and he only shrugs slightly like he doesn't understand that interaction any better than I do. I sip my drink and rack my brain, and wonder if maybe Vince is embarrassed that they had trouble conceiving? But Emilio is here, so it couldn't have been that horrible? I just don't understand it, but Vince launches into a story about how he and Charlie went on a trip to Italy a few months before she got pregnant with Emilio and the conversation moves on.

But I keep thinking about that look on his face.

Charlie drinks a couple glasses of wine and loosens up. We have an incredible meal prepared by Olive, the cook, and after we're finished, I excuse myself and drag Charlie down to the pool so we can sit and chat in privacy for a while.

"Here's to your little boy, Emilio," I say and we clink glasses. She laughs lightly though there's a strange, hysterical edge to her voice.

"You don't know how happy I am to have him. For a while I thought it would never happen."

"It must've been hard on you two, especially Vince."

She shrugs and waves a hand. "Vince didn't care. I don't think he ever really wanted kids, to be honest, so it was fine by him to keep having sex without ever conceiving. I was the one that was desperate for a baby."

"But he's happy now, right? I mean, he seems like he's a good dad." Which is a straight-up lie. Vince seems like he's a good serial killer, but not a good father.

"Oh, he loves his boy." Charlie says it quietly like she's trying to convince herself and sips her drink, but she doesn't elaborate.

“What about Vince’s parents?” I ask as I watch the slight night breeze push the pool water in tiny lapping waves. “Were they happy about Emilio?”

“They only knew him for a little while,” Charlie says, twirling some hair around a finger and letting it go. “He was four months old when they died. Actually, that vacation we went on was the first time I was apart from Emilio since the day he was born and it was so hard for me. But everyone insisted it would be good, you know, to get a little break from the night feedings even though he was starting to sleep more and more by then.”

“Do you think Vince’s dad would’ve been a good grandfather?” I sip my wine to try to make it seem like I’m being much more casual than I actually am.

Her lips pull down into a strange grimace, and I realize she seems terrified. “God, no,” she says softly. “No, not at all. I wanted to keep that man far from my baby.”

“Why?” I ask, confused and elated by her response. I don’t fully get why she’s so terrified of Benvolio Manzini, but clearly her relationship with him was complicated and strained at best—and every time I mention him, I feel like I get a little more insight into what happened to him. Even if Charlie doesn’t know anything, it seems pretty clear that people hated the asshole and maybe it’s better he’s dead.

“I grew up with difficult men,” she says quietly, not looking at me, staring off into the distance like she’s remembering some bad things. “Very hard men. Not very kind people. But Benvolio was worse than all of them combined and I know this sounds bad, I know it’s really, really terrible, but Grace, I’m not sad he burned.” She looks at me with wide eyes and her face is all drained of color, and I can see the pure, utter terror deep down in her body. “I’m not sad he’s dead at all.”

My heart’s racing and I open my mouth to ask her to explain, to ask her why she wouldn’t care that the grandfather of her child is dead and buried—

“Grace!”

But someone calls my name and I jump basically ten feet into the air.

Vincent walks toward me with a big smile on his face. Calvino is gone and I don't know where, and I'm alone with these two people and I suddenly feel more trapped than I ever have been in my life.

"Hey, honey," Charlie says vaguely and looks up at her husband with that strained smile she gets whenever he comes near.

"I was hoping I could borrow Grace for a second," Vince says, still grinning like he's got the look stapled to his skull. "Do you mind?"

"Go on ahead," Charlie says, and I note that he's not asking me, not at all. He expects me to get up and obey his summons.

And hell, I do it, because he's scary as hell and because Calvino's nowhere in sight so there's nothing else for me to do but go along with whatever's happening. There's nobody here to protect me.

Vince walks with me away from the pool and the remnants of our meal and steers me into the shadow of the porch overhang. He sips his whiskey, leans against a support beam, and keeps on smiling that skeletal grin. I feel a horrible shiver run down my spine like worms are crawling beneath my skin.

"I wanted to tell you about a dream I've been having," he says like that's the most natural and normal thing in the world. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," I say, shifting from side to side. I glance at the house and pray for Calvino to come rescue me, but the night's silent and Charlie's still down by the pool, well outside of earshot. I wonder if she'd come even if I screamed right now.

Vincent doesn't move. He stares at me, grinning and grinning, and speaks in a slow, low tone that forces me to lean closer to hear.

"In my dream, I wake up on the couch in the back room of Calvino's club. In my dream, I was getting a private dance

from a couple girls one second, and the next you're there, and your hand is in my pocket. You look at me and I look at you but that's all I can remember, because the next thing I know I'm waking up covered in sweat with the worst hangover of my life." He laughs then, sharp and shrill, and I laugh with him because my heart's racing and I'm so scared I think I might keel over and pass out at any second. "That's a wild dream, isn't it, Gracie?"

"Really weird," I say, nodding along, and I think I might be sick. My stomach's twisted into knots and I want to run, everything is screaming in me to run, run away, I can hear Riley's voice shouting, *he's a killer, Gracie, he's a killer, you have to run away!* But I can't move, not an inch, not at all.

"I heard you talked to my brother the other day when I visited the club again. I heard you and him had a little disagreement. I just wanted to say, Gracie, I appreciate you keeping your opinions and your little nose to yourself, because I'd hate to see anything happen to my brother's new girl, you get me? Charlie's fond of you, but she's not that fucking fond. Do you understand? You'll keep this between us, otherwise I'd hate to see the girls you work with start disappearing, especially since I'm so fond of a few of them. Do you hear me?"

I take a step away and sweat pools beneath my arms. My hands are shaking, and I want to look brave right now, but I can't, I'm too horrified.

"I understand," I say and hate myself so much for sounding like such a little mouse. When did I get so damn weak? I want to say more, to tell him Charlie deserves better, that he's a dick for treating her like this and a psychopath for threatening the girls at Crystal Lake—but Calvino strides over and drapes an arm across my shoulders, hugging me protectively.

Relief floods my spine and I keep my mouth shut. I'm trembling slightly and I hope Calvino doesn't notice—I don't want to explain what just happened, and Vince is looking at me like he's going to stab me in the guts if I open my mouth.

I don't care if he threatens me. I knew what I was getting into the moment I got involved with Calvino. My life's not all the

important to me, and although I definitely don't want to get tortured and killed by a monster like Vincent, I'm willing to keep pushing forward despite that.

But the girls at Crystal Lake are innocent. Would he really hurt them? Raven and Monique and Kia and Ginnie? My stomach twists into knots of fear at the thought of him hurting any of them and it being all my fault, all because I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

I'm twisted into a pretzel. Calvino wants complete and total honesty, but Vince says he'll hurt the girls at Crystal Lake if I open my mouth, and god, I don't know what to do.

"You guys okay over here?" Calvino asks like it's no big deal but I catch him give a look to his brother, who only shrugs in response, still smiling.

"All good. Shall we rejoin Charlie down by the pool?"

"I think I need to use the little girl's room first, but I'll meet you two down there."

Calvino frowns slightly at me, but he follows Vince to the pool, both of them talking quietly to each other as I hurry inside, down a short hall, and into a spacious downstairs powder room that happens to be bigger than my entire apartment. I splash cold water on my face and stare into the mirror and I swear I can see Riley gazing back at me with those pursed lips and that sad shake of her head.

*Told you to stay away, girlie. Told you to run.*

"Where am I gonna run to, Riley? You're dead. There's nowhere for me to go."

The Riley in my head only sighs like I'm the most pathetic thing in the world.

I can't tell Calvino what just happened. I don't know what he'll do if I mention it, but I do know that Vincent's the kind of guy that will make good on this threat. I desperately want to obey Calvino, but I also have to protect the girls—none of them deserve to get hurt just because of my moral quandary. God, this is tearing me to little pieces, and I don't know what I'm going to do.

And the worst part?

Vince might know what I did to him, or at least he suspects me.

Which means everything I do from here on out will be scrutinized and watched.

I have to be careful. One wrong step and someone I care about will get hurt. Ginnie or Kia or Raven, hell, even Juniper. I dislike Juniper with a passion but that doesn't mean I want to see her get killed by a vengeful mobster.

But I can't give up and walk away either—not before I have what I came for. I'm not going to fail Riley, not this time at least.

I should've been there for her before when she was killed. I should've realized she was in trouble, even if she didn't know it herself, but I didn't.

I won't fail again.

Vincent can threaten me all he wants, I'm going to get to the bottom of what happened that night sooner or later, even if it leaves me dead.



# Chapter 15

## *Calvino*

**G**race is quiet in the car ride over toward Long Beach. She's sitting down low in the passenger side of my Range Rover and I'm guiding it along the tight LA streets trying to decide if I should draw her out or let her stew. Ever since we came back from the Sandtrap last night, and especially after her private conversation with Vince, she's been a little distant and strange. When I asked her about it, she only shook her head and said it was nothing.

I let her stay for a while longer as I angle the Rover toward the edge of town. I can tell she's keeping something from me, and as much as it's like taking a knife to my kidneys over and over, I don't push her. I need her to come to me, and the longer she waits, the worse it's going to be.

Grace seems to notice that we're going somewhere new as she frowns out the window and glances over at me.

"I thought we were going to the Sandtrap," she says and toys with her hair like she does when she's nervous. "I'm pretty sure we passed the turn already."

"How very observant."

"And you're driving. Why are you driving? You usually let someone else do that." It's like the pieces are all clicking together.

I give her a tight smile as I stop the car at a light and lean over toward her. "Why don't you think about it for a second and tell me?"

Her face tightens in an annoyed glare, but she seems thoughtful. “You don’t want anyone to know where we’re going.”

“Very good.” I make a turn and head toward the ocean. “You’re right, we’re not going to the Sandtrap, and I don’t want anyone to know where I’m headed right now. Can you guess what our final destination is?”

She taps on her lower lip and I can tell she’s invested in my game even if she is a little annoyed. I let her think about it as I pull off the main road, down a short driveway, and stop outside of a closed set of gates. I roll down my window and hit an intercom button built into the wall.

It buzzes and I look over at Grace. “Last chance to guess. What are you thinking?”

She holds a finger in the air. “Damon,” she says.

Right as my brother answers the buzzer.

“Come on up,” Damon says, his voice tinny and small, and the gates roll back to reveal his house.

Grace sucks in a breath and grins at me. Damon’s place is no Sandtrap, but it’s not exactly him living in squalor like Rella said, either. Damon’s place is a modern building of glass and angular roofs, kept low like it’s windswept. I park to the side, put on the brake, and step out with Grace hurrying on my heels.

“Your sisters were talking like Damon lived in some bungalow.”

“My sisters think anywhere that isn’t the Sandtrap is a piece of garbage.”

“They’re sort of spoiled, aren’t they?”

I laugh and nod. “Yes, they are, but they’re good people.”

“They would die in a day if they had to live where I grew up.”

“I suspect you’re right, little thief. And that’s why you are who you are.” My sisters are strong in their own way, but it’s not

my place to explain that to Grace. I pull her tight against me with a grin as the front door opens and Damon steps out.

He's two years my junior with sandy dark hair, tan skin, freckles on his cheeks, bright blue eyes, and a muscular frame. He's got on a tank top, beach shorts, and flip-flops like he plans on going surfing in the next few minutes, but black ink covers most of his skin and he carries an air of danger about him like all the rest of us do. It's impossible to escape our history, no matter how far we run—and Damon's been running the furthest and fastest of everyone in our family.

“Welcome to my place of residence, brother,” Damon says, shaking my hand and thumping my back in a brotherly hug. “And who is this you've brought with you?”

“Damon, this is my girlfriend, Grace.”

“Nice to meet you,” she says and Damon smiles warmly at her.

“My sisters have nothing but nice things to say about you, which means you're more than welcome in my house.” He shakes her hand and she gives me a sly smile.

I roll my eyes. I don't need her getting an ego.

Damon's place is quieter than the Sandtrap. He keeps a small staff on hand but mostly deals with the house by himself—he cooks and cleans and takes out the trash like a normal human, even though he's most certainly not normal. He once told me that doing chores keeps him grounded, and if he didn't, he'd end up like father, an arrogant bastard with selfishness baked deep into his bones. I think it's absurd for a mafia underboss to practice humility, but he says it works for him, so I don't argue.

We head through his clean, modernist home, lots of white and gray and black like it's straight from an Instagram influencer's wet dream, and out onto a balcony overlooking the ocean. The sound of the waves, the wind across the sand, and the distant cry of gulls seems to relax Grace somewhat, and we gather at the railing as the breeze pulls Grace's hair to the side and makes her look radiant.

“Thanks for letting us come visit,” I say, leaning back to look at my younger brother. He seems fit and healthy, despite what Vince said—everyone back in the Sandtrap made it sound like Damon was having some kind of mental breakdown.

“Happy to have you,” Damon says and glances at Grace. “Though I’ll admit I halfway thought the girlfriend thing was a joke.”

“I’m no joke,” Grace says, smiling and tugging on her hair. “Beautiful house, by the way.”

“Thank you. I’m sure my sisters made it seem like I live in a cardboard box filled with urine.”

“Oh, not that bad. Maybe more like a beat-up minivan with puke on the floor.”

He laughs and glances at me approvingly, and I feel a strange swell in my chest—it’s pride, but I have nothing to be proud of, Grace isn’t really my girlfriend. It doesn’t matter if Damon approves of her or not.

Even though I want them to like Grace, and not just because that will make our job easier—I want them to like her because that somehow validates me and my choices.

As if she’s actually my girl.

“My family can be difficult right now. I’m having a bit of a disagreement with Vince over business things, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to see everyone. I wish they’d stop acting like I’ve secluded myself in some tower when I’m like ten minutes down the road.”

“Then why not come to the Sandtrap?” I ask, although I know I’m pushing a bit.

“That place has too many memories, and I hate the way Vince acts when we’re there. It’s like he’s taken over Dad’s old position and slipped right into the old man’s role, like Vince has to act like Dad to be the Don.” Damon shakes his head and the frustration is clear in his face. “But it doesn’t matter. We’re here now and that’s good, right? Should I get some wine?”

“Actually, I was hoping we could ask you something.” I glance at Grace and she seems curious as I lean my elbows back on the railing and take a breath. “It’s about a guy in the business.”

Damon nods slightly and looks out at the sand. “Lots of guys in the business, though fewer every year. You know how hard it is to find fucking Italians in California? Goddamn guys in Chicago and out east have it easy, lots of good Italian boys out there. Not so much here.”

“Then maybe this won’t be such a hard job. I’m looking for a guy that used to date Grace’s cousin.”

Grace goes very, very still. Her eyes widen and she stares at me like she’s totally shocked, and her breath quickens as she tugs harder on her hair. I smile to myself and it feels good that I can surprise her like this. I know how badly she wants to find the guy that was dating Riley around the time of her murder, and I want to help her do it—even if that means making my life more complicated.

“I might be able to do that,” Damon says though he doesn’t sound sure. “The guys date a lot of girls.” He glances at Grace. “Got a name and a picture?”

“Riley,” Grace says quickly, almost breathless, and I notice she’s blinking back tears. A stab of guilt rolls down my guts—I should’ve prepared her for this. I know how important her cousin is to her, and I should’ve known talking about the murder would only bring back a lot of difficult, complicated feelings.

If Damon notices the tears, he says nothing as Grace digs her phone out and pulls up a picture. He frowns at it, squints for a long moment, and only shrugs. “I don’t recognize her. Text me that picture.” He rattles off a number and Grace hurries to type it in.

“Her full name was Riley Callahan. She was dating a guy last year, around this time. I don’t know his name, but she heavily implied that he was a part of the Manzini mafia, she even said that Manzini name to me once, so he’s got to be in the family,

right? Otherwise how would she know it? Anyway, I just sent you her picture.”

Damon grunts and glances at me. I can tell he thinks this is a strange request, but I’ve always given my brothers whatever they asked without hesitation and I know he’ll do the same for me.

“I’ll check around. If it’s been a year, it might be hard, and we don’t even know for sure that the girl dated a guy in our family. Lots of guys talk shit and pretend to be a lot harder than they are and our family name is known all over the West Coast.”

“Any help you can offer would be good,” I say and squeeze his shoulder. “And if you can keep this from the others, we’d appreciate it.”

“You want me to hide something from my own fucking family?” Damon stares at me with a menacing glare for several seconds and I notice Grace pale, but Damon’s face splits in a grin. “Happy to fucking do it.”

I laugh and shake my head and Grace looks like she’s going to puke, the poor girl, she’s way too fragile for that kind of humor right now.

We spend another hour drinking some wine and catching up before we head out again. Grace gives Damon everything she can about Riley and he promises to look into it, “But I can’t guarantee I’ll find shit, just so you know.”

Outside in the car on the way back to the apartment, Grace suddenly reaches out and grabs my hand. She squeezes it hard and tears roll down her cheeks, fast and slow, and her shoulders shake slightly as she cries quietly, staring out the window.

I say nothing. What can I say? It’ll be okay? Don’t be sad? Nothing’s going to bring her cousin back from the dead no matter how hard we search. She might get her revenge but at the end of all this, her life won’t be any different and she’ll still be alone.

She knows it as much as I do, and it says a lot that she’s still willing to go forward even knowing nothing will change.

It says she's fiercely loyal and loves her cousin more than life itself.

That's the kind of woman I want at my side.

I hold her hand tight so she knows I'm here for her and say nothing and let her cry, because words don't mean shit, only deeds do, and I plan on showing her how I feel.



# Chapter 16

## *Grace*

**M**eeting with Damon was the happiest I've been in months and the saddest I've been since Riley died.

Talking about her like that to Damon was cathartic—I wanted him to know about my cousin, the girl so full of life, so strong and clever and beautiful, the girl that was taken away too soon and torn from the world like a cleaver through raw meat. He didn't make any promises about finding her killer, only that he'd ask around and see if any of the guys had heard of her or anyone that might've dated her, and that was enough for me.

It was hard, but it was good.

And it only makes my internal dilemma that much worse.

But I still don't understand why Calvino did it.

"You got something on your mind?" Kia leans against the bar and smiles at me, her bright white teeth shining in the black lights. I wish they'd turn those off sometimes. "You seem distracted tonight."

"Sorry, nothing important, just thinking." I smile back at her, relieved that she's even talking to me. Calvino's not in this evening which is probably why she's not going to great lengths to pretend like I don't exist.

"You seem good, you know," Kia says out of nowhere as Dustin returns with a few drinks for her customers. "Like ever since you got together with Calvino, you've got a glow about you."

I laugh awkwardly and shake my head. "I doubt that."

“Come on, girl. Tell the truth. You two are serious, right?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“That’s bullshit. I see the way he looks at you.”

“Yeah? How’s that?”

“Like you’re the only girl in this place. Even when there’s a pair of perfect boobs up on the stage, he’s still watching you no matter what. It’s almost kind of creepy if it weren’t so sweet. You’ve got that man wrapped around your finger.”

I shake my head again as she winks at me and walks off, strutting her hips toward her table, and I feel a little spike in my stomach. If only she knew.

I definitely don’t have him wrapped around my finger—but he did take me to Damon’s and started the process of finding Riley’s killer when he didn’t have to. Our deal was I get his information first then he helps me with my problem, so I didn’t expect him to start in on the hunt until things were totally finished and out in the open.

And yet he did it anyway.

I have to wonder why a guy like Calvino would give a damn about a girl like me, but maybe there’s some truth to what Kia said—maybe Calvino cares more than he says he does.

I’m smiling and my stomach’s doing flips, and I don’t know why the hell I feel like this. It only makes keeping my conversation with Vince from him that much worse—but Vince’s threat against the girls here keeps reverberating through my head.

Calvino is a bastard and a mafia monster, even if it’s not technically in the mafia, and his whole family is kind of insane—except Charlie and the girls, and maybe Damon, and also Jason, so I guess just Vincent really—and I should be trying my best to stay far, far away.

And yet every time I think I can push my feelings aside, Calvino does something, whether he kisses me, or spanks my bare ass, or walks into the kitchen shirtless and glistening with

sweat like a freaking god, or takes me to his brother so I can find my cousin's killer—whatever he does, it draws me back.

He won't let me go and it kills me, bit by tiny bit.

“Hey, yo, girl!” One of my customers, a drunk guy wearing a Harley t-shirt and a pair of cutoff jeans, waves at me frantically from up next to the stage. “Get your fucking ass over here!”

I sigh, gather the beer Dustin poured for me, and walk over. The club's not too full for an early Friday evening, and while this guy's kind of drunk and a bit more aggressive than most, he's been decent about tipping.

“Sorry for the delay,” I say and place the beer down on his little table.

He reaches out and grabs my wrist as I pull back. “Now, girl, where you going? That dancer's not holding my attention but you definitely are.” He shows teeth in a drunken smile and his grip tightens. “You look like a nice Irish lass. You got a pot of gold between those legs?”

“Sorry but I'm not for sale,” I say, staring at him flatly, doing my best *you better fuck off right now, asshole* look. And I'm pretty sure I'm not Irish but I doubt this asshole cares, all he can see are boobs and reddish hair.

“Ah, come on, I know how these places work. I got some money and you got some tits, so why don't you give me a dance? Fuck slinging drinks, I'll shower you in cash if you rub that sweet ass on my hard Johnson.”

“Please let go of my wrist,” I say, keeping as calm as I can, though it's not easy when the creepy bastard's talking about his Johnson.

“Don't be like that.” He yanks me closer and I stumble, dropping my tray. It clatters onto the table and knocks his beer over, spilling it into his lap and all over his shoes.

He leaps up, cursing. “You clumsy little bitch,” he shouts, wiping beer off himself with his bare hands. Poor guy's shitty jean shorts are slightly damp. I almost feel bad, but I don't, not really. “Oh, fuck, look at what you did, you stupid little bitch!”

He reaches for me, violence and anger in his eyes, and for the first time since I came to work here, I feel a real sense of terror and impending doom. This guy is drunk and he's unhinged and he thinks I just spilled that drink—and he's going to make me pay for it.

But before he can do whatever he's thinking, a guy looms up in my peripheral vision. "Is there a problem?"

I expected the bouncers, but instead it's Diego. He's towering over the customer, his square jaw working, his eyes hard.

The Harley-shirt guy looks back at Diego and sneers. "Yeah, I got a problem. This clumsy bitch waitress just spilled some beer in my lap. You gonna do anything about that, huh?"

"Yeah, I'll do something." Diego steps forward, grabs the guy by the throat, and throws him backwards with a sudden and ferocious violence.

The guy slams against the stage and hits the floor hard. He grunts and coughs, slowly getting to his knees as he stares at Diego.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Harley-shirt says. "Are you insane, man?"

"Get out of here," Diego says and his voice sounds so calm it's absolutely horrifying.

Harley-shirt guy climbs to his feet unsteadily. "Fucked up how you'd treat a customer. I should call the cops."

"Call them. Please, I'm begging you, call the cops. I'd love them to come watch me beat your ass bloody." Diego steps forward and Harley-shirt turns and sprints away. The guy stumbles, shoves past a group of laughing customers watching nearby, and hurries out the exit.

The club immediately goes back to watching Sunshine slowly twirl down the pole topless. She throws me a wink, good old Sunshine.

"You okay?" Diego asks, turning to me. "I notice our useless bouncer didn't intervene again. I'll have to talk to Calvino about that."

“I’m fine, please don’t get anyone in trouble.”

Diego grunts and shakes his head. “I’ll clean this up. You go sit down and get yourself together, okay? Go grab a drink or some shit.”

I let out a little laugh. “Seriously?”

“Just go.” He nods at the bar and I walk over, head still a little dizzy from that interaction.

Dustin slides me a gin and tonic without my having to ask and I sip it gratefully while Diego cleans the spilled beer with a mop and bucket. I’ve never seen him actually get his hands dirty before—normally, he’s just sitting around smiling, laughing, and talking shit, but that was a terrifying side of him I hadn’t expected.

He joins me when he finishes mopping up and Dustin hands him a whiskey. “You sure you’re good?” Diego asks me.

“Really, I’m fine. He didn’t hurt me.”

“He would’ve though.”

“Thanks for stepping in, but really, I’m fine.”

He looks at me for a long moment and shrugs. “Whatever you say. Calvino would kill me if I let his pet get hurt.”

My jaw tightens as I sip my drink to cover my frustration. “Is that why you helped me? Because of Calvino?”

“Mostly, yeah. Otherwise I’d let the lazy-ass bouncer do his job.”

“You’d let some drunk asshole beat down Kia and you wouldn’t intervene because she’s not with Calvino?”

He gives me a long, frowning glare, and shrugs. “Guess so.”

“You’re all just a bunch of assholes then.”

“Assholes flock together it seems.”

“What is with you and Calvino, anyway? How do you know each other?”

“We met in boarding school.” He sips his drink and stares into the glass like he’s remembering something from a long time

ago and doesn't like it.

I let out a sharp laugh. "Boarding school? Are you kidding me? You and Calvino went to boarding school like two little rich English schoolboys or something?"

"Yes, we did," he says with a deep sigh. "And yes, it was exactly like what you're thinking, a little school up in New England with lots of trees, angry headmasters, teachers that hate themselves and all their students, and a bunch of boys eager to get in trouble. Calvino saved me from a particularly nasty fellow that wanted to smash my teeth because I smiled too much and because my parents are Cuban and are therefore communists. Calvino kicked the fat asshole in the balls and smashed a toilet seat over his head. Nearly got thrown out. We've been friends ever since."

I lean back and study him. It's the most Diego's ever said about himself and his relationship with Calvino since I met him, although he basically never stops talking once you get him started. I try to picture him and Calvino in prep school uniforms fighting other prep school bullies and totally fail to make the image cohere with the man I know, but I can understand how Calvino might inspire this level of loyalty.

"You work for him then, is that how it is?"

"Consider me his general fixer and counsel. If he needs a job done quietly, I'm the man he asks. Though I'm also heavily involved in all his clubs and restaurants and we co-own three CrossFit gyms in the Bay Area that are surprisingly profitable. Fucking tech nerds love running around and lifting heavy stuff, the stupid bastards."

"Here's me thinking all you did was sit at his bar and drink his liquor."

He raises his glass with a wink and takes a sip. "Not a bad life."

"You've known each other since you were kids then. What do you make of all this?" I hesitate and look down at my drink, suddenly embarrassed. "You know, with me."

He studies me and doesn't smile. I expect some kind of sarcastic remark, maybe about how I'm desperate for Calvino's approval or something like that, but instead he only shakes his head slowly and taps a nail against his glass.

"He hasn't been himself since his mother died. I say his mother specifically because he hated his piece of shit father, god rest that bastard's soul, preferably in hell. But his mother, they were close, and since she died in that accident, he's been hard to be around. It's like a piece of him burned up with her."

I chew on my lip and try to picture Calvino depressed, but all I can see is the cocky, confident jerk sitting in the kitchen shirtless making eggs and toast and coffee and smirking at me like he wants to bend me over the oven and fuck me until I scream.

"You think I'm a symptom of that?"

He sips his drinks slowly. "No, Grace. I think you're the cure."

I lean back in surprise and laugh a little, tugging at my hair. "Come on, that's not true."

"He was in a dark place before you came around, but ever since you stepped into the picture, it's like he's awake again. Not quite his old self exactly, but a little bit closer every day. I don't know what you're doing to him, but I hope you keep it up."

He finishes his drink, slides the glass closer to Dustin, and stands. He sighs as he stretches, waves once, and walks off.

I watch him go, not sure what to make of that whole conversation.

Calvino was in a bad place before me—and I'm somehow helping him heal?

I find it hard to believe. When he's not actively treating me like a burden, he's teasing me, driving me insane, and getting me off. Maybe that's healing for him, but for me it's a little bit like playing tag with a rabid porcupine: if I win, I still get a bunch of spikes in my hand.



Except he did take me to Damon's place when he didn't need to, and he has been almost nice to me—almost, not quite, but almost. I want to believe what Diego's saying, but I also don't want this strange, twisting, hopeful feeling deep inside of my chest to keep blossoming.

Because the last time I let myself feel hope, my cousin ended up dead. Back then I thought Riley was going to make it as an actress and I'd move out to LA to live with her and we'd be happy forever—clearly that didn't work out.

Just like it won't with Calvino.

This is just a job. Only a job and nothing more.

# Chapter 17

## *Grace*

I sit by the windows in the apartment and stare out at the city as music plays softly from a hidden speaker. Kate Bush sings about yo-yos that glow in the dark and cloud busting, and I smile to myself as the music and words swirl around me. It's strange how when all this started, this apartment felt like a foreign body, but now it's starting to feel—comfortable. Almost home.

It helps that Calvino isn't around to distract me and make things harder.

As I'm leaning back in the couch enjoying a rare day off, my phone starts to ring. I want to ignore it, but at the last second, I pull it from beneath the cushion and stare at Charlie's name on the screen.

"Hey, Charlie."

"Grace." Her voice sounds distant and tremulous like she's holding back tears. "Can we meet up?"

"Are you okay?"

"Everything's fine, but I really need to talk to someone, and there's nobody here I trust."

I hesitate, not sure how I feel about her trusting me. That's the point of this, isn't it? But I feel terrible anyway.

"Okay, sure, let's meet up. Text me a place."

"Leave now if you can. See you soon."

I get a message with an address for a coffee shop not far from the apartment, so I throw on some clothes and hurry out. I have to walk since Calvino's not around to get me a driver or to drive me himself, and it takes me about fifteen minutes to reach the shop. It's not crowded and I find Charlie sitting in the very back with Emilio watching cartoons on a tablet in her lap. She has a cup of tea in front of her and a half-eaten scone on a plate strewn with crumbs.

"Grace," she says and I sink down into the chair opposite. Bags sit heavy under her eyes and she looks like she's been crying: the whites are dappled red.

Emilio grins at me and I smile back, but he keeps his attention on the tablet.

"What's going on?" I ask and feel my stomach tremble. I want to ask if it's Vincent, if he hit her or did something to her, but I get the feeling that kind of question wouldn't be welcome, not in this family at least. I have to approach this sideways and figure out what's going on in small pieces like putting together a puzzle.

But I know something about a woman in trouble. I spent my whole life in trouble, and my mom was constantly in trouble, and Riley was in trouble—and it killed her in the end—and Charlie's got that twitchy terrified look of a woman who's afraid to go back home. I don't know what to do and I feel a sick wave of self-loathing for all of this, for getting involved in this poor girl's life with the intent to deceive her for Calvino's own selfish gain, but I'm too far gone to turn back now, too damn far.

"I feel almost silly calling you here." She kisses Emilio's head and he beams up at his mom before looking back at the tablet. "It's just that at the Sandtrap, you can't talk there, you know what I mean?"

I shrug a little. "I guess so. It's always so full of staff."

"Exactly, the staff. Lots of ears around." She's looking at me so intently and I suddenly realize she's trying to tell me something.

Is the Sandtrap bugged? Would Vincent bug his own house so he could monitor his family?

“Did something bad happen?”

“Just a fight with Vincent. You’ll think it’s so petty.”

“Tell me what happened.” I’m disgusted with myself, but at the least I can listen to her, because sometimes just talking out loud with a neutral third party can make all the difference.

“It’s about Emilio. See, we haven’t actually decided what his last name’s going to be. I left it off on the birth certificate and I need to file an amendment to fix it soon before some deadline, I don’t know, the lawyers are dealing with it, but Vincent wants Emilio to take the Manzini name, and I don’t want that.”

I lean back in surprise. “You don’t?”

“Emilio doesn’t need to be like them,” she says, quiet and fierce. “I told you before, I grew up with hard men. But Vince and his family, they’re even worse, and I don’t want Emilio to end up like that. I’m afraid if he takes his father’s last name then he might want to go into that business and—” She stops, choking back another sob.

I reach out and hold her hand. She smiles at me sadly and gets herself together, visibly suppressing her feelings and gathering her strength. It’s strange that a woman so deeply enmeshed in the mafia world would be so against her child taking her father’s name.

“I’m guessing Vince doesn’t like that,” I say softly.

“No, he doesn’t.”

And suddenly, I know what I have to do, even if it might make things so much harder, so much more complicated, because if I don’t do this then I doubt I can live with myself. How can I pretend like I care about Riley, about women like Riley, when one’s sitting across from me clearly afraid for her life and I say nothing at all?

I release her hand and clear my throat. “Look, Charlie, I have to tell you something. Please, just listen.”

She tilts her head. “What’s wrong?”

“Vince has been coming into the club. He’s been going into the back room—”

“Please, stop,” Charlie says, squeezing her eyes shut and holding up a hand. She grimaces like I kicked her right in the chest. “No, please, no more. I don’t want the details.”

“Charlie, he’s been—”

“No, Grace, stop it, stop right there. I know about this already and I don’t need you to tell me anything more.”

I lean back in my chair, shocked. “You know?” Calvino said she would, but I hadn’t believed him.

My god, he was right.

“We have an arrangement.” She stares down at the scone and pokes it with a finger. “I understand how these things work. If I want the things I want, I have to give something in return. It’s a transaction, Grace. I know that sounds awful, but it’s how these men move through the world, always making deals. Except now I feel like the deal isn’t working in my favor anymore, because he wants to force his name on my son, and I’d rather my boy was kept far, far away from this life.” She squeezes her eyes shut and fights back more tears.

I don’t know what to say. She’s aware of what her husband’s doing and they made a deal and it’s all just too much for me. I’m a virgin, for god’s sake, I haven’t even slept with a man much less married one, had his child, and let him get his dick sucked by other women. I can’t imagine what Charlie’s going through, but this... this is all wrong.

I want to help her. The need to save her from this nightmare swells up in me like a rising tide and it’s the first time since I decided to get revenge for Riley that I felt something remotely like this. It’s a certainty, like the knowledge that the sun will rise tomorrow.

I have to help Charlie.

“I’ll do whatever you need me to do,” I say and reach out for her hand again.

She takes it and squeezes. “Just being here is a good start.”

I smile and try not to let her see the overwhelming sadness that's threatening to drown me and I squeeze right back.

I don't know what I can do or how I'm going to do it.

But Charlie's in trouble, and I need to do something.

# Chapter 18



## *Calvino*

I'm sitting in the back room of a restaurant in downtown when my manager, a nice guy named Drew that thinks he's Marlon Brando but looks more like the next JoJo Siwa, comes rushing into the room looking out of breath. "Calvino, I think your brother's here."

I sigh and lean back. I've been avoiding Vince for the last couple of days because I haven't wanted to deal with family drama or the business lately, but I can't exactly ignore him if he's in my own place.

"Seat him and anyone he brought with him, and give them the best table you can. I'll be out in a minute."

The kid nods and hurries out. I wait a few minutes doing nothing, since I can't bring myself to answer one of Vince's summons the instant he calls me, but eventually I head out around the time they should be getting their appetizers.

I stop short at the table. Damon looks up at me with an easy smile and a whiskey in his hand. "You made me wait."

I laugh and sit across from him. "I thought you were Vince."

"Wrong brother."

"I would've come out right away if I knew it was you."

"Typical Calvino, always playing power games."

I shake my head and laugh softly. "You know how it is with Vince. You let him think he's the man and he's in charge and suddenly you're picking up his fucking dry cleaning and

polishing his shoes. You have to show him you're not a pushover."

"Trust me, brother, I know better than most." Damon grins at me, takes a long sip, and lets out a breath. "I like this place, you know. I come here every once in a while."

"My staff didn't tell me that."

"I usually ask them not to, but tonight I figured we should talk." He looks around like he's seeing if anyone's listening. "Your girl here? Gracie?"

"No, she's working tonight."

"I can't believe you've still got her slinging drinks at that strip club. What the hell is wrong with you? Mom would've smacked you upside the head if she knew your girl was working at a strip joint in one of those outfits."

I give him a tight smile and try to suppress the sudden and intense sorrow I feel at the mention of Mom. All my other siblings are careful not to talk about her because we're all still feeling her absence like a hole in the middle of the room—a quiet emptiness where her laughter should be, or where the smell of her cooking should be, or the way she'd criticize you while also making you feel like you're the most important person in the world—but Damon's not afraid to talk about her, like it makes him feel better to mention her every once in a while. I thought this wound would've healed more after eight months, but it's still fresh and painful, and I cover my discomfort by signaling to the waitress for a glass of wine.

"Truthfully, she likes working. We discussed keeping her at home, but she wants to be around the other girls, you know? She's new to the city and doesn't have many friends."

"Still, let her work here. Let her work any of your other restaurants. Why that strip club?"

Why indeed? How can I explain to him that Grace isn't really my girl? That this whole thing is a show for Vince's benefit? Even if Damon and Vince are feuding at the moment, I couldn't possibly tell him just how far I've gone to maneuver

behind the Don's back. My brothers are Manzini family men through and through, and nothing will change that.

"She likes it there," is all I can offer, and Damon seems to accept it. The waitress returns with my wine and I take a long drink to try to cover my discomfort as Damon shifts in his chair and drums his fingers on the table, making a fork rattle against a plate.

"Listen, I came here to talk to you about the cousin girl."

I feel a sudden shiver run down my spine. It's the way Damon's looking at me with a mixture of concern and hesitation, and I have the feeling that I'm not going to like what he's about to say.

"Riley, her cousin," I prompt, wanting to get this over with.

He shrugs and slowly turns his glass in small circles. "I asked around with the guys. Started with my own people, the ones most loyal to me, and went from there. Got a hit pretty fast. Seems like she was popular with the boys."

I grimace and close my eyes. "Don't tell me she was—" I leave the next part unspoken.

"No, she wasn't," Damon says and I feel a flood of relief. Thank god I won't have to explain to Grace that her cousin was more than an actress. "They weren't passing her around or paying her for sex or nothing like that, but she was still popular. Really pretty, really outgoing, the sort of girl they all noticed, you know what I mean? Always showing up at the parties and the clubs and shit."

I slowly meet his eye. "Showing up with who?"

His smile is tight and guarded and he stops spinning the drink. "Before I tell you, are you sure you wanna know? I mean really, how far are you willing to take this thing?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Grace isn't digging into her dead cousin's murder for no fucking reason, right? I assume that whoever did the deed is going to stand for some punishment. How willing are you to go all the way with that?"

“Tell me who it is, Damon.”

“You’re not gonna like it.”

“Is it fucking Vince? Or fucking Jason?” Please don’t let it be Jason. I can’t handle that.

“Nah, it’s neither of them.”

I feel a small measure of relief. “Stop playing and tell me then.”

“She was going out with Louie Anastasio.”

I lean back in my chair, drink down my wine, and release a long sigh as I stare at the ceiling. My stomach’s an open pit of dread. *Louie Anastasio*. That name is like a viper sinking its fangs into my skull.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, that was my reaction too.”

“How sure are you?”

“Extremely sure. How much do I gotta worry about this? Are we looking at a full-on war now?”

I shake my head and try to still my racing heart. Of everyone in the family, Louie is just about the worst person possible for Riley to have gotten involved with—the only person worse might’ve been Vince himself, but I’m not so sure about that.

“I don’t know. I’ll sit on this for now and try to figure it out.”

“For what it’s worth, nobody said anything about Louie killing the girl. All they said was they were together and then they weren’t. Could’ve been someone else.”

“Could’ve been,” I say even though I don’t feel much conviction.

Damon shakes his head and stands. “Guess I’ll hire some real muscle for the foreseeable future just in case you decide to do something stupid. How much do you like this girl, anyway? Enough to rip the family apart?”

I only look at him and don’t answer.

He groans and pats my shoulder as he walks past. “I’m on your side no matter what, older brother,” he says and heads off.

Without paying for his drink. Bastard.

Louie fucking Anastasio.

Vince’s personal trigger man.

One of the most dangerous motherfuckers west of the Mississippi with more bodies to his name than some of the best serial killers.

And that’s the guy her cousin decided to get involved with.

I can’t tell if she was the naivest woman in the world or extremely stupid, or maybe both.

Doesn’t matter.

But now I need to decide how to tell Gracie that the guy we’re after is an insanely dangerous psychopath close to Vince and the inner circle of the family.



I HEAD INTO THE APARTMENT A LITTLE AFTER MIDNIGHT TO find Gracie sitting by the fireplace curled up in a chair with a book in her lap and a glass of wine half-drunk sitting on the side table. I watch her for a moment from the kitchen with a little smile on my face—she’s got headphones on and doesn’t realize I’m there. She looks so peaceful and happy, and I wonder how this happened—when she first came to my place, it was like watching a fish try to survive on land. She struggled and fought and made everything as difficult as possible just because she could.

Now it’s like she’s acclimated and actually likes being here.

And the bizarre part is, I like her here too. The apartment used to be so sterile and empty, and I’d do my best to stay out all night and sleep all morning and leave the second my eyes opened. This place was nothing more than a safe spot to pass out, but now it feels like more.

Almost like home.

I pour myself a drink and when I turn back, she's looking at me with a little smile, the headphones down in her lap. "When did you get back?"

"A few minutes ago. Reading anything good?"

She shrugs. "It's one of those fantasy romances with like magic fae guys and demons and stuff."

"What's a fae?"

"Like an elf, sort of. Fairy, I guess, but not like a tiny butterfly creature. Doesn't matter." She bookmarks the page and closes it. "You look like you had a long night."

"I did have a long night. How was the club?"

"Quiet. Boring."

I sit down across from her on the couch and my knees jostle up and down slightly. I keep thinking about Damon and what he told me, and I don't know how to broach the subject. I need to tell her about Louie, but the moment I say his name, I know she'll do something stupid.

But Louie's not the kind of man we can simply take down, and Grace can't handle him on her own. She'll need my help if she wants a chance to get her revenge, and if I get involved, it'll be a whole fucking scandal.

What a mess. I take a long drink and rub my face and when I look up, Grace is frowning at me like she knows I have something on my mind. I open my mouth to tell her—*I know who killed your cousin but, Gracie, he's too dangerous*—but she interrupts me before I can start.

"I have to tell you something."

I tilt my head and study her trembling lower lip. "What is it?"

"The night we went over to the Sandtrap with just Vince and Charlie. You remember that? You came out from the bathroom and found me talking to Vince."

"I remember," I say slowly, the night filtering into my mind. She'd seemed so awkward and I wondered if something was

wrong, but didn't push it at the time.

"He told me something." She's staring at her hands and I think they're trembling, and I realize with a start that she's afraid.

"Say it, Grace. I'm not going to punish you." I'm beyond that right now.

She smiles slightly. "He said he had a dream, and in his dream I was stealing his phone. He made it sound like he wasn't sure if that dream was real or not, but, Calvino, he said he'd hurt the girls at Crystal Lake if I told you. I'm sorry I didn't say it sooner, but I think he suspects me." She finally looks up and meets my gaze and I see how conflicted she's feeling: fear for her friends at work and fear that I'll be angry with her for keeping this from me for as long as she did.

The poor girl's probably been tearing herself to pieces over this conundrum. Tell me and risk hurting someone she cares about at work, or don't tell me and risk pissing me off and making things worse between us.

I sit back in my seat and let out a long breath.

"I think it's time for this to be done."

The words spill out of my mouth like hot coals belched from the guts of a fire.

She doesn't move. Tension fills the space between us like a gunshot and I try not to show her how much this is killing me. The last thing in the world I want is for this to be over—I want her to stay in my apartment, with me, just the two of us against the fucking world—but once I end our deal, I know there's no going back.

Nothing will ever be the same.

"No," she says softly, shaking her head. "No, Calvino. Absolutely not."

"I'll still help you with Riley. I'll give you what you want, but if Vince is on to you then the game's over. It's too dangerous and I'm not going to risk you getting hurt."

I won't lose her. I won't lose another person I care about.

“It’s not about me and Riley and you anymore.” She stares at me, her lips parted, and I can tell she’s shaking, but I’m not sure what from. “Charlie needs me, Calvino.”

“We can’t. I won’t let them hurt you.”

She slips from her chair and walks to me. I stare at her swaying hips, at her mouth, at her long legs, and she kneels down in front of me and takes my right hand between hers. She stares into my eyes and it nearly shatters my blackened, worthless, hell-damned heart to see her like this, so broken up and confused. None of this is right and none of it makes sense, and I’d do anything to make this pain go away, but I can’t.

“Please,” she whispers, so softly, like a dove landing on a tree branch.

“I’m sorry, Grace. I won’t let you stay in danger, not if Vince is on to you. We’ll find another way.”

“No,” she squeezes tighter. “I’m not giving up. Even if you tell me it’s over.”

“Grace,” I say, my voice a warning growl. “What did we agree? What did we say from the start? You’d obey me.”

“That was before you threatened to end this early. You can’t, not before it’s finished. I still need you.”

I feel those words deep inside my stomach and I lean forward, unable to help myself. I run my free hand back into her hair and pull it hard, staring into her eyes.

“You need me?” I whisper, inches from her lips. “You need me, or you need to keep using me to get what you want?”

“Don’t pretend like you’re not doing the same thing.”

“I’m trying to save your life, Grace. You’re trying to end it.”

“And you don’t understand how deep this all goes.” She’s pleading, staring into my eyes, and I’ve never felt so overwhelmed, so lost, so ruined before.

She thinks I want this, but I don’t, not even a little bit—I want to protect her. I want to keep her safe, far from my violent asshole brother, far from Louie the psychopathic killer, far



from all the mafia assholes that would use her and hurt her and destroy her—just like they destroyed her cousin.

But as much as I want to protect her, I don't want to let her go.

Because I know I'm just as bad as they are.

“Tell me why you don't want to walk away. Tell me why the hell you'd want to see this through, knowing my brother's suspicious and he's not kind to those that come for him.”

“Because I don't want to leave you.”

I crush my mouth against hers in a rough kiss and she moans against me. I can't help myself—I know this is wrong, this is so fucked—but I want her more than I've ever wanted a woman in my life, more than I've ever wanted anything, and she's here tonight, down on her knees, and I won't let her go.

# Chapter 19

## *Grace*

**W**hen he kisses me, everything else goes away.

That's what he does to me. Despite the raw feelings and confusion dripping down my spine, it all disappears—because Calvino has me, and when his hand slips back into my hair and tightens, sending that sweet agony and pleasure rolling into my hips, I can't do anything but submit.

I moan into his kiss and let him pull my hair tighter. He can hurt me, bite me, do whatever he wants to me, but he can't send me away. I won't leave, not when this is just starting to feel good and we're getting so close, not when Charlie's still in trouble and she needs my help.

Not when I haven't solved Riley's death yet.

He pulls me up onto the couch and I straddle him, arching my back to grind myself down against him. I feel his hardness between my legs and groan with shock as he presses tighter against me. He pulls off my shirt and tosses it aside and unhooks my bra, letting it drop forward and onto the floor. He kisses my chest, my breasts, licks my nipples, pulls my hair tighter until I'm leaning back with my hands on his knees.

His mouth is heaven and his tongue is hell, and I want to stay right there suspended between them. He licks, kisses, teases, bites my lower lip and shoulder and collarbone, and, oh, god, this is what I needed, this right here.

"I'm not letting you go anywhere," he whispers in my ear as he grips my ass tight and squeezes it. "You're all mine, you

understand me? You're mine, every inch, every bit of you. I need you to know that, Gracie. I need you all."

"I want to give it to you," I moan as I roll my hips and grind harder. "Please, Calvino." I'm begging, but for what?

But he knows without having to be told. He turns me and pins me down onto the couch and slowly peels off my leggings until I'm wearing nothing but a pair of black panties. I'm breathing hard and his mouth is all over me, kissing my neck, my breasts, my hips, my inner thigh, and my back arches as I grab his hair and pull it when he rips my panties down and rolls his tongue along the folds of my pussy. I'm soaking wet and ringing with want and need and pleasure, but he's growling, and he's not done with me yet.

His shirt comes off. The muscles on his chest ripple and the tattoos along his skin are like a map or a constellation of his pain. I sit up on one elbow as he kisses me and I touch his chest, tracing the lines along him, feeling his cut abs until I reach his belt.

I tug it off. I unbutton his pants and unzip him. His eyes burn into mine. I want him bare and open, like me.

We both know. God, he knows.

"I want it," I whisper. "Please."

"That's all you had to say, little thief."

He takes off his pants and his boxer briefs and his thick, long cock presses against me as he leans over and we kiss. I feel him pressing along my soaking, dripping wet folds, god, so fucking thick, and I moan as I roll my hips and grind against his shaft, wanting him so badly it hurts. He moves back and sits as he pulls me up onto my hands and knees on the couch, and I spread my legs as his fingers tease my pussy apart in slow, amazing strokes, while I lean over him and take his cock into my mouth.

"Get me nice and wet," he whispers as I slide down and let my spit roll along his shaft. "Get me soaked, Gracie. Nice and soaking wet, just like your pussy. That's a good girl." His fingers drive me wild and I'm moaning as I suck him faster

and faster, pleasure rocking into my skull like taking a boxer's punches. I've never felt this way before, so utterly free and in the moment, nothing but him, Calvino, my Calvino, his thick cock and the pleasure and the pain I know he's going to give me.

He spanks my ass and I gasp and pull back. He sinks his fingers inside of me and I suck his tip faster and harder. I'm being sloppy and I don't care as I take him as deep as I can.

He groans and teases my clit. "There's nothing better than your pretty mouth wrapped around my hard cock while you moan. God damn, Gracie, you are so beautiful, and this ass was made to be spanked, this pussy was built to be fucked, and you fit me in a way I've never been fit before."

I pull back and gasp, stroking him fast. "Please, Calvino," I say, pleading with him to put me out of my misery.

And he does.

He pushes me back onto the couch, spreads my legs wide, and presses his tip against my entrance. I'm shivering, trembling with nerves, but he kisses me gently. "Don't worry, little thief," he whispers, and slowly he slides himself inside of me.

I gasp, back arching. He fills me up like nothing I've felt before. I'm stretched to the max and breaking and it hurts, fuck, it hurts, it stings and burns, but beneath that pain there's something else—a bone-deep pleasure, so raw and intense I can barely stand it. He moves slowly at first, kissing me, whispering in my ear, "You're so fucking beautiful, so perfect and gorgeous, your pussy's like heaven and I could die on your lips, you feel so good, I want to taste you my entire life," and his words soothe me as he begins to move faster, filling me to the brim, making pleasure spill over me like burning hot water.

Slowly, agonizingly, the pain turns to pleasure. He keeps going, deeper and deeper, sliding into me, taking me and owning me, his big arms pinning me down to the couch, my legs wrapped around his hips, my fingers digging into his muscular back, and I hear myself moaning as if from a distance, saying his name over and over like it's a chant or a

mantra, and he growls into my ear, “That’s right, Gracie, say my name like you want to be fucking ruined by me.”

“Calvino,” I moan, “oh, fuck, Calvino,” and he goes faster, he fucks me the way I’ve always dreamed, so deep and hard and rough, like he wants to break me, but in breaking me, he wants to save me. We’re stuck together, slick and gorgeous, moving as one and gliding in the deepest depths of pleasure, a place I’ve never been before but never want to leave.

He sucks my nipples as he pins my hands above my head. I’m controlled, dominated. I’m possessed and ruined. He fucks me faster and I give small shuddering gasps of delight as the pressure builds, and I can’t believe this, can’t believe how good this feels, oh, fuck, I can’t believe I waited this long. I should’ve been sleeping with Calvino from the moment we met.

“That’s right, my little thief, I want to hear you moaning. I want to feel your slick pussy grind against me as I fuck you deep and rough. This is what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? This is what you really need. A man to fuck you and make you feel good the way you deserve.”

“God, yes,” I moan. “Keep going, you big bastard.”

“Tell me I’m a bastard again.”

I pretend to struggle against him and he seems to like that. “Bastard. Asshole.”

He fucks me faster, rough and hard and I scream his name. I bite his lower lip and his eyes flash as he takes me rougher, deeper. Sweat rolls down my flesh, when did it get so hot in here, god, I’m so fucking close I could explode any second. He moves faster, grinding and fucking, and I curse him and he laughs in my face and bites my shoulder and calls me a dirty girl, a dirty fucking girl—

And I come so hard I see black. I come in a wild explosion of pure bliss as I roll my hips and moan, shaking, trembling, but he has me, Calvino has me, and as my orgasm slowly tapers off, I feel him fill me to the brim as he finishes between my legs.

It's bliss, god, it's fucking bliss.

We're both panting and spent. He wraps his arms around my body and hugs me close, hands moving along my skin like he can't help himself. He palms my breasts and smooths down my hips and kisses my shoulder and my neck, and the way he caresses me, so loving, so adoring, like I'm his goddess, it makes the buzzy intense pleasure ringing in my brain all that much brighter.

"And here you were trying to get rid of me," I whisper.

He laughs and I laugh, another beautiful release.

"Not trying to get rid of you. Trying to protect you."

"Maybe I don't need protecting."

"That's what every girl who needs protecting says at first."

"Sounds pretty convenient for you."

"No, Gracie, there's nothing convenient about you. There's nothing convenient about the way you came into my life and upended everything, but I wouldn't change it for the world."

I smile stupidly and roll to face him. There's not much room on the couch so our naked bodies are pressed together, the sweat cooling from my skin. He's so warm though, and his strong arms hold me tight.

"I should tell you something else," I whisper, kissing his chest.

"Go ahead. I think right now's the perfect time to give me bad news."

I smile a little and shake my head. "It's not really bad news. Only it's that Charlie told me something strange. She said she doesn't want to give Emilio your last name. I guess Vince's last name."

He lets out a low, confused rumble. "Interesting," he says softly. "Did she say why?"

"She doesn't want Emilio to go into your line of work. I guess she doesn't want him in the mob, and she thinks giving him her maiden name will help with that? I don't know, honestly, it all seemed kind of weird and half-baked and mixed-up."

“As far as I know, Emilio already has the Manzini name.”

“She says he doesn’t, not legally.”

“I wonder if this is really about the name or something else.”

I kiss his chin then his lips and feel an excited thump in my chest. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“And you want to stay involved with all this so you can find out what’s happening to her, don’t you?”

“Pretty much. I think she trusts me for whatever reason, and if we end this fake relationship, I’m afraid she’ll pull away.”

“But if I keep you around, Vince is going to watch every move you make.”

“Let him watch.”

He lets out a breath. “Damn it, Grace. You really are crazy.”

“I need to help her, Calvino. If she’s like Riley and she’s in trouble—”

“She’s not your cousin.” He looks into my eyes and I blink back tears. They hit me sudden and intense, and I can see Riley in my mind shaking her head sadly, like I don’t owe her this, but I do, I owe Riley and all the other girls I couldn’t help. “You hear me, she’s not your cousin or your responsibility.”

“I couldn’t save Riley.” I barely manage to get the words out. He hugs me tighter, pulling me close, and I’m crying, god, I’m crying. I hate this. I didn’t want to cry after my first time, but these tears aren’t because of sex.

These tears are for all my failures. Sleeping with Calvino wasn’t one of those.

“There was nothing you could’ve done for her. She was all the way out here and you were in West Virginia. She made her choices.”

“I still could’ve done something. But now I have another chance with Charlie and I can’t let it slip away. You have to understand that, don’t you?”



He sighs slowly and kisses my lips. I bite him and he smiles.

“I understand,” he says, shaking his head. “Honestly, Gracie, you keep fucking me like that, and I’ll give you just about whatever you ask for.”

“Good to know you’re so easily manipulated.”

“Only by you.” He runs a finger down my lips and I cuddle up against him, smiling like an idiot as the tears keep rolling down my cheeks.

# Chapter 20

## *Grace*

**W**ork the next night feels surprisingly good.

I'm sore, of course—it's a dull ache between my legs—but that'll go away. We fucked again this morning when I woke up in his bed and felt his hard cock pressing against my ass. I rode him fast until he turned me around, pinned me down, and fucked me until I screamed his name and came in a blinding orgasm. Now I'm paying for it with soreness, but it's a good soreness.

I'd make that trade a hundred times. I'd walk around like this forever if it meant tasting him whenever I wanted. Heck, the second I see him later, I'm going to throw myself at him whether I'm in pain or not.

"Why are you all smiles, girl?" Kia leans against the bar next to me and motions for three beers from Bradley.

"No reason. Just in a good mood, I guess."

"Come on, that's a sex smile." Ginnie appears on my other side. "Right, Kia?"

"Definitely. I know a sex smile when I see it, like you're high on drugs, but really you're high on good dick."

"Oh my god," I say, blushing like crazy.

Ginnie laughs. "She's right, good dick can be better than pills. Trust me, I've had my fair share of good dick."

"Stop saying good dick." I'm turning bright red. Even if I'm not a virgin anymore, I'm still not experienced enough for this.

“Poor girl, taking all that good dick but can’t even talk about it.” Kia shakes her head, grinning at me. “Where is the man anyway?”

“I told him not to come around as much anymore since you guys don’t talk to me when he’s here.”

Ginnie flinches and glances at Kia, who suddenly seems interested in a napkin on her tray. They’re quiet for a few seconds until Ginnie sighs and puts an arm across my shoulder.

“All right, you know what, that’s fair. We try to stay away from you when Calvino’s around because he watches you like a hungry wolf, and I think we’d all rather avoid his attention if possible. But that’s not fair.”

“It’s okay, I get it,” I say, trying to put on a brave face, but it still hurts.

But Ginnie squeezes me. “You’re so damn cute, getting good dick and being sad about getting ignored. Look at you girl, it’s like you’re growing up before my very eyes.”

“Weird thing to say when we all work in a strip club,” I point out, and Ginnie laughs.

“We’ll talk to you more when he’s around, okay?” Kia nudges me with her hip. “Now I gotta go get some tips. See you girls later.” She waves and hurries off.

Ginnie sighs and shakes her head before she looks at me. “Ah, shit, are you crying?”

I blink rapidly and yes, I am crying. “Sorry,” I say, wiping my face. “I’m a little emotional right now.”

“Good dick can do that to you.” Ginnie grins and lets me go. “Better fix your makeup, girlie, you’re smeared.”

“Ah, crap, really?” I frown into the mirror behind the bar and Ginnie’s right, I’m smudged. It’s not bad, but an easy fix. “I’ll be back in a second.”

I hurry toward the back, shaking my head. I shouldn’t let myself get so stinking emotional, especially with these girls, but I can’t help myself. All I want are some friends, and

Ginnie and Kia just admitted that they'll try to include me more from now on. That feels so good it's hard to put into words.

I slip into the back room intent on grabbing my mirror and my makeup bag, but I stop short when I spot Juniper sitting in front of my locker on the bench hunched over something in her lap.

My mouth drops open when I recognize my phone.

"What the hell are you doing?"

She practically jumps ten feet in the air as she leaps to her feet and whirls on me. She's clutching my phone in her hand and staring at me, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Nothing," she says, putting my phone behind her back like a toddler.

"You stole my phone." I march toward her, rage flowing in my veins. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Juniper? Why would you do that?"

She backs off and slowly her surprise turns to a sneer. She holds my phone out, pinching it between two fingers like it's filthy.

"You want this back?" she asks mockingly, holding it up as high as she can—which isn't very high, she's pretty small. "Poor little Gracie. You want your phone?"

"How did you unlock it? Oh my god, you've been spying on me."

"You don't try to hide it when you put in the passcode."

I lunge at the phone and Juniper yanks it from my reach. But instead of stopping, I barrel forward and slam my shoulder into her chest as hard as I can, bowling her over. We both slam to the floor, me on top of her, and she starts to flail and shout, but I'm not taking this bullshit from her any more.

I slam my fist into her face once, twice, three times, just the way Riley showed me, and I can practically see my cousin grinning in my head, *good job, girlie, real proud of you, burst those fake lips of hers and smash out that filler, girl*, so I hit

Juniper again, and again, until I rip my phone from her grasp and climb up off her.

She's bleeding. Her lip's cracked and her nose is gushing down her face. She looks shocked as she slowly climbs to her feet, using a bench to support some of her weight.

"Vince is going to kill you, you little bitch, I can't believe you'd hit me like that." She's shaking with anger—

And as I stand back, staring at her with an open mouth, she realizes her mistake.

I watch several emotions flit across her face in the span of a second or two, and she finally decides to push herself up and face me with her hands balled into fists.

"That's right, Vince," she says, sneering at me as blood drips down her face. "He told me to take your phone. He told me to watch you. And now he's gonna kill you for hitting me. You went for the wrong brother, Grace, you stupid little bitch."

She storms out of the room.

I'm left standing there in shock. Juniper is spying for Vince? I knew he was suspicious of me but I had no clue he'd stoop so low. It's not surprising that Juniper agreed to work with him—she's been angling for Calvino this whole time, but why not go for the big boss if she can? I doubt the fact that Vince is married would bother her very much.

Which makes me wonder who else is on his payroll?

Juniper isn't subtle. But what about the others?

I sink down onto the bench slowly and look at my hands. I feel like my world's shaking and I live on a strip of earth suspended by nothing but a few twigs and some spider silk. At any moment, I might topple down and disappear.

Is this what it's like to live in a mafia family? Paranoia, danger, violence. There's nothing solid here, nothing I can depend on beyond my own strength and my own convictions—which explains so much about Calvino.

The fact that there's anything good left in him at all is a minor miracle.

I fix my face, wipe my knuckles off, adjust my clothes, and straighten up the room. When I'm done, it's like the fight never happened, though I'm sure I'll get lots of questions about why Juniper's looking like someone smashed her with a brick (in retrospect, I wish I had a brick). I head out to the floor and find Diego frowning at the door in confusion.

"Juniper just ran out of here with one hell of a puffy lip," he says, glancing down at me. "Do you know anything about it?"

"I caught her going through my phone so I punched her in the face a few times."

His eyebrows slowly raise. "No shit?"

"No shit." I show him the red marks on my knuckles from where her teeth bit into my skin. "It hurt."

He nods slowly and looks at me with an appreciative smile. "Hurts like hell, punching someone in the face. You got to pay a price with your own pain if you want someone else to hurt. Just how it goes." He tilts his head and nods toward a table of customers. "Get back to work. I'll let Calvino know what happened."

I turn to walk off but he calls my name.

"Good job," he says, grinning.

I laugh despite myself and hurry off to get back to work.

# Chapter 21



## *Calvino*

**T**he sound of the ocean lapping against the sand is hypnotic as I stretch my legs on an upper-floor balcony overlooking the water. Rella sips from a glass of wine and I watch my sister for a moment, wondering when the hell she became a young woman—in my mind, she’s still that awkward, angry teenager rebelling against everything Mom and Dad said and causing all sorts of trouble.

“You’re staring at me like I just sprouted mushrooms from my head. Am I covered in fungi right now?”

I smile and sip my drink. She might’ve grown up, but my sister’s the same girl she’s always been: willful, strong, angry, and proud. “Not at all. Just thinking about the old days. Remember when you and Jason would fight?”

“God, he was such a prick. I mean, he still is, but he’s not as bad as he was back then.”

“Jason’s the nicest one in our damn family.”

“Which doesn’t say much about you creatures.”

I laugh at her and sit forward, breathing the crisp beach air deep into my lungs. Sometimes I wish we could stay like this—everyone at the house living together like there’s no world outside these walls—but that’s not how life works. Rella’s got to grow up and so does Susi, and I hate that Mom won’t be around to see it. Breaks my fucking heart.

“For a while there, you were winning those fights. But then Jason hit a growth spurt.”

“Got bigger than a tree.” She sighs and shakes her head. “He didn’t realize how strong he’s gotten and he’d beat the crap out of me. Remember that?”

“Dad had to yell at him.”

“Jason gave me a black eye and Dad freaked out about it. I deserved it, obviously, I threw his phone in the pool and told a girl he had a crush on that he liked her, but still. After Dad yelled at him, Jason never hit me again. I guess he realized we’d gotten too old.”

“You sound like you miss it.”

“I miss when things were simple, is all.” She shrugs a little. “I miss Mom. I don’t miss Dad but does anyone?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“We never talk about them. It’s like the fire happened and they died and we did the funeral and, boom, they’re gone so we might as well pretend like they never even existed. Vince took over the family and everyone kissed the ring and end of story. But I never forgot.”

“I never did either,” I say quietly, remembering the funeral with a sudden, intense clarity: so many people showed up, which was what we expected for a Don like my father, except most of the guests were there for Mom. I hadn’t fully understood how well loved she was in the community, how much money she donated to local charities, how much of her time she devoted to helping people. As I stood there in the receiving line and heard story after story about my incredible Mom, I began to wonder if maybe she was working so hard to do good to balance out all the bad my dad was doing.

That’s the tragedy of it, how we’ll never get to ask her, and how we never thought to ask while she was still around.

Rella wipes a tear from the corner of her eye and clears her throat. “All right, before I get all fucking weepy, why’d you come here?”

“What, I can’t visit with my sister?”

She gives me a look. “You can, but you don’t. So what’s up?”

I grunt in response and stand. She watches me as I walk to the railing and lean out, and after a moment she joins me. The wind blows her hair and she has to tie it back, and when she's done, it's like we're all alone with nobody to hear, our voices muffled by the sea breeze.

"I'm worried about Grace and Charlie," I say, speaking as quietly as I can. Rella leans closer, frowning.

"Why? What's going on with those two?"

"I don't think I can give you details. But there's something happening and Grace and Charlie are both involved. I'm doing my best to keep them safe, but I can't be here all the time."

"You want me to keep tabs on them?"

"If you can. If I'm not around." I shake my head and tighten my grip on the railing. I hate having to ask my sister for help but I don't trust any of the others, not with something so borderline-seditious. Damon will do what he can but there are lines he won't cross, and Jason isn't interested in rocking the boat no matter what. That only leaves Rella and Susi, and I'm worried Susi can't handle the pressure.

But Rella's strong. She's got to be.

"I'll do my best. But Cal, why are you concerned about Charlie?" She's looking at me curiously, her head tilted to the side, and I realize she knows something that I don't and she's testing me, but I don't know what I can reveal—because I don't know what I'm hiding.

"There's something going on with Vince and Charlie. Grace is convinced about it and I trust Grace's intuition on this. Why, do you know something?"

She shrugs a little and looks away. "No more than everyone else living here does."

"What am I missing, Rell?"

"They argue. A lot." She's silent for a few second and I focus on the rhythm of my heart, the thump, thump, thump. "It's not always him though. Sometimes it's her just... going off. Small things make her lose it, like he'll say something wrong and she

just freaks out on him, or sometimes he won't do anything at all and she'll still start shouting. They fight like they're going to fucking kill each other, Calvino."

The fear in her face feels so familiar to me—it's the look she used to have when Dad would shout at Mom during one of their rare arguments.

"I didn't know," I say, my jaw tense. "Nobody told me."

"It's not easy to talk about, and I think everyone's still thinking about Dad and Mom, you know? We didn't talk about them when it was happening."

"But still, Vince and Charlie? I thought they were so good."

"It started up after Mom and Dad died. Like a week after the funeral, they got into this huge argument, throwing shit, screaming at each other. I still don't know what it was about, only that Charlie kept saying, 'You should've fucked him then! You should've fucked him!' and I have no clue what that's supposed to mean. That was one of the worst fights, but it's been getting more and more frequent."

"Has Vince, you know." I glare at her. "Hit her?"

"I don't think so." She sighs and stares down at her hands. "I haven't seen the marks anyway. More likely she's the one doing the hitting. I see scratches and shit on Vince's face. I don't know what's happening between them, but it's been fucking scary."

I wrap an arm around her shoulder and hug Rella tight once before I let her go. "Keep an eye on them and tell me the next time it happens. And, Rell... listen to what they're yelling about."

She grimaces. "You want me to spy on the Don?"

"I want you to spy on your older brother so we can make sure that Charlie's safe. Do that for me, please?"

"I'll try, but no promises. If Grace is wrapped up in all this, I'm seriously worried for her."

"We'll make sure she's okay." I nod to her once and turn away. "I'm going to head inside. You coming?"

“I think I’ll stay up here a little while longer. It’s such a nice night.”

I nod and leave her alone. On my descent down the stairs and into the main second floor hallway, I keep thinking about Vince and Charlie fighting, about them screaming loud enough that everyone in this massive mansion hellhole can hear. It must be bad if they’re getting that intense, especially if it’s freaking out Rella—not much rattles her—and I can’t imagine Charlie getting angry enough to scrape her fingernails down Vince’s face. I haven’t seen wounds like that on him, but there are times where I don’t see him for weeks on end, and I just assume he’s busy with work.

Maybe he’s busy hiding the scratches his wife’s been leaving.

What the hell else have I missed in this house? I move out and suddenly the place starts to fall apart, like losing Mom and Dad uncorked all the family secrets, anger, and drama, and let them spill out like rancid wine.

Downstairs, I head for the bar in the living room to refill my drink, preoccupied with thoughts of Charlie and Vince throwing things at each other and screaming at the top of their lungs. What could possibly make Charlie that angry? I’m sure being married to Vince isn’t easy—being the Don’s wife never is, no matter how kind of a man a given Don happens to be—but Charlie always seems so calm and centered and happy, especially with little Emilio around. What the hell could set her off like that?

I pour whiskey in my glass, drop in two ice cubes from the bucket, and start as someone calls my name.

Vince stands near the windows watching me with a slight smile on his lips. I was so distracted that I hadn’t noticed him standing there, watching someone in the back yard. I refocus my gaze out the window and spot Charlie sitting by the pool.

He’s standing there, staring at her.

“What are you doing, brother?” I ask and walk toward him.

Vince shrugs, head tilted. “Contemplating life. You know how these things go. The weight of the world rests on the shoulders

of the Don.”

“Are things okay with the business right now? From what I can tell, it’s all good.”

“Money’s flowing, if that’s what you mean, but there are always a thousand little fires for me to stamp out and ten thousand more brewing. But I can’t complain. It’s good to be the Don.” Vince grins at me, showing his teeth.

“Dad used to say the key to being a good leader is persistence and kindness, but he was never kind. I guess persistence is more important.”

Vince lets out a soft chuckle and turns away, staring out the window again. “I keep meaning to talk to you about something,” he says, as if he hadn’t heard what I said, or at least doesn’t care to keep that conversation going.

I stay where I am, a few feet off, and sip my drink. “What’s up?”

“You’re not going to like this, but I’m going to tell you straight out of respect for you, Calvino. Of everyone in this family, you’re the only one of us that can see the forest for the trees. You have distance and perspective that only someone on the outside of the family could possibly have, and I value that. Just so you know.”

“This must be bad if you’re giving me a half-assed compliment.”

Vince shrugs slightly and the tension in his shoulders is evident.

“I have spies in most of your establishments. Not all of them, but most. Just people I’ve paid to keep tabs on things, and not necessarily you, but everyone. Patrons, family, whoever comes around, if something interesting happens, they report it to me. And one of my little spies told me something interesting today.”

I hear my blood pulse through my ears as I stand there and stare at my brother. I suspected the bastard was doing something like this but hearing it out loud makes me boil with rage. How dare he bribe my own employees to be his spies in

my establishments? The blatant lack of trust and disregard makes me want to smash this glass and stab him with the jagged shards until his face is nothing but pulped meat.

Instead, I released a single grunt. “And?”

“You and Grace went to visit Damon. Why would you and Grace go visit Damon?”

I go very still. Does he know what we discussed, about Grace’s cousin, Riley? It’s not exactly a secret, and one of the guys that Damon questioned might’ve said something to Vince about it, but I don’t want him to know that Grace is after Louie. If he realizes that Grace is Riley’s cousin, he might figure out that Grace isn’t here just to be my girlfriend—she’s here for revenge.

“Just a friendly visit,” I say and do my best to sound casual. “I wanted to introduce her to everyone.”

“My spy suggests differently. She said the texts seemed suspicious.”

“Texts?” I take a step forward, a snarl on my lips. “Did you break into Grace’s phone?”

Vince waves a hand. “Immaterial. What are you doing with Damon?”

“Nothing, Vince. I was visiting him, you know, since we’re brothers. You do realize Damon is your underboss, don’t you?”

“I’m aware. I named him.”

“Then why the hell do you two treat each other like you’re the heads of rival gangs?”

“Because in some ways we are. Damon has his loyal men and I have mine, and those two groups split the family down the middle. It’s not ideal, but it’s the way things are.”

“You think I’m taking his side in your little shadow war?”

“I think you’re up to something with that girl of yours and I haven’t figured out what it is yet. But listen to me, Calvino.”

Vince turns to face me again and his expression is so placid, so neutral, that it sends a shiver down my spine. What happened to my older brother? The one I used to know and love, who would laugh at my jokes, play basketball with me, who taught me how to throw a curveball, how to spit, how to fight? If this is what it means to be the Don, I'm happy it's on his shoulders and not on mine.

"You will not double-cross me. Damon is under control, and you will not tip the balance. Stay out of the family business as you're meant to. Know your role, little brother."

I clench my jaw and grip my drink so tight I think the whiskey might turn to ice, but I manage to keep myself from rushing my asshole older brother by taking a couple deep breaths.

"There is nothing going on with Damon. Grace is just a girl. You don't know as much as you think you do."

Vince only shakes his head and turns away. Outside, Charlie rolls over and lies on her arms, tanning her back.

"Just remember what I said." Vince takes a long drink from his glass and I can feel his eyes staring at me in the reflection in the window like he's wondering if I'm about to try to stab him in the back.

Paranoid bastard. He has no clue what he's talking about, and even though he's way off on the details, he clearly senses that something's brewing under his nose. Between what he said to Grace and this little warning, I'm fairly certain he's going to keep us both under tight surveillance.

Which means there's nothing we can do, for now at least.

I finish my drink in two big swallows, put my glass down on the bar, and leave. I'm shaken, and Grace is waiting for me at home, and there's nothing I can do now but hope that Rella is on my side and Vince isn't too far gone that he's going to do something drastic.



# Chapter 22

## *Grace*

Calvino comes home and finds me mid-shower. The bathroom door opens as water drips off my skin and I stare at him through the fogged glass shower stall and he looks back at me with pure desire in his eyes.

Ever since that first night, we haven't been able to keep our hands to ourselves and it's like a constant pulse beating between my legs, my desire for him, my need for him, and I rinse soap off my skin as he slowly unbuttons his shirt, takes off his pants and opens the stall door.

I press myself against the tile wall. He steps toward me, head tilted to the side, and pauses beneath the falling hot water. The rain-like showerhead drenches him and he smiles, brushing his dark hair back, his eyes moving down my naked, dripping body, and he smirks with a shocking hunger, his cock already thick and half-hard.

"Hello, little thief," he says quietly.

"Calvino. Is this how things are now? You can just come into my shower whenever you want?"

"You're damn right I can. Are you complaining?"

"Only if you'll punish me for it."

He laughs softly, low and throaty, and steps forward from beneath the water. I tilt my chin up as he grips my hair, already wet from washing, and pulls my lips against his.

I whimper as we kiss nice and slow. I reach down to stroke his cock and find him hard enough to shatter stone, like the mere

touch of our tongues is enough to drive him into pure animal mode.

I feel a sharp thrill in my gut as I roll my hands up and down his thick tip and along his vein-covered shaft, and a deep growl escapes his throat as I kiss him and bite his lip, and he palms my breasts and teases my wet nipples. I love how aroused I make him, how looking at my naked body drives him absolutely wild, like he can't control himself just because he likes my hips and my breasts and my mouth.

It's all too much. I know I should keep my head on straight and I'm far from safe, but he makes me feel special, like I'm the goddess locked deep inside of his heart, and every time he fucks me, he releases me into the world.

I groan as he kisses my neck and pins me against the wall. The shower's easily big enough for five people, and we take advantage of all the space. He drops to his knees and spreads my legs as he lovingly kisses my stomach, my inner thighs, and licks along my slit, sucking on my clit, sliding his tongue deep inside before coming back out. He grips my ass and shoves me harder against his mouth and I gasp in surprise, my shoulders leaning back against the cool tiles as I run my fingers through his damp hair.

"I love it when you do this to me," I moan softly. "God, it feels so good. It's like you want to devour me and leave me destroyed and mindless. Is that what you're trying to do? Are you trying to kill me, Calvino?"

"I'm trying to make you mine. And I'm trying to ruin you, though only because you like it. You're no good to me dead. I want you warm and moaning." He smacks my ass lightly and licks my clit just right. I gasp as he slides two fingers inside and begins to stroke them in and out. "I want you in my bed, legs spread, mouth open, ready to please me however I need. I want you drenched in sweat from riding my cock and coming over and over. I crave you on your hands and knees, your beautiful ass in the air, your lovely pussy dripping. I live for this, Grace. I live for you."

I gasp as he stands and I throw myself at him, tasting my pussy on his lips, licking it off with my tongue, and I kiss him wildly. He hefts me up like I'm nothing and pins me against the wall, slowly lowering me down just enough to slide onto his cock. His arms are bristling with muscles, and I grip my hands behind his neck as he pulses into me, lowering me down onto his shaft and back up. I'm so slick and soaked that he slides into me like it's nothing, piercing me, filling me.

I kiss him hard as he starts to fuck me faster. He pumps his hips deep into my tight pussy and I gasp, moaning into his mouth. He growls, almost a roar, body a lightning rod, my pleasure coming from the heavens to invade my skin and it drives me utterly insane. I bite his lip as he shivers and groans in the most sensual way possible, then lowers me down to my feet, turns me around, and pins me against the wall, my breasts flat against the tiles.

"Tell me I own you," he whispers in my ear as his cock slides into my soaking wet pussy from behind.

I groan as he stretches me to the brim. It's like being torn to pieces and stitched back together again, but every motion is pure sin and pure pleasure.

"You own me. God, Calvino, you own me."

"Say you're mine, Grace." He wraps one hand around my throat, holding firm but not tight, not choking. I moan and my fingers curl into the wall as he fucks me nice and slow, driving me wild.

"I'm yours."

"Every inch of you? From your toes to your tight little cunt to that pretty mouth?"

"Every inch, baby, fuck me. I need you, Calvino."

He strokes faster and deeper and I'm in heaven, I'm in bliss.

"I can't get enough of you, Grace. You're breaking me, you're driving me insane, and I'd gladly lose everything to keep on taking your tight little body. I'd burn the world to watch you come again and again on my thick cock, you dirty fucking girl."

He reaches around my hip and works my clit as he fucks me, faster and faster, pounding into me. I scream his name and lose my mind as the pleasure explodes all through me, and I can't believe how good this feels, can't believe how much I love submitting to a man like Calvino: an asshole, a conceited jerk, a dangerous mafia beast, the sort of man I should hate, the sort of man that murdered my cousin—but it's good, it's so good, and I'm losing it completely as he fucks me into oblivion.

I come with his name on my lips, and he roars as he keeps going, fucking me through it, and I feel him finish as my orgasm begins to end. He fills me to the brim and I love every inch, every drop, so greedy for him.

He holds me when we're done. He kisses me and murmurs how good it feels to be with me in my ear. I purr in response like a content kitten lying in the sun. We soap each other, clean our bodies together, and step out hand in hand. We towel off and he lovingly watches as I put on comfortable clothes. It's strange, having him watch me like that—like he can't look away even if he wants to.

We sit out in the living room when we're dry and comfortable, my feet in his lap.

He rubs my heel with one hand as he looks at me. I smile back at him and bask in the post-orgasm pleasure of just being with him. The foot rub helps too.

"I visited the Sandtrap earlier," he says quietly, staring down at the floor. I can tell he's troubled and I'm losing him somewhat, the perfection of the shower starting to drift away. I wish I could draw him back, but sometimes there's nothing I can do, the world is just too much.

"What happened?"

"I talked to Vince. He seemed... unhinged." He grimaces and looks at me. "Did someone go through your phone?"

"Juniper," I say, annoyed with myself for not telling him sooner. "I punched her in the face. Diego was there."

"He didn't tell me."

"You've been busy." I shrug a little.

That seems to trouble him.

“Vince wasn’t well,” he says, glaring at the windows. I can practically see his mind whirring. “He sounded angry and paranoid, and Rella told me something strange, that he and Charlie have been fighting. But Rella said it’s not always Vince’s fault. She thinks sometimes it’s more like Charlie instigating and making things worse.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” I sit up and smooth out my wet hair. I really need to do something about it or else it’ll dry like a frizzy mess, but this conversation is too important to walk away from. “Charlie wouldn’t do that.”

“That’s what I said, but Rella was sure.”

“Charlie’s so level-headed and calm all the time. I mean, she’s gotten upset and cried, but angry? I can’t imagine her ever instigating fights with Vince.”

“I know. I know. But still.” He stands and walks to the kitchen. I watch him pour a glass of whiskey for himself and a glass of wine for me. I accept it wordlessly and he sits in the chair across from me. I wish he’d sit closer so I could feel his body, but his face is clouded and whatever joy we felt with each other earlier is nearly all gone now, like the outside world has to invade and steal it all away.

“There’s something else. Something I’ve been meaning to tell you but I’m afraid of how you’ll react.”

I don’t like his tone and a bad feeling drifts into my chest. “Just tell me. I can’t handle all this suspense.”

“It’s about Riley. And the guy that killed her.”

I sit up straight, like an arrow burst down my spine. “What do you know?” I stare at him, my mouth hanging open, heart racing.

“Damon says Riley was with a guy named Louie, one of Vince’s closest and most trusted Capos. He’s what we call a trigger man, a guy that does the killing. If there’s someone in the city that Vince needs to take care of, he sends a guy like Louie. Grace, he’s dangerous, one of the most dangerous men in the Manzini organization.”

I sit so still I feel like I can hear every sound in the room: Calvino's breathing, the groan of the air conditioner, the breeze outside, neighbors down below. It's like the world zeroes in on me and closes down around my body and I can't move as I try to picture Riley with a guy like that—a psychopath, a *trigger man*, whatever the hell that means—and I'm sure, I'm so sure that he killed her.

He killed Riley. Louie killed my Riley, my cousin, the only person that ever made me feel like I'm worth a damn. *Sorry, girlie, I almost hoped you'd never figure it out*, the Riley in my head says with a sad smile, *but I guess you found you a good man*.

No, not good, not good at all—none of these men are good, not remotely, not even close.

“Grace?” Calvino's looking at me with concern and he leans forward, reaches out, tries to touch my knee.

I pull away. I can't be touched right now. I can't be near him or anyone. I get to my feet and pace away, my hair soaking wet, still in sweats and a tank top, a glass of wine in my hand—when did I get a glass of wine—I drink it down and stare into the kitchen.

“Where is he?” I ask and the words feel like hammers in my head. I'm buzzing and bursting and I can't stay still, I need to *do something* right now or else I think I might go crazy.

“Grace,” he says, a warning.

“Tell me where I can find Louie. Tell me where I can find him, Calvino.”

“I can't. You can't. You don't understand.”

I turn on him, all hot fire and rage and anger, so much anger. I take two steps closer to him and the surprise in his eyes doesn't do a thing to temper the overwhelming tornado that tears through my heart.

“You don't get it yet, do you? I'd die to get revenge for Riley. I loved her so much and she was ripped from me, and now I'm going to kill that bastard and punish him for what he did. So tell me, where the hell can I find Louie?”

“No,” he says, his face hardening. “I’m not letting you do this.”

“You don’t have a choice. This is what we agreed on.” I put my glass down and storm into my room.

Calvino follows. “What are you doing?”

I throw some things into a bag. Shirts, pants, underwear. Shoes and cash. It’s all Calvino’s, everything in here is Calvino’s, I haven’t been back to my crappy little apartment since the night Diego dragged me to this place. And yet I feel like it’s partially mine, like we started something and began to create our own special space, just me and Calvino, where we could share everything and actually feel like humans for once.

Now that illusion is shattered.

“I’m finding him.”

“Grace, stop it.”

“Move.” I stand there seething, so mad I can barely think. I put the backpack on my shoulders and steel myself for what I’m about to do. “Move, Calvino.”

“I won’t let you go.”

I slam myself into him and it’s like hitting a brick wall. I growl, animalistic and desperate, and push and shove until he stumbles back a step in sheer surprise. I manage to wriggle past him and run as fast as I can for the door. He chases after me, but I don’t hesitate, I throw it open, hit the hall, find the steps, and descend as fast as I can.

I don’t look back. If I look back, I might see the fear and concern and the longing, god, that pure need in Calvino’s eyes, and I can’t handle that right now.

I have a name. I know who did it.

I need to find him and finish this.

“Grace, please wait!” Calvino’s voice echoes into the stairwell, but I keep going, taking two steps at the time, throwing myself recklessly forward.

Toward my death, my doom, and my revenge.



# Chapter 23

## *Grace*

I walk for a long time. My thoughts drift: Calvino in the shower, Calvino in bed, his arms around my body, his lips on my throat; Calvino holding back information because he thinks I can't handle it; Calvino protecting me, Calvino dominating me. I don't know what I want or who I love or what it means to be myself right now, and no matter how lost I get, I keep coming back to one thing—revenge for Riley.

My feet are killing me, and for the hundredth time since I ran out of Calvino's apartment, I wish I'd let him finish that foot rub before freaking out. I'm cold, my hair's a frizzy mess, and the sun's beginning to rise—but I approach a big gate at the end of a driveway and hit the buzzer.

Nobody answers. I didn't expect them to. I stand there and buzz, buzz, buzz, not going anywhere until I get what I want. Finally, after almost ten minutes, an exasperated voice clicks on.

"Who the fuck is out there?" Damon sounds pissed and I can't blame him. It's barely past five in the morning.

"It's Grace. I need to talk."

A long, quiet pause. Another click. "Grace? Calvino's Grace? What are you doing here?"

"Please, Damon, it's about Riley and Louie. I just need to talk. Please."

Another pause. I start sizing up the wall and trying to figure out the easiest way over the top because there's no way in hell

I'm letting some stupid rich guy wall keep me away. But before I try awkwardly climbing, the gate groans and slides open.

I head up the driveway to the familiar house. It's quiet and dark in the early morning sunrise and pink and purple and red splash across the sky. I head up the front steps and walk right in through the door.

Damon's in the kitchen. The smell of brewing coffee permeates the room. He nods at me and points at the table. "Sit down."

I decide I'd better play nice for now and do as he says. I pull out a chair and fold myself into it as he pours two mugs, carries them over, gives me one, and sits opposite.

"You look like shit," he says, not smiling. He's got big bags under his eyes like he barely slept. "Did you walk all night?"

"I got lost," I say, shrugging like it's no big deal.

"Where's Calvino?"

"He doesn't know I'm here. I bet he's out looking for me right now though."

"I take it he told you about Louie and it didn't sit well."

I grimace and sip my coffee. It's extremely good, strong and dark with a hint of berries on the finish. "That's basically it, yeah."

He laughs quietly and sighs. "I told him he didn't want to know. I tried to warn him. Did he explain to you who Louie is and what he does?"

"Trigger man. That's the phrase he used."

"Louie's not just a killer, he's the best killer on the West Coast. Do you know how the Manzini family's kept power for so long? We're good at finding murderers and cultivating their loyalty. We breed demons, Gracie. We bring them up in our ranks, make them feel at home, and point them toward whatever motherfucker gets in our way. That's what we do. That's our family business, our real trade secret."

I try to keep my breathing steady but my stomach's a starving mess. I'm hungry, thirsty, exhausted, lightheaded. I need freaking sleep, but I'm still just as determined now as I was a few hours ago. I have to do this, and no matter what Damon says, he's not going to talk me out of it.

"I don't need you to do anything," I say quietly, sipping my coffee again and wondering if it's the last cup I'll ever have. It's a very good cup to go out on. "You don't have to help me or anything. All I need is a place to find him. That's all."

"That's a big ask. You want me to betray my family. You want me to send you off on a suicide mission."

I give him a level, hard stare. "That's my choice."

"Is it, Gracie? I don't know. Calvino would be heartbroken if you went and got yourself killed and my relationship with him might never recover. Why would I do that to my own brother and risk a rift in the family? More than that, why would I risk the life of a very useful man in my organization?"

I shake my head. "Damon. He murdered my cousin."

"That's what he does. That's why I like him. Louie kills people, and yeah, sometimes he kills people he shouldn't, but mostly he kills people we tell him to kill. So why the hell would I help you find him when you plan on taking him away? He's worth more to me than you are."

I slam the cup of coffee down on the table and some spills over the rim. I'm seething, breathing hard through my teeth and glaring at him. "Don't tell me you're as sick as all the others."

He looks thoughtful. "Maybe I am. I'm honest at least. Give me an actual reason to send you off to your death that benefits me and maybe I'll do it, but please don't appeal to my better nature." Damon grins at me. "I don't have one."

I want to stab him in the throat. He's sitting there all smug, drinking his coffee, looking like he rules the world and I'm just a little ant beneath his boot, like Riley was an ant, poor dead Riley, crushed by a bunch of slobbering beasts. I'm so mad I could scream, but I need to get myself together and

come up with a plan. If I can't convince him to tell me where to go, I'll need to start looking on my own.

I talk quietly and make sure he feels every word: "My stepfather, we called him The Fist, on account of him loving to hit me. Riley was the only person that seemed to care. She'd nurse me back to health when he went too far and talked me down from the cliff when I wanted to end all my misery. My mother, she was too drugged out and blind to see what was happening, but Riley was my rock. She gave me everything growing up in that horrible place, and I was resentful when she left. Can you imagine? I was resentful that she left."

"I'm sorry you had a hard life," he says and I believe him. "I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Especially not a child."

"Riley was my everything and now she's gone. Louie took her from me. You have to understand, Damon. I need this if I'm going to keep going, if I'm going to keep breathing. I can't live with myself if I know he's out there, I just can't. So please, help me."

He sits back and studies me, and for one moment I think he might do it, but I watch his face cloud over as he takes another long sip from his mug. I know I've lost him, and I don't understand why the world keeps offering me something good only to turn it sour just a moment later. Calvino, the club, Riley, now this, now everything, it's all rotten at the core and no matter how hard I try to clean the rot away, it just keeps turning bad.

I'll never escape it. I'm trapped in this cycle, doomed to misery.

A car door slams outside and I sit up straight, my heart racing. Damon gives me a sad smile.

"Sorry, Grace," he says and stands.

"Who did you call?" I shove back from the table and stumble to my feet. I grab my bag and throw it over my shoulder, looking around wildly for an exit. "Who did you call, Damon? It's Calvino, isn't it? Why would you bring Calvino here?"

Calvino's never going to let me go once he catches me. He'll lock me up in that room and say it's for my own good, but it's for his good, because he can't stand to let me live, to let me take my own risks. He'll protect me, but he'll smother me in the same breath.

Damon says nothing as the front door opens.

I turn away. I can't face him. I know Calvino's face is going to be miserable and angry and judging and sad, and I don't want to see it because it'll break me, it'll truly break me, and I don't want to be shattered before I have a chance to go through with my revenge. The footsteps come and I'm trembling, tears in my eyes. I don't want to go back, but I do, I desperately do, I want him to save me from myself and bring me home, bring me to that apartment, rub my feet, kiss my lips, pour me wine, call me his good girl and fuck me until I scream, god, I want it so badly.

I want Calvino to protect me. I want him to take me back.

I turn and there's Vince.

It's like being punched in the face. All the blood rushes from my skin and I'm numb.

He smiles at me as I take a step back and knock into an end table. A lamp rolls and falls onto the floor, shattering.

"Hello, Grace," he says.

"No," I say and look at Damon.

"He's my Don," Damon says and he won't meet my eye, as if that explains anything, the bastard, that sick piece of shit.

Vince approaches, grinning so big it's like his face might split.

"Make this easy, Grace, or make it hard. Either way we're going to have a chat, you and me. Let's get out of here and head back to the Sandtrap, okay?"

I turn and try to run. I make it halfway to the door before Vince catches me, grabs my wrist, and yanks me back. He slams me to the floor and shoves a black hood over my head—"Fuck, is that necessary, Vince? Jesus, you're going to fucking kill her," Damon says—and I feel Vince laughing.

“Now let’s get to the bottom of this, shall we?” he asks, hauls me to my feet, and drags me away.

# Chapter 24



## *Grace*

I'm shoved into the back of a car and the door slams shut. "Now don't make this hard, Grace," Vince says from the seat beside me. Some small amount of sunlight gets through the hood and I can make out vague shapes: the headrest of the seat in front of me, the shape of the driver, and not much else. I look over and Vince is barely a blob as the car pulls out and we hit the road.

It doesn't take long to reach the Sandtrap. When the car parks, Vince grabs my wrists, wrenches them behind my back, and wraps them in a zip-tie. I gasp in pain as the plastic bites into my skin, and Vince opens the door and shoves me out. I land on the concrete in a heap and bang my chin against the cold ground.

"Get up," Vince growls as he hauls me to my feet and drags me forward. I can't see much, only shifting shapes, but I get the vague sense I'm being led around the side of the house to a quiet entrance based on the shadows and the lack of steps leading up to the front. I hear some beeps, and a door opens, and I'm led into a dark hallway as all my remaining sight disappears. I'm tugged, shoved, and dragged, then practically thrown down a staircase, until finally I'm pushed into a chair.

It's quiet after that. A door opens and closes. The air's cool and humid so I'm guessing I'm in a basement, which is relatively unusual in California and I wouldn't have guessed that the Sandtrap had one. The chair is cold metal and I don't move for a while as the zip-tie digs into my wrists and the distant hum of machinery keeps intruding into my thoughts. I

keep picturing Calvino, and Riley, and Damon, and Diego, and all the girls at Crystal Lake, and I wonder how many of them are going to get hurt because of me.

This has to be the end. If I wasn't dead before, I am now. Vince isn't the kind of man that would suffer a spy like me, and all I can do is choose the way I go. I can let him kill me while crying and begging for my life and telling him everything he wants to know, or I can try to keep my head held high and my mouth locked shut and go out with some shred of meager dignity.

If I talk, Calvino will pay. There's no doubt about that. He's the center of all this and Vince will attack him the second he realizes that Calvino put me up to spying and digging for information. I don't even know why I care—Calvino didn't tell me about Riley's killer right away, although in his defense, the deal was to wait until my task was over—and it seems crazy that I'd consider getting murdered just to protect him. And yet some strange part of me is grateful for what Calvino did, because without him, I never would've gotten this close, never would've gone this far, and never would've experienced everything I've experienced in the last few weeks.

He gave me something I'll always cherish: life, desire, fun. Before him, my days were bleak and depressing, but with him it was like I was learning how to breathe and walk and run all over again.

Now I'll lose all that, but at least I had it for a while.

A distant door opens and closes and footsteps echo off stone. I hear another chair scrape against the floor and stop a few feet away. I look around, trying to see through the cloth, but there's nothing, and my pulse is pounding in my guts and I feel like I need to get away, get away as fast as I can, but there's nowhere to go.

"Hello?" I ask and I swear I can feel someone breathing. I want to scream, but I wrestle with myself to keep it together. "Is someone there?"

My hood is suddenly ripped from my head. A bright light above blinds me and I have to squeeze my eyes closed as I

grimace away from it. Vince chuckles and he sits across from me.

“I apologize for the delay, Grace. I had to be upstairs while everyone else was getting up so nobody suspected anything was going on. But I’m here now and it’s time for us to talk.”

I keep blinking until Vince slowly resolves from a blob of formless nothing into himself framed by light. I test the zip-ties keeping me bound but they’re tight as ever.

“What do you want?” I ask and struggle to maintain my calm. I’m on the edge of panic.

“I want you to tell me the truth about who you are and what you want.” He leans back, arms crossed, and shrugs a little like this is no big deal. “It’s that simple.”

“You could’ve called, you know.”

He doesn’t smile. “Start talking.”

“My name is Grace. I’m dating—”

“No,” he snaps angrily, leaning forward again. “Don’t feed me that bullshit. Tell me the truth. Tell me about Riley.”

My heart’s in my throat and I think I might puke. I’m shivering from the cold and I desperately wish Calvino were here so he could hold my hand.

“Riley is my cousin,” I say slowly and decide I can’t avoid this, so I might as well tell him some of the truth. “She’s dead.”

“That’s right,” he says, calming somewhat. “Riley is dead.”

“She was dating a guy named Louie. Someone if your organization. I came out here to find him and kill him and get my revenge for Riley. That’s the truth.”

He lets out a soft laugh and shakes his head, looking truly bewildered. “Does Calvino know?”

“Most of it.”

“And yet he brought you around anyway. Fascinating. What was he thinking?”

“I’m not sure.” I grind my teeth trying to come up with some way to wiggle out of this, but I don’t think there’s an easy solution. The more I say, the more obvious it’ll be that Calvino had a hand in everything I’ve done so far.

“Here’s the thing I bet you don’t know yet.” Vince pushes back his chair and stands. He walks a few feet away and begins to pace from side to side. I get a good look at my surroundings for the first time: bare stone floor, bare stone walls, with several racks filled with bottles. I’m in a wine cellar, a fancy rich people wine cellar. There’s a drain in the middle of the floor, and I wonder how many people have bled into that over the years.

“I met your cousin,” he says, not looking at me, and I feel like I’m frozen, like I was thrown onto the ice and left to die. “She was a pretty girl, although there are a lot of pretty girls in this town. But still, there was something special about her, although I think you know that already, don’t you? Riley was interesting, and my men didn’t really appreciate her, not really, although I kept her far away from them as much as I could. Still, Louie was a good excuse, a loyal soldier, and smart enough to keep his hands to himself.” Vince stops and looks at me with a deep frown. “Louie didn’t kill your cousin.”

I don’t know what to say. I open my mouth but there are no words, and my fingertips are tingling probably because the blood flow to my hands is cut off. I try to stand, but I don’t have the strength.

He knew Riley. He’s talking like he knew her, truly knew her, not just as some passing girlfriend of a soldier but as an actual person in his life. He knew her and I don’t understand how or why but the fear is so sharp it’s slicing through my insides, tearing me to ribbons.

“How do you know?” I finally manage to get out and my voice sounds like a croak.

Vince doesn’t even look at me. He just keeps pacing back and forth. “There were too many eyes on her and she knew too much. That’s the problem with my family, as soon as you get close, you know too much. Most of the guys, they take loyalty

oaths, they follow the old codes of omerta, but Riley? She was just some damn girl trying to survive in a town that wanted nothing more than to smash its jaws down and rip out her throat. I wanted her for one job and one job only, but that was too damn much.”

“Vince. Please. Who killed my cousin?”

He stops pacing and glares. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Why the hell do you need to know? Riley’s fucking gone and she’s not coming back.” He takes a few steps toward me. “What do you want with my family, Grace? Why is Calvino with you? What are you doing here?”

I feel desperate, my heart racing, my mouth dry, and I’m so tired I can barely speak, but Vince knows who really killed Riley. He seems to know and I need him to tell me, otherwise my entire life’s been worthless, my entire existence has been for nothing. Even if I’m going to die soon, at least I can die knowing the truth. He said he needed her for *a job*, but Riley didn’t mention working with anyone, only that she was dating Louie. Vince thinks that was a lie, a cover, a front for something else, but god, what?

What did you get yourself into Riley?

*Don’t worry about me, girlie, worry about yourself.* Riley’s voice in my head. Always there, always teasing.

But before I can beg, his phone starts ringing. He walks away, down a short hall, and answers. I hear only a slight murmur as he talks to someone on the other end and reappears after a short conversation.

“Looks like we’ll finish this chat later, Grace,” he says as he grabs the fallen hood and yanks it over my head again. I groan as fear floods me. Being blind is worse than I ever could’ve thought. “You’re hiding something from me and I will find out what it is. Take some time and think about your situation. Nobody knows you’re here but me and my most loyal men. Think, Grace. Think about how you might survive. Think about how you might still honor your cousin’s memory. When I return, I hope you have something to tell me.”

And before I can plead with him to stay, to tell me the truth, to make me understand how he knows Riley and what he had her doing, he walks off and I'm plunged into quiet blackness again.

I don't know how long it lasts. Time doesn't make much sense when I can't see much of anything and there's nothing to hear but groans, hums, and my own breathing. I'm not tied to the chair, but I know that if I get up I might never find it again, and there's no way I'm going to escape with a bag over my head and my hands bound behind my back.

I'm stuck here. I'm stuck and I'm going to die—and I don't know if I'll ever learn the truth.

It's a while before the door opens again. Enough time that my thoughts drift deeper and deeper into very grim and dark territory as I contemplate my death and imagine myself finally being with Riley once again. *No way, girlie, you gotta stay breathing, at least for me.* But the Riley in my head is wrong for once.

I'm ready to go. This is the end.

Calvino is my only regret. If I could do anything, I'd go back and spend another night with him, or at least I'd apologize for running the way I did. We had something real, and I was impulsive when I disappeared and went to Damon's place, and now I'll never know what could've been.

That hurts the most. If I didn't have Riley dragging me back to hell, if I could somehow move on and be a normal, complete person, maybe I could have a decent life with Calvino. But it's not possible for me because I'm so twisted and shattered, and too much of my life back home was a misery. Riley was the only shining light in my otherwise bleak daily existence, and no matter how hard I try to love and be loved, all that's left is a hollow pit in my chest where my heart's supposed to be.

For a long time, I've only been able to imagine filling that hollowness with revenge, but maybe I should've tried to fill it with Calvino instead.

Now I'll never get the chance.

Footsteps come closer. I'm breathing fast and hard. I'm so afraid of saying something that might hurt the people I care about, and I don't know how long I can last if Vince decides to hurt me. Tears roll down my cheeks, hot and wet, and the hood feels damp when it's ripped off my head.

I blink rapidly at the face staring at me and a spike of dread fills my veins.

"Hello, Grace," Rella says, grinning.

# Chapter 25



## *Calvino*

I spend the night driving around LA looking for Grace, but she doesn't turn up anywhere. I drift past all the local haunts, anywhere I think Louie might be hiding, and even check out a few hotels.

"I've got a few guys looking, but so far there's nothing," Diego says over a steaming coffee in the front room of a cafe I own downtown. "I asked the girls, but none of them have heard from her."

"Send some guys to check their places anyway just in case they're being stupidly loyal."

Diego nods. "Good thinking."

"I fucked up, Diego." I take a long sip of the too-hot drink and let it burn my tongue and throat. "I never should've told her about Louie, at least not until I was ready to do something about it."

"You thought she needed to know. There's nothing wrong with that."

"But I could've done it better, maybe had some of the girls around or something. I should've figured out a way to keep her from running off at least."

Diego gives me a long look, and if anyone in this world understands what I'm going through, it's him. He's been with me since we were kids, since the bad old days of that awful hellish boarding school where everyone thought they were better than the pair of us and maybe they were right, but we

fought and kicked their asses anyway. He knows I've never felt like this for a woman before, and the fact that I'm aching so damn much for Grace to come back says all there is to say.

"You can't let yourself come unwound," he says quietly, leaning forward in his seat. "You love her, don't you? You want to do the right thing?"

I close my eyes and take a long breath before I answer. "Yeah, Diego, I love her."

And the words ring true: for the first time in my life, I love someone other than myself and, in a way, I never thought it was possible. It fills me, and it fucking hurts, but it makes me sure that breathing for another day is worth the effort to stay alive.

"Good. Then we'll find her and we'll make this right. I'll be honest, if someone had said to me a year ago that you'd fall for some farm girl from West Virginia, I would've laughed my ass off. But here we are."

"She's not a farm girl, more like a coal-miner's daughter."

"Even worse. I've got my guys on it. We'll keep looking. We'll find her."

I nod to him and take another sip of coffee to cover my emotions. I feel like I'm out of control and the idea that Grace is out there somewhere lost and angry and confused, hunting down a psychopathic killer, is like a constant gunshot wound in my throat. I want to scream and rip this place to pieces and the only thing keeping me together right now is Diego's friendship.

He's a good man, and I try to remind myself to give him a fucking raise when this is through.

"Let me check in with the boys and I'll let you know what they say." Diego nods to me as he stands and walks off, disappearing outside. I watch him through the window as he starts making phone calls.

God, Grace, why am I such a fool sometimes?

I should've been prepared for this, and yet it feels like a sudden shock. I knew she'd react badly and yet I went ahead and told her anyway, and now if she's hurt or worse, it's going to be my damn fault.

My phone rings. It's a little past six in the morning and there aren't many people that would reach out at this hour. Damon's name shows up on the screen and my stomach's a cold, empty pit as I pick up.

"Damon," I say, "you're calling early."

"Calvino. I figured you'd be awake."

"What's going on?" I can hear the uncertainty and the fear in his voice.

"You're going to be pissed. Let me just say that I did what I thought I had to do."

"Damon." I stop walking and stare at the counter, my mind running through a thousand scenarios all at once. "What happened?"

"Grace is with Vince."

I nearly collapse then and there. She's with Vince? Fucking Vince? This could only be worse if Louie had her, and even then, not by much.

"How do you know?"

"She showed up here and I called him to come get her. He told me he was looking to talk to her and I just—"

"You sold her out to him," I say and a savage growl escapes my lips. Rage runs hot through my body and I'm going to kill Damon, I'm going to cut his throat and bleed him like a pig. No, like a rat, because he's a worthless rodent to me now.

"I didn't know he'd take her. He told me yesterday he planned on having a chat with her and when she showed up at my place, I called him right away. It was a peace offering. I thought I was doing the right thing."

"You thought fucking wrong, Damon. Why would you call Vince, of all people, and not me?"

“Because I figured if she was showing up alone, she was running from someone, and that someone was probably you.” He pauses and his voice drops quieter. “She was talking about her cousin, Riley. I guess you told her about Louie.”

“That’s why she ran away. She wants to hunt him down and I told her she can’t. But now none of that matters, because Vince has her.”

“Why does Vince want her at all? I don’t understand what’s happening here. I thought she was just your girlfriend. I thought Vince wanted to discuss something trivial, not bag her and drag her off.”

I release a pained grunt. “He bagged her?”

“Hood and all. I’m sorry, Cal. I never would’ve called him if I knew.”

I hold the phone down and close my eyes, breathing hard. Sweat drenches my under arms as I imagine Vince pulling Grace away with a black hood wrapped tight over her beautiful face. It’s a nightmare, pure and simple, worse than any nightmare I’ve ever had—and this one actually happened. That bastard, that sick fucking bastard. All at once, I hate him with a force I’ve never felt before. If she’s hurt, he’s dead.

I raise the phone back up. “When did they leave?”

“Not too long ago. I should’ve called you first, I just didn’t know.”

“You’ve done enough, Damon. Just stay put and don’t get involved anymore.”

“Cal, wait. What are you gonna do? Why did Vince drag Grace off?”

I hang up the phone, because fuck him.

I don’t know what I’m going to do about Damon. I’m too angry to think clearly right now, but I’m pretty sure I’m going to drive over to his place and put a bullet in his head when I’m done with everything. He never should’ve called Vince, that stupid bastard, even if he didn’t think Vince would hurt her. Clearly, something’s going on that he doesn’t understand.

God, Vince has Grace. I whirl away and Diego's standing in the doorway.

"What's happening?" he asks, face hard.

"That was Damon. Vince has Grace."

He pales slightly and steps forward. "That's not good, is it?"

I shake my head. "No, it's not."

"Calvino, what are you and Grace up to?"

I don't move. I'm buzzing with nervous energy and all I want to do is drive to the Sandtrap, burst in through the door, and start killing everyone in my way. But I know that's not the solution to my problem.

I take a calming breath and meet Diego's eye.

"I think Vince killed my mother and my father, and I wanted Grace to prove it."

Diego blinks rapidly and takes a step back. "Holy shit. Are you kidding me?"

"I think the accident wasn't an accident. I think the fire was a coverup, and something terrible happened that night. Charlie's the only person that was there who might possibly say something, and so it was Grace's job to get the truth from her. Things were going well until I fucked it all up."

"Well, god damn," Diego says and slumps down into a chair, rubbing his face. "Okay, so you and Grace were trying to find out the truth about your parents dying. Why would Vince take her then?"

"He's been suspicious from the start. I think he remembers Grace drugging him that night at the club, but he's not sure about it. I think he's starting to put it all together, and now he's going to torture her until she tells him the truth."

"That explains Juniper. She went through Grace's phone and Grace beat the crap out of here."

I snort once. "Yeah, she told me that."

“I bet Juniper saw something in Grace’s texts and told Vince about it. That’s probably why he took her.”

I close my eyes and rack my brain, trying to remember what we messaged about back and forth, until it hits me: early on, she asked me questions about the fire and I answered them. I deleted those texts, but what if she didn’t and Juniper read them? It’d look suspicious as hell.

And if I were Vince and I learned that Grace was texting me about that night, the night I killed my father, I’d start to spiral.

I might start acting paranoid and angry.

I might lash out and kidnap someone.

Fuck, it’s all making sense. I begin to pace back and forth as Diego watches me.

“Bring the guys back,” I say as a plan starts to form. “Get anyone loyal to me off the streets. I can’t promise they’ll be safe right now.”

“I’ll make the calls.”

“And you’d better hunker down too. Don’t bother opening Crystal Lake. Tell the girls to stay home, keeps their doors locked, and don’t go out. Everyone except for Juniper, she can go play in fucking traffic for all I care.”

“Understood.” He raises his phone, looking grim. “What are you going to do?”

“Get Grace back. No matter what it takes.”

# Chapter 26

## *Grace*

**R**ella helps me up and cuts the zip-ties from my wrists. I groan with relief and rub the raw, cut skin as she hurries to the far hall and pokes her head out.

“All clear,” she whispers as she returns and takes my arm. “Are you sure you’re okay? Vince didn’t hurt you?”

I shake my head. “He didn’t get a chance.”

“Perfect.” She grins at me. “Susi’s a really good mimic.”

I look at her blankly for a second then cover my mouth to keep from laughing. “She made that phone call?”

“Damn right she did. She pretended to be one of his top Capo’s wife and made it sound like there’s some emergency. Vince is probably halfway across LA right now and if we’re lucky and traffic is bad, we got some more time. But still, we’d better hurry.”

“Susi’s helping too? Why are you doing this?”

Rella shrugs a little. “It wasn’t my call if I’m honest, but I like you, Grace. And I hate the idea of my brother torturing you down in our wine cellar. Do you have any idea how hard it’s going to be to drink wine after that? No thanks. I’ll admit this is not purely altruistic.”

“If this wasn’t your idea, then whose was it?”

Rella only grins and tugs me along. “You’ll see.” We hurry down the hall and reach the door, and climb up a flight of wooden steps. Rella’s trying to be quiet, but it’s like every board is loose and creaks with maximum volume. I cringe with



fear and grimace the whole time, trying to figure out why the hell Rella's helping me.

She's a member of the Manzini family. I know we got along and I genuinely like her and Susi, but why would she move against her brother to let me go free? There have to be cameras all over this place so he'll figure out that it was her eventually. Why risk herself for me?

I don't fully understand it, and I wish she'd stop to explain. But I get the feeling that there's no time to waste, and I'm so nervous I feel like I might pass out at any moment. It's like I'm being given a second chance at life, and I don't want to waste it this time. I keep thinking of Calvino, his lips, his arms, and the safety I feel when he's around.

At the top of the steps, Charlie is crouched in the shadows and looking around wildly. She beams at me when we approach and gives me a quick hug as we step into the hallway just above the basement stairs.

"Are you okay?" she whispers. "Did he hurt you?"

I shake my head. "Aside from a bag over my head, I'm fine."

Her face darkens. "I've seen them drag men in here with the bag on. They rarely come back out."

I feel the blood drain from my face and I only stare at the floor.

"We can scare the shit out of her later," Rella says softly. "Susi's keeping an eye on the driveway in case Vince or someone else comes back early, so we'd better hurry. And to answer your question from earlier, you can thank Charlie for this, by the way."

I blink at her. "Really? You?"

"Really, me." Charlie grins. "Wasn't a hard decision really. You're nice and my husband's an asshole, so here we are."

I hug her tight and she hugs me back. I hold on for a moment and I feel a strange warmth in my chest—the warmth of having a real friend.

“What’s the plan from here?” I ask, looking around as I pull away from the embrace. The hallway is plain with few decorations and in a part of the house I don’t recognize. I’m guessing it’s a service area mainly for staff and for Vince’s victims.

“I’ve got a car,” Rella says. “I’m getting you out back, around the pool, and into the garage. From there, I’ll drive us out of here, but you’ll have to hide in the trunk.”

“Oh, great, a comfortable ride.”

Rella grins. “Better you’re alive in a trunk than dead in a trunk. Come on, let’s get moving before brother dearest returns.”

“Wait,” I say, grabbing her arm. “Isn’t he going to blame you?”

“I can handle Vince.”

I glance at Charlie and the fear in her eyes suggests Rella’s wrong, but I don’t have a chance to argue. Rella hurries away and marches down the hall, and I have to walk fast to stay close as Charlie brings up the rear.

If there’s typically anyone in this part of the house, we don’t come across them. I hear the sound of the kitchens nearby and feel the heat of the ovens, but we don’t spot any cooks. Rella pauses a few times and waits, listening for something, before motioning for us to keep going. The walls are beige and bare, and the floor is all green vinyl tiles like in a hospital, and it’s like we’re in an entirely different world—the total opposite of the opulence of the main house.

We reach another door and Rella pauses and looks around before she opens it. Sunshine spills inside and a warm gust of fresh air blows across my skin and I blink away the sudden painful transition from the gloom of inside to the too-bright outdoors, pulling back. There’s too much light after being stuck under that hood for as long as I was.

“This is the hard part,” Rella says, turning back to me. “Stay close and don’t do anything stupid. If I tell you to run, you’d better run, okay?”

I look at Charlie. “What about you? What are you going to do?”

She smiles sadly and shakes her head. “I have to get back up to Emilio. He’s with the nanny, but I don’t want to leave him alone when Vince gets back and finds out you’re missing.”

I stare at her for a long moment before I grab her and pull her into a tight hug. I hold her hard and feel a single sob wrench itself from my stomach, and when I pull back, she’s crying too.

An idea hits me suddenly like a wave. “Come with me.”

“What?” She seems confused, like she can’t imagine a life beyond the one she’s trapped inside of.

“Come with me. Run with me. We’ll go to Calvino, he’ll get you out—”

“I don’t need to get out.” She laughs but there’s no mirth behind it. She glances at Rella. “My son’s here. My husband’s here. My life... I don’t need to run.”

“Charlie.” I touch her arm and Rella’s staring outside like she’d rather be anywhere else in the world. “I know what he’s doing. I know you’re going through something. You can leave with me. I swear we’ll help you—”

“No,” she says, pulling away, and I see the fear in her eyes, that same fear I used to feel whenever The Fist would come home in a particularly bad mood. It’s the fear of a man’s wrath, a man’s desire to kill and break and hurt, the fear of a true sadist.

She’s trapped. I can see the cage all around her—bars of her own devising. I want to break her free and take her from this place, but I don’t think she’ll ever get away until she’s ready.

I pull her into another hug, this one fierce and brief. “When I’m away, call me. Come see me. You can tell me the truth about everything then and I swear I’ll help.”

“How do you know there’s a truth to tell?”

“Come on, Charlie. It’s written all over you.” I kiss her cheek and wipe a tear away. “Find me. I want to help.”

She only nods and walks away like she's forcing herself to move.

"Let's get going," Rella says softly and tugs on my wrist.

I follow her outside. I have to squint and let my vision adjust. I wipe the tears from my eyes and steady myself as we hurry around the back of the house, flitting from tree to tree, bush to bush, trying to stay as quiet and unobtrusive as possible. The pool is a problem—there's not much cover around it, so we hurry as fast as we can and skirt along the back as a single inflatable giraffe floats along the gently lapping water.

It's quiet. Nobody calls out, nobody says a word. We reach the far side of the pool and the garage is there, the back door beckoning, and inside is freedom and Calvino and—

"Hey, you two!"

Rella freezes and I look back.

Two big guys in dark suits are walking fast from the back door toward us.

"Guards," Rella hisses. "Vince's men. Run!"

She yanks on my wrist so hard it nearly dislocates my shoulder. I sprint after her, hurrying hard and breathing rapidly. The guards shout again and chase after us, but we're close to the garage and reach the door before they can catch up. Rella yanks it open and throws herself inside as her dark hair billows out behind her. I follow, dodging around tools and storage boxes, as the smell of oil and exhaust and grease and humid concrete fills my nostrils.

The guards outside shout as Rella hurries up to a bright red convertible Mazda Miata, this tiny little thing with a round snout and only two seats. The top's down, and the leather seems to glisten expectantly, like it's waiting for me to dive inside and wants to be driven so desperately it hurts.

"This is your car?" I ask, gaping at it.

"Don't stare. Jump in! No time for the trunk trick, so I hope you're a good driver."

I yank the door open and get behind the wheel. I look around for the keys but they're nowhere to be seen, and Rella's busy hitting the garage door opener. The door clatters up as the guards burst into the garage, look around briefly, then spot me.

"Rella!"

She yanks a set of keys hanging on the wall free and tosses them to me. I reach out and manage to snag them from the air, barely grabbing them with the tips of my fingers. I pull them down and shove the biggest into the ignition.

A guard reaches me and grabs my hair over the door. I scream as I turn the car on and the engine roars to life. Rella's shouting, the guards are shouting, but I can't understand what they're saying as the guy that has me pulls my hair and yanks my head from side to side like he's trying to break my neck. I can't reach the gear shift, can't get the car out of park, and can't reach the gas pedal. It feels like he's going to rip my head off and tear all my hair from my skull and I'm screaming in pain and yelling at the top of my lungs when a huge blast echoes through the room.

The guard gripping my hair suddenly releases me and something wet splatters against my clothes.

I look over and the guard's gone. His partner's standing there staring with an open mouth and I follow his gaze: the man's lying on the ground in a puddle of thick red blood. His head is a mess of bone fragments and brain, and I vaguely recognize his hooked nose and dark eyes, but half his face is missing, replaced by meat and gristle and shattered eyeball goop.

I look up at the other guard, a young pale guy in his early twenties with a nose ring and tattoos, and he opens his mouth to say something when his skull explodes followed by another loud boom. The guard crumples down to the ground, hitting it with a dull, wet thud.

Calvino comes forward, a gun held out, sweeping it over the garage. He looks down at me and I see the cold gaze of a killer in his expression, so empty and clinical, as he reaches across and turns off the engine.

Rella's standing at the key hook with her hands over her ears looking horrified. She stares from Calvino to the guards and back again, and cringes against the wall like she's afraid her brother's going to turn his gun on her next.

But he doesn't. Instead, he shoves the weapon into his waistband, pulls the door to the Miata open, and scoops me up into his arms. He holds me tight against his chest and hugs me so hard it hurts.

All at once my numbness breaks and I'm basking in Calvino's warmth.

"You're here," I say, breathless as he puts me down and takes my hand. "What are you doing here?"

"Damon told me Vince took you. I've been staking the house out all morning when I heard the yelling."

"You killed them." I want to look back at the bodies, but I can't bring myself to do it.

His face hardens. "They hurt you. Nobody fucking hurts you." He squeezes my hands. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. But Calvino, what about Vince? He'll know."

"I don't give a shit about Vince." He turns to Rella. "Don't look so damn scared, little sister. You know what kind of men your brothers are."

"I knew they were like this, but you?" She's pale and trembling, but she does her best to smile still. She's so damn brave. "I guess I should've realized you're all the same."

"I'm taking you home," he whispers to me, kisses my neck, and pulls me from the garage. "Thanks for the help, Rella."

"Anytime," she says vaguely, sounding like she's about to float up into the atmosphere at any second.

His SUV is parked midway up the driveway. He rips the back door open and helps me inside before he slams it and gets behind the driver's wheel.

"You didn't have to come back for me," I say softly, reaching up to touch his arm.

“Yes, I did,” he says, turns the wheel, whips the car around, and blazes down the driveway and away from the Sandtrap.

# Chapter 27



## *Grace*

I climb up to the passenger seat and tremble as he holds my hand the whole ride back. We don't talk about our fight or the way I ran from him—we only sit in silence and I try not to think about those guys and their heads exploding in gore or the calm, determined look on Calvino's face just after he murdered two living human beings. I try not to think about how much trouble Rella's going to get in or the danger Charlie's still in or the horrible thrum of energy between my legs. I try not to think about anything but Calvino and my freedom and what I'm going to do with what little time we have left.

Because Vince is coming and he's going to burn us to the ground.

"Where are we going?" I ask quietly as Calvino navigates into a part of the city I'm not familiar with.

"Somewhere safe." He doesn't elaborate and I don't need him to.

If Calvino says it's safe, then it's safe.

He parks outside of a hardware store that looks like it's been out of business for a decade, although a faded *open* sign hangs on the door. He leads me to an unmarked entrance, unlocks it with a big brass ring, and we head up a flight of stairs. Another door is at the top, and beyond that is a simple apartment, a little kitchen, a living room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom, furnished with nothing more than the necessities penned in by bare white walls.

“I own the store downstairs,” he says as I drift to the window and look out, half expecting to find a bunch of mafia guys standing across the street. Instead, there’s only a quiet house, some trees, some grass, and beat-up old sedans. “I own a lot of places my family doesn’t know about. Places that I find useful.”

“Is this like a safe house?”

“Pretty much. It’s a place I set up that nobody knows about aside from Diego, so Vince won’t be able to find us here. He doesn’t even know about the hardware store, much less about this apartment.”

I turn from the window and stare at Calvino and my heart does a double-patter. He’s looking back at me like he doesn’t know if he wants to smother me or kiss me and I want him to do both. I take a couple steps forward, but he rushes to me, wraps me into his arms, and he bites my lower lip before crushing my mouth with his.

I release a whimper and kiss him back with all the need I’ve felt since the moment I ran away from him what feels like a lifetime ago. I kiss him and the memory of that hood over my head and that dank basement air grazing my skin and the utter terror I felt as Vince sat there and looked at me like I was nothing more than a bag of meat and flesh—and I focus on Calvino’s strong arms and the heat that radiates from his body, and I need him more than I ever imagined I could, more than I ever knew was possible. I stagger backwards under his weight and he pins me against the wall, his hands moving along my body, pulling up my shirt, yanking it off, tossing it aside.

I groan as he unhooks my bra and palms my breasts. My nipples are stiff beneath his fingers and I move my hips, rhythmically grinding against him, practically panting with want.

“You shouldn’t have left me,” he whispers as he bites my lip and slowly unbuttons my shorts. He slides them down my hips and I gasp as he presses himself between my legs. “You never should’ve left me, little thief. I wasn’t finished with you.”

“It was stupid, I know.”

“You wanted to do right by your cousin. I understand that, but Grace, there’s too much happening right now to take stupid risks. And god, you don’t know how bad it hurts knowing Vince made you suffer.”

“I know, Calvino, I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry I fucked up and didn’t trust you and I’m sorry I made you do what you did back there at the Sandtrap.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” he says, gripping my hair and pulling my head back. “Little thief, don’t you get it? I’ll kill a hundred men if it means I get to keep you safe and sound. None of them matter and you’re all I need.”

He slips a hand down the front of my panties and I moan into his kiss. Heat ripples along my skin as he teases me, slips two fingers inside, and rolls my clit in soft circles. I wiggle my hips and arch my back and groan as he works me, the bastard, the strong bastard, and it’s like a stake through my brain, those words—I’m all that matters to him and he’ll kill for me if that’s what it takes.

I pull him against my lips as I bite his shoulder and whimper his name. I know we’re in hiding, but I can’t help myself, I can’t stay quiet, I won’t when he’s touching me like this. His fingers are like heaven and combined with his mouth, his body, and what happened earlier, I can’t hold back—I come like a lightning storm, my skin peppered with goosebumps and my muscles spasming with delight. He grips me and turns me around, pushing me harder against the wall, and his hand comes down firmly on my bare ass just as the orgasm begins to dim.

I gasp in shock as the pain meets pleasure in a wild convergence in my mind. He kisses my shoulder and grips my hips. I look back as he undresses, spanks me again, undresses some more, until he’s naked and his cock is like a redwood tree, hard and massive against my bare, dripping pussy.

He spanks me roughly until my ass is tingling and bright pink and grabs my hair, pulling me back against him. His other hand grips my breasts and rolls his knuckles around my

nipples. “Promise you’ll never run away again,” he whispers. “Promise you’re mine.”

“I promise,” I moan, blind and crazy with bliss. “I swear it.”

“Your dripping pussy’s all mine. Your hard nipples, your soft lips. At night, when the moon’s high in the sky, you’re all mine. During the afternoon, the morning, you’re all mine. When you wake and when you sleep, when you dream and when you laugh, you’re mine. Say it.”

“Whenever you want me, I’m yours.”

“I want you all the time, Grace.” He bites my shoulder and spreads my ass wide before he presses his cock against my dripping pussy. “I can’t stop thinking about you. When you’re not here, it’s like I lost a limb, like I can’t see or breathe or think. I won’t lose you again.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” I look back over my shoulder just as he thrusts himself inside of me, and I moan at the pleasure and the pain, and his eyes burn into mine like he can’t get enough of the look on my face. He fucks me slowly from behind and roughly pins an arm behind my back as he takes me, spanking me, fucking me, deeper and deeper, this wild man, this massive beast.

His hand wraps around my hips and he rolls a finger along my clit as he fucks me faster, my breasts shaking with every thrust, and his name falls from my mouth. I can’t help it, I pant his name, I moan it, I say it like it’s an incantation or a magic spell. “Calvino, god, yes, Calvino,” like his name will protect me from the monsters that want to do me harm.

He purrs in my ear and brushes his teeth along my neck. “I love the way you feel. I love the way you moan. I love your back and your ass and the way you laugh and the way you fucking come. I need you, Grace, I need all of you.” He takes me harder, faster, but before I can reach another height and break into a million little orgasm-ridden pieces, he pulls back and drags me into the back of the apartment.

I’m dripping wet when he shoves me onto the queen bed in an otherwise empty bedroom. He drops to his knees and his

tongue licks and sucks my pussy, lapping me up, driving me up to the edge of absolute madness before he climbs onto the bed and takes me again. He spreads my legs wide and fucks me, plunging deeper and deeper, and we're moving together, writhing, grinding, moaning, my flesh, his flesh, my pussy his to do with as he pleases, and he fucks me until I'm grabbing the headboard, my fingers digging into the wood.

"I want to feel you come for me, Grace," he says. "I want to see your face." He kisses me and bites a nipple. "I want to taste it when you're done, my little thief. God, you grip me and won't let me go and it's heaven."

"Then keep fucking me," I pant, moaning, staring into his eyes. "Keep fucking me, Calvino, and don't you ever stop, don't you ever stop again."

He does as I ask, fucks me deep and rough and I come in a blinding flash, my entire body going taut, and as I finish, he pulls out and licks me just like he promised, lapping me up, rolling his tongue around my folds.

Instead of fucking me again, I push him back and take his cock into my mouth. I lick myself from his thick shaft and suck his tip, suck him faster and faster, wanting him so badly it almost hurts, like this is the only thing that can keep the fear and pain at bay. If I can please him, if I can make him come, if I can do something right for once in my life then maybe I can solve all the mistakes that led me to this point.

He grips my hair and fills my mouth and I swallow him, every inch of him as he comes on my tongue.

We collapse onto the bed, sticky wet with sweat. He holds me tight and I say nothing. I try not to think about Rella, and Susi, and Charlie, and those two dead guards, and everyone else, but it's impossible. Too many ugly things flit through my mind, and it was only Calvino's body that kept it all at bay for so long.

He doesn't say anything when I start to cry. He only holds me tighter and strokes my hair for a while, and as I slowly calm down, he whispers comforting things into my ear.

“Do you really think we can get through this?” I ask and I’m not sure I want him to answer.

He nods and stares into my eyes. “I know we can.”

“But Vince. He’s going to find you. He knows you killed those men.”

“I’ll handle him.”

“What about Rella?”

He hesitates and shakes his head. “She’ll be okay. He wouldn’t hurt her.”

“Are you sure?”

He doesn’t look sure. Instead, he touches my cheek and kisses me gently. “I won’t let him.”

I nod and curl up tighter against him. “Vince said something when I was in that basement. Something confusing.”

“What was it?”

“He said Louie didn’t kill Riley. He talked about Riley like he knew her, and said something about hiring her for a job, and how Louie was just a cover?” I shake my head and everything’s a confused jumble in my mind. “I don’t really get it.”

“Hired her for a job,” he says quietly, and I can tell he’s skeptical.

“I swear, Calvino, he was acting like he knew Riley and like the whole Louie thing wasn’t real. What the hell could that mean?”

“A lot of things. Vincent uses people for the family all the time, and maybe Riley got wrapped up in one of his schemes. Maybe the Louie thing really was misdirection, but I have to wonder why the hell he’d do that, like what’s the point of giving her a fake boyfriend?”

He sounds troubled and it does nothing to ease the worry in my guts, but at least I have him now. At least I have his arms around my body and the smell of his musk in my nose and the sight of his tattooed skin in front of my eyes.

I can hold on to that for a while.

My phone rings in the other room. I decide to ignore it and hold on to Calvino, because I feel like if I let go right now then I'll drown in all this misery and uncertainty. But whoever's calling keeps ringing over and over until Calvino finally gets up, fetches the phone, and tosses it to me.

Charlie's name is on the screen. He nods once like I should answer.

"Hello? Charlie?"

"Grace." She's whispering but her relief is obvious. "God, I was so worried when I heard the gunshots."

"Is Rella okay?"

"She's fine. There was a lot of yelling and Vince is really, really mad, but she's okay."

"Did he hurt her?" Worry rips through my spine.

"No, no, she's locked in her room right now, but she's okay. I'm down by the pool with Emilio, and Vince is out looking for you." She takes a breath and lets it out. "Don't tell me where you are. But you're safe?"

"I'm safe. Charlie, listen. Let's meet somewhere safe. We can help you." I glance at Calvino and his face is clouded and uncertain, but I push along anyway. "Vince is lying about something. He did something with my cousin, Charlie, he knew her and gave her a job. Please, come meet me and let us help you."

Her voice is strangled, like she's fighting tears. "What did he say to you about Riley?"

"That he knew her and gave her a job. That Louie didn't kill her, but he knows who did."

She lets out a long groaning sigh. "Fuck, Grace. I'm so, so sorry. I should've said something sooner, I just—I was too scared."

"Said something about what? Charlie, what do you know?"  
Uncertainty makes my feet go numb like the blood's pooling

into my toes.

“I’ll come meet you. I have a lot to tell you and a lot of atoning to do, but I’m afraid no amount of truth and tears will wash away my sins. Just tell me where to meet you.”

I look back at Calvino and quickly tell him the situation. He sighs, rubs his face, and gives me the address of one of his coffee shops. Charlie seems to know the place.

“Tomorrow,” she says, hurrying now. “Tomorrow at three. I’ll be there, okay?”

“Charlie, tell me what you know.”

“I’m sorry, Grace. Tomorrow. I’ll tell you tomorrow. Don’t call or text, it’s too dangerous.”

With that, she hangs up.

I stare at the phone and let it drop onto the bed.

Calvino hesitantly touches me and I instantly melt into his embrace. He hugs me tight and we say nothing for a long while before he pushes my hair aside and kisses my shoulder.

“I don’t know what they did, Grace, but we’ll figure it out. I promise we will.”

I nod once and fight the tears. “I need to shower,” I manage to say. I want to wash that basement off me.

He laughs softly. “I’ll join you. Come on.”

I let him lead me into the bathroom, both of us still naked, and he turns on the water. I look at him in the mirror and marvel at his body and I wonder, I really wonder, if maybe we should skip that meeting with Charlie, if maybe we should run away from this place and disappear somewhere safe and live together, just the two of us.

We could be happy if we really wanted to be, and all I have to do is ask.

But a thousand reasons make me keep my mouth shut, and I step into the shower with him when it’s steaming hot, and the burning water washes away my fear.



# Chapter 28

## *Grace*

**T**he coffee shop is small and cute with lots of wood, house plants, thrift shop mugs and cups and plates, and the constant steam and hiss of an espresso machine. The rich, bitter smell of roasting beans wafts through the otherwise empty room, and if the employees recognize Calvino as the man that owns the place, they say nothing about it.

He seems anxious as he sits with his coffee. He keeps glancing from me to his watch, to his phone, and back again like something's going to change. He rests his hand on my thigh, but that doesn't stop my knee from bouncing as I watch the windows, waiting for Charlie to appear, but three comes and goes with nothing.

"Are you sure she got the right place?" he asks quietly and I know he's wondering how long we should wait before we run. This meeting is dangerous as hell and it took about an hour of begging to convince him to go through with it.

"I'm positive. She definitely knew the place."

"Diego's outside making sure nobody sneaks up, but I don't like that she's not yet here."

"Give her some time."

He squeezes my leg and grunts in response.

I sip my iced coffee and wish I had something to do with all this excess energy, and after another few minutes of painful waiting, the front door opens and there's Charlie, looking haggard and tired but mostly herself.

I hop up and hurry over. I give her a big hug and she hugs me back and looks at me with a fake smile, and I note the bags under her eyes and her frizzy hair. “How are you?” she asks, and I wonder I should be the one asking that instead.

“I’m fine, Calvino’s taking care of me.”

She smiles past me toward him. “Lovely to see you, brother-in-law.”

“Sister-in-law.” He nods to the chairs and she folds herself into one. I sit across from her and lean forward on my elbows.

“Do you want anything?”

Charlie waves that away. “I don’t have time. I can only stay for a little while. Vince thinks I’m out food shopping.”

“Don’t you have staff for that?” I ask and glance at Calvino, who frowns in response.

“We do, which is why it’s such a weak excuse, but I’m not exactly in my right mind right now.” She rubs her face and tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes, and her laugh is empty and bitter. “I’m sorry, Grace, I really am. I should’ve told you everything from the start, only it’s just—” She stops and tears gather, and I can tell she’s struggling to hold them back.

I reach out on impulse and touch her hand. “You’re here now.”

She nods and takes a breath to steady herself. I know what she’s going through or something like it, and I’m doing my best Riley impression right now. Back then, my cousin was the only person in the world that could make me feel better when it felt like the whole world wanted to crush me under its boots, and I want to do the same for Charlie, even if I’m terrified that what she’s about to tell me will change everything for good.

“I knew your cousin,” she says and meets my gaze. “She was such a good person and I’m so sorry she’s gone.”

I lean back in my seat, open my mouth to ask a billion questions, but nothing comes out. I’m in shock, and the idea that Charlie knew Riley never really occurred to me, and it still seems fake, impossible.

Calvino speaks for me. “How? When? I’ve never met Riley.” He sounds as confused as I feel.

“It was a while back, before Emilio. Riley was our first option. I guess we never imagined that it might be Vince, and we both assumed it was my fault, or at least Vince kept saying it was my fault over and over again, and he said he met this young girl, new in town, trying to be an actress like everyone else, but she was willing for the right amount of money and—” She’s rambling, telling the story in bits and pieces, and I can’t follow it.

“Charlie, slow down,” I say and look at her with my mouth hanging open, my pulse racing, trying to fit my cousin into the jagged half-narrative Charlie’s spilling out. “What do you mean, your fault?”

She chews on her lip and tries to reset herself. “We couldn’t get pregnant. We tried and tried and tried, but we couldn’t do it.”

I think back to the first night I met Emilio, that cute little one-year-old. “That’s right, you told me you think he’s your miracle.”

“Riley was our first option. Vince figured since it was my fault we couldn’t conceive, he’d use Riley as a surrogate, although he refused to go through official channels. There were no doctors, no paperwork, nothing, because he said that if word leaked out, it could ruin him. And I had to believe him, because what else could I do? Can you imagine, Grace? My husband was fucking your cousin to try to get her pregnant, and he did it almost every night with her for *months* before he gave up.”

I stare at her without comprehending for a long, quiet moment as Charlie leans forward and cries into her hands. Calvino’s face is stricken and his skin is ashen, and he’s clearly as shocked as I feel. My ears buzz and ring and I can barely think straight. I try to imagine what Charlie went through, but it’s impossible. Her husband, fucking another girl. Trying to get her pregnant. It sounds like a nightmare.

“Vince was sleeping with Riley?” I say it so softly it’s like a whisper. Like I can’t connect the two things in my mind.

Charlie nods, wiping her red-rimmed eyes. “He wanted to get her pregnant. He refused to go to a doctor because he was afraid that word would get out. He’s the oldest son and he was the first in line to become Don when his father passed. He was terrified that if his rivals saw him as defective and weak, it would ruin the family and make his ascension to leadership impossible. You know how these families are, they’re like medieval kings all obsessed with lineage and bloodlines. He found Riley somehow, he never explained where, offered her huge sums of money to carry his child, and fucked her over and over again. But Grace, it didn’t work.” She chokes out the last words and starts to cry again.

I look at Calvino, at an utter loss, trying to imagine Riley new to LA and struggling to survive on what little money she could make working as a waitress, and suddenly this opportunity falls into her lap—more money than she ever dreamed, and all she’d have to do is get pregnant and have a baby for this nice couple that can’t conceive on their own. It must’ve been horrible, and hard, and sickening, but she did it because otherwise what could she have done, gone back home? There was no home for her, not after she left.

Meanwhile, Charlie suffered the indignity of it all, as Vince slept with a young pretty girl and probably enjoyed it. It must’ve been hell, all of it.

And my cousin, my poor, brave, beautiful cousin, she fucked Vince. She tried to get pregnant. And she failed.

I want to throw up.

She lied to me for so long. She sounded happy whenever she called like her secret boyfriend was taking good care of her. She even bragged about him being a part of the Manzini mafia—like that was a good thing. And now small things begin to make sense: the way she dodged any details about the guy, the way she refused to say his name, the way she was quick to get off the phone if I started asking too many questions.

She was terrified. And she was desperately trying to fool me and maybe herself into thinking she was happy.

God, Riley, why wouldn't you just tell me the truth? *Would you have really understood back then, girlie? Little West Virginia Gracie never would've gotten it, you know that, come on.* I hate that my mind-Riley's right. I hate that she kept it from me to protect us both.

"That's how I knew you early on," Charlie says, wiping her face. "I mean, that's why I wanted to get closer to you, because I realized you were Riley's cousin the second we first met. It wasn't until later when you were talking about how your cousin was dead that I understood what happened. Vince told me Riley left town, that he paid her off and she went back home to West Virginia, but that's not what really went down, is it? He killed her, Grace, my husband murdered Riley because she knew too much, because he used to fuck her and couldn't get her pregnant, and so he made her disappear like she was nothing. But she wasn't nothing, she was a nice girl." She's shaking, trembling with rage, and I'm trying to process what she's saying, but it's impossible.

"How do you know it was Vince?" Calvino, my Calvino, so strong when everyone else is falling apart.

"I can't be sure. It feels like forever ago, but I do remember Vince complaining about Riley a few times, saying she was asking for more money even after we'd moved on to something else. But he never acted like it was... like it was worth killing her." She stares at me, tears running down her face, and I don't know if I want to hit her or hug her or run away and hide in the bathroom. "I'm so, so sorry, Grace. I should've told you sooner but I didn't know how. It's so terrible, so fucked up, and I don't know what I'm going to do. My husband's a killer, and I'm just... I'm so scared."

And all at once, I know what's right. I know what's important and what I need to do. It hits me like a revelation, like a spotlight shining from the clouds and it hurts so bad, so fucking bad, but I know I can't turn away just because it's hard.

*That's right, girlie. I'm gone, I'm gone and I'm not coming back. So what if I got mixed up with some bad people? I wanted to live my dream. I went for it. I failed, but at least I tried. Now what are you gonna do, let this poor girl suffer for something her husband did?* The Riley in my head smiles at me, and it feels like she's fading a bit, getting more indistinct. I want to keep her around forever but I know that's impossible, Riley can't be with me, not really.

"We'll help you," I say, nodding once to myself for strength, and Calvino doesn't look like he agrees. But I push on anyway. "We can help you, but we need your help in return. You need to swear to tell us everything you know about the night Calvino's parents died."

Charlie turns pale. She blinks rapidly and the tears keep falling, but she wipes them away. "Why would I know anything about that?" But it's obvious she's lying.

"We know you were there. Please, Charlie, this is so important. We need to know what happened to Calvino's parents." I glance at him and he's stone-faced and troubled, but I know this is right. Charlie's the key to everything and she needs our help.

I could be angry. I could rage at her and yell and scream, but it wouldn't bring Riley back and it would only damn poor Charlie to more suffering. She's been through enough and I won't sit back and let Vince claim another innocent woman just because she's married to the wrong man. I won't do it, I can't stomach it, and I'll fight and struggle and push to fix the mistakes of the past by doing better in the present.

"For my mother," Calvino says quietly, staring at Charlie. "You loved her. I know you did. My father can burn in hell for all I care, but my mother didn't deserve what happened. Please, Charlie."

She stares down at her hands and says nothing. Slowly, the tears stop, and she manages to get control of herself.

"If you can get me and Emilio away from the Sandtrap and somewhere safe, I will tell you everything. I swear I'll tell you everything."

“I have a safe house. We’re staying in it right now and there’s plenty of room for you and Emilio. From there, we can plan. I have plenty of money and resources. I can help you start over.”

Charlie nods once, battered and broken, but she’s not finished. She’s not lying down and dying and taking the abuse, and I admire her for it.

“When?” she asks, and I know this is going to happen, and I know this is right.

As much as it hurts, it’s right.

God, I miss Riley so much.

Charlie didn’t ask for Vince to do what he did. Vince killed Riley, or Vince had one of his guys do it, but either way Vince is at the center of everything.

I wish I’d stabbed him in the heart back when I drugged him and made him fall asleep—we could’ve avoided so much pain.

But revenge doesn’t matter right now. Getting Charlie and her little boy to safety matters, and everything else can follow after that.

“Keep your phone on,” Calvino says. “We’ll contact you as soon as we can.”

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you both.”

“Just stay strong, okay? Stay safe and keep it together. We’ll get you out.” I stand and walk around the table to hug her again.

It hurts, hugging her, because I know she was tangentially involved in my cousin’s death, but I can feel the sadness in her, all the hurt and all the horror, and I don’t blame her, I can’t blame her.

In so many ways, she’s me, except she’s the version of me that never escaped from my nightmare back home. She’s the version that stayed with The Fist and suffered his degradations and his humiliations and all the pain he had to offer, again and again.



Charlie will keep on suffering if we don't get her out, at least for her baby's sake.

"I shouldn't say this, but I feel like you have to know." Charlie touches my cheek and smiles slightly. "Vince isn't Emilio's father. That's why I'm going to run, more than anything else. For my baby."

She drops her hand and walks to the coffee shop door. I stand there utterly stunned. "Wait! Who is the father then?"

But it's too late. Charlie's outside and Calvino grabs my wrist before I can chase her down.

"Let her go. She'll tell us when she's ready." He pulls me against him and hugs me hard, and I can feel the anger radiating through his body, hot and sharp and intense. "Are you okay?"

"I think so. I'm numb right now, and I think this is going to hurt later, but I'm okay."

"Fucking Vince." He sounds like he's going to break this coffee shop to bits. "We'll make him pay. I promise."

"I believe you."

He kisses me for a long moment before he pulls me outside.

# Chapter 29

## *Calvino*

**W**e get our chance a week after the coffee shop meeting.

It's a quiet night a few minutes past one in the morning and the street around the Sandtrap is dead. My car is empty except for food wrappers and a big jug of water. I've been staking out the block since sundown and my back's aching from sitting still and cooped up for so long. Grace is back at the apartment, and even though she begged me to let her come with, I couldn't allow it. I couldn't risk her, not again.

The last week was a beautiful flurry of sex and planning. Every moment we spent with each other was either in bed, in the shower, on the floor in the living room, or on the couch. I fucked her and tasted every inch of her body, and together we managed to drown out all the pain and the anger through intense, mind-breaking, sweat-churning sex.

And it was heaven. It was the best week of my life, and when Diego called with a time and a date, I wanted to tell him to fuck off.

I didn't want it to end.

Being with Grace is something I never envisioned for myself. All my life I've been alone, either in my apartment or in my businesses, with only Diego as my close friend. I love my family, but I've always been an outsider with them and purposefully so—Dad set up that system where I would be the clean brother and separated from everyone else and we all

obeyed his wishes, and we still do, even with him dead and buried.

It's strange how much power our parents have.

But it had to come to this. I only hope that Charlie can escape. Her story rings through my mind like a piercing bell and I shiver at the thought of Vince fucking Grace's cousin, trying to get her pregnant, and failing again and again. Poor Charlie had to sit there and take it, probably not in the same room, but still—she knew what her husband was doing, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

In the end it amounted to nothing, just one dead girl and no baby.

But Charlie's final admission keeps bothering me. Who is Emilio's father if not Vince? She said Riley was their first option—what was their next? A sperm bank is a possibility, but I find it hard to believe Vince would be willing to raise the son of a stranger, even if it's a stranger they chose from a binder of highly qualified individuals.

Who got Charlie pregnant?

I catch a flash of headlights down the street and it pulls me from my reverie. I flash my lights back once. That's the signal—Diego's parked nearby and waiting, same as me. I glance at the clock and it's the designated time, so I slip my gun into my waistband and climb out of the car into the crisp California evening.

The Sandtrap's walls aren't far and I walk fast toward them. I cross the sidewalk, glancing around for any guards, any sign of men waiting in nearby cars, or any killers walking around the perimeter, but there's nothing. I reach the edge of the walls and keep going around, heading toward the ocean, walking through a thicket of low bushes and twigs and grass until I find the spot I'm looking for.

A dead, fallen log is pressed up close to the stone. I climb up onto it and it's just enough height to let me jump and grab the lip with ease. I hoist myself up, heart racing, and sure enough the section of wall is clear of glass—most of it is stippled with

shining shards, but I cleared this off years and years ago when I was still a teenager. This used to be how I'd sneak on and off the property without my parents knowing.

I reach the top and pause before I drop down into the shadows. Getting inside is the easy part. I don't move, waiting several heartbeats, and there's no sound from the house. I can see it up ahead at the top of a short rise, the lights like beacons in the windows.

I go toward the back of the property, keeping close to the wall and the shadows. When I'm parallel to the garage, I start in, moving from tree to tree and pausing to wait and listen for any patrolling goons. There's nothing and I manage to reach the garage and the side door.

I open it up to find blackness. I turn on my phone's flashlight and sweep it over the space—

And nearly have a heart attack when I spot Rella, Charlie, and little Emilio crouched near the Miata.

"Turn that fucking thing off," Rella hisses. "You want to get us killed?"

"Don't curse in front of my nephew," I say though I wonder if he's actually my nephew or not. I turn off the flashlight and creep inside.

Charlie smiles at me, looking wan in the moonlight. "We're ready," she says. "Are they waiting?"

"Everything's set. Diego should be in position right now. Do you have what you need?"

"I have enough for a week or two, but I'll need diapers and food and stuff soon."

"We'll take care of it." I reach out and touch Rella's arm. "Thanks for this."

She only shrugs. "After what I've seen lately, it's the least I can do. Now get the hell out of here before we get caught." She hugs Charlie and hurries off into the night, disappearing out the far door and toward the pool.

I put a finger to my lips. Charlie nods, looking brave, and hugs Emilio tight to her chest. We start out, back into the evening and down into the trees. Emilio's quiet the whole time, which is beyond lucky—he's half asleep and clearly cranky, and one bad cry could spoil the whole mission. We flit from tree to tree and reach the wall with ease.

I whistle softly, and Diego whistles back from the other side.

"Emilio first," I whisper.

Diego's hands appear at the top of the wall. I make a basket with my hands and boost Charlie up, and she manages to hand Emilio over to Diego. We wait a moment, then Diego helps Charlie up and across.

I take a deep breath and step back. "Now comes the hard part," I mumble, and run at the wall as hard as I can.

I jump up, hit it, kick off, and grab for the lip, my feet scrambling and my arms flailing. Fuck, this used to be a lot easier when I was ten years younger.

I can't get purchase and fall back down, cursing as my ankle turns. I stagger slightly and have to pace back and forth to keep myself from screaming with rage.

"You okay?" Diego asks and his voice drifts over the wall. "You need help?"

"I can do it." I take a few steps away, shake out my hands, and roll my neck. I can do this, I've done it a dozen times before. I can do it one more time.

Back at the house, lights come on.

I cursed softly as someone shouts. I can't hear what they say, but it sounds angry. Someone yells in return, a girl's voice, probably Rella. More yelling and a dog barks.

I run at the wall. My ankle hurts like hell and I'm too fucking old for this, but adrenaline burns in my veins. I kick up, leap into the air, and grab the wall's edge. I catch it and grunt as the concrete burns into my skin, and I pull myself up and shimmy my chest onto the edge as Diego helps me over from the other side.

Charlie looks terrified. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” I say and nudge them toward the street. “But we’d better run.”

More yelling. It’s louder, and as we approach the sidewalk, the gate on the driveway grinds open. Two cars come flying through, their engines churning, and I have to grab Charlie to yank her out of the way as their brakes scream and the tires burn rubber.

“Run!” Diego yells and pulls his gun.

I yank Charlie and we sprint ahead. She’s clutching Emilio and he’s crying now, screaming in utter fear. My SUV isn’t far, but the doors to the cars open and several guys jump out.

Diego opens fire. The guards scatter, get behind cover, and return fire, their guns like cannon shots in the otherwise quiet night. Diego’s forced back, pinned down as they shoot back, but it’s enough of a distraction for me to get Charlie and Emilio into the back seat. I leap behind the wheel and start the engine.

“What about Diego?” Charlie shouts, terror in her voice.

“I wouldn’t leave him behind,” I say, snarling as I floor the SUV. It leaps forward and I angle it toward the guys shooting at Diego’s position. They scatter barely in time as I slam on the brakes and spin the wheel, nearly rolling the damn car, but we come to a stop between Diego and the shooters.

“Down!” I yell as they open fire.

Glass sprays all over. The guards light the car up, and I’m slumped to the side as the windows shatter and little cuts cover my exposed skin. I hear a door open and Diego’s voice shouts over the gunfire, “Go, go, go!”

That’s all I needed. I hit the gas, still partially down, and throw the wheel. The SUV peels out, fishtails, nearly loses control, but the tires bite to pavement and we’re flying again. The guards are shooting, but I reach the far end of the street, turn left, and go faster.

We drive for a long while after that, the wind whipping into the shattered windows. Diego makes sure Charlie and Emilio are okay: the baby's fine and Charlie has only superficial lacerations like me. After an hour of taking the long way through the city making sure Vince's people aren't following, I park outside of the hardware store.

"You saved our asses back there," I say, gripping Diego's arm. "You're my brother, you know that?"

"I know it." He grins at me. "You saved me too, you know. Nearly got yourself killed doing it."

"And I'd do it all over if I had to."

"I'd better ditch this wreck of a car before it draws attention. You guys okay?"

"We're good. Be careful and report in when you're done. Then you'd better lie low and find somewhere safe to kill time."

"Will do, boss." Diego nods at Charlie, gets into the bullet-strewn SUV, and drives off.

"Oh, god, I've been so worried." Grace runs over from the open apartment door and wraps Charlie and Emilio in a hug. They hold each other and I watch them, a small smile on my lips.

That was close, much closer than it should've been. I'm scared for Rella and terrified for what's going to happen next, but whatever Charlie knows will change everything.



# Chapter 30

## *Grace*

I thought I lost him. The night before, I kept sitting around the apartment, alone and bored and terrified, wondering if I'd ever see Calvino again. When they finally showed up in that bullet-ridden SUV, it was like a nightmare resolving into a pleasant dream as he stepped onto the sidewalk with Charlie and Emilio and Diego. I got Charlie and her baby settled before Calvino dragged me back into our bedroom and locked the door.

We made love that night quietly, his hands pinning my wrists to the bed, his lips against mine, muffling my moans.

In the morning, I lay curled against Calvino's chest and breathe him deep until he insists on getting up, making coffee, and cooking breakfast. "It's the right thing to do for our guests," he says with a smile. "Besides, I think everyone needs a little normalcy right now." I sigh as I watch him go but he's right—things have been supremely un-normal lately and we could use the meal.

By the time I'm dressed and showered, I find Charlie and Emilio in the living room. Baby Emilio is so adorable in a matching sweat suit with little pictures of Cookie Monster studded all over his legs and chest. *Sesame Street* is on TV and he crawls over babbling at me, and I laugh as I scoop him up. The kid's on the verge of walking, but he hasn't gotten brave enough yet.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask Charlie. She looks exhausted and haggard, and I know she's probably only just holding on.

“Better than I expected,” she says smiling, or trying to anyway. “Helps that Emilio was absolutely exhausted and went right down. I haven’t slept in the same bed with him since I was breastfeeding. It’s giving me some bad flashbacks. Real baby PTSD.”

I laugh and accept mug of coffee from Calvino after I place Emilio on the couch beside his mother. He wriggles around and plops onto his back and grabs at his feet and just smiles in the way little pre-toddlers do when they’re bored, but happy.

“We can look into getting a crib. Maybe one of those pack and plays? And a sound machine if he needs it, and a humidifier, and wow, babies need a lot of stuff.”

She laughs and touches my arm. “All that would be ideal, but I’ll survive for now. I’m just really thankful you came for me is all.”

“I couldn’t leave you behind,” Calvino says with a shrug and returns to cooking. The smell of bacon and eggs wafts into the air, and even though I’m not particularly hungry, the simple normalcy of making food somehow undercuts the otherwise massive tension we’re all feeling—just like Calvino said.

I sip my coffee as Charlie relates her perspective of what happened the night before: Rella and Susi helping her pack and slip out, her escape with Calvino and their near miss, and then passing out back at the apartment. “I never would’ve guessed this was possible, you know.” She hugs Emilio against her and the little baby squirms until he drops down onto the floor and sits watching Elmo sing about counting.

Calvino brings her coffee which she drinks gratefully. I watch and try not to bug her too much, but I have a million questions and they’re all incredibly pressing and banging on the inside of my skull like a pair of trashcan lids. But I keep my mouth shut until Calvino finishes cooking and we eat a light breakfast at the table, including little Emilio, who picks at eggs and makes an adorable mess out of a pile of ketchup.

Charlie gets her boy settled in front of the couch in a nest of blankets with a little tablet and puts videos on for him which seem to distract him enough for her to stand by the window,

take a deep breath, and slowly let it out. I sit with Calvin on the couch, both of us drinking coffee, and he gives me a concerned frown.

“I know what you two are thinking,” Charlie says quietly, her back turned to us. “You want me to uphold my end of the bargain, right?”

“We’re just worried is all,” I say and nudge Calvino in the ribs before he can say something stupid.

He grins at me. “Right, just worried.”

Charlie laughs bitterly and there are already tears in her eyes as she turns to face us. “It’s okay, I understand. You have a right to ask me whatever you want and I’ll do my best to answer.”

I try my best to be calm about this, but the question bubbles out unbidden: “You said Vince isn’t Emilio’s father. Can you tell us who is?”

She nods slowly and looks at Calvino. She’s blinking rapidly not and trying hard not to cry, and it breaks my heart how much pain she’s in, but we need to know. Stealing her away from Vince was bad enough, but unless we have a good reason, we’ll all have to be on the run for the rest of our lives.

“I never wanted this to happen. Can I start out by saying that, just so it’s clear? I didn’t want this and it wasn’t my idea, but after the Riley thing failed and she didn’t get pregnant, he was desperate. He came to me one night with this crazy idea and I told him I’d never do it, but he was persistent. He said it was the only way we could guarantee my child would be a product of the Manzini family, that Emilio would look like everyone and act like everyone. He was crazed, but he said it was the only way.”

She squeezes her eyes shut. I put my hand on Calvino’s arm to keep from him pressing her harder because I can tell this is extremely painful for her.

Eventually, she continues: “It started out as just a conversation, something to speculate about, but he kept talking about it until one day suddenly it was happening and I felt

totally swept away. I need you both to understand that I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it at all, because the thought of it was so repulsive and horrifying and it was just, it was just wrong. But I was raised to obey and to follow the family's wishes, and I didn't think there was another way out for me, so I went along with what my husband needed. I did it for my family."

Tears roll fast down her cheeks and she hugs herself tightly. I shift closer to her, my body tingling with anticipation, and I try to imagine what she could've possibly done that still has such an effect on her even today, over a year later. She's shaking, trembling, and her words come out in a rush like she can't stand to taste them for too long.

"He came to my room and lit candles. He laughed and said it would set the mood. He lit candles every single time it happened, and I asked him not to once but he only shook his head and said it helped him perform. And what did it matter anyway? I kept my eyes closed the whole time and he did what he had to do, and afterward I felt like I'd been ripped to pieces, like I'd been treated like a dog sent out for breeding, like I was nothing but an animal to those bastards, a convenient hole for them to fuck." She snarls the words, her face red.

"Who went into your room, Charlie?" I ask, squeezing Calvino's hand. "Who did Vince get to sleep with you?"

She laughs once, sharp and horrible, and I can hear the bleak sadness in that sound, like there are no depths, no bottom to her sorrow.

"Louie. Vince's little trigger man."

I sit back like she punched me in the face and Calvino recoils in pure horror.

Charlie stands there and sobs. She wraps her arms around herself and cries so hard her body twists in half, and it takes all my willpower to get up, take a step, another step, until I'm hugging her.

“Louie said he didn’t mind if I cried,” she says, sobbing the words. “He said he didn’t care if I cried while he fucked me. He kept coming, night after night, until he got me pregnant, and Vince let him do it. Vince begged me not to tell anyone until I was with child, and he promised nobody would know, since Emilio would look like someone from the family. I mean, Louie’s got that Italian look, right? I did it and I hate myself every day, I feel so sick and used and disgusting, so horrible and dirty, and I hate Vince for it. I hate him so much I want him to die for what he did to me.” She looks up with a shocking rage.

Calvino stands and his legs are shaking. “Vince let a murdering psychopath...” He shakes his head and stumbles away. He steadies himself on the kitchen counter and stares into the sink with a blank, faraway gaze. “That’s why you two fought all the time, isn’t it? He made you sleep with a killer.”

Charlie nods and sobs once. “I’m so mad at him. I can’t... I can’t just move on. He wants me to forget what I went through with Louie, but I can’t do it. How can I do it when I still feel the bastard on top of me, sweating and grunting like a dying pig?”

I hug her so tight I’m afraid I’ll hurt her but she only sobs into my chest. Emilio crawls over and pats his mother’s foot, but he clearly doesn’t understand what’s happening. Charlie bends down and scoops him up and holds him against her body.

“This is my son,” she whispers into his thin curly hair. “This is my boy and I don’t care who his father was, he’s mine and I love him. Do you understand?”

“I know you do, Charlie,” I say and it’s like my head’s a balloon floating into the sky. The implications of what she just told us are too heavy and I’m disassociating myself from his moment in an attempt to stay sane.

I want to ask more, but a car door slams outside, followed by two more. I look out the window through the blinds and nearly choke as several men in dark jackets spread out on the sidewalk. I look back in panic.

“Calvino,” I say, breathless, and he must hear the fear in my voice because he manages to pull himself together enough to come join me.

He looks out and sucks in a sharp breath. “They fucking found us.”

Charlie releases a long groan. “Oh, god, he’s going to kill me. He said he’d kill me if I left and now he’s going to do it.”

“There’s another way out.” Calvino grabs me by the arm and yanks me to the bedroom. “Charlie, gather your stuff, we need to go in ten seconds. I’ll make a call.”

Together we throw what we can into bags as he phones Diego. “Need you around the corner in two minutes. Vince found me. No, I don’t know how. Well then you’d better fucking hurry.” He slams the phone into his pocket and helps me throw more clothes into a duffel. When we’re done, we meet in the living room. Charlie’s already packed—she never had a chance to take things out—and she stands there with Emilio clutched to her chest.

Calvino shoulders another bag and grunts under the weight. “There are stairs down to a back door that leads into an alley. We go fast and quiet, and if we’re lucky, his men won’t spot us. Understood?”

I nod and Charlie says nothing. What can we say? It’s like I’m a robot and my emotions are shoved down deep inside of me, and all I can do is keep moving forward.

Calvino leads the way into the hall. He pauses and listens but there’s no sound, so we walk single file as fast as we can without making too much noise. Once we reach the back door, someone begins pounding on the entrance in the front. Calvino curses quietly, but unlocks the back stairwell, and we descend as softly as we can. I’m breathing hard and sweating and doing my best not to make any noise, thinking tiny thoughts, pretending to be a mouse, like I weigh nothing and I’m as light as the wind. When we reach the bottom, a massive bang and a crunching splintering of wood means the guys up front just broke inside.

“Hurry.” Calvino drags me along with Charlie bringing up the rear. We stumble out a back door into a narrow alley framed by two fences about twice the width of my arm span. The far side looks like a dead end, but when we reach it, there’s a gap between the fence on the left and the buildings on the right, just enough for us to slip down.

“Slow and quiet,” Calvino says and we’re off. Charlie goes first, then me, and he brings up the rear. “Head straight. When you reach the sidewalk at the end, turn right and keep running until you can’t run anymore.”

Charlie forces her way forward, staggering under the uneven terrain. There are empty glass bottles, trash bags filled with rotting refuse, mud and old leaves, and it smells like the underside of a fallen log. Emilio makes some crying sounds and Charlie does her best to shush him but she’s clearly barely holding on as it is. We reach a narrow section of the fencing, and Charlie’s bag gets caught on a loose nail in in the boards, and we have to spend a tense thirty seconds getting it untangled, my hands shaking, Emilio whimpering against his mother’s chest.

There are voices back the way we came. Vince’s men must’ve found the stairwell and the back alleyway, but they haven’t spotted the tight path we’re moving along. Charlie hurries now, going faster, and the end’s straight ahead, a brightness cut into the otherwise damp, dark path. She reaches it, steps out onto the sidewalk, and turns to the right as a voice back the way we came calls out, “They’re behind the fence! They’re out back!”

Calvino curses and shoves me forward as a sharp roar kicks out and a piece of the building next to his head breaks off and showers us in rock dust. I nearly fall but he catches me, steadies us both as we stumble onto the sidewalk, and then we’re running, all three of us sprinting away from the block and into a more residential section of the neighborhood. Charlie’s falling behind under the weight of her bags and the baby, and Calvino grabs another one of her backpacks off her shoulder, hefting its weight and grunting under the effort.



“This way,” he shouts, turning a sharp corner. Voices echo after us, and I know they’re getting closer. An engine roars back at the hardware store, and my heart’s racing, my lungs burning, my legs churning. I’m riding the edge, right in the middle of utter agony, and my muscles want me to stop so desperately it’s like slogging through sand, but I don’t let myself give up. I have to keep going, or else we’re dead, we’re all dead.

Calvino pulls us down another street, and ahead there’s a busy intersection with another strip mall. A car’s parked in front of a fire hydrant, and I recognize Diego as he steps out from behind the wheel and shades his eyes, squinting at us.

“Get it started!” Calvino shouts, and Diego jumps back into the car.

We reach it just as a black truck comes shooting around the corner and nearly T-bones a Tesla. Horns blare and honk as I practically throw Charlie and Emilio into the back seat. Calvino makes sure I get in next before he leaps around to the passenger side, and Diego doesn’t wait for him to close the door before he’s flooring it and zooming into traffic. The black truck gets stuck trying to maneuver its way out from between three very pissed-off car drivers, all of them honking and shouting, and we run the next light, make a few sharp turns, and finally drift into traffic.

I’m sweating and I think I might die from exhaustion, but we’re safe again.

“You’re lucky I was getting donuts,” Diego says, laughing hysterically at his own joke.

Calvino grins at him. “I knew you’d make it in time.”

“God, that was close. If I hadn’t been up and ready—” Diego shakes his head and his smile slowly fades. “But how the hell did he find you?”

Calvino grunts and turns around. He looks at Charlie, who frowns, her eyes red-rimmed and her cheeks tearstained. “Tablet,” he says, raising his eyebrows.

“Excuse me?”

“Tablet. And phone. Vince tracked your electronics.”

“No, that can’t... I mean, it’s not like...” She blinks rapidly.  
“Oh, shit.”

Calvino rolls down his window and reaches out a hand. Reluctantly Charlie hands the stuff over, her phone, Emilio’s tablet, and another tablet, plus a laptop. Diego pulls over long enough for Calvino to toss everything into a pile on the side of the road.

“I feel naked without my phone,” Charlie says softly and I laugh and squeeze her hand.

“Better that than dead.”

“Says you.” She sighs and leans her head back, squeezing her eyes shut. “What are we going to do now?”

“I have a plan,” Calvino says and looks back at me over his shoulder. “My family needs to know what Charlie just told us.”

“No,” Charlie says and her eyes shoot open. “No, no, no, you can’t tell them. You can’t tell *anyone*. Please, Calvino.”

“They need to know,” he says softly, gently, and keeps looking at me. “What Vince did, it was too far. It was way too far. They have to know if we’re going to end this.”

Charlie’s pale and horrified, and I turn to her. I steel myself against this, because there’s no easy way out of something so wretched and twisted and evil, especially not when the truth is as terrible as what she told us. If I were in her position, I’d want to keep it buried away as far as possible and never think about it again, but Calvino’s right: if we’re going to stop Vince, we need to start by making sure everyone knows just how far across the line he went.

“He’s right,” I say simply and there’s no other way around it. “They have to know. He made you—” I stop myself and touch her knee, unable to speak the words out loud: *he made you sleep with another man*.

Charlie releases one miserable sob and nods her head, lowering her chin down, and closing her eyes as she hugs

Emilio tighter against her chest.

I look back at Calvino and his expression breaks me—stuffed with sorrow and anger and hatred, blinding and powerful hatred, like a fire raging bright in his eyes.

“Take us to Damon’s place,” Calvino says and Diego drives.

# Chapter 31

## *Grace*

“I really shouldn’t let you in,” Damon says as our exhausted and sweat-covered group enters through the front of the house and gets comfortable in the living room. Emilio crawls around until Damon puts *PJ Mask* on TV for him, and Charlie remains hovering protectively. Damon frowns at her and sighs before he joins me, Diego, and Calvino in the kitchen. “Seriously, Vince is going to murder me.”

“You need to hear this,” Calvino says, giving his brother a hard look. “You got whiskey?”

“Of course, but it’s like nine in the morning.”

“Pour it. You’ll want some.”

Damon barks a sharp laugh. “Are you joking?”

“Pour it,” I confirm. I can use a drink myself right about now. Escaping death leaves me strangely thirsty.

Damon sighs, but he gets out enough glasses for everyone, including Charlie, and pours a bit of whiskey into each. Diego stands off to the side watching carefully, and I know Charlie would prefer it if he weren’t here, but at this point we need him. And besides, he’s risked his life enough—he deserves the truth.

“What’s so bad that you’re kidnapping Charlie and Emilio from Vince and making me drink in the morning?” Damon takes a sip and doesn’t look like anyone’s forcing him to swallow.

“Charlie?” I watch her carefully as she bounces Emilio on her knee. “Do you want me to tell him?”

“Please, don’t make me,” she says, not looking over. “I can’t do it twice.”

I sigh and feel my stomach twist, but I do my best to give Damon the whole story. I start with Riley, move through her failure, into her murder, and finish with Charlie and Louie. When I’m done, Diego throws his drink back and stares at the ceiling with his eyes squeezed close, mouthing what looks like a prayer in Spanish.

“This has to be a joke,” Damon says, his face utterly pale. “Louie, of all people? That fucking psychopath?”

Calvino shakes his head. “I’m sorry, brother, but it’s real. Vince forced his wife to sleep with another man, all because he couldn’t get her pregnant.”

Damon shakes his head and starts to pace. Charlie watches him warily. “I knew Vince was a little unhinged. It’s part of why we’ve been fighting lately. He doesn’t have his emotions under control and I’m afraid he’s making bad decisions, but you’re telling me it’s even worse than that. You’re telling me he committed some heinous crime, all because he didn’t want to go to some fucking fertility doctor.”

“I think he’s unhinged because of what he made his wife do,” I say and look at Calvino, who seems thoughtful. “It explains a lot, doesn’t it? His anger and paranoia.”

“We have to do something about this,” Calvino says, approaching his brother. “Vince is out of control. What he did to Charlie is bad enough to warrant death, but—”

“Death?” Damon steps back. “You want to kill our brother?”

“He forced his wife to sleep with a trigger man. He let a member of the family rape his wife, Damon. Do you understand this at all? What kind of people would we be if we saw that and let it slide?”

Damon throws his drink back, visibly trembling. “You want to kill Vince. Which means I’ll become Don.”

Calvino closes the distance between them and swats the glass from his hand. It hits the floor and tumbles to the side but doesn't break. He grabs Damon by the shirt and jams him backward into the wall, snarling like a rabid wolf. "Are you thinking about yourself right now? After what you just learned about your sister-in-law? And what your brother did to her?"

"I'm thinking about the family," Damon says and he's sweating and his eyes are wild. "If we kill Vince, I'll become Don. Can we survive another leader in less than a year?"

"We'll fucking survive it because you'll step up and be strong." Calvino stays close, talking right into his face. "I'll make sure of it."

For a long, tense moment, nobody moves. Diego shifts subtly, moving closer to Calvino like he plans on helping. The only sound is the TV and the PJ Masks defeating a night-time villain, and Emilio gurgling and laughing and babbling along while his mother plays with his hair and blinks away the tears.

"Okay," Damon whispers. "We'll do it. God help my soul, but we'll do it."

Calvin releases him and steps away. He's breathing hard and I go to him, touch his arm, press myself to his side. He hugs me tight as Damon pours another drink and throws it back.

"There's one more thing," I say as I get on my toes to kiss Calvino's cheek. "We still don't know what happened the night your mother died."

Calvino closes his eyes. "I don't want to know anymore. But we need to know, don't we?"

I nod and kiss his hand before I turn to Charlie.

"We went on that trip four months after I had Emilio." Charlie talks and stares ahead at the TV and doesn't acknowledge anyone, only keeps playing with her son's hair, combing it, pulling it, twirling it. "We left my son at home with the nanny with enough frozen milk and formula to get him through a few days. On the second night, I went upstairs to pump and he followed me. At first, I didn't understand why until he started lighting candles."

I groan and Calvino whispers something sharp in rough Italian beneath his breath. Diego curses in Spanish, and Damon turns green like he might be sick.

“I didn’t let him do it,” Charlie says. “He came onto me saying how much he liked it before and how maybe I’d start to like it too, kept calling me his wonderful lady, and I grabbed a fireplace poker and started hitting him with it. He fought back, and I guess we struggled and knocked over the damn candles. That’s how the fire started. I pulled the poker from him when he tried to turn around and douse the flames and hit him in the head over and over again, and maybe I killed him then or maybe he died in the fire, I don’t know. But the smoke was bad and the flames were growing, and I didn’t have time to warn everyone. I got out of there, and Vince came stumbling out next, but your mother, she never made it. She’d gone to bed earlier with a headache after drinking too much wine and I think she just never woke up.”

The room is drenched in silence. Emilio struggles from his mother’s arms and crawls on the floor, playing with a pillow. Damon pours another drink and throws it back, and I hug Calvino tightly, holding him as a shudder runs down his spine.

“I’m sorry,” Charlie says, finally looking over. She seems so exhausted, so emptied. “I didn’t mean for anyone but him to die. I loved your mother, Calvino, but I’m not sorry about your father.”

“I’m not sorry about him either,” Calvino says sadly and he pulls me closer. “Thank you for telling me. At least now I know what happened to my parents, even if it wasn’t easy to hear.”

“Can’t say the old man didn’t deserve it,” Damon mumbles.

Diego says nothing, only has another drink and remains back against the countertops.

“What will you do?” I ask, looking up at Calvino.

He closes his eyes and seems to gather himself. Storms rage beneath his skin and I can only imagine his pain. I can only



imagine the suffering Charlie went through, and the horrors Riley experienced.

All for this man, this Vincent.

I hate him so much it makes my heart bleed. It makes my throat close.

“We’ll go to the Sandtrap,” Calvino says, opening those beautiful eyes, those eyes I can’t get enough of. He turns them on me like spotlights. “We’ll deal with Vince. We’ll do what we’ve got to do.”

I kiss him. I bite his lip. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

And I kiss him again, because I don’t know how many more times I’ll get to taste his mouth and feel his breath on my skin, and I wonder if there will be a bottom to all this madness.

# Chapter 32

## *Calvino*

Damon rolled his vintage Jaguar down the driveway, taking it nice and slow. The interior smelled like leather and shoe polish, and I kept catching glances from Calvino in the rearview mirror: he was nervous, just like we all were. The car was a puffball of anxiety, a thick cotton swab of uncertainty. Outside, the Sandtrap loomed like a gossamer tomb. I put my hand on Charlie's leg and felt her muscles jostle restlessly and she didn't turn to look in my direction.

"He'll be fine," I say quietly, "Diego's good with kids." I have no clue if that's true, but it feels like the right thing to say.

She only shakes her head and doesn't answer.

Something feels off. Maybe it's the armed guards that walk toward us from the garage, each of them holding a long rifle and looking fairly pissed. That'd be on account of Calvino killing two of their coworkers. And the multiple escapes. I'd imagine Vince isn't happy and is taking his rage out on his employees—typical asshole boss behavior.

"Let me do the talking," Damon says as he parks. "Right now, I'm the only one with good standing in this damn family."

"I don't love that," Calvino says but doesn't argue further, again, on account of murdering two guys.

"Stay in here until I motion for you to get out. God, this is so fucked."

Damon unbuckles his seatbelt and climbs out. He keeps his hands spread wide as the guards walk closer, and he barks

orders at the young guy, black hair, neck tattoo, that tries to pat him down. “I’m still the fucking underboss, you little rotten pus-filled shit sandwich, so go find my goddamn brother and don’t touch me.” The guard leaps back and runs off to the house.

Charlie shifts her weight and turns to me with big watery eyes. “There’s something I should tell you,” she whispers. She grips my arm hard like she wants to transmit her anxiety through her hands. How simple life would be if we could communicate everything we’re feeling, all the complexities and vagaries and shadows with only a touch. But we can’t. Instead, I get things like, *there’s something I should tell you*. That’s one of the worst phrases in the world because it’s always said much too late. And doubly too late when there are a bunch of armed and angry men lingering around.

Damon puts his hands on his hips and glares at the house.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper back and Calvino gives me a sharp look.

Charlie’s fingers dig insistently into my skin. “The story I told you about what Vince made me do.” Her voice twists and cracks like a lightning-addled ancient tree stump. “There’s a part I left out.”

I lean back to say something along the lines of, *are you fucking kidding right now*, but I don’t get the words out. Up at the house, Vince steps onto the porch and looks down at Damon like he wants to murder his brother, and probably does.

Damon goes forward and they talk. I can’t hear what they’re saying, and Charlie pulls at my wrist like she’s a little kid trying to get the teacher’s attention. Calvino twists in his seat and frowns from her to me.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing. Just a last-minute adjustment.”

“Really. I need to tell you.” Charlie’s panicking. I can hear it in her breath and her twitchy fingers. I want to push her into finally speaking, but Damon turns and waves at the car.

“That’s our cue,” Calvino says and takes a deep breath. “We’re either about to get shot or about to have an extremely uncomfortable family conversation. Probably both.” He steps out and slams his door, which doesn’t make me feel better.

“We can’t go out there,” Charlie hisses with wide eyes. “There’s something you have to know.”

“It’s okay. We’ll get through it together.” Because there’s no other choice. I want to stay and make her finish what she was trying to tell me, but Charlie’s too far gone, panicking like a spooked horse at this point, and Damon and Vince look impatient, so I step out of the car and help Charlie follow.

The guards glare at the pair of us like they want to open fire. Vince is red and practically apoplectic. Damon seems exhausted by the whole thing, like this danger is a mere inconvenience.

“We’re here to talk,” Calvino says, putting himself between me and the big boys with the death machines. Charlie clutches my arm, hyperventilating. “I want to hear your side of the story, brother.”

“Brother.” Vince sneers and hocks the word like sick phlegm. “Since when did brotherhood matter to you?”

Calvino bristles, his back up. “Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for the family.”

“Except for that one.” Vince nods to me. “Little Grace. You know, I have the strangest memory. I’m sitting on a couch in the back room of your strip club, half-asleep, and there’s your little girlfriend digging through my pockets.”

“Do we have to do this here?” Damon asks impatiently. “We can go inside, you know. Much more comfortable without all the guns.”

“I want her to admit it,” Vince presses. “I want to hear her say she slipped something in my drink and tried to rob me blind.”

“You don’t need anything from her,” Calvino says, taking a step forward, but the guards twitch and that’s probably not a good thing. He stops moving. “What Grace did or didn’t do isn’t the issue here. You are.”

Vince shows teeth. It's like a grin, but the sort of smile you'd give a venomous snake. "The terms aren't up to you."

"I did it," I say and push forward though Charlie tries to hold me back. "Is that what you want? I did it because I knew you had something to do with my cousin's death, and now—"

Calvino grabs me by the other arm and yanks me forward. Charlie stumbles and it's like a chain reaction. He hugs me against him, and Charlie rams into me, and we're one nice little family all smiling at each other and airing our grievances.

Vince snorts once and shakes his head. "I don't know what my wife told you, but she's out of her mind. Did you know she's been taking crazy pills? I don't know how you'd believe her over me."

"Antidepressants," Charlie says quietly, an embarrassed frown. "For my post-partum depression. Not crazy pills."

I didn't think Vince could be more of an asshole, but obviously I was wrong.

"Enough of this," Damon says. "Inside, everyone. Right now." He glares at Vince, daring him to object.

But he doesn't, and the group moves forward. Up the steps and in through the big doors. I spot Rella and Susi standing on the stairs watching, pale and white-knuckled and sweating like they're scared everything's about to end in a big, bloody climactic battle, like we're in some Western movie and the two pissed-off boys with guns are standing face to face at high noon or whatever. Vince takes everyone through a side room and into a large library where he stands behind a massive oaken desk like the master of the house holding court. Damon pours a drink.

Charlie shuts the door with a click.

"You killed two of my men," Vince says, glaring at Calvino. He leans forward, hands on top of a leather mat covering the smooth wood. "I didn't particularly like either of those fucks and they failed to keep your little girlfriend from escaping, but still. It's a big deal."

“You were going to torture Grace. Let’s call that one even.”  
Calvino’s voice could melt ice.

Vince snort-laughs and shakes his head. “How fucked is this, brother? Trading lives for lives.”

“It’s what we do,” Damon says with false cheer and sucks down some whiskey. “And Calvino has a point. You were going to torture Grace.”

“I was going to ask her some questions.” He hesitates. “After some mild psychological pressure.”

“You blindfolded me and tied me to a chair.” Not strictly true: he bound my wrists, but I wasn’t stuck to the seating.

“Poor girl.” Vince sneers, very Vince-like, another way of saying he’s a true douche. “You would’ve survived.”

“We can argue all day about who hurt who worse, but the fact is you provoked me first. You think I would’ve come anywhere near you otherwise?” Calvino takes two big steps forward. “You kidnapped my girl, Vincent. You stole her and bagged her and tossed her into the basement like she was some gutter rat you needed to interrogate. But she’s mine, you hear me? You don’t touch what’s mine.”

Vince bristles. I feel his anger like a blast of hot air from a furnace vent and this isn’t going anywhere good. These two will measure dicks and we’ll find out which one is biggest, but whoever loses won’t go down easy. There’s still a way through this situation that doesn’t end with everyone dead, and I want to find it.

I step forward. “Charlie told us everything, Vince. You can stop pretending that you’re some misunderstood good guy now. We know what you made her do.”

His eyes dart to mine and for one brief moment, I imagine there’s surprise or pain or something else hiding behind his expression. But it doesn’t last, and he turns back to Calvino.

“And what did my mentally unstable wife say?”

“She told us about Riley,” Calvino says evenly. “About how she couldn’t get pregnant and you made her go away.”

Vincent waves a hand, dismissing the memory of my dead cousin like she wasn't a person but only an inconvenience. "She was running her mouth and you know what happens to people who can't keep their lips sewn shut."

"You killed her, you piece of shit." I stride forward, fully intent on grabbing the gold Eiffel Tower paperweight from his desk and beating his skull in until it's nothing more than mush. Runny oatmeal, drenched in red. "You murdering piece of trash."

Calvino holds me back. "Grace," he warns.

Vince seems amused. "Maybe I was right to take this one. Look at how mad she is. Tell me, Grace, do you think I should've let your cousin live, knowing what she knew?"

"Fuck you," I spit at him.

"Grace," Calvino says, speaking soft, lips near my ear. "He'll pay. Just wait."

My desire to smash Vince into tiny atom-sized pieces, to parade his corpse around town just to humiliate him further, to kill him and tarnish the memory of him forever, it nearly outweighs my trust in Calvino. But his words hold me back. For now.

"All of this could've been avoided if Grace had been up front from the beginning. If only you would've explained why she drugged and searched me, maybe none of this had to happen."

Calvin grunts like someone kicked him in the spleen. "You're so full of shit, it's like a latrine in here. Come on, Vince, if we told you that Grace is Riley's cousin and she drugged you to find out information, you would've lost your damn mind."

Vince hesitates and shrugs. "All right, that's true."

"And you know the worst part of all this? It's not what you did to Grace, although that's bad, but I think the two dead soldiers was a good payback. It's not even what you did to Riley, although that was monstrous. It's that you forced your wife to fuck another man just so she'd get pregnant, and you kept bringing her around him. You dragged her in front of him again and again, until one night he went upstairs while Mom



and Dad were in their bed and tried to sleep with her again, only to start a fire. The same fire that consumed our goddamn parents.”

Vince leans back and I expect a snarl of denial or some kind of argument, but instead his face is etched in confusion. He tilts his head like he’s trying to hear a distant noise, and his lips tug into a deep frown.

“Who do you think was sleeping with Charlie?” He speaks slowly and methodically.

“Vincent,” Charlie says and everyone looks at her. “Don’t. Please don’t.”

“Louie.” Calvino looks between Vince and Charlie. “She told us it was Louie, the trigger man.”

Vincent’s confusion breaks. He throws his head back and laughs, and Charlie looks green like the underside of a welcome mat stuck in shadow. I extricate myself from Calvino’s grip and take her hands between my own and squeeze them hard—this was what she was trying to tell me in the car—and try to make her feel the strength I want to give her.

“Who was it really?” My voice is a whisper. It hurts to talk and everyone’s still except for Vince, who’s laughing like he just won the lottery.

“I was too ashamed,” Charlie says, crying again, and I have to wonder how one person can have so many tears. “So embarrassed and ashamed. I’m so sorry I lied.”

“Enough of these games,” Damon says as he finishes his drink. For someone that didn’t want whiskey so early, he sure is guzzling it down. “What the fuck is happening?”

I turn and Calvino’s staring at Charlie with his mouth hanging open and I watch his brain make connections mine isn’t—piecing together a torn-up ransom note, reconstructing a crime scene, rebuilding a home lost to a tornado—and his skin turns pale, his eyes dilate, and his hands ball into fists.

“You wouldn’t,” he says quietly and his voice is a twisted husk. He’s talking through a thousand leagues of water and I

still don't understand why. "Vincent. Tell me you wouldn't."

Vince's laughter disappears. "I had to ensure the child would look like us, brother. It was the only way."

Calvino's face turns red. "It wasn't the only way. You could've come to us and asked for help. We could've donated, or gotten doctors involved, or something. A thousand other ways, a thousand better ways. But not this."

"It had to be done in secret, and there was only one person in the whole world that understood what I was going through. I was the son of the Don and I couldn't conceive. Do you understand how that looked? I was supposed to take over the family one day, and I couldn't even get my fucking wife pregnant. It was pathetic, but he understood, Calvino. He understood."

Charlie's shaking. She's sobbing, trembling, like she's having a fit, and she sinks down to her knees. I sink down with her, hugging her tight, holding onto her like she's a buoy in the ocean because I'm starting to see the edges of the picture. What Charlie told us was bad, awful, horrible, one of the worst things I could imagine—and yet this is so much worse. Like a horror movie made real.

"You made your wife fuck our father." Calvino vomits the words out.

Damon gags and steps back, bumping into the bookshelf. "What? No, you fucking wouldn't."

Vince is bright pink. He's angry, embarrassed, everything. I can't tell because my brain's a swirling, buzzing mess, and Charlie's falling to pieces in my arms as I pull her tighter against me, trying to protect her from what's coming out, the truth she kept hidden and instead told a lesser but still awful story. She tried to come clean but it was too much, and now I can understand why.

Benvolio Manzini, the Don of the family.

Emilio is Calvino's half-brother.

"I did what I had to do," Vince says as he punches his fist down against the desk. "Nobody else would've gotten it, but

Dad knew the pressures I felt. He knew how important it was for Emilio to look like us, for my wife to be pregnant. We had to show that the family would continue, on and on. It's so fucking barbaric and backwards and yet it's part of our world, and it was all on my fucking shoulders. When I told Dad that we were having trouble, he suggested a solution. He could get Charlie pregnant. The baby would be mine and a Manzini, truly a Manzini. But my boy is my brother, isn't he?"

"You twisted monster," Calvin says and he stalks forward. "You forced your wife to fuck our father. You let Dad rape her."

"She chose to do this. Don't get all moralistic on me, brother. You know what we do for this family and what it asks of us better than anyone. Nobody raped Charlie, she did it willingly."

At that, Charlie only cries harder.

"You forced her into it," Calvin says, barely restrained. "You think she had any choice when her husband and her father-in-law are telling her this is the only way? Can you imagine how fucking scared and alone she felt? She agreed out of terror, and you let her do it. You let her sleep with Dad, you let her get pregnant, you made it all happen. And god, that night, he tried to fuck her again and she killed him."

Charlie sobs against my chest and nods her head over and over. Good for fucking her.

Vince looks away. "That wasn't part of the deal. He wasn't supposed to do that."

"But he did and Charlie killed him, and goddamn right she did. Dad deserved to die for that, and you know what, Vince? You fucking do too."

Calvin leaps at the desk and grabs the Eiffel Tower paperweight. When I pictured it as a bludgeon, I never imagined how small it would look in a hand, but it seems so inadequate. Charlie screams and buries her face in my arms and Damon shouts something weakly but doesn't move from where he's holding onto a shelf like he's desperately trying to

keep the house from collapsing. Calvino slams into Vince like a rugby player and the pair of them topple backwards, hit the window, and fall to the floor in a tangle of limbs and punching fists.

“Damon! Do something!”

Damon, still in shock, throws his drink aside. He staggers forward but the paperweight comes up and slams down with a dull thud. When it raises again, blood’s splattered on its edge. Calvino brings it down, again, again, again, until Damon reaches him and yanks him back.

Blood splatters Calvino’s shirt in little red flecks and covers his face in a fine mist. Vince makes no noise and doesn’t rise. Charlie’s gagging on her tears and drowning in her sorrow. I can’t move, rooted to place, pinned by Charlie and my own horror.

Calvino shrugs Damon off and tosses the blood-drenched weight onto the desk. He yanks open the top drawer and takes out a gun. Its metal gleams dully in the light and Damon’s mouth opens, and maybe he wants to stop Calvino, or maybe he wants to tell him to do it, but no words escape as Calvino raises the weapon.

“Too far,” he snarls. And pulls the trigger.

More blood mists into the air and seeps into the carpet beneath the desk. I see Vince’s feet, but they’re not moving, and I keep Charlie from going over to investigate. She won’t like what she finds: a pulped and ruined Vince with a bullet hole in his forehead, the rest of him a wreck.

Guards pile into the room, men from outside, but Damon gathers himself enough to forestall them. He starts shouting at them to put down their guns, and since they’re all confused as hell anyway, most of them listen. Calvino stays panting, breathing deep, and I extricate myself from Charlie finally as he comes around the desk, leaning against it for support.

I rush to him and hug him tight. I smear blood on my face and top but what’s it matter? None of it matters, I need Calvino more than I need to be clean. I kiss him and he grunts back,

still in shock. Vince's corpse cools on the floor behind him and I try not to look, but I can't help myself. It's as grisly as I knew it would be.

"Are you okay?" I whisper and he nods.

"I'm okay. I have one more thing I need to do." He gently moves past me and steps up beside Damon. He grabs his brother's wrist and raises it up into the air as more guards enter the room, six of them, a dozen of them. "Damon Manzini is now the rightful Don of the Manzini Famiglia. Any opposed should speak up now."

Rella appears in the doorway, ashen. Susi stands just behind her. Neither sister says a word but they stare at Calvino's blood-covered face and body and they know what happened, everyone knows what happened, even if they're unaware of the details: Charlie, Vince, Benvolio, the whole messy horror of it.

"Long live the Don," Rella says, her voice clear and bright, and more people take up the call. *Long live the Don*, they chant, and Damon looks up at Calvino. The implication is clear: Don's rarely live for long, and he's wondering what sort of tenure he'll have.

One built on blood and heartbreak.

Calvino releases his brother as Damon takes over. He starts ordering men to get the room cleaned up, the body removed and disposed of, the word of his ascension spread to all the important Capos and lieutenants. He sweeps from the room with guards and soldiers hanging on his hips, and other men brush past us toward the ruined corpse of their former leader and Don, like a violent coup is merely part of a normal workday. Rella enters with Susi, and the two sisters take Charlie in their arms and move her from the wreckage of her husband.

Rella gives me a look: she wants to know what the hell happened.

I nod once: *I'll tell you later*.

The girls exit, leaving me alone with Calvino and the cleaning crew.

He wraps his arms around me. Exhaustion clings to him like barnacles. He releases a long sigh and I've never seen him so hurt and broken before, like the cracks in his body widened ever so slightly and he's doing all he can to keep from being pulled down into the black.

But I won't let him falter. I won't let him sink.

I kiss him and look into his eyes.

"You did the right thing."

He stares back. "I'm not so sure. I killed my brother, Grace."

"He let your father rape his wife. He murdered my cousin. He would've ruined this family. You did the right thing."

He nods once and I don't know if he believes me but I hope my saying it is enough.

"Let's leave," he says, draping an arm over my shoulders. We step into the hall. "This is for the Famiglia to handle."

"And you're not a part of the organization, are you?"

"Still an outsider. Always will be." He limps forward and I stay close.

It's chaos in the house, but a good chaos. A busy chaos. One that suggests new things are coming, and new things aren't always bad—they're just new. Change can mean growth, prosperity, happiness.

And I feel a change coming in my own life.

"I love you," he says as we walk down the front steps. "You're never going back to your apartment."

"I love you too. And god, I hope not. That place is a wreck."

He laughs, a tired hawking grunt. "Let's go check on Diego and Emilio. My little baby brother." He shakes his head. "Insanity."

"Charlie will raise him. And we'll help her."

“Absolutely. She’ll always be a part of the family, no matter what. I’ll make sure Damon takes good care of her for the rest of her life.”

“And Emilio?”

He smiles slightly. “We’ll see what he wants to do.”

We reach the car and climb inside. It’s Damon’s but I find it hard to imagine he’ll complain right about now. Calvino holds my hand as he turns on the engine and we drive away together toward the unknown, but the unknown doesn’t frighten me, not anymore, not now that revenge is behind me and only my world-eating love for Calvino is before me. Once in a while, the future looks bright—and it’s up to us to grab hold and keep it shining.

I don’t plan on letting go.

# Chapter 33



## *Grace*

**T** *hree Months Later*

I FOLD MYSELF INTO A BIG PLUSH SEAT AROUND A MASSIVE oak table and for the first time since meeting Calvino, I feel like I'm really mafia.

Feels pretty good, I've got to admit.

Damon sits at the head of the table with Calvino to his left and Jason to his right. Rella and Susi sit on either side of them, and several hard-looking Capos fill in the space, with little old me at the very end feeling extremely out of place and uncomfortable while these scarred, tattooed mobsters glare at each other and watch every one of Damon's moves.

It's startling how much he changed since Vince died. The Damon I knew three months ago is gone, replaced by a regal man with slicked-back hair, hard eyes, expensive suits, and expressive hands. Gone is the bohemian surfer. Gone is the laughter. He's the Don now and his position covers him like a second skin.

I catch some looks. Mostly from the Capos: they have no clue who I am. Screw them. But Rella grins and winks at me, and Susi gives me an encouraging smile, and Calvino's constant glances send a sparkling sharpness up my core. That man can't keep his eyes off me for a second. It's intoxicating. I want to crush his attention and snort it. God, I want to stitch it into my skin.

“Thank you all for coming today,” Damon says, leaning forward with his palms flat on the table top. I remember a similar gesture from Vince that day, so long ago, but still flashbulb bright and sharp in memory. Sometimes I dream about the paper weight coming up and going down and flicking blood splatter against the walls. Damon had the whole library renovated a week after it happened.

Damon continues (sounding very stern): “As your Don, it’s my responsibility to update the family on what’s been happening inside of our organization. We’re all aware of the turmoil and difficulties, but I remain steadfast in my commitment to our businesses, our employees, and our mutual good will. To honor that, I’ve raised several lieutenants to full Capo, and I am expanding our territory into Santa Monica, Ocean Park, and Venice.” He doesn’t mention that two cartels teamed up to evict us from those territories to begin with, so it’s less of an expansion and more of a brutal, grinding war to reclaim what’s rightfully ours.

“To that end, my brother Jason is taking control of several crews and will work closely with the corresponding Capos to ensure our territory remains ours. Blood will spill, gentlemen, and war will rage across Los Angeles, but we are prepared and we are strong. Cartel, mafia, yakuza, dragon, none of them matter. We are the Manzini Famiglia. We will prevail.”

I feel a chill of patriotic fervor spill over me and I can sense the others shifting in their chairs. War’s scary, blood’s not great, but Damon has a way about him. Stripped of anything that held him back from the family, he’s now truly taken control of the Manzini organization, and though there’s been lots of pushback from all over the city, he’s handled himself admirably. Case in point, all these badass, scary guys still sitting around taking his orders.

The meeting drags on. It’s not all that exciting: most of it is dedicated to discussing financial and legal issues and hammering out long-term plans. Calvino looks bored and I catch a sly smirk in between comments on zoning laws, and by the time the meeting’s done, I’m ready to take a nap.

“How’d you like your first meeting?” Rella asks, leaning over my shoulder. “Lots of fun, right?”

I shrug and grin up at her. “Just happy to be included.”

“You’re happy now, but just wait. We do this every week.” She rolls her eyes and walks on.

Susi’s next. “Glad you’re here though,” she whispers and winks as she hurries after her sister.

I find Calvino in the hall. He’s talking to two Capos and I watch until they’re finished. Although Calvino is still not technically a part of the Famiglia, he is Manzini family, and Damon’s treating him like he’s an honorary consigliere—a position officially offered and officially declined. Though I have my doubts.

“It was refreshing to have you in the room for one of those meetings,” Calvino says, hugging me against him as we walk into a quieter part of the house. Most of the Capos gather in the living room in the back of the house to drink and smoke and talk business, while the family disappears into other parts of the Sandtrap. The building’s littered with ghosts, but we’ve learned to make do with their chain-rattling and hauntings. Life continues and memory’s just that: memory.

The Riley in my head’s been silent since the day Vince died.

I miss her sometimes, but it’s better she rests.

“You just like giving me flirty smiles,” I say, getting on my tiptoes to kiss his stubble-studded chin.

“That’s true and you like it.” He squeezes me tight, steering me toward the back of the house.

“Why did I get the invite this time? Far as I know, nothing’s changed. I’m still not *technically family*.” I say that last bit in my best Damon impression.

“That’s true, but I convinced Damon that technicalities aren’t all that matters. Emilio is technically our brother, for example.”

I nod solemnly. Emilio’s treated more like Vince’s son than their brother—which is a good thing. Charlie talked about

moving back in with her family up in Seattle, but she hasn't taken the plunge yet, and I'm glad for it. She seems happier with Vince gone, and Emilio's growing so fast, I would hate to miss anything. She's loved and taken care of and considered *technically family*, which means she's free to do as she wishes. Mostly she keeps to herself and steers clear of Damon.

"Besides," Calvino continues, "I have a surprise for you."

"Surprise?" I squeeze his hand lovingly. "You shouldn't have. Taking me to bed already?"

"Not yet, but I like where your head's at." He hesitates as we reach the back room. The vaulted ceilings are church-like and a chandelier glitters from the light cast by the ocean. Tables, chairs, couches, everything wrapped in a luxurious veneer, perfectly manicured, magazine-quality decorations. "Come here."

He steers me to the windows. Beyond, the ocean laps against the sand thirstily. He wraps his arms around me, hugging me from behind as we look to the endless blue frothed with white and I have to wonder where this is coming from, but it doesn't matter—this is life with Calvino. Happy, content, joyous, ecstatic. All those good words.

"I love you, Grace," he whispers, kissing my neck. "I need you to know that no matter what happens, I will give you whatever you need. If you want the sand, you'll have it. If you want the ocean, you'll have it. I love you more than I ever dreamed I could, and it makes me a better man."

"I love you too," I say with a giddy smile. "Where's this coming from?"

He steps back and as I turn, he drops to one knee, and my hands fly to my mouth as time crawls to a standstill: one of those moments where memory seizes on all the details, all the minute subtleties, all the intricate shifting motions of air and light, and my heart's racing like a hailstorm, and right there in his hands is a little black box.

"Open it," he says.

I do.

The ring sparkles. Diamonds, gold, all of them big and shimmering, and he presses the ring on the tip of my finger. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I say and the ring doubles, triples, and it takes me a second to realize I’m crying, that’s why I can’t see straight, so I wipe my face and laugh and look at the massive ring on my finger as he wraps me in a hug, and kisses me long and slow.

“One more surprise,” he whispers and it’s like my head’s up with that chandelier as he tugs me to the sliding doors that open out to the porch area. Once we step down onto the patio the roar hits me, the shouts of *surprise, surprise, surprise!* And people step out from behind pillars, table, obstacles—they weren’t well hidden, I’m just not very observant.

“You did this?” I ask, looking back at Calvino.

He kisses me once in return before the tide of people crashes down.

There are Kia, and Ginnie, and Raven and Monique. “Girl, you bagged a good one,” Kia says.

Ginnie cackles. “Lucky as hell.”

“He told us you were missing everyone from the club, so we figured we’d come out and see you,” Kia says as I give her an enormous hug. “This place is massive. Like, stupidly massive. I need a tour.”

“Soon, I promise,” and I’m whisked away to more people, Capos and soldiers and lieutenants, all there to congratulate me and Calvino.

“Sisters soon!” Rella promises.

“Sisters forever,” Susi says with a wink.

Then Charlie comes over with Emilio in her arms. He struggles free and comes to me, and I scoop him up in a big hug, and Charlie’s hugging me and we’re both crying. God, I don’t know how much we’ve cried together since all this started, but these are the good kinds of tears. I’m not ashamed to shed them, neither is she.

“Welcome to the family,” she says and accept Emilio back.  
“Any second thoughts?”

“None whatsoever.” I look at Calvino and his eye catches mine from across the crowd, and his smile is heavenly, so deep and big and bold, true joy radiating from him in heavy waves.

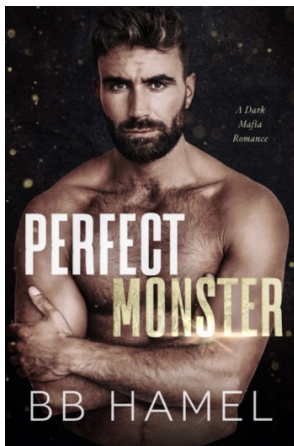
“No, I’m exactly where I need to be,” I say, and Charlie laughs.

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# Preview: Perfect Monster



## *Chapter One: Cassie*

The red stain spread across his crisp white shirt in a wide bloom. I took a step back from the very large and very angry-looking man as he wiped at his chest and groaned. The wine glass lay shattered into pieces at his feet, sparkling like little diamonds.

That shirt probably cost more than three months of my rent, and the suit looked custom. The pinstripes matched up perfectly at the shoulders, each little detail fastidiously tailored and finished.

“You idiot girl,” he said, still trying to wipe the wine off with his palms, like that would work.

He was a wine-soaked gorilla.

I was tempted to suggest club soda. Or maybe I should just run.

Instead, I kept my mouth shut and kept still.

His date, a pretty brunette with striking lips, thick dark hair and eyebrows, and enough jewelry to make the queen blush, rubbed his arm and gave me an apologetic smile.

“It’ll be okay, baby. Just a little stain.”

The man shoved her away.

“Do you have any idea how much this cost, you stupid little bitch?” His eyes bugged out, and he stared at me like he was about to rip off my head and drink my blood like a demented Viking.

Which he might've, all things considered.

It was a very weird party.

Winter in Sea Isle, New Jersey, didn't exactly get a ton of tourists, but when Jack, the manager at the Stone Harbor Club, called me up and said some big gathering was going down and offered me a catering job for the night, I had to say yes. Money was always tough to come by in the cold, lonely months.

Though, in retrospect, maybe staying home would've been a better idea.

The room was packed with men in expensive clothes and skinny girls draped on their arms like cotton candy. They mingled over drinks, laughing softly to each other, the room's air was thick with danger and discontent.

I knew men like them. I had distinct childhood memories of men smoking cigars and talking at each other too loudly over poker games and football on TV, the room crackling with a sense of unease and latent violence. It'd been a long time since I'd last let myself get anywhere near men like these, but the rent was due and I liked eating, so I kept my head down and tried to power through.

The ballroom was set up like a wedding, with a dance floor and lots of round tables, but there was no music, and the gathered men seemed more like they'd rather blow lines of coke off a stripper's ass and maybe kill someone than do the Electric Slide.

Couldn't blame them. I hated the Electric Slide.

I had no clue what the occasion was supposed to be except that it celebrated a man named Roman and some new business venture he'd started, which sounded great, good for Roman. I wished him the best.



Only I really didn't want this very large, very angry-looking Italian man to murder me in front of fifty people.

And based on their bored stares, I was pretty sure nobody would come to my rescue.

"I am so, so sorry," I said, finding my voice at last. The guy's date glared at him and crossed her thin arms over her curvy chest, saying nothing. I wasn't getting any more help there, clearly.

"Sorry's not good enough," he said, voice dropping into a dangerous snarl. He'd be handsome, if it weren't for the death glare.

In my defense, it was an accident. He'd been arguing with that girl about something when I walked past with a glass of red on a tray for one of the guests, and he turned abruptly and slammed into me.

Obviously, that didn't matter now, but still, I was a decent waitress.

I'd only ever spilled drinks on, like, two other customers. Three, max.

"Sir, I'll get you some club soda, and maybe—"

"Club fucking soda? For wine on a two-thousand-dollar shirt? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I really shouldn't have mentioned club soda. I'd known it was a mistake and would only piss him off more. I just couldn't help myself.

I held up my hands, pleading now. I didn't want this to turn into a whole thing. I couldn't afford to lose my job, especially not in the winter when I was barely making ends meet to begin with, and the idea of burning two grand for some rich guy's shirt made me want to scream bloody murder into my pillow.

"I'll make it right, sir, whatever you need."

A dangerous gleam flashed in his eye. "Anything I want, pretty bitch?"

I stepped back from him, heart suddenly racing. The way he ran his tongue over his lower lip was both lascivious and threatening, and I wasn't a fan of where this was going.

"I meant, financially. I can pay to have it dry cleaned—"

He reached for me, faster than I could follow. My tray clattered to the floor, and the other men didn't even react, like they were used to seeing waitresses get assaulted.

"Is there a problem here?"

A voice behind me. I was about to hyperventilate from the stress and the worry that maybe, just maybe, this creep would sexually assault me in front of all these people.

Yeah, it felt like that kind of party.

My asshole assailant looked up, and his face instantly switched from rage-induced mania into something more like a very angry child caught sneaking into a forbidden room.

"Roman," he said, gripping my wrist harder. "This woman ruined—"

"Let go of her, Manzi."

Manzi, his face very red, released me instantly. I rubbed the aching bone and looked back at the looming figure behind me, then sucked in a surprised breath.

Dark hair, light skin, handsome, cut jaw, and eyes the pale blue of arctic ice. His expression was tightly controlled fury, though I got the strange, distinct sense that he could lose himself at any moment. He was muscular and athletic, and he wore an expensive, sleek suit—not quite as flashy as Manzi's, but perfectly fitted to his exquisite body.

His eyes drew me in and made me want to get lost. I'd never seen eyes like those on a person before. They looked like a wolf leading its pack. His dark hair was pushed back in a deceptively messy, almost perfectly imperfect style that accentuated his high cheekbones and sculpted brow. His full, pale pink lips frowned and twitched slightly as he stared down Manzi like a bull about to wreck an alley filled with clowns wearing bright red capes.

Roman was gorgeous. I'd seen plenty of handsome men in my life, but Roman was on an entirely different level, like his mouth and eyes and cheeks and hands were built to attract and to please.

Like he was used to giving orders, and to being obeyed. He held himself like a prince, like a king.

He was a honeypot, a poison flower, a Venus flytrap, something beautiful and dangerous all at once.

Terror flitted through my gut as I turned back to Manzi.

He looked down at the floor. "There's no problem, Roman."

"There better not be, not at my party. Not when we're celebrating a business venture that your father worked very hard to put together."

"Of course, Roman. I didn't mean anything. It's only, this shirt —"

"I'll write you a check." Roman's tone was a snarl and a whip.

Manzi flinched. "That won't be necessary."

"I insist. Or are you simply looking for any excuse to terrorize this girl?" He finally looked at me—

And his head tilted to the side like he saw something interesting for the first time.

His eyes roamed down along the full length of my body in very explicit judgment, and I felt weighed and measured. Coming from most men, that look would be rude at best, but somehow it felt natural from Roman, like he was used to taking the temperature of a person.

I hoped he didn't realize that I was burning up.

I stared back. I couldn't help myself. His gaze commanded respect and attention, and I was instantly drawn toward him, like I was a space rock on a crash course for the moon. I knew instinctively that he was a hunter, that he was a predator with sharp teeth and a strong jaw and a hunger that I couldn't begin to sate, but my curiosity only intensified under the pressure of his presence.

He was alluring and terrifying.

“No, Roman. I apologize for making a scene.”

“Good. Go now. Don’t bother the girl again.”

Manzi turned and strode away. He grabbed his date’s arm and dragged her with him. She let out a string of curses in Spanish, none of which Manzi seemed to understand, let alone care about, but I was pretty sure they were extremely intense.

At least, I thought so, based on my Spanish 101.

Nobody stopped him as he pushed open the door and the pair disappeared outside.

The remaining men went back to drinking and talking in a low murmur.

“I apologize for my young, reckless friend.” Roman continued to look at me with those incredible eyes, and I felt like a patient on an operating table.

He could take me apart and I think I’d let him.

What the hell was wrong with me?

“It’s okay. It was just an accident.”

“Even still. Did he hurt you?”

“No. I’m fine, really.”

He nodded once. “If he bothers you again, come find me.”

And with that, he walked away and joined the nearest group of men. They greeted him with smiles, though they all seem reserved, respectful—even a little afraid.

I couldn’t blame them.

“Holy crap,” I whispered to myself as I picked up my tray. I returned it to the back, found a broom, and quickly cleaned up the glass shards.

They glittered in the overhead light. I kept glancing over at Roman, the center of attention.

Who the hell was that guy? He’d defused the very angry, very scary Manzi without breaking a sweat, and I got the feeling

that Manzi wasn't used to being deferential.

Heck, none of the men in this place struck me as the simpering type. And yet Roman controlled the room like a general in front of his latest cadets.

I hurried into the back again and leaned up against the wall by the employees' bathroom, hands shaking. I wasn't sure if I was freaking out from Manzi manhandling me, or if I was trembling from the intensity of Roman's attention.

"What the hell happened out there?" I turned as Winter stormed over looking outraged. She was a few inches taller with dark auburn hair and the kind of curves that made most women jealous. Including me. And I knew for a fact that her idea of working out was walking to Wawa to buy three Snickers bars and a cheese-filled pretzel.

Whereas I went for a five-mile run most mornings just to stay in shape. And to quiet the little voice in my skull that kept wanting to go over the same old mistakes from my past, again and again and again.

Mostly to stay in shape, though.

"Did that fucking guy grab you? Jack just told me—"

"It's okay, seriously," I said quickly, holding up my hands to try to keep her from exploding. "One of the other guests helped me out."

Winter let out a sharp huff and slammed herself against the wall next to me. "That motherfucker. Did you see the way he was talking to that girl he had with him? If I were her, I'd stab him in the eye with a fork."

"I totally believe it. I sort of have the feeling she's tried that, though. You should've heard what she said to him in Spanish as they left."

"Yeah? Good, I hope she makes him feel like a real piece of shit." Winter's expression softened. She was a few years older and lived in the apartment unit below mine. We rented from this nice old lady named June who was happy to lose out on a little extra cash in the summer to have a couple of full-time,

dependable tenants. “You’re too passive sometimes, you know.”

“Hey, don’t make me feel bad. I wasn’t the one being a dick.”

She smoothed her hair over her shoulder. “Fair enough. I just want to see you stick up for yourself, you know?”

I forced a smile. “You do the sticking up for both of us.”

“Damn right I do. Any guy talks to my girl like that, I knee him in the balls. No questions asked.”

“Pretty sure that’s not true, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

She gave me a stern look. “You ever need a pair of nuts kicked, you find me. I love you, girl.”

“Love you too.”

She patted my wrist. “Jack says take your time and come back out when you’re ready. I’m gonna go scope out the room and make sure that asshole’s definitely gone.” She pushed off the wall and hesitated. “You sure you’re okay? You look a little flushed.”

I stared down at my feet, thinking about Roman’s ice-blue eyes and the way his lips curled as his gaze traveled down my body—it was strange, like he was both appraising me and unable to look away.

“I’m fine. Really.”

“All right. Take your time. I’ll be back in a bit.” She waved and marched back off toward the banquet hall.

I leaned my head against the wall and took a few more calming breaths, trying to remember that meditation exercise I’d learned on YouTube. The guy with the very soothing British accent called it a body scan or something like that. I started at the very top of my head and imagined the focus of my attention slowly moving down, from the tip of my skull to the points of my toes, pausing to focus on each muscle, each inch of skin.

By the end of it, I almost felt better.

Except then the image of Roman's hands following that exact same pattern, touching all of me, from my lips down to my breasts down to the soaking wet heat between my legs sent me into another stupid dizzy tailspin and I decided I had to get some fresh air.

I grabbed my jacket from the break room, headed through the kitchen, waved to Chef José, then shoved out the back. The Stone Harbor Club was a little private events space right on the edge of the bay, and the seaweed stench rolled up from beneath the wooden pier that surrounded the building. I walked over toward the railing overlooking the water and stared out at the gently lapping tide, the marsh grasses waving in the wind. I pulled my jacket tighter for warmth and let out big plumes of white breath, trying not to think about that man again, about that Roman.

It was like he wiped away the darkness of the moment with Manzi. For one second, I felt utter fear, the sort of chest-constricting terror I hadn't experienced in a very long time. I was sure Manzi would do something horrible if given the chance, and I couldn't tell if a room full of men would stop him.

At least until Roman had appeared. Then it was all about that beastly specimen.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to banish the thoughts. I couldn't get some stupid, girly crush on a guest, especially not when I'd been working so hard at keeping to myself. I'd moved to Sea Isle three years ago, after the incident, and ever since then, I hadn't done much dating or really much of anything at all.

I touched my belly where the scar tore me in half, hip to hip.

Winter said I was antisocial and wallowed too much. I said she was right, but I didn't tell her why. Before the incident, I was an outgoing girl—I had lots of friends, liked big parties, always had a big smile on my face.

The world was great. Sunshine and flowers. Rainbows, ponies, unicorns, and all that crap.

But afterward, things changed.

“Get the fuck off me, pendejo. Vete a la verga, stupid asshole.”  
It was the Latina girl again, and she sounded pissed. Her voice echoed off the pier and the club walls, and I caught her shadow projected along the wooden slats.

Another voice, this one male. It was Manzi, but I couldn't make out the words. He sounded angry, though, and I drifted toward them, heart racing.

What would he do to that poor girl, out here alone? Should I run inside and get Roman?

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