



RAFAEL

THE UNSEEN UNDERGROUND

PAGANI

ABIGAIL DAVIES

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Rafael Pagani

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hi fellow book lover,

I don't tend to write warnings in my books, but this one definitely needs one. Be warned, this is a dark romance and has dark themes. Here is a little snippet of what to expect from this story in the form of a list of tropes:

- Domestic Violence
- Miscarriage
- Reverse Age Gap
- Mafia Romance
- Trauma
- Emotional Scars
- Domestic Abuse

Rafael Pagani is a complete standalone, and can be read on its own, or if you'd like to enjoy the series as a whole, you can read the other mafia books in the [Unseen Underground Series](#).

If you'd like to find out more about me and what I write, then you can check out my website: www.abigaildaviesauthor.com or join my newsletter: www.abigaildaviesauthor.com/newsletter and get free books when you sign up!

PROLOGUE

PEYTON

My heart hammered in my chest, the pounding rhythm doing nothing but reminding me that I was alive.

I was still alive.

Outwardly anyway, but inside...inside I felt like I was rotting away, disintegrating into nothing as each day passed me by, hours racing by so fast like a sports car on a racetrack. But there was nothing I could do to slow them down, the brakes weren't working and I was about to crash and burn. I only had one option left but it was a huge risk.

A risk that was starting to look more and more appealing as I stared at myself in the mirror.

The dark purple bruise under my eye would heal, just like the split lip, thanks to the ring he wore on his pinky finger. Days would pass, weeks even, and then the marks would be gone. But the mental scars...they stayed. They refused to leave, haunting me like a ghost in a mansion, not able to pass to the other side.

I lifted my shaky hand, just now noticing the dried blood caked on my knuckles. It was mine, but not because I'd hit something, not because I'd fought back. In fact, I had no idea where it had come from this time.

This time.

What was I doing? Why was I still here?

Blinking, I turned, trying not to think about the throbbing in my eye as I glanced into the boys' bedroom. They were sleeping peacefully, one in his small bed and the other in his crib, matching pjs covering their small bodies.

They were why I was still here. But deep down, I knew it would only be a matter of time until he turned his rage onto them.

Gagging, I placed my hand on my stomach, trying not to bring up the small amount I'd eaten at dinner...a dinner that had set all of this into motion.

"They're both asleep," I said, ambling back into the kitchen where our huge, twelve-seater dining table sat. Travis was at the head of it, leaning back in his chair, watching me like a hunter stared at its prey before it pounced. I smiled, hating that he was catching me off guard as I walked over to him and took his empty plate from in front of him.

I turned, about to clean up the rest of the plates, knowing that he wouldn't want the mess out for long, when his long fingers wrapped around my wrist, stopping me in my tracks. "Did I say I was finished with that?"

Blinking, my pulse thrummed throughout my body, my brain screaming that danger was coming as I looked back at him, a shaky smile pulling at my lips as I placed his plate back down in front of him. "Sorry, Trav," I murmured.

He laughed, slowly standing, towering over my five-foot height. There was a time I'd liked how much taller he was than me, but as the years passed us by, I realized it was a weapon when it came to me and him. One that he used constantly.

"Are you that stupid? The plate is empty, why would you put it back down in front of me?" He pushed closer, his hand gripping me tighter. "You expect me to clean it up after you've been home all day doing fuck all? Is that it?"

I shook my head rapidly. “No, no. I’m sorry. It’s me, I’m... I’m not with it today, Travis.” I reached for the plate again, hyperaware of his hand still attached to my wrist, but he yanked me away, making sure I couldn’t grab it.

“You’re a stupid bitch, you know that?” I didn’t answer him, knowing what was coming next. I’d sensed his mood the moment he’d walked in the house and sat down at the table, but I’d hoped I was wrong. I never was though.

Fuck. I hated hoping things would turn out different, just for them to be the exact same over and over again. Wasn’t that the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

“Answer me!” he roared, backing me up until I hit the kitchen island, the marble countertop biting into the middle of my back.

“I’m sorry, Travis,” I whispered, looking him in the eye. It was a mistake, one that I realized too late as his hand lifted, clenching into a fist. Within a split second, his knuckles slammed against my eye socket, making my head spin and my face turn. I bit down on my tongue, feeling the blood spurting in my mouth, but he wasn’t done. That hit hadn’t satisfied him. One never did anymore.

“You’re a lazy cunt.” Another punch in the exact same spot so he could cause maximum impact. “Good for nothing.” His hand wrapped around my throat as he slapped me at the same time, no doubt wanting me to keep my head still so it hurt all the more. My lip stung followed by a trail of blood.

And all the while I kept my mouth closed. All the while I didn’t beg him to stop, I didn’t scream out for help that never ever came. I just took it, knowing it would be easier.

“I don’t know why I ever fucked you in the first place, you disgusting little whore.” He pushed his face closer to mine, his erection pressing against my leg. It wasn’t the first time him hurting me had turned him on, and I had a feeling that it wouldn’t be the last.

My stomach bottomed out as reality hit me harder than his fist had—this was about to take a darker turn, one that had only happened a handful of times. One that he would never admit he did. The hits? Sure, he would apologize for them and then I would forgive him. But forcing himself on me? He didn't see a problem with that; after all, I was his wife...

"Mommy?" I froze. Travis froze. My eyes widened as I managed to flick my attention past Travis to the little boy standing in the doorway, his face utterly broken. "What is Daddy doing?"

Travis's hand was still around my throat, his eyes wild as he looked between me and our oldest son. "We're just playing a game," I croaked out, thankful when Travis let go of me and stepped away. I'd noticed he hadn't said a word as I scrambled over to Kian. "Just a silly game," I murmured, reaching for his hand. "Let's get you back to bed, okay?"

"O...okay, Mommy." Our son turned his head to look at Travis but immediately looked away, holding my hand tighter as he whispered, "I don't like when Daddy hurts you, Mommy," low enough so only I could hear.

And with those words, it confirmed to me that it wasn't the first time he'd seen Travis hurt me. I'd thought I'd covered it up, but I should have known better. Kids didn't miss anything happening in their home, I was a prime example of that.

I couldn't stay. Not any longer. I had to protect the two people who meant the world to me, even if that caused me to turn my back on other people who I loved...even if it meant I had to go it alone for the first time in my life.

My heart was pounding for a completely different reason now. It wasn't scared of what *had* happened, but what *could* happen from now. I was making the decision for not only me, but my sons, I just hoped it was the right one.

Rushing out of their room as my choice solidified in my mind, my feet padded on the hardwood floor across the hallway and to the other side of the house. A house that I

hated. A house that would never feel like home even though I'd lived in it for seven years. It was an empty shell of plain walls, expensive art that didn't appeal to me, and pristine surfaces. Surfaces that I was expected to clean as I was the one who "stayed home all day doing nothing."

I refused to go into the fact that looking after two boys under the age of six was no easy task, but then, anything he could do to put me down, he would. With his words or his hands, it never mattered to him, not since that time he'd lost his shit with me when I was pregnant the first time.

Shaking my head, I finally made it to our bedroom, knowing that I should have confided in someone way back then—I should have told them what he'd done. But I'd believed him when he said he wouldn't do it again.

Weeks. That was how long it had taken for him to slap me across the face. He was smart enough not to leave any marks back then. Now though, he didn't give a fuck what he left behind, after all, there was only him who ever saw me.

And my brother. My big brother. His best fuckin' friend. But that was less and less nowadays. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd seen him. Three, four, no, five months ago. It had been an entire five months and there had been nothing from him.

I paused, my feet glued to the ground as reality hit me. Travis had isolated me. How was I only just now seeing that? It was like someone had cleared the fog in my brain and now I could see the road ahead.

Stupid. I'd been so damn stupid.

Closing my eyes, I placed my palm on the bedroom wall, trying to catch my breath, trying not to let my spinning head take over. I had so little time to get everything done—to get away from here. I knew his routine down to a T. He'd knock me around, then leave, heading to the bar on the next street over, down some whisky, then would stumble in around 1 a.m. apologizing for what he'd done. Then I'd forgive him, just like I always did—just like I always thought I had to.

Not anymore though. Tonight was the final straw. Tonight, things had gone too far. Tonight, my son had witnessed what his father was really like. So I was done. Done with everything but being a mother to my two sons.

With renewed energy, I grabbed a large bag from the closet, then threw in as many clothes as I could, along with some shoes. Anything I thought I needed, I put in there. Then I got a second bag, going into the boys' room and doing the same with their things. Neither of them stirred as I packed everything I could, and once both bags were full to the brim, I pulled them to the front door.

My ribs burned from the movement, the faded bruises from last week aching, reminding me that the time between each hit was getting less and less.

Huffing out a breath, I then opened the door and headed out to the driveway and my car. The darkness outside covered me so that no one could see what I was doing. And after a good ten minutes of dragging and lifting, I had both bags in the car.

Now all I needed was the boys. And the secret stash of money that he didn't know I was aware of.

I left the front door open a crack, knowing that I would have to do this next part so much quicker. I grabbed my coat off the rack by the front door along with both of the boys' coats, then headed back into our bedroom. I beelined it for the closet again, this time going into Travis's section, and input the code to the safe. It clicked open, revealing the stacks and stacks of bills there.

Part of me wanted to clean him out completely, but I knew I couldn't be like that—I couldn't be that kind of person.

So I grabbed six stacks, knowing that each one had ten thousand dollars in it. It would be enough to start us a new life, to give me some breathing room until I got us settled.

Shoving them into my purse, I then sprinted to the boys' room, gently putting Reed's coat on first, my ten-month-old boy who saw no danger at all. Once he was ready, his eyes still

fully closed, I moved over to Kian, my softhearted six-year-old with a heart of gold.

“Kian,” I whispered, tapping him softly on the shoulder. “Kian, baby, wake up.”

“Mom?” he groaned, his blond hair sticking up all over the place as his puffy eyes slowly opened. “Mom?”

“Get up, sweet boy, we’re going on an adventure.” I grinned at him, trying not to let my sadness slip past the mask that I always put on in front of them.

His eyes widened, excitement gripping him instantly. “An adventure?” He pushed his little hands on his bed, sitting up, already reaching for the coat I was holding. “We’re leaving now, Mom?”

“We sure are.” I stood, helping him find his other armhole, then placing his slippers on his feet. “Let me get Reed, then we can go.” I did a little squeal, trying to show my excitement, knowing that he would feed off of it.

He did a little dance, staying right next to me as I reached into the crib and picked Reed up. He still didn’t stir, not even as I held Kian’s hand all the way to the front door, then opened up the car.

I stood behind Kian as he climbed into the back, then I shut the door and went around to the other side, placing Reed in his seat, then strapping him in. Kian was trying his hardest to do his own straps, a grin plastered over his face that gave me hope.

“I got it,” I told him, clicking the strap in effortlessly. But then I paused, placing my hand on the side of his sweet little face. I hated that he’d witnessed anything at all last night, but I swore to myself as I stared into the bright blue eyes—the exact same as his father’s—that it would be the very last time he saw anything like that.

I was doing this for my boys. But I also knew, I was doing this to save myself, because if I didn’t run now, it would be too late. He’d destroy me without a second thought, draining the life out of me, losing himself to his anger.

It was me or him. And I was choosing me, for once in my life.

CHAPTER 1

PEYTON

FOUR MONTHS LATER

Easy.

Fun.

Full of laughter.

Those were three things I'd never thought my day-to-day life could be...but it was. There was no darkness surrounding me, Kian, and Reed. No walking on eggshells. No answering to anybody.

Four months.

That was how long it had been since I'd walked out of the house I shared with my husband.

One hundred and twenty-one days.

That was how long it had been since someone had laid their hands on me.

Two thousand, nine hundred, and four hours.

That was how long it had been since I started my new life.

I wished I'd done it sooner, but I knew I wasn't ready for it before that night. It wouldn't have stuck, and I wouldn't have made sure I was a four-hour drive away from anyone that knew me. I'd gone as far as I could without leaving the state, and settled in a nice, but normal, neighborhood.

I hadn't created a new name for myself, or for the boys. I wasn't hiding, I was just starting a new life. Even though the thought of Travis finding us played over and over every night in my nightmares, I refused to be anything other than the person I'd always been.

Walking around the front of my new car, I smiled, remembering how I'd gotten more cash for the top-of-the-line car that Travis had bought me when I'd given birth to Reed. It was a bribe, one that said, "forgive me for strangling you only an hour before you went into labor."

The vehicle held memories that I refused to be reminded off, plus there was no doubt that a tracker was in it. So I'd sold it the next morning, then bought this one, a small silver car, costing a tenth of what I'd gotten for the other one. Which meant I had more money to go into the pot, allowing us to really settle in before I had to find a job.

Luckily, Kian was already in school and Reed was going to daycare twice a week to run off his crazy energy. Ever since he turned one two months ago and learned how to walk, he'd been a little terror.

I lifted the lid on the trash can, then deposited the bag of trash from the kitchen into it, not looking up until the last second. The neighborhood was always quiet and settled, so when I looked up, I jumped out of my skin. "Fuck," I grunted, my hand flying to my chest as I stared at the woman who was putting her trash out too, only ten feet away from me next door. "You scared the shit out of me."

She was like a deer caught in headlights, her face shadowed, her eyes pools of green. She couldn't have been a day over eighteen. I tilted my head, trying to place her face, but I'd never seen her here before.

Frowning, I glanced around, realizing she'd come from the house where the Mafia guy lived. Yeah, I knew he was Mafia, I'd known it the first moment I'd met him when he helped carry Reed's new crib to my front door. Romeo Pagani had been a man of very few words, but I'd known who he was instantly. If it hadn't been for the vibe he gave off, then the name would have confirmed it.

I may have grown up in the next state over, only moving into this state when Travis decided we should get away from the chaos that I'd grown up around, but the Pagani name was renowned across the country. And it was in that moment that I knew the only reason Travis had moved us into a different state was so that he could hold his control over me even more. It made no sense to live where we had because he had to cross state lines daily to work for my big brother.

He hadn't wanted *us* to be away from it all, he'd wanted *me* alone so he could do whatever the hell he wanted. And he had. Over and over again.

Shaking my head, I pushed the thought of him out of my mind. I couldn't go there, not today, not any day, not if I wanted to survive.

"Sorry," she whispered, her shoulders tightening as she stared at me.

"You're all good." I waved my arm in the air, hyperaware that I had to leave to get Reed from daycare in the next few minutes, but also trying to shake off the anxiety bubbling inside at remembering my husband. I should have walked away, cleared my mind, then got into my car, but something kept my feet glued to the ground, telling me I needed to stay. "Are you okay?" I asked. I had no idea why it slipped out of my mouth, but if the widening of her green eyes was anything to go by, then everything *wasn't* okay at all.

"I..." She trailed off, blinking as an engine came closer—no, two engines—then abruptly stopped.

"Bailey," a deep voice snapped, followed by the slamming of a car door. I swung my head around, staring at the driveway and to the man who owned the house she was standing in front

of *Romeo Pagani*. “What the hell are you doing?” I bristled at his words, but the part of me who had learned to keep my mouth shut when a man was angry had me frozen still. “Get back inside. Now.”

She stumbled back a step, like Bambi not quite sure of her legs. “I was just taking the trash out,” she murmured.

He wasn’t listening to her as he growled, “Get inside.”

“Romeo,” she said, this time her voice a little surer. Her gaze flicked over to me, worry shadowed in her eyes, then looked back at Romeo. “I was talking to—”

“No.” He stiffened at the sound of another engine. “Get inside, Bailey. Right now.”

“It’s them,” a new voice said, but I didn’t turn to look at it, too caught in the trap of what was happening right in front of me. “Fuck, it’s them.”

“Inside,” Romeo roared, so loud that I winced, my stomach dropping, the same old feeling washing through me that always did when Travis came home in a mood and I knew what was going to follow it up: a night of fist hitting, blood, bruises, and pain.

My body jerked as I witnessed him grabbing her arm and yanking her toward his house. The switch flipped and gone was the Peyton that Travis had created, and in her place was the Peyton I’d always been deep down—the one my brother had taught me to be. I’d buried her for a while there, but now she was back, full of vengeance.

“Hey!” I called, taking a step forward. “Don’t grab her like that.”

He stopped at the front door, and my attention moved between him and the girl. “Stay out of my goddamn business,” he warned.

My nostrils flared, my shoulders pushing back as I tried to make myself bigger, it was kind of impossible though as I wasn’t an inch over five feet tall. He narrowed his eyes on me and I did the same right back, not willing to back down.

I opened my mouth, about to say something else, but he pulled her inside, slamming the door shut behind them both, and leaving me standing there full of frustration. Everything in me wanted to march over there, but I knew better. I knew outside forces only made things worse.

“You should go inside,” the voice I hadn’t turned to look at said.

I blinked, slowly moving my attention to him, spinning on my heels and realizing I’d come out here with no shoes on. Glancing down at my toes, my chipped dark red nails reminded me that I needed to paint them soon.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” I tried to whip out, but my tone was off, my body swaying to the left, at least, it felt like it. In reality, I was standing as still as a statue, staring at the man who looked so much like Romeo but also not like him at all. They had to be brothers. And he...he couldn’t have been a day over 20, and that made me an entire decade older than him at thirty.

Which was why I shouldn’t have still been staring, taking in the slacks he was wearing, clinging to his hips like they were afraid to let go and not be touching him anymore. His black shirt was rolled up to his elbows, some tattoos peeking out on his forearms—forearms that were tensing as he stood there, cracking his knuckles one at a time.

“Not tryin’ to tell you what to do,” he murmured, his voice like a jagged edge covered in velvet. Fuck. A voice shouldn’t have had me squeezing my legs together like that. “Just thought you may be a little cold.” He shrugged like it was no big deal, a move that I both hated but liked at the same time.

“I...” I stared down at my shorts, my legs covered in goose bumps. He was observant, that was for sure, but so was I, and I hadn’t missed him looking behind him at the car that parked five houses down as we were talking. “Friends of yours?” I asked, finally gaining my bearings as I sidestepped toward my front door.

“What?” he growled, his lips lifting into a sneer. He looked...dangerous. Fuck. I placed my hand on my stomach,

backing away several steps as he moved closer to me. I didn't do danger, not anymore. "I don't associate with pieces of shit like them." His face was turning red, his rage clear for me to see. But it was gone in the blink of an eye as he pushed his hand through his ink-black hair, gripping it for a second as he stared down at me. "Go inside."

It was an order. One that I wanted to refuse. But...I needed to go and get some shoes on anyway to get Reed, so I spun around, trying not to let my body pull in on itself. It didn't matter how long I spent away from Travis, those natural instincts to protect myself from men were built into me. I didn't think they'd ever go away if I was honest.

Pulling in a deep breath, I stepped inside my house, slipped my shoes on, then grabbed my keys and headed back out.

He was still standing there, one foot on each driveway as they were only separated by a thin row of bricks. "Didn't I just tell you to go inside?" he gritted out, but he wasn't looking at me, he was still staring at the car five houses down.

"I'm going out," I told him, although, I had no idea why. I didn't owe him an explanation; I didn't owe anyone an explanation.

I blinked over at him as I pulled open my driver's door, but he still wasn't paying me any attention. His body was taut, his muscles locked into place with his feet hip width apart. And in that moment, he reminded me so much of the men that worked for my brother—protective, foreboding, angry—that it shocked me for a second and I just sat there with my door wide open, my hands on the steering wheel, staring at him.

Footsteps sounded out, but the only thing that moved was my gaze as he sauntered closer, his expression changing the closer he got. Gone was the straight line of his lips, and in its place was a smirk. "Where you goin'?"

I licked my lips, tilting my head to look up at him as I murmured, "To pick my son up from daycare."

Why was I telling him that? Why was I still sitting here? Why couldn't I stop looking at him?

He nodded, his attention not moving off of me as he gripped the top of my door and told me, "Drive safe, mama."

My stomach flipped at his words, my mouth opening and closing as he shut my car door and stepped back, watching me with a knowing look on his face. He knew exactly what he was doing, and...dammit, I'd fallen into his trap.

"Fuck," I ground out, slapping my hand on my steering wheel as I turned the ignition on with the other. I refused to look back over at him as I reversed off the driveway, but that didn't mean I couldn't still feel his eyes on me.

He was dangerous, in more ways than one, and for some reason, I wanted to find out just *how* dangerous he was.

But I wouldn't.

I was here to start a new life for my boys. Men were off the table.

RAFAEL

"Make sure you keep me up to date, son," my dad said through the speaker on my cell. His tone told me everything I needed to know, and even though we were only on a call, I could imagine the expression on his face as if I was on a video call—serious and foreboding.

"I will," I replied, not leaving a second between our words. I was loyal to my family—my father, my older brother, my mother—but I was also loyal to my cousin Lorenzo who was the boss of the Beretta Mafia.

But...my father always came first.

To the outside world he was this scary man who literally cut people to pieces for revenge, but to me, he would always be the man who guided me, who protected us all when we didn't even know we needed protecting. He was the boss within our house, but now he was struggling with knowing his place within the organization.

I had respect and loyalty for Lorenzo, but my father would always come first. Which was why I told him everything that was happening, all the ins and outs and decisions being made, especially since he'd been doing less and less for the Beretta Mafia. They were pushing him out, but deep down, I had a feeling he didn't want to be as involved anymore. At least, not physically. He always wanted to be kept in the loop though, and I was the only person who facilitated that.

A door closing caught my attention and I turned to look over at where the sound had come from. My shoulders tensed as I widened my stance in front of Romeo's front door. I'd been guarding his house for two weeks now, but it wasn't the building that was important to him, it was the woman inside—Bailey. I tried not to think about all the shit she'd been through, it was hard not to. I'd been watching over her at my big brother's house ever since he'd freed her from hell nearly two weeks ago. It was a job that Romeo hadn't even needed to ask me to do. Family first. Always.

"I gotta go, Dad," I said down the cell, ending the call before he could reply to me as I braced myself for the woman who was walking across her driveway and then Romeo's, beelining it right for me. "No," I told her, not having the energy for it today. I had too much on my mind, too many things to try and sort through, and a job to concentrate on. The last thing I needed was her in my way.

"I want to see the girl who's in there," she demanded, halting three feet away from me and planting her hands on her hips.

"No can do." I crossed my arms over my chest, widening my stance to block the door even more. "She's busy."

She shook her head, not accepting what I was saying. “I want to see her. I want to make sure she’s not hurt.”

My blood boiled at her words. Who the fuck did she think we were? “She’s not,” I growled out, hating what she was insinuating. “She’s fine.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “I don’t care. I want to see her face,” she whipped out, crossing her own arms over her chest, mirroring me, only her move pushed her tits up high.

Fuck. Me.

They were almost spilling out of the white tank she was wearing, and I was sure she had no idea. She was oblivious to how she looked, her plump lips, her smooth pale skin, her wide eyes.

My nostrils flared, my gaze dipping from her cleavage to her face. I tried to keep my attention there, even though everything in me wanted to glance back down again. I stopped myself though as I focused on her light-brown eyes. “I already told you. She’s fine. He hasn’t hurt her.”

She laughed, the sound reaching deep inside my chest. *Fuck.* “You think I’m gonna believe you?” She dropped her arms at her sides, taking another step forward, her head only coming to my chest even with the thick-soled Vans she was wearing. “I haven’t seen her for five days. I want to see her in the flesh right now.” She pointed at the ground to emphasize her point.

I gritted my teeth together, trying to keep a lid on the anger that was bubbling up inside me. Not a single neighbor had bothered us since I’d been guarding the house. They may not have known for sure who Romeo was, but deep down they knew. There was no mistaking the look that came with the men of the Mafia, or the vibe that surrounded us.

So the fact that this woman had the fuckin’ balls to come up to me and demand to see Bailey was rubbing me the wrong damn way, and I liked it. *Fuckin’ hell, I liked it.* “Listen here, lady.” I stepped forward, my words cutting off as I inhaled her sweet jasmine scent. It wrapped around me, soothing me, but

dammit, I couldn't let it. I had to keep my guard up at all times. "I don't know who the fuck you think you are, but this ain't none of your business." I took a step toward her. "Now back the fuck up."

A creak from behind me had my back snapping upright and my head whipping around. And none other than Bailey—the girl my brother had bought and rescued—appeared. "Hi," she squeaked out. "I...I'm okay."

"You sure?" the woman standing mere feet away from me asked.

"I'm sure," Bailey said, her voice sounding more sure than it had since the moment I'd met her. I clenched my fists at my side as I watched them go back and forth. "Do you want to come in?"

"Romeo won't like that," I warned, staring the woman down with narrowed eyes. I didn't like the way she'd come over here, but more importantly, I didn't like the way she'd made me feel off-kilter, even if it was only for a few seconds. It was enough for me to notice.

"Romeo isn't here," Bailey reminded me. She was right, he'd been gone for over twelve hours now, but it was for a good reason. He was getting the intel he needed to take down the scum who had hurt her and Navy, the underboss's girlfriend.

I had no idea how I was supposed to voice that, how I was supposed to tell her that while I was here keeping her safe, he was out there making sure she wouldn't have to look over her shoulder for the rest of her life. He was trying to ensure her freedom.

Opening my mouth, I was still trying to come up with a reason when the woman said, "It's okay, the kids are waiting in the car anyway. I gotta get them inside and into bed."

"Kids?" Bailey asked, perking up and taking a step outside of the door. "You have kids?"

"Bailey," I warned her yet again, but this time my tone made no room for argument and neither did my arm as I

whipped it out so she wouldn't be able to get past. "Don't."

She blinked up at me, her eyes glazing over, and for a second I was sure she was going to cry, and then I'd have been in deep shit with Romeo. Fuck's sake. "I know, Rafael," she told me. "I'm not going anywhere, promise."

"Are you sure you're okay?" the woman asked again, this time taking a step away from us. Her body was finally listening to the danger in front of her—*me*—but her mouth wasn't done. "Because if you're not, I can get help."

I laughed—I couldn't help it—the sound so harsh that it made Bailey jump. "What do you think, that we kidnapped her? That she's here as a sex slave?" The fact that she *had* been kidnapped and *was* used as a sex slave was the irony of the situation. It was too close to home, but they always said that if you were going to lie, to make sure it had bits of truth in it, right?

The woman's eyes got big, her arms wrapping around her stomach, a protective instinct that I didn't miss. My observation skills were something that I'd had to hone and work on. My dad and Romeo were masters in torture, but me, I was a master in reading people, and whatever was going on with this woman went deeper than anyone knew. "I'm just making sure that he didn't hurt her, that's all."

Darkness ebbed away at the edges of my vision as I saw the pain in her eyes. I wanted to reach out to her, to demand that she tell me why she looked like that, why she all of a sudden resembled a broken little doll, but within seconds, she blinked and it was gone.

A mask replaced everything, a mask that it was clear she was used to wearing. My frustration was getting the better of me as I ground out, "You saw her. She's fine. Now you can go."

"Fine." She huffed out a breath. "But here, have this." She handed a piece of paper to Bailey, but I took it from her, reading the digits and memorizing them within seconds. My photographic memory came in handy in times like these. "It's my number. If you ever need anything." She backed away

another step. “I’m only next door.” She smiled sadly. “Name’s Peyton, by the way.”

Peyton. I tilted my head to the side as I passed over the piece of paper to Bailey and stared at the woman. Her name suited her.

“I’m Bailey,” Bailey shouted, her voice sounding happy for the first time in days.

If I was honest, I wanted to stand here all day with my only attention on Peyton, watching as she walked back to her car on the driveway. But I was here to do a job, and right then, I wasn’t doing it the best I should have been.

“Get back inside now, Bailey. If Romeo comes home and sees you like this, he’ll blow a damn gasket.”

She backed up without a word and a second later the door clicked shut, but I didn’t move my attention off of Peyton as she opened the back door to her car and a little boy jumped out. He wrapped his little arms around her hips, staring up at her like she was the entire world to him.

Something stirred low in my stomach as I watched her stroke the side of his face, then plant a kiss on the top of his head. I swallowed, cracking my neck side to side as she let go of him and watched him run to the front door. But it was as she pulled a sleeping toddler out of the other side of her car that had me taking a step forward.

I wanted to help her. I didn’t want to watch her struggle with him but...I couldn’t move from my post. I couldn’t put Bailey at risk just because I was having a weird-as-fuck day. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t watch them with my eyes.

I didn’t look away, not as she walked up to her front door, and definitely not as she laughed at something the older boy said, throwing her head back and putting her whole body into it. It was a genuine laugh, one that had a smile lifting at my lips.

Fuck. I could have listened to her laugh like that all day long. So, as she went inside her house and locked the door behind her, I made a promise to make her laugh like that. Just

so I could watch her happiness again. Just so I could say *I* had made her have that reaction.

CHAPTER 2

PEYTON

“And then he took the dinosaur from me,” Kian gasped out, his hands animated in front of his face as he told me all about his day at school. “I told Miss but she didn’t tell him off.”

“Aw, baby, I’m sorry. Did you get it back?”

He shook his head with so much force that it must have hurt his neck. “No. He’s so mean, Mommy.”

I reached my arm between the seats and patted his leg. “Some people are like that, baby. You just make sure you stay away from him.” I paused, feeling the mama bear inside of me roaring to life. Every part of me wanted to get us back out of this car and head inside the school, but I couldn’t go in with every little thing that happened. Sending my first son to school was an entire new world for not only him, but me too.

“I will, Mommy.” He smiled wide, the dinosaur forgotten about. And I took that as my signal to turn back around and head off the school grounds.

The school was only a fifteen-minute drive away from my house, but I’d been running late today. I normally did the grocery shopping while Kian was at school and Reed was in daycare, but the daycare had called me as soon as I’d put all the groceries in the car, which meant I had no time to take

them home before going there and then picking Kian up from school.

It was a conundrum that only moms thought about: how was I supposed to get two kids and a trunk full of groceries in the house without either a screaming match or one child trying to run away.

My head started to hurt as I took the turn into our street, but the distraction of Kian and Reed talking—although it was more babbling from Reed at this point—was helping. That was until I pulled into my driveway. I turned the engine off, but I didn't move as I tried to figure out the best way to do it.

There was only one option: keep the kids in the car and do mad dashes to the door. Taking a deep breath, I then pushed out of the car, holding my keys firmly in my palm as I rushed around to the trunk. The boys were still talking away, so I grabbed two bags and jogged to the front door, then placed them down on the ground.

I spun around so fast that I knocked myself off-balance and fell against the wall, my shoulder smashing off the brick building, the jagged edges cutting into my skin. And I knew instantly which brick I'd hit—the same one that I'd reported over and over again. It was broken off, sticking out like a knife, threatening to slice something—my arm, clearly.

“Motherfucker!” I gritted my teeth as I righted myself and grabbed on to my arm, pulling my palm away and seeing the blood there. “Dammit.” My head spun for a second from the sharpness of the pain. Crap, I didn't feel too good. It was more than a scrape, and now my stomach was swirling and—

“Mommy?” Kian shouted. I blinked, trying to clear my eyes but there was a blurriness around the edges. I was used to pain, so I had no idea why this was affecting me the way it was.

“Coming,” I murmured, but I wasn't sure he could hear me. I took another step, feeling how shaky my legs were. Swallowing, I looked down at my arm, seeing the blood flowing down to my wrist and dripping onto the ground. How the hell was I bleeding so much?

“Mommy!” Kian shouted, and when I looked up this time, I could see him banging his little fist on the window, his face as white as a ghost. His franticness caused Reed to start screaming, and for the first time since I’d left our family home behind, I felt...lost.

“I’m coming,” I told them both, taking another step. Each one was wobbly, but I managed to make it halfway to the car before footsteps gained my attention. I didn’t bother looking up, too intent on getting to the boys as Kian’s shouting wasn’t stopping.

“Peyton?” a deep voice called. “You okay?”

I breathed deep as I moved my gaze off my car and to the man standing on the driveway next to mine. “I...” I wanted to say I was fine. I wanted to tell him to mind his own business, just like he had with me days ago when I’d gone to check on Bailey. But...the sound of my boys screaming because they couldn’t get to me was breaking my heart. “I fell and...” I trailed off as I pulled my hand from my arm and held it up to him. *Where the hell was all of this blood coming from?*

“Fuck,” Rafael cursed, but within seconds he was over to me, his large hands wrapping around my arm, one just above my elbow and the other on my wrist. “Where did you fall?”

I jerked my head toward my front door. “On the wall. There’s a brick that sticks out.”

“Stay here,” Rafael ordered as he pushed me against the wall. I did as he said, not having the energy to tell him that I could manage this. I couldn’t, not right in that second, and although I didn’t know this man, there was something in my gut that told me I could trust him.

If there was one thing I’d learned over the last seven years since Travis and I had been together, it was to listen to my gut. It had told me to get as far away from him as possible, it had warned me that he wasn’t the man he portrayed himself as, but I’d ignored it. I hadn’t listened to my instincts.

It was different now though. *I was different.*

“Damn, that’s sharp.” I turned my head to look at Rafael who was touching the brick that was protruding from the wall. “It’s like a damn blade. How long has it been like this?”

“Since I moved in,” I told him, clearing my throat and feeling like the world was spinning beneath my feet.

“No wonder you’re bleeding so bad.” He shook his head and made for me again, this time grabbing just my wrist and leading me to my front door. “Go inside.”

“No.” I shook my head, trying to move past him, but his height—over six feet—and the width of his body stopped me immediately.

“Go inside, Peyton.” His tone changed, getting deeper and more demanding. “I’ll get the boys.”

“They don’t know you,” I told him, trying to fight him, but the longer I stood here, the more my stomach turned, my shaky legs begging me to take a seat.

“Look at me.” I tilted my head up so I could look into his eyes. The dark brown was more than just a dark brown, it was ringed with gold and then dispersed with honey flecks. I’d never seen eyes like that before. *Captivating*. “Go inside. I’ll get the boys.” He said the words slowly, almost as if he needed them to sink in, then a second later spun around.

I stood there, watching as he beelined it for the car. Kian wasn’t trying to break through the glass window anymore, but even from here I could see the tears that had streamed down his face. It didn’t matter how much I liked to believe that Travis hadn’t impacted our oldest son, it just wasn’t the truth. Kian had seen more than I’d ever known, and now it was manifesting.

Gripping my keys in my hands, I took one last look as Rafael opened Reed’s door. I could hear the deep tone of his voice from here, but couldn’t make out what he was saying. Kian turned to look at him and I took that as my opportunity to unlock the front door.

I dipped down to gather the bags of groceries but halfway down I realized that was a mistake as I went lightheaded, so I

climbed over them instead and headed right for the kitchen. The house I was renting wasn't anything close to the one I'd lived in since Travis and I had gotten married.

Where the old house had been cold and uninviting, all woodwork and cold surfaces, this was the opposite. The wooden flooring was stained a beautiful dark oak color and I'd covered it in as many rugs as I could. The walls in the hallway were a mixture of greens, warmth exuding from everywhere as it led to the stairs that were covered with pictures of the boys. A door to the left led into the living room, the one on the right a makeshift playroom, and at the back was the open-plan kitchen and dining room.

It was less than a third of the size of the old house, but that was why I loved it so much. It was my little slice of heaven.

"Peyton?" Rafael called.

"In here," I said, taking a seat at the kitchen table. The long oak table had three chairs on one side and a bench on the other.

Little footsteps rang out followed by a few sniffles, then seconds later, Kian ran into the kitchen with a box of macaroni under his arm as he beelined it right for me. "Mommy!" He dropped the macaroni on the floor and dove at me, his little arms trying their best to wrap around me.

"I'm okay," I told him, kissing him on the top of his head as Rafael appeared in the doorway with Reed in one arm and two bags of groceries in the other. He placed the bags on the dining table, his gaze not meeting mine as he tried to put Reed down.

"No, no, no!" Reed demanded, using one of the five words he could say clearly as he held on to Rafael tighter. I wasn't sure if Rafael was as shocked as I was, but he didn't show it. Instead, he just turned back around and headed out of the kitchen.

"You're hurt," Kian said, pulling back as Rafael entered again and put two more bags on the table. He swiped my keys

off the table and left again; there was only one more bag left to bring inside at this point.

Glancing down at Kian, I tried not to see the terror in his eyes, but it was impossible to miss. My softhearted boy was so concerned about me and...dammit, I could feel tears brimming, threatening to come to the surface and fall.

“It’s just a little cut.” I placed my hand on the side of his face and pressed a kiss to his other cheek. “I’ll fix myself up and then I’ll be okay.”

“Like before?” Kian asked, his brows furrowing. My heart hammered in my chest, my pulse thumping in my ears so loud that I could barely hear anything else. I opened my mouth, wanting to say something...anything...but nothing came out. “Like when Daddy would hit you and you made the ouchies better? Will it be like that, Mommy?”

My heart was in my throat, my head spinning for an entirely new reason now, but it was as I looked up and saw Rafael standing in the kitchen doorway with Reed still attached to him that I truly realized what Kian had said.

“I...” I didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what to do. I was shell-shocked, I was...I was...I didn’t know *what* I was.

“Why don’t you watch your little brother and I’ll fix Mommy up?” Rafael said, his eyes turning darker as he stepped toward us. Kian didn’t move from right in front of me though. He was waiting for me to say something, waiting for direction from the adult who should have been protecting him this entire time but hadn’t.

“Go on, sweet boy,” I told him, barely able to get the words out from around the massive lump in my throat. “I’ll only be a couple of minutes.”

He blinked up at me, his mouth turning down for a second, and then he spun around, heading for Rafael who held his hand out to him. Kian took it like he’d been holding that man’s hand for years, like it wasn’t even a second thought and...I had no idea what I was supposed to think about that.

And if I was honest, I didn't have the energy to think about what was happening here, or what Kian had just said to me. The back of the chair was keeping me from slumping down as I closed my eyes and waited for just a second.

"Where's your first aid kit?" Rafael's rough voice asked. I didn't bother opening my eyes as I told him where it was—in the first cupboard for easy access.

I wasn't used to having help from anyone, and although it felt nice, I couldn't let it keep happening. I had to nip this in the bud as soon as I could, so when the sound of his footsteps came closer, I opened my eyes and told him, "Thank you for your help, but you can go now."

He made a noise in the back of his throat, ignoring me as he placed the first aid kit down next to me, unzipped it, then pulled things out. "Extensive first aid kit you have here, Peyton." I bit down on my bottom lip, refusing to answer him. He didn't need to know why I had more than just the essentials. He didn't need to know anything...yet, he did. He knew because he'd heard Kian say something and—

"Move your hand." His words cut off my train of thought, but I didn't quite process what he'd said until he crouched down in front of me and pulled my hand away from my arm. Some of the blood had dried now, but it was still bleeding. Not as much as before, but still enough to cause droplets on my kitchen floor.

"I can do it myself, you know," I gritted out as Rafael wiped away the dried blood, then swiped along the wet blood to look at the cut.

"No doubt you can, Peyton," he replied, an edge to his tone. He didn't say another word as he meticulously cleaned me up and placed some butterfly stitches over the cut, then covered it in a wide, square dressing.

He grabbed another wipe, continuing down my arm and to my wrist, taking all of the dried blood away, and I could do nothing but watch him. His long tan fingers encircled the entirety of my forearm, holding me in place. But it was the

way his touch had me on the edge of my seat that was the most confusing.

“I’m good now, Raf,” I whispered, shortening his name.

He glanced up, his lips lifting up on both sides into the widest grin. “I like the sound of my name coming from your lips.” Butterflies took flight in my stomach as he slowly stood, dropping the wipe on the table and grasping both arms of my chair. “But I know it’s a distraction.” He leaned in closer, his woody scent wrapping around me like the warmest blanket to ever exist. “I heard what the little man said, Peyton.”

I pulled in a stuttering breath as I stared right into his eyes and witnessed the whirling pools of rage. “It’s nothing.” I tried to laugh, but the sound was off even to my own ears.

“Nothing?” He tilted his head to the side, lowering his voice. “I can see it in your eyes, mama.” He paused, leaning in a little closer as he whispered, “I see the pain and anguish. It doesn’t matter how much you try to hide it; I can see through it.”

The silence stretched between us as neither of us moved. The sounds of Kian and Reed playing in the other room were mere background noise as I concentrated on the man ten years my junior.

“Raf,” I whispered, so low that only he could hear me. “Please...I...” I wasn’t sure what I was trying to say.

“Your secret is safe with me, mama.” He smiled, a sad kind of smile, then placed a soft kiss on my forehead.

I closed my eyes, breathing him in and enjoying the moment for what it was, because I knew it would be over too soon and I wanted to commit it to memory. I wanted to think about the way he spoke to me. I wanted to remember how he’d cleaned me up and helped the boys into the house without me even asking.

But most of all, I wanted to remember how he made me feel safe for the first time since I’d gotten married.

It was a feeling I hadn’t even realized I’d missed, not until that moment. Not until the prospect of being taken care of was

right in front of my face.

But life was always a cruel bitch to me, because as fast as that feeling had come, it was gone again when Rafael walked out of my house, leaving me alone with my dark thoughts and my stinging arm.

I'd let my guard down today, but I wouldn't again. I'd erect a steel wall around myself so that he couldn't penetrate it. I needed to protect myself from Rafael, but not because I thought he would hurt me, but because I *knew* he wouldn't.

Life was all about choices, and in that moment, I'd made the hardest one of all. I just didn't realize *what* that choice was.

RAFAEL

It didn't matter how many times I tried to stop my gaze drifting over to the house next door, I just couldn't help myself.

Three days.

That was how long it had been since I'd been standing in her kitchen as I overheard what her son had said to her.

Like when Daddy would hit you and you made the ouchies better?

His words echoed in my brain on repeat, refusing to leave as I imagined scenario after scenario. I hated the images that popped into my head, spinning around and around, getting worse the longer I thought about it. I cracked my neck to the side, trying to distract myself—trying not to think about anyone hurting her.

But it was no use, because all I could think about was her—Peyton, the mom to two boys who had pain in her eyes unlike any I'd ever seen before. I needed to know more about

her, I'd even dropped her into conversation with Romeo just so that I could attempt to get some kind of background, but he gave me next to nothing. All he said was that she'd moved in four months ago and he'd helped her carry in some furniture and that was the extent of it.

It wasn't enough to sate the thoughts swirling around my head. It wasn't enough to make me not wonder who she was and if she'd run away from something.

I shook my head as I tore my attention off of her house. Of course she'd run away. That wasn't even a question at this point, not to me anyway.

Swallowing, I tried to not think about her at all, or the fact that her car wasn't on her driveway. I had a job to do, important things to focus on, but my brain had different ideas on what it should and shouldn't do in that moment and—

“I gotta head to a meeting,” Romeo said. His voice had me jerking, and I hated to admit my heart beat a little quicker at him leaving through the front door and ambling past me. “I won't be back until late.”

I nodded, trying not to let anything show, but I wasn't as good at that as he and Dad were. “Got it. I'll be here.”

He tilted his head in acknowledgment, not saying another word as he sauntered to his car that was parked on his driveway. Mine was against the curb right in front of his house, a statement for anyone who drove down the street. There was no way you'd miss my bright green Dodge Challenger. Its custom paint job had cost a fortune, but it was so damn worth it.

I lifted my hand in a wave at Romeo as he reversed off the driveway, but he didn't look back at me once. My older brother was the epitome of broody. His harshness was no doubt a product of the way he was raised, and even though I could be the same at times, I tried not to be the person our father had attempted to turn us into.

Only you can decide your own destiny. At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

I'd kept my attention focused until I could no longer hear Romeo's car, but as soon as the roar of his engine was gone and the neighborhood silent, I felt my gaze drifting toward the house next door again. Only this time, I took a step away from Romeo's front door. It was one step—just one—but it was a mistake, one that I didn't realize until I felt the hard thump against the side of my head.

My legs went weak, threatening to lose control, but I managed to stay upright as I spun around, seeing the outline of the man that I was trying to protect Bailey from.

Gio Pozzi.

Fuck.

"Night night," he murmured, then slammed an object onto my head a second time.

It was lights out immediately. Darkness surrounding me on all sides. Inwardly I knew I needed to fight it, but my body and brain weren't cooperating. They were on different schedules entirely.

Until a hand softly landed on my shoulder and a wistful voice said, "Raf? Wake up."

I groaned, wincing as thumping echoed in my head. My movements were slow and labored, my body not able to catch up with my brain quick enough.

"Please, wake up." The hand on my shoulder became firmer, shaking me. "Raf."

"I'm waking up," I spluttered, opening my eyes and seeing Peyton's face inches from mine. What the— "Peyton?"

"Hey." She grinned, her full lips pulling up on both sides. "Are you okay?"

I blinked. Was I okay? I tried to take stock of everything, but I couldn't comprehend what had happened apart from, "Where's Bailey?"

Peyton shot up, her eyes wide as she snapped her head around to look at the open front door.

Fuck.

I tried to push myself up as Peyton went inside, and every part of me wanted to shout at her to wait for me, but I knew she wouldn't listen anyway, not if everything I was thinking was true. Everything she'd done since she'd first seen Bailey was making more and more sense. She was trying to protect someone because she hadn't been able to protect herself.

"What the hell?" Peyton gasped out. I couldn't see her anymore, and as much as I tried to push myself up, my legs weren't working properly. "Is she okay?"

"Leave," I heard Romeo growl, and at the sound of his voice, something inside of me switched and I stood, using the outside wall as support. "Right now."

"I asked if Bailey is okay." I could imagine the look Peyton was giving Romeo right then, probably the same one she'd given me when she'd come around to give Bailey her number—a number I'd memorized. "I'm not leaving until she tells me herself."

Taking a step, I held my hand to the wall, determined to make it inside, but as soon as I did, all I saw was utter chaos. "Fuck, what happened?"

Furniture was flipped over, tables crashed to the floor. The room was an utter mess.

I frowned down at Peyton and then at Romeo, before my attention finally landed on Gio. He'd been the one to knock me out. Fuckin' douche. "Bailey?" I asked, realizing that she was the one person who I couldn't see. I maneuvered past Peyton, trying not to show how shaky each of my steps forward was. I refused to show any kind of weakness, especially in this moment.

"She's behind me," Romeo growled, pushing his shoulders back. He was in protective mode, something that hadn't left him from the moment he'd gotten Bailey out of that underground sex-slave and trafficking ring. The problem was, it was still happening with other people. We may have Bailey away from them, but we hadn't been able to close them down

fully—yet. It was what Romeo had been working on—why he was supposed to be gone all day. But now he was back and—I looked at the time on my wrist...fuck, it hadn't even been an hour since he left.

“Leave. Both of you,” Romeo grunted, then spun around, crouching beside Bailey, but neither I nor Peyton moved. I felt her step a little closer to me—could hear each of her sharp breaths. She was looking for reassurance, but I wasn't the person to provide that to her. If my instincts were right, she was running away from a threat, but she'd managed to land herself in just as much danger by living next door to Romeo.

I wouldn't make that worse for her. So as I stared at her from the corner of my eye, I committed her face to memory, making sure I took in the smattering of freckles on the bridge of her nose, the way her eyes lifted at the corners, her long lashes, but most of all, her full lips.

Because after today, things would change. We had Gio where we wanted him—within our grasp—which would mean that I wouldn't need to guard Bailey every day. I had no reason to be here anymore.

“Let me check you over,” Romeo murmured, snapping me out of my own head. “Let me make sure you're okay, baby.”

Peyton took another step forward and I turned to look at her fully just as her face went as white as a ghost. Fuck. I hated how my stomach bottomed out at the expression on her face. I couldn't let it affect me though. I'd just made my decision, and I had to stick to it.

Frowning, I wasn't sure what she was seeing—what she was doing—but my gaze tracked her as she darted toward Romeo and Bailey. I shoved my arm out, trying to stop her, but all of my movements were off, and she had passed me before I could blink.

Then a groan rang out, and just as I stumbled a step, I witnessed Peyton slam the sole of her boot onto Gio's face.

Well, damn.

Why was everything she was doing making me want to come to this house every day when I didn't need to just on the off chance that I would be able to see her and say two words to her?

I shook my head, trying to dispel the stupid-ass thoughts, but all that it achieved was for the thumping to get louder and heavier.

"I hate men like him," she gritted out, sneering down at him, then glancing at Romeo and Bailey. I clenched my hands at my sides, thinking about the words I'd overheard from her son, yet again. There was so much more to Peyton than met the eye, so many secrets she was keeping close to her chest. I wanted to know them all. I wanted her to tell me what was haunting her.

Jesus. I was giving myself an even bigger headache with my back and forth. I blamed Gio. If he wouldn't have hit me on the head, I never would have allowed half of the thoughts I was having to come forward. It was all his fault.

"Come on, Bailey. Let's get you cleaned up," Peyton continued, her tone calm and neutral, as if she wasn't witnessing what we all were: the aftermath of Gio Pozzi trying to rape Bailey...again.

That thought had my teeth gritted together, all of my muscles so taut that they felt like they were going to snap at any second. I was supposed to be the buffer between Gio and Bailey, but I'd been taken out in seconds.

"Don't touch her," Romeo warned, standing up to put himself between Bailey and Peyton. I jerked a step closer, my protective instincts kicking in, but not for Bailey...for Peyton. It didn't matter how many times I told myself to stay back—to not get involved—there was a deep-seated need to do something—anything.

The room spun. Fuck. How hard had I been hit on my head?

I rubbed at the sore spot, feeling wetness from the blood, but I didn't look down at my hand as I pulled it away. I'd seen

enough red liquid spread across my palms over the years, so I didn't need to witness my own there, not when all it did was serve as a reminder that I'd let Romeo and Bailey down. We wouldn't have been standing here right now with Bailey looking like she was falling to pieces in the corner of the room if I had been paying attention like I should have fuckin' been.

"I'm trying to help." Peyton shook her head, staring up at Romeo. And all the while I stood there, not knowing what to do or say. For the first time in my life, I was at a loss. "Just let me help her."

"Romeo," Bailey whispered, her voice so small and shattered. Gone was the Bailey I'd come to know—the one who kept trying to get me to come in the house or would bring me glasses of water and homemade lemonade—and in her place was a broken version. "I want her to help me."

Romeo's features screwed up, and even though I felt like I couldn't concentrate on any one thing right then, I could see the indecision plastered all over his face. He'd told me what he'd done to Bailey the first time he met her, he'd confided in me how he felt and the indecision he was battling with, but you only had to take one look at Romeo and Bailey together to know that they could overcome anything with each other by their sides.

"Fine," he relented, but I could clearly see he didn't want to go anywhere or let anyone be near Bailey. "But go to her house, okay? Don't stay here."

Bailey nodded, wrapping her arms around her knees, her gaze flipping over to Gio. "Once he's gone, I'll move. I just...I can't..."

"I get it," Romeo growled, the Pagani side of him rearing its head as the Mafia man that lived inside of him twenty-four seven took control. Just seeing that switch within him caused my own to kick in, so as he waved me over, I went without a second thought. I didn't want to admit how out of sorts I felt, not when it was me who should have been stopping any kind of attack—an attack that I hadn't seen coming at all. "Grab him."

I did as he said and dragged him to the door with Romeo. We dropped him on the porch while Romeo moved the car closer and I stood there, staring down at the man who had caused so much pain to the people I cared most about.

He'd get his comeuppance.

The Pagani men didn't mess around when it came to revenge—we took that shit seriously.

Romeo came back and we had Gio stowed away in the trunk of his car within a minute flat. I stood at the passenger door of the car, wincing at the pounding in my head, but not wanting to show it, luckily Romeo was making his way into the house, no doubt to talk to Bailey.

He was back within seconds, and then we were both slipping into his car, heading away from the house and all of the chaos that had just ensued there. My stomach rolled at the prospect of leaving Bailey and Peyton there with no protection, but we had to get Gio out of there. My gaze scanned the neighborhood, searching for anyone else who may have come with Gio.

There was nothing and nobody there, so they'd either escaped when they realized Gio was done for, or he'd come alone. I blinked, my shoulders tensing. He had to have come alone because he was the one who knocked me out. He never did his own dirty work, but this time he was so desperate that he had.

A noise came from the seat next to me, almost like a growl, and I knew what was coming before Romeo gritted out, "How the hell did he get in?" His voice was deep, and his hands were gripping the steering wheel with so much force that his knuckles were white.

Deep down, I knew it wasn't my fault, even though it *felt* like it was.

I groaned, feeling a sharp pain in my head again and lifting my hand up to it. "I don't know. He just...fuck, he came out of nowhere, then the next thing I knew, I was waking up and you were there again."

Romeo was silent for so long I wondered if he'd even heard me, but then he demanded, "Call Dad."

He was done talking to me, and I was okay with that because there was no way I wanted to be on the receiving end of his wrath.

I pulled my cell out, knowing that this was it. This was the moment revenge would be taken. Romeo and our dad didn't have the best relationship, mostly because Romeo was the oldest son, so had been taught the most when it came to our father's...profession.

But that didn't mean I'd gotten off scot-free growing up. He'd taught me that shit too, but to top it off, Romeo had left me with our father for the last five years. He'd gone and made his own home, but he'd failed to see what he'd left behind: a boy who was trying to prove himself to be as good as his big brother, something that I was afraid I would never live up to.

And Dad made sure to remind me of that. He may not have said it outwardly, but I could see the constant disappointment in his eyes when I didn't do something as well as Romeo did. I was always being compared to him, and if I was honest, I was tired of it. I was tired of being not only in my father's shadow, but my brother's too.

Trying to dispel those thoughts, I dialed Dad's number, then gave him a rundown of what had just happened. His silence and heavy breathing over the line told me all that I needed to know, and as soon as the line clicked off, I told Romeo, "He's preparing the shed."

"Good," Romeo gritted out.

He was angry at me, and if I was honest with myself, I didn't blame him. I was supposed to be protecting Bailey, it was my only job right then, and I'd failed at it. I'd fuckin' failed.

Wincing as Romeo slammed his fist down on the steering wheel, I shifted as far away from him as possible and retreated into myself, something that I did when we were younger. I'd

go quiet, watching and waiting, something that I'd become a pro at—being able to analyze people and situations.

I didn't say another word as he slowly stopped the assault on his car and pulled into the driveway of the home we'd grown up in. Neither of us missed a beat as we pushed out of the car and rounded to the trunk. My body and brain were working on automatic, knowing what needed to be done now.

Romeo grabbed Gio, jerking him out of his car trunk.

“Want help?” I asked as Gio's body slammed against the ground, but Romeo didn't stop yanking him toward the gate that led into the backyard.

“Nope,” he grunted. “I've got this.”

He dragged him all the way across the lawn and toward the brick shed that Dad taught us all of his torture techniques in. It had just as many bad memories for me as I was sure it had for Romeo. But neither of us showed it; we'd become masters at putting on a mask that no one could see behind.

“Ready?” my father asked.

Romeo didn't answer as he pulled Gio into the shed and tied him to a chair that was sitting in the middle of the room.

Dad glanced at me, frowning. “Go inside, Rafael. Get cleaned up and get some rest. You're going to need it.”

I opened my mouth, wanting to tell him that I wasn't leaving. I wanted to cause this motherfucker pain too, but with one look from my father, I knew it wasn't my place to argue back.

This was Romeo's revenge, and I was just here to help when they needed me.

Besides, my head was pounding and a nap right now sounded like heaven, so I backed away, quietly leaving the brick shed, then heading up to the house, hating that as soon as I walked away from the brick building, the only thoughts in my brain were of Peyton again.

Fuck. This didn't bode well for anybody.

CHAPTER 3

PEYTON

I leaned against the doorway to the living room, my attention focused on Bailey who was staring out of the window, waiting for Romeo, but he still hadn't arrived. However much I hated admitting that she needed a man to comfort her right now—to protect her—there was no denying it.

The longer I was away from Travis, the more I realized that he was never the support system I'd craved growing up. He was never going to be the man who held my hand while we were walking down the street. He was never going to pull me into his lap just because he wanted me to be near him. He'd never wrap his arms around me and burrow his face in my neck.

All Travis had wanted was ownership—control—and he'd gotten it, *with* my big brother's approval.

I blinked, trying to resist the tears that attempted to spring up. There was no way I was going there right now, not when Bailey clearly needed me. I had to be strong for her, just like I was strong for my boys. But damn, it was hard when I had a front-row seat to her pain and anguish. I was jealous in a way, jealous that she could be open about it all, meanwhile I had to keep all of mine locked deep down so that it never saw the light of day.

Swallowing down the lump that was building in my throat, I didn't take my eyes off Bailey. She hadn't told me everything that had happened to her—I was sure she never would—but she'd told me enough for me to connect the dots. She explained how Romeo was the one person who was helping her—who she trusted. And that was all I'd needed to know. That and the fact that I knew whoever that man who had broken into their home was wouldn't be breathing for much longer.

That was what organizations like Romeo's did. I knew that better than most because I'd grown up in the middle of the controlling family to the biggest criminal organization in the next state over. We didn't have an official Mafia there—not an Italian one like in this state—but it was the equivalent of the same thing. People feared them, people wanted to be them, people wanted to eradicate them. But nobody had ever achieved that. They were stronger now than they ever had been, courtesy of my brother at the top and Travis right beside him as his best friend and right-hand man.

I shook my head, refusing to think about him, not wanting to allow the dark thoughts in my brain while I had someone else in the house. As soon as she was gone, I could let them swallow me whole, but until then, I just needed to focus on what was right in front of me.

Bailey would be safe now. No harm would come to her. But as my gaze slipped to my two sons who were playing quietly on the floor, I wasn't so sure about us. I'd already been here for nearly five months and there was an itchiness starting to take place, a voice in the back of my head demanding that I start to move on, to not stay in one place for too long, to not risk being found.

But Kian was loving his new school, so maybe I should wait for the school year to be over—for summer to begin—and then I could pick up and move us somewhere new. Somewhere we could start fresh again.

Blowing out a breath, I came to terms with the fact that if I wanted to keep my little family safe, we'd never have true roots, we'd always be on the move—on the run—from their

father, my husband, the one man who was supposed to protect us from the evil of this world, not *be* the evil we needed protecting from.

My stomach rolled at the true reality of my situation. It didn't matter what I did to distract myself, nothing would work. So I pushed my shoulders back and pulled a bright smile onto my face. I was a master at faking it, I'd had to be over the years. "The more you stare out of that window, the longer it will take him to get here," I told Bailey.

She turned, her brows furrowing as she looked at me—really looked at me. "I know but...I just need to—" An engine roared down the street, one that had her eyes widening. "He's here," she blurted out, and shot up from her seat.

She was out of the living room and flinging the front door open before I'd even had time to process what was happening. By the time I told the boys to stay put and followed her to my front door, she was already in Romeo's arms.

My breaths came a little harder as I watched them both, seeing the love on clear display—a love that I'd never had, a love I never would get. I envied her. It was ridiculous. Bailey had been through so much in her short life, yet I was jealous that she had someone who cared about her.

Maybe it was time I moved on. I couldn't make attachments, I couldn't make friends, not when I'd just leave again. I backed away and shut my front door, leaning my head against it for a second as I caught my breath.

I was learning lessons every day, keeping a tally of all the things I needed to do differently next time. I needed to not get involved with people. I needed to not make friends. I needed to keep to myself so that when I moved on again, no one would notice. I had to blend in, not stand out.

"Mom?"

My body tensed at the sound of my son's voice. It was all for them, everything was for them. So I made my way back into the living room, stopping at the window just in time to see Bailey getting into Romeo's car. I lifted my hand in a wave, a

sad smile on my face and watched as he peeled away from the sidewalk.

“Mom?”

“Coming,” I called automatically, but I stayed at the window for an extra few seconds, pulling my mask down over my face, determined not to let a single person see the true darkness and pain that ebbed away at every part of me.

I pulled yet another fake smile onto my face, turned around, and tried not to see the features in my sons that were so similar to the man who had caused every ounce of agony I’d ever felt. The older that Kian and Reed got, the more they looked like *him*. It was my worst nightmare, but there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Even when he wasn’t here, he was haunting me.

No one would ever truly know the suffering I held on to. I’d lock that deep down inside and throw away the key. Because I knew if I ever opened that box up, it would swallow me whole.

Pain was a part of who I was now, and I had no choice but to live with it, because the alternative didn’t bear thinking about.

RAFAEL

My stomach dipped as I heard the sound of Romeo’s engine pull up into the driveway of my parents’ home. Frowning, I made my way into Dad’s office and stared out of the window, watching as Romeo got out and walked around to the passenger side of the car, then opened up the door.

Fuck. He’d brought Bailey with him.

Wincing, I spun around and headed for the kitchen, but Mom calling my name had me halting.

My heart raced in my chest, thumping an erratic beat. Mom knew something was going on down in the brick shed, but she didn't know the ins and outs. She didn't know all of the details.

"Raf?" she called again, only this time it was closer—right behind me. "Who's that girl with Romeo?"

I squeezed my eyes closed, taking a deep breath, hoping I could pretend that she hadn't asked that. "She's..." I cleared my throat as I turned to face her, seeing the hope in her eyes but the confusion plastered all over her face. Romeo never brought anyone here—ever. "That's Bailey."

She blinked, realization setting in. "Bailey...his girlfriend?" She paused, taking a step closer. "Why is she here, then? They're handling business in the..." She trailed off, probably putting two and two together and creating four. Mom had been born into the Mafia, her father controlling part of Italy before her older brother—Luca, Lorenzo's dad—moved to America to start a new life. She knew how this worked better than most of us inside the organization.

I nodded. I had no idea what Dad and Romeo had told Mom about the entire situation, which was why I probably should have kept my mouth shut, but dammit, when it came to my mom, I couldn't. She'd been my best friend growing up. She and I were as thick as thieves when we were together—which was almost all of the time.

"She got hurt," I blurted out, instantly regretting it when Mom's face dropped, all of the color draining out of her. Her Italian tanned skin only got darker in the summer, but right now it was lighter than usual, which only served to showcase her face turning paler as the blood drained from it.

"What do you mean she got hurt?" She stepped forward, her shaking hand reaching out to me. "Raf?" I stayed silent, wincing at having confessed something that she clearly didn't know. This was yet another one of the times when people decided not to tell me the ins and outs and still expected me to know who knew what. Communication was key, the problem was, no one ever communicated *with me*.

“Gio Pozzi.” Mom’s eyes widened at the name. I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t keep secrets from her. “He took Bailey, and Romeo got her out.” There was no point in keeping any of it back now. She may as well know almost all of it. “But Gio came back and tried to hurt her again.”

Mom’s throat bobbed, her feet shuffling on the floor. Her body swayed, so I reached out, grabbing on to her arms to keep her steady. “When you say she got hurt...”

“He...” I hated admitting what had happened to Bailey. Over the time that I’d been at Romeo’s house, keeping constant watch, I’d created a friendship with her. She was part of the family now. So I knew this wasn’t my place, but...my frustration was getting the better of me. “He raped her.”

Mom gasped, the sound so otherworldly I was sure I’d imagined it. “And that’s who is in the brick shed?” I nodded, not finding the words to say because this was a side of Mom that I’d never seen. She looked terrified but also ready to go to battle all at the same time. “We need to go down there.”

She tried to move past me, but I kept my grip firmly on her arms, not letting her move. It was one thing Romeo bringing Bailey here, but Mom couldn’t go down there when Dad was in the middle of business. She knew that, and she always abided by it.

“You can’t,” I told her, keeping my tone low.

“Yes, I can.” She stared up at me, her brown eyes welling up with tears. “Romeo brought Bailey here for a reason, and your father...” Mom paused, pulling in a stuttering breath. “He won’t allow it. But he has to.” She placed her hand on my face, smiling sadly. “He has to let her see it.”

I didn’t disagree, whatever reason Romeo had brought Bailey here for was good enough for me. But she was right, Dad wouldn’t like it. He was old fashioned, of the old ways, and this wouldn’t stand, especially not in his house.

So, I let her arm go and followed her through the house and out into the backyard. I caught sight of Dante as he reached the back gate. Dante Beretta was my cousin, he was

also the younger brother of Lorenzo, the boss. His dad was my mom's brother. He raised his hand, about to step toward us, but I shook my head.

Mom was in a world of her own, heading straight for the brick shed. She was already halfway there by the time Dante had pushed through the back gate and clicked it shut behind him.

"Mom," I called, trying to keep my voice down, but it was no use because she was already at the door.

She reached out to open it, but paused as Dad's voice roared from inside, "She needs to go."

Mom turned to face me, pushing her shoulders back and schooling her features. This was the mom that I remembered, the strong version, the one who went to bat for us no matter what. I just hated that she barely made an appearance.

We stepped inside and I surveyed the room. Dad was standing across from Romeo and Bailey, two sides opposing each other, and off to the left was Gio Pozzi, the man who had broken the rules, the man who had tried to take us down from the inside out, the man who had hurt Bailey in unimaginable ways.

"Antonio," Mom said, walking toward Dad. I stayed a little behind, coming in line with Romeo and Bailey. "She needs to stay."

"Not now, Vivianna," Dad growled, not looking away from Romeo for a single second.

"Yes, *now*," Mom told him. She glanced around the room, stopping for the briefest second on Bailey. I frowned at the silent conversation happening between them, then raised my brows when Bailey stepped toward Mom. "She needs to see it, Antonio," Mom continued, finally turning her attention back to Dad.

"She doesn't." Dad stepped forward, rage vibrating off of him. "No woman should ever—"

"What?" Mom interrupted, and I took a step forward too, not knowing how Dad would react. Mom never spoke to him

like that—ever. “Get hurt? Get raped?” My stomach flipped at her words. “Newsflash, Antonio, she was hurt...*I was hurt.*” Mom placed her hand against her stomach and Dad’s gaze flipped down to it, a murderous look in his eyes. I screwed my face up, feeling the atmosphere completely change. *What was happening?* “She was raped...*I was raped.*”

“What?” Romeo whispered. “What did you say?”

My entire body shut down at her words, the room spinning, my ears popping and making it feel like everything was being said from three buildings away. Did I hear her right? I couldn’t have heard her right. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out as her words repeated like a broken record inside my head.

I was raped. I was raped. I was raped.

She was raped. Bailey was raped...*Mom was raped.*

No. No, no, no.

Not my mom. Not my sweet mom who tried to care for everyone. Not the woman who raised me to treat a woman with respect and kindness. Not the woman who rescued abandoned baby birds from the yard and kept them alive.

“I should have protected you.” Dad’s voice made its way through the fog that was currently consuming me. My ears thrummed, the voices getting louder.

“You *did* protect me. But you and Luca should have let me witness it.” Mom’s voice softened. “I needed to see him take his last breath with my own eyes.” She paused, letting her words sink in, but I still couldn’t process anything. “Let Bailey see him take his last breath, Antonio. Let her see that she doesn’t have anything to be scared of anymore.”

I shook my head and opened my mouth, determined to say what was on my mind. Mom was wrong, she’d lied, because my father hadn’t protected her. If he had, then she wouldn’t have gotten hurt. If he had been on alert and—

I stumbled back a step, my body caving in on me as I realized that they could say the same thing about me with Bailey. I was tasked with making sure she was safe, yet Gio

had gotten past me. He'd gotten to her when I should have been the one to stop him.

I hadn't protected her, just like my dad hadn't protected my mom.

They were all talking, but I had no idea what they were saying because my body was frozen, my brain crashing just like a computer. I needed to reboot, but I couldn't. Nothing was working apart from my eyes as I watched Romeo lead Bailey across the room and in front of Gio Pozzi.

Gio looked up, a grin on his lips, showcasing his missing teeth. "Ahh, you brought her to see me."

His words were exactly what I needed to snap me out of my own head. Rage slammed through me unlike any other time as I growled out, "Shut your mouth, you dirty bastard." I wanted to say more, to do more, to use every single torture technique that my father had taught me. But it wasn't my place.

The room was silent, even Gio must have been shocked at my words because he just blinked, turning to look at me, then back to Bailey as she announced, "I'm ready."

I relished in the way Romeo grinned ear to ear as he stood behind Gio, the glint of the knife flashing in the room. This was it. Romeo was done causing him pain. He was done enacting his revenge. He snapped his wrist, slicing him from ear to ear, blood spurting out of him like water crashing through a broken dam.

Seconds. That was how long it would take for him to lose enough blood to no longer keep his heart beating. And I just stared, watching it happen with a grin on my face until his entire body slumped forward and his last breath stuttered out of his lungs.

He was gone. Gio Pozzi was out of our lives.

But...

Because of him, more had been revealed than anyone ever knew. Secrets were out in the open, secrets which were starting to make sense. The reason Mom would get anxiety so

often, the screaming coming from her room in the middle of the night—her nightmares—the reason she barely left the house and had become a recluse.

This hadn't only impacted them, it had impacted all of us. But they hadn't seen it. I turned to look at my parents, catching Mom's gaze, but not saying a single word as I exited the brick shed, walked across the yard, pulled my car keys out, then got straight in my car and drove away from the only place I'd ever lived.

I couldn't go back there. I couldn't stand looking at them. Not right then.

It was time I moved on. Time I found my own space. Time I became the Pagani man my father never really wanted to teach me to be. Only he'd inadvertently done just that. He thought he and Romeo were bad, but they had no idea the shit I could do when I wanted to. They were about to find out just exactly who the real Rafael Pagani was though. And I had a feeling that neither of them would like it.

CHAPTER 4

RAFAEL

I stood toward the back of the room, my knee bent and foot placed against the wall as I watched everyone step inside. Most were dressed in designer suits—including my dad—but my older brother was in his usual T-shirt and jeans.

Romeo had always been an outlier, whereas I was somewhere in between. Not as old school as some, but not as new age as Romeo, which was why I was in a black button-down shirt that was rolled up halfway on my forearms, and a pair of black jeans. I was a mix of the two worlds, yet I felt like I didn't belong anywhere.

“Are we ready?” Lorenzo called from behind his desk. We never usually held meetings in his office at the mansion, but apparently today was different, and it had even brought out some of the older generation who were no longer active. My father was in attendance along with my uncle Alonzo, the previous underboss. Those two and Lorenzo's dad used to run this entire operation, but now it was up to the next generation to make it work with the times we lived in.

The room quieted and I caught Romeo's gaze as he scanned his surroundings. He raised one brow at me, a question splattered on his face. I knew what he wanted to ask me, but whether he would actually voice the words or not were another story.

“It’s been five days since we eradicated Gio Pozzi and his entire family.”

I hauled in a breath, wincing as I remembered us all standing in the brick shed, Gio tied to a chair as my mom confessed what had happened to her. All of these years I’d thought it was my father that had stopped her from going outside and the terror of who he was and what could happen. When all along, it was because someone had already harmed her.

Clenching my hands by my side, I tried to keep my attention in the room, but it was hard when I wanted to scream and shout, when I wanted to run over to my father and show him how much it hurt to find out that he hadn’t protected my mother in the way that he should have.

It was his fault she’d gotten hurt. Just like it was my fault Bailey was injured a week ago. *I* was supposed to be guarding the house—keeping her safe—and he’d gotten past me within seconds.

“Romeo,” Lorenzo called out, and several people parted in the crowded room, making way for my big brother to step toward Lorenzo. “You’ve shown me that you’re ready.”

My heart hammered in my chest as my gaze veered to my father. He knew what was coming, as did everyone else. Only, I wasn’t sure Romeo even wanted the position. It was always my father who demanded that he advance in the Mafia. It had never been my brother’s ambition, but that didn’t matter. We were Paganis and expectations of who we would be were plastered everywhere.

“You’re now a captain.” Lorenzo paused, his gaze flicking around the room. “Rafael, Marco, Leo, Massimo, you are to answer to Romeo.”

I raised a brow, flicking my attention to my brother whose jaw was locked and his eyes looking straight ahead. He wasn’t showing a single emotion, keeping it all locked away. Seemed like we were both good at that lately—not showing how we really felt.

People murmured around us, Lorenzo saying something quietly to Romeo, then they both looked over at me. If they hadn't have been so obvious, I'd never have known they were talking about me. But their stares had me one hundred percent certain. Which only signaled that I needed to get out of here asap. The last thing I needed was to be accosted and told to explain where I'd been for the better part of a week.

"That's all for today," Lorenzo announced, his dark eyes narrowing on me. I kept my gaze to his though, not backing down even though I probably should have. I was a Pagani, a man who served the boss, but in that moment, I was simply a son—a son of a woman who had been hurt in the worst way possible. There was no way in hell that Lorenzo hadn't known about it. The bosses knew everything.

"Rafael," I heard from beside me. I'd known he was close without him saying a word, especially as people started to file out of the room and into the entryway. They'd stay there for hours where Auntie Rosa would cook traditional meals. It was always my favorite part of these meetings, but today...today I couldn't wait to get the hell out of here.

So I pushed up off the wall, not giving my father a single look. For too long he'd controlled me. When Romeo lived at home, I was always the hanger-on, the one who never got put first by him. It was me who had been there with my mom. Me who had hugged her when I walked in and saw her crying. Me who had sat with her in the dark, silence surrounding us because Romeo and Dad had been out to work late and she was sure she heard someone trying to break in.

Neither of them had any idea just how on edge Mom was. They had no damn clue.

But now it all made sense—everything came crashing down around me, the equation I'd been staring at for my entire twenty years of life had now been solved.

"Rafael," my father repeated, his voice deeper this time. Now there were only a handful of people left in Lorenzo's office: Lorenzo, Romeo, Christian, Dante, and of course, me and my father.

I took a step toward Romeo, but it was only because that was the way to get out of this office, when a hand gripped my bicep. Blinking, I counted to ten, trying to keep a lid on all of my rage, but it was damn hard as I turned to face the man who had raised me.

“What?” I growled. I felt the icy-cold chill thrash across the room at my word, but it was the fire echoed in my father’s eyes that kept my own anger a raging inferno.

“I haven’t seen you since we took care of Gio.” His words were calm, at a complete opposite to how hard his hand was gripping me.

“Let go of me,” I gritted out, yanking my arm from his grip.

“Rafael.” He took a step toward me, but I whipped around, losing my shit big-time as I took two steps toward him and got in his face.

“No.” My nostrils flared, all of my senses on overdrive. I could hear the footsteps coming closer to us, could feel them all at my back, but I didn’t give a fuck. I didn’t care. “You’re a piece of shit.” The words came out more broken than I’d meant for them to, and there was no doubt he’d heard it. I wanted to come across fierce and protective, but in my head, I sounded like a lost little boy—I felt like it at times too.

“Son...” He trailed off, backing away a step, but I just followed him.

“Don’t ‘son’ me.” I felt the heat in my face, my muscles so tense I was sure that they would snap at any second. “You were supposed to protect her.” My chest heaved, my anger a living, breathing thing as I stared at my father. “And you fuckin’ didn’t!” I roared, hurting my own ears. “It’s all your fault.” I let my shoulders droop, feeling every ounce of energy draining from me. “She’s the way she is because of *you*.”

“Raf,” Romeo said from behind me. His tone was off and I hated it—I hated the idea of turning around and facing him, knowing that I was supposed to protect Bailey, just the same way as my dad was supposed to protect my mom.

We'd both failed. Epically.

"No." I squeezed my eyes closed, backing away. I couldn't look at anyone else. I couldn't face the reality of what was right in front of me.

I had to get out of here. I had to do something... anything...because all I could hear—see—were those moments in the brick shed where my mom confessed what had happened to her.

"Come on, lil' bro." Romeo's tone was jovial, but we all heard the tenseness behind it. "Bailey is missing you."

I shook my head, hating the words he'd spoken. He knew how they'd affect me. I mean, damn, I'd spent every day with Bailey since he'd rescued her from the hellhole Gio Pozzi had created, and now...now I was no longer there. But I couldn't. I couldn't face her knowing that she wouldn't have been harmed again if it wasn't for me.

"I can't," I choked out, hating how out of control I felt in that moment.

"It's not your fault, Raf. He's gone. Bailey is good. She wants to see you," Romeo said, his voice sounding like he was closer.

Shaking my head, I refused to hear his words, refused to acknowledge anything but the pain I was feeling inside. "I need to..." I trailed off, spinning on the spot, then beelining it for the door. I only made it two steps before I had to open my eyes, but I refused to make eye contact with anyone. I just needed out of this place—away from all the demons determined to haunt my every waking hour.

PEYTON

“Give Mommy a kiss,” I told Reed as I held him against my chest. He made a noise in the back of his throat, squirming away from me, telling me without words that his patience was wearing thin. I half smiled and half rolled my eyes. The first time he’d come to daycare, he’d refused to let go of me, and now he couldn’t wait to get away. I knew it was because he could hear his friends playing and he didn’t want to miss anything, so I placed a kiss on his cheek and told him, “Have fun today.”

He nodded, not taking any notice of me as I passed him to the staff member who was waiting in the doorway. No parents were allowed beyond that point, which was something I appreciated. The security here was the main reason I’d chosen it.

I backed away a couple of steps, watching as she locked the door behind her, then carried Reed to the play area. I could just about see him if I craned my neck. And I knew if I didn’t leave now, I’d still be here in an hour, waiting, when I was supposed to be using this time to get things done, like the grocery shopping.

I had an entire six hours to do anything I wanted, so why did I find it so hard to just walk away from Reed’s daycare? Something in my stomach swirled, my gut trying to tell me something, but I had no idea what. I’d learned from a young age to listen to my gut, so I had no idea why I pushed it aside—just like I had with Travis—as I walked out of the daycare and back to the parking lot to my car.

Rolling my shoulders to ease some building tension, I switched the ignition on and drove out of the lot and the ten minutes to the grocery store. It was boring, but I kind of liked boring. It meant that I was leading a normal life. One that wasn’t full of turmoil and upset.

I was at peace. For the first time in years, I wasn’t worried about what was going to happen if I bought the wrong kind of pasta, or the wrong cut of meat. I could do what I wanted, when I wanted.

Grinning, I strutted around the grocery store, so proud that I was just like all of the other parents in here, running errands while their kids were at school, wondering what to cook for dinner and what chores needed doing when I got home.

It was a novelty, one that I hoped would never wear off.

But as I got to the parking lot and loaded up my car, then closed my trunk, it was gone within seconds at the sight of a familiar car.

My heart pounded in my chest as I stared at the license plate, reading the letters and numbers. My instinct knew before my brain could catch up, but by that time everything was blurry, my world tilting on its axis, threatening to knock me over.

It couldn't be.

How?

What?

My hand landed on my chest as my breaths came faster and harder, panic setting in.

I had to get out of here. I had to—

The driver's door cracked open. I didn't think, I just darted for my own door and dove into my car, my gaze glued to my rearview mirror as I watched my husband get out of his car.

Travis was wearing his usual slacks and shirt, designer sunglasses on his face as he stepped out of his shiny black sports car. My throat dried up as I watched him glance around, taking stock of the place, then he turned, heading right for the store I'd just come out of.

Why was he here?

Had he found me?

Shit. Fuck.

I had to get out of here.

I didn't hesitate as I started the engine and peeled out of there, my shaking hands trying to grip the steering wheel. My

mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, trying to figure out what had just happened and what I had to do from here.

If I would have been thirty seconds later, he would have seen me, he would have walked right by me. Fuck. It didn't bear thinking about what could have happened—how he would have reacted.

By the time I'd pulled up into the driveway of my house, I hadn't had one clear thought. I was a mess. I wouldn't deny it. The fright of what this meant was too much to bear, so I just sat there, leaving my engine running, my hands gripped onto the steering wheel as I stared straight ahead.

What was I supposed to do now?

Did I need to leave?

Had he finally found me?

It had been five months since I'd disappeared in the middle of the night. And there was no doubt in my mind that he would have been looking for me. But how...how had he found me? I'd taken every single precaution that I knew to take.

A knock echoed off my driver's side window and I panicked, jumping in my seat, a scream leaving my mouth as I whipped my head around to see who it was.

Had he followed me? Had I been so inside my own head that I hadn't noticed Travis's car behind me?

Rafael's frowning face screwed up as my gaze latched on to his, his eyes scanning my face. I wasn't sure what was reflected back at him, but it was enough for him to yank my door open.

"Peyton?" He tilted his head to the side, staring at me with such intent that it should have made me squirm, but it didn't. It...comforted me. "What's happened?"

I shook my head, my mouth opening and closing but no words coming out. I gripped the steering wheel harder, feeling the lump in my throat get so big that I could barely swallow.

"It's okay," Rafael murmured, crouching down beside me and reaching for my keys. He turned them, switching the

engine off, then pulling them from the lock. “Take your time.”

His voice was so soothing that I felt myself relax a little, but as soon as I heard another engine coming down the street, I tensed right back up, my head whipping around to see who it was—to see if it was *him*.

“It’s just Romeo,” Rafael said, as his own head turned to look. My heart pounded so hard I swore it was like everyone around us could hear it. “Take a breath, mama,” he whispered, placing his large hand over both of mine that were still attached to the steering wheel.

His touch made me jump, but he didn’t let go, not as Romeo pushed out of his car, his attention focused solely on his little brother. “Raf,” he called, his tone sounding all kinds of pissed off. “You should have told me you were coming to see Bailey.” Romeo paused. “You disappear for an entire week again and just turn up?” Romeo was closer now, but I didn’t look away from Raf, needing him to ground me in that moment. “Get inside, I need to talk to you.”

I made a noise in the back of my throat, hating that the thought of Rafael leaving me sent all of the panic back full force. Dammit. I didn’t need anyone to protect me. I didn’t need—

“I’m busy,” Rafael answered, bringing my focus back to him as he lowered his voice. “What happened, Peyton?”

I couldn’t decide if I preferred when he said my name like that, or called me mama. They were both equally as alluring coming from between his lips, and fuck, I shouldn’t have been thinking about that.

“I...I saw him.”

“Saw who?” Raf asked as he pulled my hands off the steering wheel and held them between us.

My gaze turned down as I held my breath, feeling my head start to spin before I let it back out again in a big gush. “My...” I couldn’t say husband—it was the truth but...I couldn’t say it out loud. “Ex.”

Raf's eyes darkened so much that I swore I could see my reflection in them. He had no idea what I'd run from, but he knew enough from what he'd overheard from Kian a few weeks ago.

"Where?" he growled out.

"The grocery store." I let out another stuttering breath, trying to get myself together. "It's fine, he didn't see me." I laughed it off, not able to handle the look on Raf's face. It was too...much.

I pulled my hands from his, then swung my legs out of the car and placed my feet on the floor. He didn't back up though, instead, he just stood, keeping all of his focus attached to me. "You don't look fine, Peyton."

His words were the truth; I wasn't fine, I was so far from fine, but I hated the audience we had. I hated confiding in someone. I hated...I hated the situation we were in.

"It's none of your concern, Raf," I whipped out, wincing at how sharp my tone was. I hadn't meant it to sound like that, but as he took two steps back from me, I'd known it had the desired effect.

"Raf," Romeo called from behind him, and as Raf turned to look at his older brother, I took that as my opportunity to escape from him as I grabbed the three grocery bags from the trunk of my car and then beelined it for my front door. I'd just placed the bags on the ground when footsteps neared from behind.

"You forgetting something?"

My heart raced in my chest again, only this time it was for an entirely different reason. I felt his body getting closer, his front against my back as he towered over me from behind. I tilted my head back, staring up at him as he held the keys in the air.

Dammit.

"Raf," I whispered, still not feeling okay. I was shaken to my core, trying to process it all, trying to figure out when I needed to run and how I was going to do it. "I can't..."

“You can’t what?” His lips lifted on one side as he reached around me and unlocked my door. Blinking, I didn’t move a muscle as he stepped around me, picked up all three bags effortlessly, then walked right on into my home.

I wanted to be angry, I wanted to shout at him for thinking he could do that, but...it looked so natural, like he’d done it a thousand times before as he turned to face me when he was halfway to my kitchen, winking at me.

Fucking hell. I needed a distraction like I needed my last breath, but *this* was not the distraction I was hoping for. This was just trouble with a capital T.

“Raf,” I huffed out, but I paused as I felt the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. I turned, searching for whatever had made my body have that reaction, but there was nothing there.

Shaking my head, I berated myself. I was on edge and just needed to get inside. That was all it was.

So I turned back, catching sight of Romeo who was standing on his driveway, watching us with a deep frown on his face. Although, that wasn’t unusual for Romeo, he was the epitome of broody man.

“You know you shouldn’t just let yourself into other people’s homes, right?” I announced as I closed the door behind me and made my way into the kitchen. Silence greeted me. “Raf?”

“Hmmm?” His deep timbre had my stomach dipping. Dammit, I hated how he made me feel. We’d only been alone once before, and I’d sworn I wouldn’t be alone with him again. But here we were, in my kitchen with not a single soul in sight.

This was bad. Really bad.

I opened my mouth, about to tell him that he needed to leave, but my mouth snapped closed, my eyes soaking him all in as he pulled items out of my grocery bags and placed them on the small dining table in here. He did it so effortlessly, the

muscles in his forearms tensing with each movement, the tattoos dancing over his skin.

Why was it that every time I saw Rafael, I always had groceries with me?

“You don’t have to do that,” I told him, my voice sounding off.

“No biggie.” He grinned, the kind of grin someone who was up to no good would give you. “I used to help Mom all the time when I got the groceries.”

“When you got the groceries?” I asked, confused by the way he’d said that.

Raf paused, a darkness exploding over his face that made me want to take ten leaps backward so that I was away from him, but my body stayed put, my gut knowing that it wasn’t because of me as to why he was looking like that.

“Yeah. Mom...she...never got out much.” He shook his head, blinking rapidly, then looked down, pulling the last item out of one of the bags. He opened a cupboard, searching inside, most probably trying to figure out where everything went, and I...I didn’t stop him.

It was both comical watching him but also comforting. From the first moment I’d met Raf, there was just... something, about him. Something that made me feel...safe.

Safe.

I felt my chest cave at the word pinging around in my brain. I hadn’t truly felt safe in a very long time, not since it had been just me and my big brother.

“Peyton? Peyton?” I snapped my head up. “Where do these go?”

Raf held up a box of cereal in the air, waving it like a soldier would a white flag when he was surrendering.

“I got it.” I leaped forward, taking it from his hand, then reaching around him. He didn’t move though, just stayed put as I had to push against him to get to the right cupboard.

Raising a brow, I turned to face him, sliding the cereal box onto the correct shelf. “You could move you know.”

His lips lifted into a smirk, that knowing look on his face. “Why would I want to do that?” His tongue came out and swiped along his bottom lip. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” he murmured, lifting his hand and placing some hair behind my ear. He was so close that I knew if I took a breath too deep, I’d be touching him.

“Raf,” I whispered. I swore I’d said his name a hundred times in the last thirty minutes, but each and every time the word left my mouth, his eyes would flash.

“Yeah, mama?” He pushed closer, backing me up until I was flush against the countertop.

“You...”

“I?”

His eyes swirled with mischief, pulling me in unlike anything else ever had.

“You’re too young,” I blurted out.

He raised a brow, tilting his head to the side. “Age is just a number, mama.”

I snorted. “No it’s not. I’m thirty years old, Raf. You’re too young...” I trailed off, biting down on my bottom lip as I stared up at him.

“And I’m twenty.” He shrugged like it didn’t matter. And maybe it didn’t.

My stomach swirled as my gaze connected with his. I shouldn’t have been looking at him like that. I shouldn’t have wanted him to look at me the way he was. There were a whole host of reasons why: he was ten years younger than me; I was a single mom; I was on the run from my husband.

But...I couldn’t bring myself to care about a single one of them as he dipped his head down, bringing his face level to mine and his lips only centimeters away.

“Say the word,” he growled out. “Say the word and I won’t touch you.” He paused, searching my eyes as he waited. There was no way I was going to say a single thing, not now, not ever. His hand moved to the side of my face, holding me in place. “Last chance.”

I pulled in one last breath, telling myself that I was ready.

But it was a lie.

The biggest lie I’d ever told myself.

Because as Raf’s lips pressed against mine, I knew I was done for. I knew nothing would ever be the same again.

I’d heard of love at first sight. But that was nothing compared to this.

My body went haywire, my nerve endings exploding and singing in rejoice as his tongue dipped out, pushing past my lips and invading my mouth like he owned it.

And maybe he did.

Maybe he was claiming me as his.

I’d never truly be his though, not with Travis in my past, but I could pretend. Even if it was just for a little while.

With my mind made up, I placed my hand on the side of his neck while pushing my other one through his hair and gripping it.

His groan vibrated through me and shot straight between my legs, turning me on instantly.

Trouble. Rafael Pagani was nothing but trouble, and I couldn’t wait to find out just how much.

CHAPTER 5

RAFAEL

I shouldn't have been kissing her.

I shouldn't have been trailing my hand down her side and to her ass.

I shouldn't have hauled her against me as I deepened the kiss.

I shouldn't have been doing a lot of things, but I'd be damned if anyone was going to stop me.

I needed this. She needed this.

It was only a matter of time until this would have happened, and I was done waiting.

As I'd walked out of Romeo's house and saw her sitting in her car on the driveway, her face so pale it was as if she'd seen a ghost, I knew I couldn't walk away from her. The words I'd heard from her oldest son echoed in my brain over and over again.

And when she'd said she thought she saw her ex, I knew I couldn't bypass what I felt when I was near her. I wasn't one of these men who refused to give in to my feelings. I wasn't like my older brother who tried to push everyone and anything away—at least, I didn't use to be.

That was before though...before I'd found out the lies I'd been told my entire life. Before I'd failed at my one job.

But this...Peyton...I couldn't fail at this.

Not with how the electricity flowed between us when we touched. Not with how she roared a fire deep inside me but also settled it down too. She had me on edge and relaxed all at the same time. Something that I hadn't felt before, but dammit, I never wanted to stop feeling it.

"Fuck, mama," I growled, pulling away from her plump lips. "I'm so goddamn hard right now." I pressed against her, showing her exactly what she did to me.

"Raf." God. Fuckin'. Dammit. The way she said my name. The way her long lashes fluttered as she looked up at me. I took a mental picture, knowing damn well that was the last image I was going to see before I closed my eyes tonight. "We shouldn't have...I..."

I shook my head, placing my finger on her lips to silence her. "We shouldn't do a lot of things, Peyton." I paused, pressing my forehead to hers as I picked her up and placed her on the counter, fitting perfectly between her open legs like we were two jigsaw pieces. "But that doesn't mean it's gonna stop me."

Her fingers pushed through my short hair, gripping on to it. Fuck. I liked it—I really liked it. "You're ten years younger than me." I shrugged, not caring. "I have two kids." Her tone wavered as her hand slackened, her body pulling away slightly. "I have baggage, Raf. Baggage that doesn't disappear."

I gripped her hips in my hands, pulling her to the edge of the counter so that her pussy was in line with my erection. I was teasing myself—and her—but I couldn't help it. "I'm not asking you to marry me, Peyton." I paused, staring into her light-brown eyes, so light they were almost green, but not quite. "Don't overthink it. Life is wasted by thinking everything through too much. Live in the moment."

She blinked, her nose wrinkling as she stared at me. “Live in the moment?” she asked, like the concept was foreign. And to most people it was. We were always thinking about what was next, planning for the future, or living in the past. I was one of those people, but sometimes...sometimes you needed to let all of that go. And right now was one of those moments.

“Yeah, mama. Live in the moment with me. Have fun. Throw caution to the wind.”

She laughed, the sound so damn entrancing that I swore I lost control of my brain for a moment. “You make me feel like a damn teenager again. Only back then there was no way anyone would have come near me.”

“Yeah?” I moved my hands down to her thighs, rubbing my palms up and down her light-denim jeans. “Why wouldn’t anyone come near you?”

She shrugged, acting like it was nothing, but I saw the way her eyes creased at the edges—I witnessed the straightening of her lips. “You know, big brother and all that.” She waved her hand in the air as if to bat her words away, but it wasn’t working. I’d seen that there was more than that to it. I wouldn’t confront her about it, not yet, but I was one hundred percent positive that there would be a time where she felt like she could confide in me, just like she could about her ex.

I wasn’t stupid, I could clearly see he’d been abusive towards her, and unfortunately, that shit was just way too common nowadays. But me...I had every intention of showing this woman that what she deserved was way more than she’d been given.

“Big brothers can get like that with little sisters,” I remarked, going along with what she was saying. The only experience I had with that was growing up with my cousin Sofia—Lorenzo and Dante’s little sister. She was older than me, but I was protective over her, just like all the others were. And now Bailey too.

I blinked, hating how the image of Bailey curled into the corner of Romeo’s living room shot into my head. It was my fault she’d gotten hurt again. My fault that—

“Raf?” Her soft tone snapped me out of my own head, her small hand cupping the side of my face and tilting it so that I was looking right at her. “Where’d you go just now?”

“Nowhere.” I cracked my neck to the side, hearing the bones crunch.

She smiled sadly, like she knew exactly where I’d gone but still didn’t say anything. We had a silent understanding, one where we wouldn’t push each other too much. One where we knew our secrets were just that: *ours*.

Peyton was becoming my—

“Escape,” I murmured, thinking out loud. I hadn’t meant to say it, but now that the word was hanging in the air, I had to clarify what I meant. “You need an escape.” I pressed closer to her, watching her eyes intently to see what she thought about my words, but she was giving nothing away. “I need an escape too.”

Her gaze flickered between my eyes, then down to my lips before focusing higher again. “How do you...” She trailed off, her voice cracking. I waited, wondering what she was going to say. “How do you know I need an escape?”

I blinked, staring at her intently. “The mask you wear, it slips when you’re with me.” Her eyes widened at my words, but I didn’t allow her to think about it too much as I continued, “Wearing it all the time is exhausting. But with me, you can let it go.” I paused, pressing closer to her so that my lips were right by her ear. “I can be your escape, mama. Just say the word and I’m here.”

I pulled back just enough to press a long kiss to her cheek, to inhale a breath of her distinctive jasmine perfume.

“Promise?” she murmured, just as my cell vibrated in my pocket. I knew who it was without having to look—Romeo. He wanted to talk to me, and there was no way he was going to let it drop now that he knew exactly where I was.

“I promise,” I said, deadly fuckin’ serious as I stared into her eyes. I hated that I was going to have to walk away from her right then, but fuck, I’d given myself enough time to

process all of my family's secrets, not that I'd made sense of them in that time. But now I had to stop acting out and do what I needed to—talk to my brother.

My cell vibrated again, this time followed by a knock on the door and a shout, "Raf, I know you're in there! I need to talk to you." I didn't look at Peyton as I stared down her hallway, not wanting to let her see that I'd felt the way she'd tensed, I'd sensed the way the atmosphere changed and the terror took over.

I had to get to the bottom of it all, but first, I had to figure my own shit out, which meant...

"I gotta go." I closed my eyes, inhaled a breath, then pulled back completely from her as our gazes met. So many things were said in one look, but the most important one of them all was: "This isn't over."

And it wasn't. That wouldn't be the last time I pressed my lips to hers, that was a damn vow I made as I headed to her front door, opened it up, walked outside to see Romeo standing right there, closed it behind me, then walked across both driveways and back to his house.

I'd wanted to come and go before he'd known I was here, but as I entered my big brother's house, the first thing I said to Bailey was, "You called him."

Her eyes widened, her gaze batting around the room, then landing on Romeo as he walked in behind me.

"Erm..."

"She didn't need to call me. The sensor alerted me as soon as there was a second person in the house." Of course it had. Bailey said that he'd upped security in the house, so that made sense. But still... "We need to talk," Romeo continued.

"Then talk." I shrugged, ambling over to the other side of the room, choosing to lean against the wall instead of taking a seat. I'd already been here an hour, talking things out with Bailey, but now I had to rehash it all with my big brother and —

"Mom."

“Nope.” I pushed off the wall, not willing to hear any of it.

“Raf,” Romeo growled, his tone brooking no room for argument. “We need to talk about it.”

I laughed, halting in the middle of the room. “Why? It won’t make any difference. She was raped. He let it happen. And I was the one who had to deal with the aftermath.”

Romeo frowned. “You were a kid, Raf. You can’t have remembered—”

“What?” I interrupted. “I can’t have remembered what? The way Mom would scream in the middle of the night?” My breaths came faster. “The way she would pace the house in the dark, waiting for you and Dad to come home?” I took a step toward him. “Or how about the anxiety attacks that she had when it was just me and her—which was most of the damn time.”

“Raf—”

“Or how about the fact that it was me who did all of the grocery shopping. It was me who made a deal with the delivery man to honk his horn at the bottom of the driveway and I’d collect the packages. Or how about just the fact that when she cried, when she got so upset she could barely breathe, it was *me* who comforted her because you and Dad were gone.” I paused, pulling in a shaky breath. “You were fuckin’ gone, Romeo.”

Silence stretched between us, Romeo’s features shuttering closed as he mulled over what I’d said. For days on end all I’d been thinking about was all the times I’d been left to pick up the pieces. I’d put everything on hold growing up, just to make sure she wasn’t home alone. But now I was done. I was done living for everyone else.

I’d live for myself. I’d do what made me happy. And in that moment, that was not being here. So I took one final look at my brother, walked to his door, then paused as he murmured, “I’m sorry, Raf. I didn’t know.” I turned to look at him. “If I had known...”

He didn't need to say anything else. I could read between the lines. I could decipher what he was saying. And right then, that was all I needed to move forward, after all, he wasn't just my big brother but also my captain.

"I have my cell on."

He nodded, knowing that I was telling him that I was done hiding. I was done running away. I was here to stay. I was here to live. I was here to do what I wanted when I wanted. And that included the single mom who lived next door.

PEYTON

"Remember," I told Kian and Reed as we waited at Bailey's front door for someone to open it. "Best behavior, okay?" I wasn't sure why I was saying that to them because Kian never misbehaved, and Reed...well...he actually *was* the reason I was saying it. He could be a little terror when he wanted to.

"Yes, Mom," Kian replied, holding on to my hand tight. He was nervous, which made two out of the three of us. Whereas Reed, he just wanted to be around people and have as much attention focused on him as possible. Kian was the opposite, hating to be around more than a couple of people. And me? I was nervous for just one person...Rafael Pagani.

I felt my cheeks heat as I thought about him standing between my legs in my kitchen three days ago, his lips on—

"You're here!" Bailey announced as she swung the door open. She was taking Reed out of my arms before I knew it and beckoning us all inside. Reed lapped it up, meanwhile Kian held on to my hand tighter.

"Are we late?" I asked, hearing voices as we walked in.

"No," Bailey said as I shut the door behind Kian and me. He didn't let go of my hand and I was good with that. We were

keeping each other rooted, something my son shouldn't have been doing, but it was the reality right now. "You're just the last ones here." She bounced on the spot, making Reed giggle. She was a big ball of energy, her excitement overwhelming.

"Last ones?" I frowned as we followed her through the living room, then the kitchen, and out into the backyard.

I paused in the doorway to the huge glass sliding doors that were framed in black, blinking at the amount of people here. There couldn't have been more than ten people altogether, not including us, but I only recognized three of their faces, Bailey, Romeo, and Rafael.

"I..." I bit down on my bottom lip, trying to get my legs to work, but they were frozen to the spot, my ears thumping as a body moved closer to me, then crouched down in front of Kian.

"Hey there, little man." Romeo. It was Romeo.

"Hi," Kian responded, moving from one foot to the other.

"Peyton?" Bailey called. I snapped my attention to her and watched as she pointed at two empty spaces on the bench. She'd been so excited about this huge wooden table with two benches that could easily fit sixteen people around it when it was delivered last week. I hadn't understood why she'd gone with one so big...until now. "Come sit."

My body jerked forward, my words escaping me as I silently walked past Romeo with Kian's hand still firmly placed into mine. I felt like a robot, like I didn't know how to act or what to do. Memories were bombarding me, but I was holding strong, keeping them at bay as I placed Kian on the bench, then slowly lowered down next to him at the end.

"Everyone?" The conversation died down. "This is Peyton, she lives next door." I felt my cheeks burning as all attention moved to me—attention that I didn't want or need. "Peyton, you already know Romeo and Raf." I glanced up at her as she held Reed so effortlessly on her hip and he played with her hair, twirling it around his chubby fingers. I refused to look at Raf, not willing to let myself think about the last time I was in

the same place as him. But that didn't mean I couldn't feel the burning of his eyes on me.

"This is Lorenzo and Aida." She pointed to the couple opposite me. He had a stern-looking face while hers was kind. "Dante—Lorenzo's brother—and Navy, and their little boy, Dario." I smiled this time, a genuine smile as I looked at the boy sitting on Navy's lap, close in age to Reed.

"Hi," I greeted, waving awkwardly at them all.

They all greeted in various ways, but as soon as they had, normal conversation resumed, and I was more glad than anything because I did *not* need that attention on me. Not from these people—these men. I'd grown up around men like this, been seated next to men like this.

I knew who they were without having to ask. And if the way everyone kept looking over at Lorenzo and Aida was anything to go by, he was the one in charge here. Just like my brother was back home.

Making a mental note of it, I pulled in a deep breath, hating that I'd been caught off guard by who was here. When Bailey had asked yesterday if we wanted to come for a barbecue, I'd thought it was just us, but now I was sitting around a table with a Mafia boss, and the man who had kissed me like his life depended on it.

Fuck. I looked. I looked at him and the woman sitting next to him, laughing her head off like she'd just heard the funniest joke in the world.

It was fake. She was fake. Shit. I shouldn't be thinking like that. I didn't know who she was. I didn't—

"Yeah, that's how we feel too," a voice opposite me murmured. I blinked, focusing on Aida as she pushed some hair behind her ear and grimaced. "She's been hanging around for a while, trying to get his attention." She rolled her eyes, looking around as she lowered her voice. "Looks like he finally gave in."

I laughed, the kind of laugh that you do when you're not sure what to say, so just any kind of noise feels like a reply.

Luckily, Kian asking for a drink distracted me from Aida. Not so luckily, Bailey was right there with a cup of juice, dotting on him in the same way she always did.

“I have some toys inside for you too,” Bailey said, crouching down.

I groaned, dipping my head back. “Bailey.” Shaking my head, I tried my hardest to admonish her but it was so hard when I knew she was just wanting some happiness in her life, determined to bring some light into her darkness. I wished I could have the same drive as she did, but since I saw Travis at the store—

Fuck. No. Don't think about him.

“What?” Bailey asked, fluttering her lashes at me like she had no idea what she was doing. She may have been ten years younger than me, but she'd lived more life than most forty-year-olds. “They're basically my nephews at this point so...”

Nephew.

I didn't hear anything else she said because my ears popped, my body going burning hot as the yard started to spin around me. I grabbed on to the edge of the table, trying to keep myself steady, but it was no use because her words had set off the deluge of memories I'd managed to keep away since I'd walked out here.

But now they were there, refusing to leave. Playing like a highlight reel in my mind, getting louder and louder the more that went by.

“I...” I stood, interrupting Bailey who frowned at me. “I need to use the bathroom.” It was the only thing I could think of to do. I needed to get away, even just for a few minutes. “Can you watch the boys?”

“Sure.” Bailey stepped forward, placing her hand on my arm, and I couldn't help but flinch. “You okay, Peyton?”

Nodding, I clipped out, “I'm good,” then maneuvered past her and into the house. There was a small bathroom downstairs, but it was too close to everyone, so I moved into

the living room and upstairs to use the bigger bathroom that I used the other day when I needed to change Reed.

My breaths came a little faster as I beelined for it, taking the stairs two at a time. I nearly tripped over the front of my dress at one stage because I was moving too fast, but it didn't stop me, nothing would stop me, not until I was safely in the bathroom with the door locked.

I placed my palm on the back of the door, trying to get my body and mind under control, but nothing was working. Nothing was pushing the memories away.

Nephew. They were nephews to my older brother. The only man in this world that I'd trusted, but that was before...

"Peyton?" I grinned at the sound of Ace's voice. It had only been the last couple of years that it had deepened so much more, but now that he was twenty, it was deeper than our father's used to be.

"Yeah?" I called, hearing his footsteps on the stairs. I closed my folder that all of my homework was in, deciding I could finish it off tomorrow.

"Where you at?" He sounded panicked.

"Bedroom," I called, standing up and stretching. My bedroom was the smallest room in our house, not that I was complaining because twelve months ago we didn't have anywhere to live, but Ace had worked his butt off to get us some stability after what happened with Dad.

I winced, hating how my thoughts were so intrusive at the most random of times. I didn't want to think about the fact that my dad had gone against someone in the organization and it had cost him his life. The same organization that Ace didn't have a choice but to become part of.

He appeared in my bedroom doorway, all six foot four of him, his T-shirt clinging to his toned muscles. "I need you to stay home this weekend." His lips were in a straight line, his anger clear to see reflected in his green eyes.

“Why?” I tilted my head to the side, partly frustrated that it meant I had to stay in when I had plans. What fifteen-year-old girl didn’t have plans? They may not have been important, but still, I had plans to go to the mall.

Ace shook his head, his big-brother mode setting in. “Just stay here. I’ve gotta go away and won’t be back until Sunday.” He paused, running his hand through his hair and staring off into the distance. I hated it when he was gone. My security disappeared the moment I knew he wasn’t able to get to me quick enough, just like the night men had broken into our house and put five bullets in my dad’s body right in front of me—two in the head and three in the chest.

“I don’t like it,” I whispered, feeling my shoulders sag and the anxiety kick in.

“I know.” He stepped forward, placing his large hands on my shoulders. “You’ll be safe, I promise.” He dipped down so his face was level with mine. “Trav will come and stay with you. He’ll make sure you’re safe.”

My stomach rolled when I thought about my brother’s best friend, Travis. His dark and broody looks and minimal words drew me to him. I had a crush, but only since he’d started to smile at me. I perked up a little, determined to make the most of this weekend now that I knew he’d be with me.

“Okay. But make sure you’re safe too. I...I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’ll never have to find that out, P.”

I clutched my chest, hearing his words echoing in my ears as if he was standing right here with me. He lied. I was having to live my life as if he didn’t exist. I was having to run not just from Travis, but from him too. Because if he found me...it didn’t bear thinking about.

Ace had spent years and years climbing the ranks, and now he was at the very top, the one in charge, just like the man who was sitting outside with his wife next to him.

How had I run away from one organization, just to find myself living next to another? In a white-picket-fence neighborhood like this of all places.

I had no luck, that much was clear. I gravitated toward danger, and I had no idea why.

My ears rang as I squeezed my eyes closed, so much so that I didn't hear the footsteps until they were right outside the door and someone was knocking. I sucked in a breath, hoping that if I was really quiet, whoever it was would go away until I'd gotten myself under control.

"Peyton?" I squeezed my eyes shut. "I know you're in there. Open up."

I pressed my head to the door, relishing in the coolness against my skin. "Go away."

"Nope." I felt and heard a small thud as the handle moved. "I can pick the lock in the time it would take for you to count to ten." He paused, and I hated how my lips lifted into a small smile. "Your choice, mama, but I'm getting in there to you either way."

Shaking my head, I pulled in a calming breath. They still weren't normal, but they were better than they were, and when I opened my eyes, the room wasn't spinning anymore. Although, my hands were still shaking.

"Five."

I took a step back, then another, and another as he counted down to one, and sure enough, with his last number, the lock turned and he opened the door.

"Told you." He grinned, clearly pleased with himself.

I folded my arms over my chest, not missing the way his gaze dipped to my cleavage. I hadn't done it on purpose, but now I couldn't move them because he'd know that I'd noticed. "What are you doing, Raf?"

He locked the door behind him, then stalked over to me like a predator does with his prey. "Came to check on you." I

opened my mouth, but he continued, “I saw that you were upset.”

“I’m not upset.”

He pursed his lips, clearly not happy with my words. “Can’t lie to me, mama. I see everything in those eyes of yours—windows to the soul, that’s what the flowery writers call them, right?”

I couldn’t help but snort. “Flowery writers?”

He shrugged, tilting his head to the side as he continued to advance toward me. I don’t know what made me back away a step, but I did. “You tryin’ to get away from me?” My breath caught in my throat. “You scared of what I’ll do to you?” His voice was lower now, enticing me in all the ways I shouldn’t have wanted it to but craved.

“That depends,” I whispered, my back hitting the wall, the coldness from the tile shocking me as it blasted the bare skin of my shoulders. “What do you plan on doing?”

His tongue traced his lips as he looked me up and down, taking me all in. I wasn’t wearing anything special—just a dress that ended mid-calf and tied around my waist, along with some wedges. My hair wasn’t curly, but not straight either, it was in that weird in-between stage.

“My plan,” he started, taking two more steps toward me, then stopping inches away. “Is to finish what I started three days ago.” He placed his arm on the wall above my head, blocking me in.

“Is that right?” I asked.

“Yeah, mama.” His thumb swiped along my bottom lip, pulling on it. “That’s right.”

I swallowed, my breathing picking up for an entirely new reason this time. “What else?”

His dark eyes lit with fire, his enjoyment clear to feel as he pressed his hips into my stomach. Even though I had wedges on, I was still too short, and as if he’d read my mind, he dipped down, moving his head into my neck as he whispered,

“I’m gonna touch you.” His breath fanned over my ear, followed with a kiss, then another, trailing down my neck. “Everywhere and anywhere.”

“Fuck, Raf,” I moaned, giving him better access to my neck. I couldn’t explain what his words did to me, how they made me feel, but my body loved every second of it.

“You want that, Peyton?” he asked, lifting his head from the crook of my neck so he could look right at me. “You want me to touch you?”

I nodded, scared that I’d mess up the words coming out of my mouth if I tried to vocalize it.

“Words, mama, I need those words.” His thumb gripped on to my chin, keeping me in place as he lowered to his knees in front of me. “Tell me what you want.”

My chest nearly caved as his hands trailed down my waist, over my hips, and all the way to my ankles. He gripped each one of them, staring up at me with eyes that I swore invaded the deepest parts of my mind.

“Touch me,” I begged. “Please. Touch me.”

“Where?” he whispered as his hand trailed up my leg, stopping on my thigh. “Here?”

“Higher,” I panted, barely able to contain myself. Raf was a distraction, I knew that; he knew that, but it was one that I desperately needed.

His fingertips climbed higher, sneaking past the edge of my panties, then swiping through my folds.

“Fuck,” I hissed, banging my head on the wall. “Raf, please.”

“You’re so goddamn wet,” he growled, moving his fingers faster, finding my clit with expertise. “I bet you taste fuckin’ divine.”

I groaned out, his words having just as much of an effect on me as his fingers were. I’d never been one for talk during any kind of intimacy, but Raf was changing the game for me in that department without even realizing it.

“Fuck it,” he growled, pulling his hand away.

My eyes snapped open as I stared down and watched him dive beneath my dress. He gripped each of my thighs, lifting me off the wall and placing them on his shoulders and—

“Oh my God.” My palms slapped against the wall, my attention not able to move off of the sight in front of me: Raf on his knees, buried beneath my dress as he swiped his tongue from my hole, up to my clit, then back down again, plunging it inside me. “Don’t stop,” I begged. “Please, Raf, don’t stop.”

He growled, moving his tongue faster, lapping me up like he was on death row and I was his last goddamn meal.

I needed something to hold on to, anything to touch, so I grabbed the top of his head, wishing that I could—my mind took over before I could even think about it and I untied my dress at the side, letting it flop open.

“Fuck. Me.” I weaved my fingers through his hair, staring down at him as he gazed up, not stopping his torment on my clit. “Raf, you look...fuck...” I moaned, thrusting my hips harder into his face. The sight of him kneeling below me, his face buried between my legs was almost too much to take. “That’s it, baby,” I groaned out, not thinking about my words. “I’m gonna...I’m gonna...”

I tensed, my entire body going ramrod straight as my orgasm slammed through me with so much force that my ears popped and my senses went into overdrive.

Damn. It had never felt like that before.

“I got you,” Raf murmured, moving his head and grabbing me around the waist as I slid to the floor. “I got you, mama.”

CHAPTER 6

RAFAEL

I tried to keep the grin off my face as I sauntered down the stairs and back outside, licking my lips and still tasting her on them, but it was real damn hard when I knew what I was leaving behind in the bathroom.

Every part of me wanted to turn back around, say fuck it, and do every single thing to her that my body desired.

But I couldn't.

I had to remember where I was, and who I was with.

Fuck. I'd forgotten about Alina.

I paused in the kitchen, grimacing at the idea that I had to go back out there and sit next to her. I had no idea how she'd managed to invite herself along today, but I had somehow picked her up and brought her here with me.

Did that mean I was leading her on? Because there was no way in hell that anything was happening between the two of us.

She was to the Mafia what puck bunnies were to hockey players. She wanted in as a girlfriend or a wife, but it was only for clout, to assert some kind of control over everyone around her. Too bad for her that it would never fuckin' happen, not

with me anyway. She had me pegged for a fool, but she was so damn wrong.

I heard Peyton's footsteps overhead, signaling that she would be down in a matter of minutes. She'd need some time to right her clothes and do her dress up. Holy shit, the image of her was making me hard again, and the last thing I needed was to—

"There you are!" I snapped my head around as Navy bounded into the kitchen with Dario in her arms. She gripped my forearm, her eyes wide as she blurted out, "You need to get back out there and save Bailey."

"What?" I frowned, already stepping around Navy, concern thrashing through me. "Why?"

Navy raised a brow and tensed her fingers on my arm, causing me to halt. "One word: Alina."

"Fu—" I cut myself off as I glanced at Dario and gave him a cheeky smile. "—dge. Fudge. I meant fudge."

Navy pursed her lips and raised her brows at me. "Sure you did." She laughed as she let my arm go and waltzed past me and into the living room where I heard her greet, "Oh, hi, Peyton."

Dammit. I needed to get out there asap so it didn't look like I'd just spent the last ten minutes eating Peyton's pussy out.

Jesus Christ. Why did I have to go thinking like that? Now I was getting excited again and—

Get on task, Raf. I shook my head, trying to think clearly as I strolled back outside like I hadn't done a single thing but use the bathroom while I was gone. Everyone was where I'd left them when I'd gotten up from the table, apart from now there was an empty spot next to Kian. His head was down, his shoulders rounded, and no matter how much anyone around him tried to talk to him, he wouldn't answer them.

Bailey glanced at me, her brows furrowed as if she was at a loss on what to do.

Indecision waged a war inside me, but ultimately it wasn't a hard choice to make as I walked toward Alina and bent down next to her. "I'm gonna go and talk to the little guy over there. I'll be back."

"What?" she hissed, whipping her head around to look at me. "You've left me on my own enough already, sit down."

I paused, lifting my lips into a mocking smirk. "You forgetting who you're talking to, sweetheart?" My sarcasm was lost on her because at my words, she fluttered her lashes. It didn't have the desired effect, so instead I got straight to the point. "Maybe it's time you left," I sneered.

"What?" She shot up off the bench, hands on her hips in outrage. Fuck. Why did I think bringing her here was a good idea?

I shrugged, glancing around the table and noticing that almost everyone was listening to us. "I gotta head out on a job." I cleared my throat, the lie not coming as easily as it did to other people around the table.

"No you don't!" she shouted. My attention snapped straight to Kian, hating how he flinched at her voice. See that shit? That shit made my blood boil.

"It's okay," Bailey whispered to him, but he shook his head, his bottom lip wobbling. And that...that was the final straw that had me all kinds of fuckin' livid.

I took a step toward her, then another, making sure that there was only an inch of space between us. From the outside looking in, it would have seemed like we were being sweet—intimate even—but this was anything but that. "I'm gonna say this to you once, and once only." I paused, staring into her blue eyes. They were nothing but cold and calculated, a fact that I'd always known about her. "Get out of this house. Don't come back. Don't call me. Don't find me." I paused, cracking my neck to the side. "Don't talk to me again. Understood?"

"But—"

I held my hand in the air, cutting her off. "You have two minutes to get your shit and get the fuck out of my brother's

house. You're no longer welcome."

She huffed out a breath, crossing her arms over her chest and searching around the table, probably hoping that someone would back her up. Her dad was a fellow soldier, just like I was, only, my name held power in this state, hers didn't, which was why she was actively seeking someone out, and I was the last available one whose name meant anything.

"Fine." She stomped her foot and pushed past me, heading toward the door. "But I won't be here when you come crawling back to me."

I grinned as she turned back to face me. "That won't be a problem." I winked, causing her to growl in response.

"Finally," Dante grunted when she'd disappeared inside the house. "She was like listening to nails on a chalkboard." He rolled his eyes like a sullen teenager. "Went right through me."

"Me too," Romeo grunted, taking a seat next to Bailey.

It was then that I remembered why I'd gotten so pissed off with her in the first place: Kian. Peyton still wasn't out here—she'd most probably gotten pulled into conversation by Navy, and anyone that knew her knew that once she had you trapped, you could do nothing but listen and let her finish.

"Kian," I called, walking over to him at as normal of a pace as I could, but inside all I wanted was to sprint over to him. "You okay, little man?" He closed his eyes, much the same as his mom did when she was trying to escape. "It's okay," I told him, placing my hand on the bench next to him.

"I don't like it," he whispered, slowly opening his eyes and looking straight at me.

"Don't like what, bud?"

He lifted his little arm, pointing at the door that Alina had exited through. "When people shout." He hiccuped a sob, a couple of tears streaming down his face as he inched closer to me, his voice low. "Daddy always shouted at Mommy and I didn't like it." He shook his head with so much force he must have made himself dizzy.

I swallowed, tearing my gaze away from Kian and to my older brother, searching for his reaction. He was staring at us with as much intensity as I was sure I was looking at Kian with. But he wasn't the only one listening, so were Dante and Lorenzo.

"It's okay. No one else is going to shout here now." I ran my hand over the top of his head, trying to comfort him. Every fiber in me wanted to wrap my arms around him and hug him, but I had a feeling he wouldn't like that. He was sensitive whereas his little brother wasn't. It meant that he'd seen things Reed hadn't, which only served to make my rage that much more than it already was.

"Promise?" Kian asked, pushing his shoulders back. "Mommy promised me that Daddy wouldn't shout again but he always did." He blinked, his tears starting to dry up the more he spoke. "I don't like when Daddy shouts."

"Kian?" Peyton's broken voice penetrated through the trance Kian had us all in. I whipped my head around to face her, standing and holding my palms in the air like I'd just been caught with my hands in the cookie jar before dinner. "What happened?" She looked straight at me for an answer, not bothering with anyone else, and I wasn't stupid enough to admit that I liked it—I liked when she only had eyes for me.

"Alina was shouting when I told her to leave." Fuck, I couldn't help but scan my gaze over her body, remembering how her dress was open not long ago.

"I don't like shouting, Mom," Kian announced, jumping down off the seat and reaching for my hand. I embraced his small palm in mine, not even thinking about it for a single second.

Peyton made a noise in the back of her throat, her hand moving to the base of her neck, her anxiety on clear display for everyone to see. I should have taken a step toward her. I should have comforted her as her eyes glassed over. But...no one knew what we'd done, and I wasn't going to inform them now. This was our business, not theirs.

“We...um...” She cleared her throat, pulling her cell from her pocket, then glancing up. “We should go.” She held her hand out for Kian who immediately let go of mine and went running to her as Bailey stood, taking Reed over to her.

“You don’t have to leave yet,” Bailey said, trying to keep her voice low, but it was no use because we could all hear her over the silence bathing us. “You haven’t eaten yet.”

It hadn’t been lost on me that Peyton hadn’t eaten, yet the boys had. In fact, when I thought about when I helped her inside with her groceries, there only ever seemed to be food for the boys.

“I’m not hungry,” Peyton said, taking Reed out of her arms. He placed his head on her shoulder, his little eyes closing as soon as he was back with the one person he loved most in this world.

Without another word, she spun round, taking her sons with her. Everyone was silent as they made their way through the house, then I heard the front door beep open and close—the alarm signaling us. And I didn’t know what possessed me, what made me follow her, but my gut was telling me that I couldn’t let her leave like this, not without saying something to her. What that something was I had no idea.

Blinking, I didn’t look back as I casually strolled into the house, taking the same route that Peyton and the boys had just taken, and as soon as I was outside, I spotted them near their front door.

“Peyton?” Her head snapped around at the sound of my voice, her brows knitting together in confusion. “Wait up.”

“I...” She maneuvered Reed on her hip, adjusting him. “I can’t do this right now, Raf.” She shook her head, tiredness flashing over her face as her mask slipped a little—a mask I was starting to see behind more and more.

“Just...” I held my hand in the air. “Just wait a second.” I glanced down at Kian, seeing his puffy eyes. “I just wanted to check that Kian is okay.” I crouched down, knowing that

wasn't the only reason I'd come out here, but I *did* want to know that he was okay.

"Don't," she warned me, but I didn't listen to her as I asked Kian if he was okay. His little nod and small smile reassured me, so I stood again, staring her square in the eyes and wishing I wasn't about to walk away from her.

Fuck. When did this need to be close to her start? It felt like it just all of a sudden sprung on me, and now I didn't know how to act—how to behave.

"Don't do this," she said, her voice getting firmer. I raised a brow, silently telling her to expand on what she was saying, and with a small huff, she told me, "What happened in there, it...it means nothing, Raf. It was just a moment of fun." She glanced around, clearly trying to find the right words, which only told me that she didn't believe a word she was saying, because if she did, she would have known exactly what to say to me in that moment.

"Mama," I murmured, not missing the pink hue that took effect on her cheeks. Damn, I loved the sight of that. "You can tell yourself that all you want, but both you and I know that *that* was more than a moment of *fun*."

Her chest heaved, her body taking a step away from me. "No, Rafael." She said my name in a way a mother did when you were in trouble, and fuck me, I liked it a whole lot more than I ever thought possible. Shit, this woman was making me all kinds of crazy. The back and forth, the secret looks, the silent conversations that we had. It was all...more than I'd ever experienced before. And I wanted more. I needed more.

"Yes, Peyton." I took a step back too, lifting my hand in a wave as I promised, "I'll be seeing you soon."

And I would. There was no doubt about that. Me and her were only just getting started. She just had no idea.

PEYTON

“Mom!” Kian shouted from downstairs. “Someone is at the door!”

I winced, a second of terror flowing through me at his shout and knowing that whoever was on the other side of the door now knew who was home.

“Coming,” I responded, placing the rest of the laundry on my bed, then shooting out of my bedroom and down the stairs. Kian was standing there, waiting for me, a smile on his face.

I narrowed my eyes at him playfully as I reached the front door. “What are you up to, Kian?” He laughed, running away back into the living room where I’d left him and Reed. A mother’s instinct was never wrong, so I knew they’d done *something* in there, but right in that second, I couldn’t find out because I was opening the door to—

“Bailey.” I let out a breath, thankful that she’d come over. It had been two days since I’d walked out of her barbecue.

She shuffled from foot to foot, her gaze batting between me and the open door. She was nervous. “Hey. I...I just...” She cleared her throat, her awkwardness making me smile a little. “I just wanted to see if you’re okay. If Kian is okay.” She paused, her gaze finally landing on me. “If we’re okay?”

I pursed my lips, trying my hardest to keep my grin from taking over my face as I stepped forward, grabbed her hand, then pulled her inside. “Of course we’re okay.” I closed the door behind us, automatically engaging the extra locks I’d installed the day we moved in. Although part of me wanted to put more there, I didn’t need to.

Not yet anyway.

Bailey let out a big breath, one that sounded like she’d been holding it for a while. “I was so worried.” She leaned against the door in the hallway, pushing some hair off her face. “When I didn’t hear from you yesterday, I was sure you were mad at me.” I held my hand up to stop her, but she didn’t take

any notice, just continued, “I’m sorry about Kian getting upset. I didn’t know that was going to happen. And then he said that his dad—”

“Mom! Reed is being mean to me!”

My shoulders drooped, my stomach bottoming out as I was saved by my oldest son yet again. I couldn’t talk about their dad, not right then, not when I still hadn’t figured out everything that was going on. I felt like a kite flying in the wind with no destination in sight. I was just drifting, hoping that I would find the place I was meant to be at, but it was hard knowing *when* that was going to happen.

“Come inside,” I told Bailey, spinning around and heading into the living room.

I halted in the doorway, groaning. What was that saying? If your child was too quiet, then they were up to no good. I should have known when I took the laundry upstairs...

“What have you done?” I asked both of the boys, not expecting an answer from either of them. I could hear Bailey’s soft laughs from behind me, but one quick look at her told me that she was doing her best to keep them at bay.

“We...” Kian looked around, as if seeing the mess for the first time. “We wanted to help clean?”

I blinked, then blinked again. Reed was covered head to toe in laundry detergent, his clothes sticking to every inch of him. Kian was surprisingly not covered in anything. Taking stock of everything in the room, there were suds on the sofa, a puddle of detergent in the middle of the rug, mixed in with who the hell knew what. My table had been scrubbed with the stuff, and even the walls where Reed had drawn on them last week. Although...that had actually come off now, so maybe this was a win after all?

I shook my head, trying to keep my own smile as low as possible. “We need to clean up, don’t we, boys?”

“But that’s what we were doing,” Kian said, holding up a sponge to show me. Reed copied him, looking dead serious.

“You...I...” I closed my eyes, finally giving in to the grin and letting out a little chuckle. “I can see that,” I finally managed to get out, opening my eyes. “But let’s clean up the cleaning up?” I said it like a question, not sure if it sounded right, but either way, it felt like every time I turned my back, there was something else for me to do. Not that I minded, but sometimes...sometimes I just wanted to be able to sit down and not worry about anything. Not have to think about how it was all on my shoulders, weighing me down.

There had only been a handful of times when I’d ever felt like I didn’t have to worry about it all: when I was growing up with my big brother, Ace, and when Raf was around.

Dammit. I shouldn’t have let those thoughts into my head, because now as I picked Reed up and took him in the kitchen where I stripped him down and cleaned him up, all I could think about was how safe I felt with both of them. How I should have felt like that with Travis, but I never had.

I stared at Reed as I dressed him in some clean clothes—luckily his pile of laundry was still down here, waiting for me to take up and put away in his closet.

“There, all cleaned up,” I announced, placing him on my hip, then heading back into the living room where Kian and Bailey still were. They were hard at work, trying to clean everything up and get the majority of the suds out.

“Your sofa is going to take a few days to dry,” she said, dropping to the floor where Kian was playing with his trains that were still partly covered in suds.

“At least it’ll smell nice, right?” I said, trying to look on the bright side.

“Yeah,” she whispered, and her low word reminded me why she’d come here. Reminded me of what she was about to say to me before Kian interrupted. “Peyton—”

“You want a coffee?” I asked, not wanting her to ask anything. The moment I opened up about the past was the moment I knew I’d have to move on. I couldn’t let anyone into that. I couldn’t let them see what was following me. I couldn’t

allow them to find out what I was running from—sprinting from.

“No.” She stood, tilting her head at me. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m good,” I said, way too quickly to be believable. And if the expression on her face—her frown and wrinkled-up nose—was anything to go by, she didn’t believe me at all.

“And Kian?”

I glanced over at him, remembering how upset he’d been a couple of days ago at Bailey’s house. I’d been talking to Navy about all things babies and how we should get together for a play date. It wasn’t until her little boy, Dario, started to get fussy that I managed to go back outside. As soon as I’d walked out there and seen Kian upset, mom mode kicked in. I’d left without many words, knowing that people would think it was strange. But I had to protect Kian. I had to make sure he was okay because he’d seen so much more than Reed had—than he ever would.

“He’s okay too.” I smiled, knowing that after some kisses and cuddles and a movie on the sofa, he was okay. All he needed was reassurance, and I’d been able to give that to him without even trying. But it was a reminder, one that told me Kian still had to recover from what his dad had put us through.

My stomach bottomed out, my anxiety kicking in full force. I pressed my hand to my stomach, trying to keep my mask in place in front of Bailey. “I’m not feeling too great.” It wasn’t a lie, it was the truth. But it was code for I need to be alone.

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. “I better get going.”

Neither of us said another word as she gave both of the boys a kiss on the cheek, then walked out of the house. She turned at the last minute, her features screwing up. “I also... um...” She bit down on her bottom lip. “Never mind. I’ll see you later.” She waved her arm in the air, shrugging her shoulders as she walked away and across the driveway to her home.

Not wanting to think about anything other than my two boys in the house, I stepped back inside, getting on with all of the chores—which felt like a never-ending list, but that was what moms did, right? We looked after everyone around us.

Sometimes though, it would have been nice to be looked after. Maybe just once.

The hope that that would someday happen filled my mind as I cleaned the house, cooked dinner, bathed the boys, tucked them into bed, then finally tucked myself into bed. Only, the problem was, my brain chose that moment to run into overdrive, refusing to sleep.

So when my cell pinged at eleven p.m., I was wide awake.

I clicked the message open, frowning at the number that I didn't recognize.

UNKNOWN

Hey, mama.

Butterflies swarmed in my stomach, my body instantly knowing who it was. But...how did he get my number?

I wasn't sure it mattered how he got it, but the fact that he'd gone out of his way to find out filled me with equal parts excitement and dread.

Why was he messaging me? I'd told him that what happened in Romeo's bathroom didn't mean anything. Whether that was the truth or not didn't matter. But dammit, he was insistent, and...I liked it.

My hands shook as I stared down at the screen on my cell, the cursor flashing over and over again, tempting me to write something—anything.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. Maybe I should have locked my cell and put it over on the other side of the room to stop myself, but...there was a small voice in the back of my head tempting me—goading me to message him.

I bit down on my bottom lip, my thumbs hitting the screen as I typed out a simple message:

PEYTON

Hey, Raf...how'd you get my number?

RAFAEL

How'd you know it was me?

PEYTON

Only you call me mama.

I blushed, thinking about the way the letters would curl around his tongue along with the deep baritone of his voice. I sighed, imagining it as if he was right here with me, whispering it in my ear.

RAFAEL

Damn straight I am.

RAFAEL

You good?

I tilted my head to the side, staring down at the screen like it had two heads. I'd never been asked that before, not from a guy, not one who wasn't my brother. My stomach dipped, memories wanting to push forward, but I refused to let them. Not here. Not now. Not when I was all alone.

PEYTON

I'm good.

RAFAEL

That was a little bit too quick for my liking, mama. You wanna tell the truth?

PEYTON

No

Grinning, I started to type back, but he was quicker.

RAFAEL

You know you can trust me, right, Peyton?

I held my breath, not sure that I believed the words he'd written. I'd believed a man once before, one who said he would take care of me, one who promised to be by my side and cherish me, but he'd done nothing of the sort. In fact, he'd done the complete opposite.

How was I supposed to trust what Rafael was saying, especially when I knew *who* he was. He lived in a world I'd grown up in, but...he didn't know that. To him, I was just an unsuspecting single mom, running from *something*. He had no idea that I knew the inner workings of an organization like his.

PEYTON

Do you want me to be honest? Because I can...

I sent the message, trying to pluck up the courage to say something to him that I would never vocalize to his face. It was now or never. I knew I'd never be able to say the physical words to him, and this was the next best thing.

PEYTON

I don't think I can trust any man ever again.

Silence. Three dots appearing, then disappearing. I wasn't sure how long I was sitting there, waiting for his reply, but after five minutes had passed by, I was sure I wouldn't get one, so I made a move to swipe out of the messaging app, just as a long message appeared.

RAFAEL

I get that, mama. I do. But you can't live your life never trusting anyone ever again. I can see the pain in your eyes every time I look at you. I know you've been through some shit. You're a strong woman, a mother, a fuckin' badass. But you don't have to be that all of the time. Get to know me first. Then decide whether you can trust me or not. Don't write me off before you've even read the first chapter.

The butterflies were back, flying around like crazy. I hadn't expected that—I didn't know what I *had* expected. But it wasn't that. Damn.

I pulled in a deep breath, then another, trying to calm the storm starting to rage inside me. Part of me wondered whether I was looking for a distraction to keep my mind off of who I was sure I'd seen a week ago at the grocery store, but there hadn't been anything since then. I'd been all ready to pick up and move, but after the silence that ensued, I was sure Travis hadn't spotted me. I would have known about it by now if he had.

And Raf...Raf was so different to Travis. He may have worked in a criminal organization too, but that was where the similarities ended.

All I'd been thinking about for months was making sure the boys and I were safe, and I'd achieved that. I'd gotten us out of there and started fresh, but I hadn't truly started over. I'd kept myself locked away, having the bare minimum of contact with other adults.

But Raf...he'd changed that. He made me feel things—things that I'd never felt before. And even though it was scary, I liked it. I liked it a hell of a lot.

So I typed back a reply with a huge grin on my face.

PEYTON

I'll get to know you, Raf. Name the time and place.

It was seconds before a reply shot through.

RAFAEL

I'll pick you up at 12 on Friday.

Both boys would be at school, but I had a feeling he knew that already. He was making this easier and easier by the minute. The problem was, nothing good should come easy, right? The other shoe was about to drop, I was just biding my time, preparing myself for when it did.

CHAPTER 7

RAFAEL

I pulled up outside her house, hating how the nerves were bashing through me with the force of a bulldozer to a building. It didn't help that the drive over here from my new place was thirty minutes, so all I could think about was what I was going to do—how I was going to act.

But now I was here, parked at the bottom of her driveway, my engine still running, my hands clutched to the steering wheel.

Dammit, I hadn't expected to be this apprehensive. Being nervous was a good thing, right? It meant I cared. That was what people said, but right then, I just felt...out of sorts.

Inhaling a breath, I closed my eyes and tried my hardest to let calm wash over me. My stomach dipped, butterflies flying around like crazy. Fuck. I just needed to get out of the car, to make the first move.

Without thinking, I opened my eyes, switched the engine off, then darted out of my car. I strolled up her driveway, past her car, then to her door, knowing I was portraying an ease I didn't feel in that moment.

I was ten minutes early, which to some probably wasn't a good look, but I needed to show her that I was serious about her giving me a chance.

I'd never wanted to spend time with another woman the way that I wanted to spend time with her. We'd had a few conversations, some touching—*fuck me, that touching*—but we'd never just spent *time* together. It was what most people called a date, right? But to me, it was more than that, it was me showing her that she was worth spending time with—worth fighting to get to know.

She was a closed book, that much was clear, but I was determined to open her up, crack the spine, and flip through the pages, consuming every word like I needed them to breathe.

She didn't know it yet, but there was no way I was walking away from her. My gut knew—it knew that she was in my life for a reason. I'd never believed in love at first sight—or lust at first sight. But I one hundred percent knew that we all had a path that was created for us, one that could take many twists and turns with the choices we made. And this—she—was a choice, one that I refused to turn away from.

I lifted my hand and knocked on her front door, listening intently as her footsteps neared, then it swung open, revealing her to me.

Now to most people, the dress and denim jacket she was wearing was casual, but to me, it was out of this world, but only because it was covering the curves I knew were underneath it. The lilac material clung to her waist, then flared out, stopping just below her knees.

“Hey,” I murmured, my voice gruff.

“Hey,” she responded, stepping outside with her purse on her shoulder.

I witnessed her throat bob as she swallowed, all of my attention zoned in on her as we walked side by side down to my car. I was observing her, taking stock of every little move she did: pushing her hair behind her ear, the shake of her hands, the small smile she had displayed on her face. But most of all, the way her gaze would veer to me, then away, then back again, almost as if she couldn't help herself.

My own lips lifted as I stared directly at her, then halted at my car. I wanted to say something but...I didn't know what, so I just opened the passenger door for her and waited for her to get inside. Her cheeks pinked as she slowly maneuvered inside my vehicle, and damn, I couldn't help but be obsessed with the way she moved.

Stop staring. Fuck, yeah, okay. I cleared my throat, closed her door, then sauntered around the front of my car, feeling her gaze burning against my skin. There was tension, so much that I felt like I was in the middle of a scorching building, sure to set alight any second.

The roaring of my engine was the only sound as I pulled away from her house, and for ten minutes, neither of us spoke. It wasn't awkward, but instead more of a comfortable silence; a silence that held promises. And I was okay with that. I wanted to be around people who didn't want to make me talk, who didn't need conversation to make them feel comfortable, even though I knew I could get like that sometimes.

I relaxed back in my seat as I took the freeway, knowing we wouldn't be on it for long.

She sighed, causing me to quickly glance at her, but her eyes were closed, a small smile playing on her lips.

Was she content? Because she sure as hell looked like it.

My gaze dipped to her lap, my fingers itching with the need to reach over and rest my palm on her thigh. I could almost feel the soft material of her dress against my fingertips. She looked so damn beautiful in that moment. I wished I could have stared at her like that all day, but I couldn't, so I turned my attention back on the road.

We pulled up outside of the place fifteen minutes later, right in the middle of our territory. I pushed out of the car and rushed around to her side to help her out, then took her hand in mine. I'd overthought touching her the entire way here, but now I was done with hesitating. I was taking what I wanted, not giving a damn about what it would mean later. We didn't intertwine fingers, but it was enough to let her know she was here *with* me.

There was a line forming outside, but I bypassed it, walked inside, and was immediately greeted by the manager.

“Mr. Pagani.” He shook my hand, bowing a little as if I was King. “It’s a pleasure to have you dining with us today.” He let go of my hand, his gaze turning to Peyton, but I sidestepped in front of her, blocking her from his view.

I knew exactly who this man was and what he did to the women he liked the look of, and there was no way in hell that I was going to allow him to get a look at Peyton. Fuck, it was about time I used my influence and put an end to this slimeball. He hadn’t bothered me before, nothing landing at my feet, but now I was standing feet away from him with a woman I cared about next to me, I realized that I couldn’t let him get away with what he’d been doing. They may have only been rumors right now, but I’d find out for sure, and if there was an ounce of truth to any of them, he’d be gone, with a warning...a physical one.

Peyton cleared her throat, her fingers wiggling in my hold, and I realized that I’d been gripping her a little too hard, so I made a mental note to deal with him at a later date and concentrate on what I was here for: Peyton.

“Your table will be ready shortly.”

I grunted in response, watching as he walked away. My eyes narrowed on him, my body tense as I watched him talk to one of the servers. She looked so damn uncomfortable with how close he was standing.

“Is this a date?” Peyton blurted out.

Blinking, I turned to face her, trying not to show my shock and loving how her cheeks were turning red, her gaze was bouncing across the room. “Peyton.” She either didn’t hear me, or was too inside her own head. So I reached up, grasping her chin between my finger and thumb, turning her so that she was looking right at me. “It’s whatever you want it to be.” I paused, letting that sink in. “Now, if you’re asking whether I *want* it to be a date, then the answer is yes.” I let that sink in, then leaned closer, pressing my lips to her cheek as I whispered, “Ball is in your court, mama.”

I breathed deep, loving the way her flowery scent wrapped around me. I swore I could smell it everywhere I went for days after the bathroom incident. Fuck, I couldn't think about that, not here, not while I was this close to her.

"I..." She cleared her throat as I backed away, watching her intently. She opened her mouth again, but we were cut off by a server who came to get us and take us to the back corner of the restaurant. I hadn't only booked us a table, I'd booked us ten tables so that we wouldn't be surrounded by a single person.

It may have been lunchtime, but this restaurant had a waiting list of five months minimum for lunch and dinner service.

Not for me though. My name was worth more than money could buy. And for once, I'd used it.

I pulled Peyton's chair out for her, making sure she was seated before going around the opposite side and sitting down too. The server took our drink orders—water for both of us, there was no way I was drinking alcohol right then, not when I wanted to soak up every second of being with her alone like this for the first time.

The server walked away and I focused my attention back on Peyton just as she announced, "If we're going to do this"—she waved her hand between the two of us—"whatever this is, then we're honest with each other."

I pulled in a breath, not liking where this was going. I wanted her to be honest with me, I wanted her to tell me everything she'd been through, what she was feeling... *everything*. But I wasn't sure I could do the same. I wasn't sure I could tell her when I'd be on a job for Lorenzo. There would always be things that I couldn't tell her.

I opened my mouth, about to attempt to explain that, but she beat me to it.

"Before you say anything." She leaned forward, placing her palms on the table as if to brace herself. "I know who you are." She paused, her light-brown eyes staring me down, not

an iota of wavering inside them. “I’ve known who you are since the first day we met.”

Raising a brow at her, I mimicked her by leaning forward, placing my hands on the table too, our fingertips centimeters from touching. “Is that right?” I lifted one side of my lips. “And who am I, mama?”

She sucked in a breath at my words, her nickname doing exactly what I wanted it to—to throw her off. But it only worked for a few seconds because she narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re the Mafia, Rafael. Your father is the notorious Antonio Pagani.”

My expression shuttered, my hands slipping from the table. My words escaping me.

She knew. She’d known the whole time, yet... “You still let me touch you.”

Her cheeks reddened. “Yes.”

I tilted my head, staring at her. “There’ll be things I can’t tell you.”

She nodded. “Same here.”

I didn’t like that, but I couldn’t demand of her what I wasn’t willing to give her.

“But I’ll be as honest and open as I can.”

She smiled, her full lips pulling up and causing a dimple in her cheek. Fuck, that was cute. “I will too,” she told me.

“You will?” She nodded in response. “Then tell me, Peyton...” I leaned forward, dropping my voice to a murmur. “Have you thought about what I did to you in the bathroom?”

Her chest heaved, her cleavage on full display as her breaths came faster. “Raf,” she admonished, her eyes wide, but I didn’t miss the way she shuffled on her seat. My words affected her, and I loved seeing it.

“What?” I was acting innocent, but I was anything but that. Both she and I knew what I was doing.

“You’re a fiend.” She shook her head, but the smile on her face couldn’t have been mistaken for anything but happiness. I licked my lips, watching her with my full attention, soaking in the way her cheeks flushed, her lashes fluttered, and her lips pursed. Fuck, she was picture perfect, my very own goddess sitting across from me.

“You’re so damn beautiful, Peyton,” I told her, reaching for her hand, but I was halted by my cell ringing like a loud siren, pulling us out of our moment. I gritted my teeth, ready to give whoever was on the other end hell, when I spotted the name flashing on the screen. Fuck, there was no way I was going to answer it, not in front of Peyton, so I clicked the side button on my cell, rejecting the call.

“Who was that?” she asked, leaning back in her seat with her drink in her hand. Her eyes didn’t move off of me as she took a sip, her full attention almost too much to bear.

“Nobody.” She raised a brow at that, reminding me of the conversation we’d had not long ago. “My dad.”

“Then why aren’t you answering it?”

“Because...” I trailed off, not willing to tell her why I was mad at him. What he’d kept from us growing up. How he’d always made out like he was the bad guy when he wasn’t. Well...he was, just, not in the way we thought he was.

“Because why?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Most things are.” Darkness flashed over her eyes, taking her away from me for a split second, but as soon as it appeared, it was gone again. If I would have blinked, I would have missed it. Everything in me wanted to ask her about that, to switch the conversation and get the heat off of me, but my cell ringing again distracted me. This time it was Romeo’s name flashing on the screen. “Answer it,” she told me, standing, “I need to go to the restroom anyway.”

I cracked my neck to the side, hearing the bones crunch against each other, my gaze attached to Peyton as she made her way to the restrooms, my cell still ringing in my hand.

“What?” I growled as I placed it next to my ear.

“Need you to come to Dad’s house.”

“No way in hell,” I gritted out, holding my cell tighter. “I’m busy.”

“Get here now,” Romeo demanded. “Lorenzo’s order.”

At his last words, I sat up a little straighter, my eyes narrowing on the door that I was watching, waiting for Peyton to come back through it. We hadn’t even ordered any food, and now I had to up and leave...fuck.

“I’m out,” I told Romeo. “With someone.”

“Leave.”

I shook my head, my lips curving up as I spotted Peyton moving back toward me. This was the life I led, and if she wanted to know the true me, she was going to have to get a front-row seat right from the beginning. “I’ll take her home and then come.” I didn’t let Romeo say another word as I ended the call, standing up as Peyton got closer. “I...” I trailed off, wincing at what I knew I was about to say. I’d told her to give me a chance, but now I was bailing. “I have to leave.”

Her face dropped, her expression on clear display for me to see. “You do?” she whispered, the disappointment in her tone evident.

“Yeah.” I rolled my shoulders. “Work.”

One word. It was all I needed to say and hope that she understood, and with a clip of her head, she moved closer to me. “Are you at least going to take me home first?” She pressed her front to mine, my arm snaking around her waist and holding her to me as if we’d stood like this a thousand times before.

“I’ll take you home, mama.” I sucked in a deep breath, running my nose up her neck and to her ear as I whispered, “We’ll finish this later.” I pulled back a little to look into her eyes. “That’s a promise.”

PEYTON

“No one likes you, you know that?” His laugh echoed in my brain, taunting me, just like his expression did when he spoke like that—dark, foreboding, his eyes almost edge-to-edge black. “That’s why you have no friends.”

He stepped closer, causing me to wince. I was usually good at keeping that at bay—at not letting him see my reactions—but this time I’d let my mask slip—let him see how truly afraid of him I was.

“Don’t do that,” he demanded, his voice deeper now.

“D-do what?” I whispered, trying to keep my tone neutral, but it was no use because even I could hear the shake in my voice.

He pointed at me. “That. Act like you’re scared of me.”

“I...” I licked my lips, swallowing against my dry throat. “I’m not scared of you.”

I thought it was the right thing to say—thought it was what he wanted to hear.

I was wrong. So, so wrong.

“Peyton.” He shook his head, his lips lifting up on one side. “You should always be scared of me.” His hand lifted in the air, his fist clenched, and I knew what was coming, I knew

I woke with a start, jumping up out of my seat and searching the room. It took only seconds for the noise of the boys playing to reach my eyes, but it felt like minutes...hours. My mind was trapped between the dream and reality, one foot in each camp, not able to move between the two.

I tried to center myself, tried to concentrate on the boys' laughs, but I was frozen to the spot, trying to remember where I was and who was—

“Peyton?” Gasping, my hand flew to my chest, my heart racing a mile a minute as I spun around and spotted Bailey standing in the doorway—the doorway to *her* kitchen—with Reed on her hip, twirling her hair around his small chubby fingers. “Are you okay?”

I inhaled a deep breath, trying to get my shaking hands under control. I couldn't let her see any inkling of what I'd been dreaming about. Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried my absolute hardest to bash the memories that I'd dreamed away—because that was what they were: memories.

“I'm good.” I smiled, or at least, attempted to smile. “I must have dropped off to sleep.” Opening my eyes, I made out like everything was easy breezy when it was anything but. I'd perfected that over the years though, so I had no doubt that my mask was convincing her.

“Are you sure?” She stepped closer, not quite coming in the living room. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

I laughed, the sound off even to my own ears, but there was nothing I could do about it. “Nah, just lack of sun.” I shrugged, stepping toward her and taking Reed off of her. “Sorry I fell asleep. I came here to help with Romeo's party and then...”

“Don't even worry about it.” Bailey stood a little taller, her pride for what she was organizing taking over. She'd changed so much over the last couple of months since *that* day—the day that she refuses to talk about, the day I'd walked in on her and the man that had caused her so much pain.

I understood more than she would ever know why she didn't bring it up. There was no way I would talk about a single day of my life before I came here. I'd never speak about me being hurt by my husband, not only because the pain was too fresh, but because I'd be there for hours, opening up Pandora's box, knowing that nothing would fit back right

again. It was like toothpaste, once it was out of the tube, there was no way you could get it back inside.

It was a risk I wasn't willing to take—*ever*. The memories that haunted me were mine, and mine alone.

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked, trying to take my mind off of everything but also distract her so that she didn’t ask any questions that I wasn’t willing to answer. Our friendship had a line that I wouldn’t cross. She didn’t know that, but she’d find out if she stepped in the wrong direction, and I didn’t want that to happen, not yet anyway.

She grinned, back in organizing mode as I followed her into the kitchen where Kian was sitting at the table, coloring. “I’ve invited his mom and dad, and of course Raf.” She paused, her brows furrowing. “Although, I haven’t seen him in a few days, so I need to message him.”

I bit down on my bottom lip, trying to keep from saying anything or letting my mind wander as she told me all about the surprise party and what time to turn up and what to bring.

But I couldn’t help but think about the fact that I hadn’t seen Raf for days either. Four days to be specific. I hated to admit that I’d believed his words in the restaurant: “We’ll finish this later.” I’d taken it literally, assuming that I’d see him later that night.

I was wrong.

So damn wrong.

It had been four days since Rafael held me against him in the restaurant, making me feel things that I had no right to feel.

He’d taken me home, walked me to my front door, kissed me on my cheek. And then...nothing.

He hadn’t been to Romeo and Bailey’s. I hadn’t seen his car; hadn’t noticed him around.

I didn’t want to believe it, but it felt like he was ghosting me, and in turn, Bailey too.

She was like a little sister to him at this point, so if he was avoiding her, then there was no doubt he was avoiding me too.

Had I done something wrong? Had he found out who I really was?

I slowly closed my eyes, trying to convince myself that there was no way he could have found out who I actually was. No one knew what I was running from—well, maybe Raf had a bit of an idea thanks to Kian, but he didn't *really* know, he'd never truly know.

Secrets were supposed to be just that: *secrets*, never to be spoken about. And I had every intention of keeping it that way.

I blinked, bringing myself back to the here and now, realizing that Bailey was silent, waiting to see what I'd say. My eyes widened as I tried to remember what the last thing she said was. Crap, I wasn't paying attention, my mind lost somewhere else—thinking about *someone* else. Dammit.

“It's just so unlike Raf not to come and see me, you know?”

Right, Raf. We were talking about Raf.

“Maybe he's busy?” I shrugged, trying to act like it was a completely plausible excuse, but deep down I knew something wasn't right. I hadn't listened to my gut in the past and it had gotten me into trouble, so now I knew to listen to nothing *but* my gut.

“Maybe.” She huffed out a breath, tilting her head to the side as the sound of an engine outside rang out. “Romeo's home.” She stood, panicking, as if all her surprise party plans were laid out on the table yet they were all in her mind.

“We better go,” I announced, standing and bringing Reed with me. I strolled over to Kian, rubbing the top of his head as I said, “Grab your stuff, bud.”

“Okay, Mom.”

He gathered his things up, not missing a beat, then took Bailey's hand as I followed her out of the house. The pair of them were chatting away, meanwhile I was still trying to push

everything that had happened inside her house out of my mind. I swore I could feel the bruises starting to form on my body from the hits, but that was impossible because it was just a dream...*just a dream*—a nightmare. A living, breathing nightmare.

“Romeo?” Bailey said, stopping all of a sudden on the path between her front door and the driveway. “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking,” he replied, but it sounded from far away. I tried to see around Bailey, but she started moving again, and when we got to the driveway, I could finally see what she was seeing.

Frowning at the sight of Romeo crouching down next to my car, I sidestepped Bailey, my hackles rising. What was he doing by my car? What was he searching for?

“Is there a reason you’re by my car?” I asked, sounding harsher than I’d meant to, but Romeo was the king of harsh, so he didn’t acknowledge me for several seconds. But after everything today, I was on edge, my hands starting to shake as he continued searching for something, walking around my car several times, staring at it with such intent that it was scary. “Romeo?”

He glanced up, his attention focusing solely on me. “You need new tires,” his deep voice said. I raised a brow, having no idea what he was talking about. I hadn’t had the car for that long, there was no way I needed new tires. Or did I? I glanced around, trying to remember the last time I’d had anything to do with cars, but I’d never really had to. My brother took care of all of that, at least, he did until Travis took over, yet another tactic to control me.

Why hadn’t I insisted on knowing these things? Why hadn’t I kicked up a fuss when he took control?

You know why, a small voice in the back of my mind reminded me. It was so easy to be hard on myself now that I was out of it, now that I wasn’t living it day in and day out, but the reality was, if I would have pushed too much, he would have knocked me back down—literally.

“I do?” My breaths picked up, my anxiety coming to the forefront as I moved Reed from my left hip to my right. “How do I get new tires? I’ve never had to get tires before, I...I don’t —”

I was panicking, and if the way his expression shuttered, showing me a different side to him, was anything to go by, he could see that I was.

“Give me your keys,” he said, standing up and strolling toward us with his hand open, palm facing up.

“My keys?” I echoed. “I need my keys to get into my house.”

He pursed his lips at me. “Take the car key off the chain and give it to me.” He reached for Reed, taking him like he weighed nothing when we all knew different. My arms were starting to go dead from holding him for so long. “Go on,” his rough tone demanded, tilting his head at me.

My shaking hands reached for the keys that were on my wrist thanks to the wrist strap I had on the keychain. That thing was a lifesaver, especially with two young kids. I did as he said, taking my car key off the chain, then handing it to him. I reached for Reed, but he just spun around, heading to the house while Reed placed his hand on his jaw, babbling away at him.

“What...just happened?” I asked nobody in particular.

“He’s making sure you’re safe,” Bailey said, taking my arm and pulling me toward my house. “People think he’s this bad guy”—she paused, her gaze moving to mine—“and he is sometimes. But there’s a side to him people don’t know about. A protective side.”

“I see him like that with you,” I told her. And I had. I’d never seen anyone be as protective over another person as he was with her.

She was silent for a minute as we followed Romeo to my front door, then she whispered, “He’s letting his mask slip around you. Maybe you’ll let yours slip around us soon too.”

I blinked, my mouth opening and closing, not knowing what to say. I was frozen, my brain trying to reboot, but it didn't matter what I did, nothing was working, and before I knew it, I was back in my house, the door closed as Romeo and Bailey walked back to their house.

I was alone once again. With nothing but my memories to haunt me.

CHAPTER 8

RAFAEL

I would have rather been anywhere but here: inside my dad's brick shed with a bloodied and bruised body in front of me.

Pulling in a deep breath, I could smell the metallic scent that was unmistakably blood. After three days being trapped here, I was starting to become noseblind to it, and numb to what was going on around me. This may have been what my father and Romeo liked to do, but not me. Mind games and reading people were what I enjoyed, not this. Maybe that was because I could discipline myself when it came to that, but the physical violence always felt like I was on the edge of losing control.

I didn't want to get dirty, not unless it was with a woman—one woman in particular.

Fuck. I scraped my palm down my face, trying to wake myself up and not let my mind wander more than it already had. I could feel eyes burning into the side of my head, but I didn't look, refusing to see my older brother's face.

He'd demanded that I be here—for what reason, I didn't know. Now that he was a captain—my captain—I didn't have a choice. What he said went, and as a dutiful soldier, I had to follow, even if it meant I was putting myself at risk. But what was even worse, he left me alone with our father for hours and

hours at a time. Part of me wondered if it was a tactic to get us to mend the feud happening between us. It wasn't fuckin' working though. If anything, it was making it worse. I needed space from him, not forced proximity.

I gripped the pliers in my palm, reaching forward as I pulled yet another fingernail off this guy's hand.

"You're being too gentle," a rough voice said from behind me.

Cracking my neck from side to side, I tried to release some of the tension that was building, but it was almost impossible. I hadn't acknowledged my father since I'd walked in here just over seventy-two hours ago, and now too much time had passed, too many things gone unsaid, from now and from when I was a kid.

I was holding every ounce of animosity toward him like a warrior would his shield in the middle of a gruesome battle. It was protecting me from him, from Romeo, from everyone around me.

"Do it properly," my father continued, only this time, I heard his footsteps near. "You should know this by now, Rafael." His disappointment was evident, and as I turned, I spotted him only three feet behind me. I was covered in blood, my clothes saturated thanks to the days of torture—only, I wasn't sure whether it was the man sitting in the chair who had borne the brunt of it, or me having to be here, in the same building as my father.

My gaze flicked over to Romeo, his features carefully schooled so that he didn't give anything away, but unlike most people, I knew the tiny movements of my big brother, and the small shuffle to the left and tenseness of his shoulders told me that he knew I was a firework waiting to go off and light up the sky.

"Dad," Romeo said, taking a step toward us, the atmosphere becoming so thick it was almost hard to take a breath.

“No,” Dad cut him off. “I’ve taught you both all I know. I did it all for you, and now you’re slacking.” He paused, his nostrils flaring. “You’re my legacy, and I’ll be damned if this”—he waved his arm around—“is what I’m leaving behind. Do fuckin’ better.”

I tilted my head to the side, staring at the man who helped bring me into this world, and for the first time in my entire life, I wasn’t scared of him. There was always that tiny bit of fright that reared its ugly head up, no matter how old I got, but now it was gone...

I’d had enough. I didn’t care if Romeo would get pissed that I’d walked out, I just couldn’t spend another minute in the same room as that man. For years I’d looked up to him. I’d desperately wanted his attention, hating that all his focus was always on Romeo. It was me who had been left with our mom, me who had helped her when she had an anxiety attack, me who had held her hand as an unknown car sped by our house, me who had seen the utter devastation and heartbreak in her eyes on the daily.

Smiling, I lifted my arm as I let go of the pliers, relishing in the clang they made against the concrete floor. “I need to do better?” I laughed like I’d just heard the funniest damn joke. “Old man, I think you need to take your own fuckin’ advice.” My tone went from jovial to downright threatening within the space of a few words.

“Raf—”

“No.” I clenched my hands by my sides, trying to keep control of myself when all I wanted was to hurt the man who was supposed to protect us all but hadn’t. “Fuck you, Dad.” I sidestepped, pointing at him. “Fuck you for everything you did to us.”

“Don’t you dare walk out, Rafael,” he warned, pushing his shoulders back.

I shook my head, grinning at him. “You don’t get to tell me what to do ever again.” Rolling my neck, I stared at Romeo, having a silent conversation with him, and with his small clip

of his head, giving me permission, I spun around, leaving them both in the shed.

“Where are you going?” my dad’s booming voice asked.

I strolled toward the door, stopping as I started to push it open, then looked back, narrowing my eyes on him. “Away from you.”

“Rafael.” My name coming out of his mouth was a warning, one I didn’t adhere to as I sauntered across the backyard and over the lawn, heading into the back of the house I’d grown up in. Mom was sitting in the kitchen, a cup of coffee in her hands, a sure sign that she wouldn’t be sleeping again tonight. It was already after eight p.m.

“Hey, Mom.” I hated that I hadn’t seen her in so long because I’d refused to stay here, but right then, I didn’t have a choice but to go inside to get clean. And Dad knew that.

She gasped, the blood covering my clothes the first thing she saw, but I didn’t need to explain it, not to the daughter of a previous Mafia boss, as well as the sister to one. She’d grown up in this world, just like I had.

“I’m going to shower,” I told her, placing a kiss on her head, the smell of coffee bringing back memories. Every time she would scream in the middle of the night, her nightmares taking hold of her, I’d smell the coffee not long after. When I got a little older, I used to come down and join her, having a hot cocoa and just wanting to make sure she was okay.

The more I let all of the past memories fester, the more the hatred for my father seeped in.

“Okay, Raf.” She smiled up at me, placing her hand on the side of my face. “Are you staying after?”

I shook my head, not able to get the word out as I backed away, keeping my attention on her for just a second longer before spinning around and heading upstairs.

It didn’t take long for me to get to my bedroom, strip off my clothes, place them in a bag so they could be burned, then take a shower. It felt like the longest shower of my life, but in reality, it was actually the quickest because I wanted to get the

hell out of there. I knew it wouldn't be long until my dad finished the job. We'd gotten the information we needed out of our victim, so he was no longer of use.

But I was done with needing to clear up the mess. He'd never cleaned up the destruction he'd made with his own wife, so why should I have had to clean up that mess?

I was done with it all. Totally fuckin' done.

My mind was a whirr of thoughts as I toweled off and dressed in a pair of light-denim jeans and a white T-shirt. I wanted to look clean, even if I felt like the blood was still staining my skin.

Slipping my feet into my black boots, I then grabbed my wallet and keys, intending to get the hell out of there without another word, but I wasn't so lucky because Mom was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, a sad smile on her face.

"Raf," she started, her tone tentative. I halted halfway down the stairs, my stomach dropping at the way she said my name. "I...what happened that day..." She trailed off, her gaze snapping to the right, her feet shuffling on the floor. "I should have told you before. You were always there and—"

I couldn't listen to her blame herself, not anymore. "It's not your fault, Mom." I took the stairs as quickly as I could, then wrapped my arms around her when I was close enough. "You were trying to make yourself better without any help, but now you have the supplies and can heal properly." I pulled back, letting her go but looking her right in the eyes. "But...I can't be here to see it happen, Mom. The hatred in me is too much and I...you don't need that around you right now."

She didn't miss a beat. "I need you, son. I've always needed you."

I nodded, knowing that she has, but I had to be honest with her... "I need myself more, Mom."

Silence stretched between us, her eyes filling with tears as my words physically impacted her. There was nothing else for me to say, not now, not about this. So I placed a kiss on her cheek, then walked past her, letting myself out of the front

door and walking toward my car that was parked on the driveway.

I got in, turned the key in the ignition, and had no idea where to go. Maybe I could have driven to my new house, the one that I'd closed on the morning I'd taken Peyton on a date. I was so damn excited to tell her about it; I'd even planned to take her there after we'd eaten to show her.

But then Romeo had called and fucked up every single one of my plans.

Slamming my hand on the steering wheel, I spotted Dad walking around the side of the house. I had to get away from here—from him—so I revved the engine, wheel-spun off the drive, then sped out of the neighborhood I'd grown up in.

I wasn't sure where I was heading, I just drove, letting my mind take over and steer me to wherever it wanted to be. Forty minutes later, I was pulling up outside of Romeo's house, but it wasn't his home that my gaze veered to, it was hers. Peyton.

Without a second thought, I climbed out of the car, the streetlamps illuminating the way in the now near-pitch-black darkness, and headed across her empty driveway. It didn't even occur to me that her car was missing, didn't register for a single second because I could feel that she was close by, and that was all I needed.

Leaning my head on her front door, I debated whether I should knock or not. I'd come all the way here, not even considering the fact that it was ten p.m. and both boys would probably be in bed.

But I'd made her a promise. I'd told her that we'd finish what we started. And I always kept my promises. So I lifted my hand, knocked twice, and waited.

Seconds ticked by, ten, twenty, then a light came on, shining through the small glass strip above her front door.

There was several seconds of silence, and then I heard the echoing of her feet hitting the stairs as she came down then her shadow appeared.

“Hello?” her tentative voice asked.

“It’s me,” I responded, trying to keep my tone neutral and low enough not to scare her.

A lock clicked, then another, and another. Damn, how many did she have?

“One second,” she whispered, and I stared intently as the last lock clicked and she opened her door. “Raf?” She wiped her eyes, her frown appearing. “What are you doing?”

“Keeping my promise, mama.” I stepped inside, not waiting for her to invite me in, then closed her door, engaging all of the locks. Seven. That was how many she had, and they were all different.

“What? I...”

I finally turned back to her, not hesitating. Life was too damn short for all of the back and forth. It was time she knew what I felt, time she knew that I wanted her more than anything.

“I’m done waiting,” I told her, backing her up until her body was pressed against the wall. I caged her in, placing one arm above her head as my gaze dropped down to see what she was wearing: a tank top and a pair of tiny fuckin’ shorts. Jesus Christ. “Dammit, mama. You look fuckin’ divine.”

Her chest heaved at my words, and I didn’t miss the way her nipples protruded behind the white material. I couldn’t help myself as I reached out, stroking my thumb over first one, then the other, eliciting the sweetest moan from between her lips.

“Raf,” she murmured, her attention focused solely on me.

“Hmmm?” I was only half listening, captivated by her body and the fact that I was finally near her again. There had been times over the last three days where she’d been my only escape, the only thing I’d been able to imagine so that I didn’t drown inside my own darkness.

“I can’t...we can’t...”

I skimmed my nose up her neck, inhaling her and committing it to memory. “Can’t what?” I asked right in her

ear.

“Can’t...” She lifted higher, her chest pressing against mine with the barest of touches, but we both felt it, there was no doubt about that.

“Can’t what?” I paused, pressing my lips just under her ear. “Can’t kiss you?” She groaned, so I followed it up with another kiss, this time a little lower. “Can’t touch you?” I grasped her around the waist, yanking her to me so that her front was plastered to mine.

“Raf.” Her arms wrapped around my neck, causing our position to change, and then we were face to face, our lips separated by only a few centimeters. I refused to wait any longer. She had to know how I felt, and dammit all to hell, I needed to fuckin’ touch her again.

So I slammed my lips onto hers, not wasting a second to push my tongue between her plump flesh. This time it was me groaning as her tongue slid against mine, so slowly that it drove me fuckin’ insane and the little control that I had snapped.

I threw my arms around her waist, lifting her up, and she came willingly, her legs wrapping around my waist like they’d done it over and over again. Like they were always supposed to be there.

My feet were moving before my brain could catch up, and then we were going up the stairs, but she didn’t stop me as she pulled away, just enough to tell me, “Last door at the end of the hallway.”

I nodded, not wanting to be away from her for more than a few seconds, so I placed my lips back on hers, keeping my eyes open as I got us to the top of the stairs, then headed where she told me to. We both knew what was going to happen, both had been waiting for it, but that didn’t mean I was prepared for when I was standing in the middle of her bedroom, the door closed, completely alone.

Slowing the kiss, I then pulled away, my breaths so heavy it was as if I’d just run a marathon, but I hadn’t, all I’d done

was kiss her. Fuck me. She was almost too much.

“We can go slow,” I growled, tensing my fingers on her back as her hips moved in just the right way. “Or...not...”

She tilted her head to the side, staring down at me as she ran her fingers around the nape of my neck, then up into my hair. “Take me,” she whispered, her tongue coming out to lick her bottom lip. “Take me however you want me, Raf.”

She was a tease. Fuck. Me.

“You sure?” I asked, moving toward her bed that was sitting in the middle of her room.

She smiled. “More sure than anything.”

Three seconds passed where I simply stared at her, absorbing her words. Then I let her go, throwing her down onto the mattress. I was a flurry of movement. I grabbed my T-shirt at the back of my neck, then yanked it over my head. My jeans were next to go along with my boots and socks. Then I was standing there in just my boxer briefs, my cock standing to attention as she stared down at it.

“Fuck me,” she whispered, in a trance.

“That’s the plan, mama.” I sauntered toward her, kneeling down so I was between her legs, then placed my palms on her thighs. Where I was in a hurry when it came to my clothes, there would be nothing rushed about touching her.

Slowly, I trailed my fingers to her waistband, then hooked them underneath, pulling them off and soaking in the fact that she was wearing nothing underneath them. She was exposed to me, her pussy coated in her juices. Damn.

Her shorts went over my head somewhere, closely followed by her tank top, and for a second, I just watched her in the same way she had me. But her legs opening a little more, showing me her folds had me diving between them, tasting her on my tongue.

I lapped her up, sucking her juices from her the more turned on she got.

I wasn't sure how long I ate her like she was my last meal, but at some stage I'd ended up on the bed, her pussy still in my face, only her shoulders left on the mattress. But she was moaning, her shouts becoming louder before cutting off completely.

"I'm gonna come, Raf. Fuck, I'm gonna..."

I paid attention to her, shoving a finger inside her hole as her thighs locked around my head, her clit thrumming and pulsating as her orgasm thrashed through her. She yelped, her muscles tightening, and then she went limp, her body trying to process what just happened. But I wouldn't let it, not when I was as hard as a fuckin' rock.

"Ready?" I asked, but I wasn't expecting a response, not that I got one. I held her up, my hands digging into her ass as I lifted myself and lined my cock up at her entrance. I didn't know what possessed me to look up, but when I did, I saw her eyes focused in on me.

It was unnerving, almost too much as the head of my cock pushed into her entrance, oh so slowly.

I didn't look away from her, and neither did she as I slowly entered her as far as I could. I sat there for a second, taking her all in, her pussy wrapped around my cock, her hands moving to her chest and tweaking her nipples, but most of all, it was the way she was staring at me, like she was in a daze but also seeing everything clearly for the first time.

And I knew how she felt because that was all I could think about too. Why was everything fuzzy but crystal clear at the same time? Why did it feel oh so right when I was near her but also a little wrong?

I swallowed, not sure where my thoughts were coming from as I pulled out of her nearly all the way. Her pussy clamped down on me just as I was at the edge, and then I pushed back in, creating a slow but steady rhythm.

My cock was getting harder—I had no idea how that was fuckin' possible right then—and I was being erratic, feeling her G-spot at the head of my cock when I went in at a certain

angle. And every time I hit it, the noise she made was unlike anything I'd ever heard before.

“That’s it, baby,” she groaned, her hands reaching out and resting on my stomach.

“Fuck, mama,” I gritted. “Say that again.”

“Say what?” she asked, fluttering her lashes up at me as she squeezed around my cock and whispered, “Baby?”

I threw my head back and rammed my cock inside her so hard that she moved up the bed. But I just followed her because her words had tipped me over the edge...threw me into oblivion as I came so damn hard, squirting my come inside her, and marking her as mine for all eternity.

CHAPTER 9

PEYTON

I probably looked like an absolute creeper staring at Rafael, but I couldn't help myself. I'd only had three hours sleep, and now the birds were singing outside, light shining through a gap in my window. Any minute now the boys would be waking at their usual six a.m., so I knew I only had a short amount of time until this was over—until Rafael's arm wasn't wrapped around me, his fingers curved into my hip, holding me in place against him.

Sighing, I closed my eyes for just the briefest of seconds, memorizing the feel of being safe in his arms. If I never had this sensation again, then I was good with that because I had it now, and it was enough...more than enough.

"Mmmm," his deep tone reverberated in my ear. "If I woke up like this every morning, I'd be the happiest man on the planet." His gruff, morning voice had me squeezing my legs together, wetness coating my folds. Dammit.

"Is that right?" I whispered, opening my eyes and seeing him staring directly at me, just like I had with him only moments ago.

"Yeah." His hand wandered from my hip to between my legs, but I trapped it there, stopping him in his tracks.

“Can’t,” I said, shaking my head. “The boys will be awake so—”

As if on cue, Reed’s crying started, so loud that it was sure to wake everyone up in the house.

“Fuck,” Raf whispered, burrowing his face in my neck and breathing me in. “I wanna touch you.” He emphasized his point by wiggling his fingers, managing to push one through my folds. “Damn, you’re wet, mama.”

My breath caught in my throat, Reed’s cries getting louder as everything in me wanted to open my legs and let Raf do to me what we were both desperate for. But I couldn’t. I had responsibilities. My sons came first, always.

Shaking my head, I pulled myself away from Raf, my naked body on full display for him as I hopped out of my bed and threw on the closet thing I could find—Raf’s T-shirt.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, Peyton.” He groaned, throwing his arm over his face. “Are you trying to kill me looking like that?”

Grinning, I felt my cheeks heat. I hadn’t even thought about it, just needing something to cover me so I could go in to Reed, but the soft material felt like velvet against my skin, and the unmistakable sandalwood scent of Rafael was an added bonus.

“Nah,” I said, spinning around, then opening my bedroom door. “You’re no use to me dead.” I winked, not thinking twice as I rushed over to Reed’s room, hearing Raf’s laugh behind me. I wasn’t sure whether it was just the sound of it, or the combination of him still lying in my bed, but butterflies swarmed in my stomach, a calmness washing over me that I hadn’t felt in such a long time, not since I was a kid.

Everything in me wanted to analyze every second from the time he’d knocked on my door last night, but I didn’t have a chance, not with changing Reed, getting him dressed, then waking Kian up. I was going back and forth between their rooms and the bathroom, getting them both sorted out, and Raf still hadn’t exited my room.

I didn't think too deeply about it though, not as we headed downstairs and I got breakfast started.

"Scrambled eggs on toast for breakfast today, boys," I announced, plating up the eggs and placing them on the table. Kian was sitting on a small booster seat so that he could reach the table, and Reed was still firmly in his highchair, although he'd already tried to escape countless times.

"Something smells delicious." Goose bumps prickled my skin at the sound of his voice, and as I turned back to the stove, I caught him watching me, his gaze following my every movement.

"Do—" I cleared my throat, my word coming out croaky. "Do you want any breakfast?"

My hands shook as I turned back to face him where he was standing in the doorway, his hands outstretched and holding on to the top of the frame. A sliver of his stomach showed beneath his zipped-up jacket, a reminder that I was still wearing his T-shirt.

"Nah, I'm good." He let his arms drop, maneuvering over to the table where he said hi to the boys before beelining it to me, and all the while, I was as still as a statue, trying to make sense of everything, but mostly trying to work it out in my head.

How had I gotten here? How did I manage to be this confident around another man? How was I not on edge, waiting for something bad to happen with him?

It was simple: I trusted my gut. A small thing but it made so much difference.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours, yeah, mama?" He sauntered toward me, wrapping his arm around my waist and bringing me to him.

"I...I will?"

His lips lifted on one side, a glint in his eye as he dipped down and placed a slow kiss on my cheek. "Yeah. Romeo's party, remember?"

I closed my eyes, letting out a little laugh. I'd completely forgotten about that, and the fact that he'd taken my car to get new tires. I hated that my car wasn't there, ready for me to jump into and escape at any moment if I needed to.

"Yeah, I'll see you there," I whispered, pulling back just enough to look up at him.

Neither of us said anything for a few seconds, instead just simply taking each other in, then with one last kiss to my forehead, he was gone, letting himself out of my house and shutting the door behind him. There was something so much more intimate about his forehead kiss than anything else we'd done in the last twelve hours.

Shaking my head, I turned my focus to the boys, but neither of them were paying attention to me, too busy eating and babbling away. And I was grateful because in that moment, if they would have asked why Raf was here, I wasn't sure what I would have been able to tell them.

My mind raced a mile a minute as I tried to think of an excuse as I cleaned up, then set them both into the playroom to give me time to catch up on chores, and before I knew it, several hours had gone by, the clock ticking down faster than every other day. Maybe it was because I knew I was about to see Raf again.

Grinning, I told Kian to head upstairs as I picked Reed up out of his playpen that he liked to try and break free from but never achieved, then headed up behind Kian.

It took over thirty minutes to put Reed down for a nap, but even if he only got an hour before we went next door, it was better than a cranky baby around the guests—Romeo and Rafael's parents. Fuck, I was going to meet his mom and dad and I'd slept in the same bed as him last night.

My cheeks heated. Dammit. I hadn't even realized until that very moment, and now I was all kinds of nervous as I headed into Kian's room where he was sitting at his little desk, drawing yet another picture. I needed a distraction, because if I thought too deeply about it, I'd end up bailing, and that was

the last thing I wanted to do when Bailey had put so much effort into this surprise.

“We need to get ready, bud,” I told him, pulling some clothes out of his closet. He ignored me, too busy with what he was doing. “Come on, Kian, we’re going to be late.”

“I’m busy, Mom.” He huffed out a breath, sounding just like a teenager and letting me know that although he was six now, he’d soon be sixteen and then it would be a whole other ball game.

“No, Kian, come—”

A loud knock ricocheted throughout the house, causing both Kian and me to jump.

“Peyton!”

My eyes widened at the booming voice, my heart jumping into my throat. But it wasn’t just me who had recognized the tone, Kian had too because he instantly dropped his crayons and came running over to me. I wrapped my arms around him so tight I was scared I’d hurt him, but I needed him to know it was okay—at least, I hoped it would be.

Banging echoed again, this time so loud I was equal parts afraid that it would wake Reed up, but also take my door down. And then there wouldn’t be a barrier between us.

“Mommy,” Kian whispered, a single word but it told me all I needed to know. He was petrified, just like I was.

“It’s okay, Kian.” I rocked us back and forth, trying to soothe us both. “It’s okay.”

He’d found us. He’d finally found us.

How had he discovered where we were? It had been weeks since the grocery store incident. He hadn’t seen me that day, I was sure of it. So how was he now at my door? I needed to do *something* but I was paralyzed, the only thing I could do was hold on to my oldest son as tight as I could and hope that Travis would leave.

I shook my head. It was a stupid thought, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t hope for a miracle to happen.

It was all over now.

“Open the fuckin’ door, Peyton! I know you’re in there.”

My stomach bottomed out, my shaking hands barely holding on to Kian as I crawled us over to the corner of his room underneath his window that looked out onto the backyard, but was also closest to the stairs. One wrong move and he’d see us.

“Open up!” he roared, the door shaking as he crashed into it, with either his body or his fist, neither would have surprised me.

I stroked Kian’s hair, trying to keep him and myself as calm as possible, but that didn’t stop his little sobs, his terror physically manifesting as he let it all out. We’d been safe for too long. I’d gotten complacent when I shouldn’t have. The grocery store should have been my warning that I listened to, but instead I’d stayed, feeling like I was creating a new life for us that included friends.

But I’d put us all at risk. I’d once again let my sons down.

“Can I help you?” I heard another voice ask, and this time my stomach rolled for an entirely new reason.

“Mind your business,” Travis snapped at Raf, and I could just imagine the way Raf would frown at him, analyzing him the way he did with everyone else.

“Peyton! Open this damn door.” I jumped at the sound of his voice again, but this time some of the fright that had taken hold of me started to simmer away. Rafael was out there and there was no way he would let any of us get hurt. I knew that without a doubt.

“She’s not in,” a new voice said. Bailey. Fuck, what was she doing out there?

“She is in,” Travis growled at her. “I’m tracking her.”

Tracking me?

How the hell was he tracking me? There was no way he could be. That...that didn’t make any sense.

“She had to rush to the store to get diapers,” Bailey said, so convincingly that even I believed her for a second. “See? Her car isn’t here.” My shoulders drooped as I remembered Romeo getting me new tires. It was the perfect time, but that also meant that he wasn’t tracking me through my car.

Seconds ticked by, which turned to minutes, and I couldn’t hear a single thing out there. I was starting to relax when his gruff voice said, “Tell her I’ll be back. I’m not letting this go—I’m not letting *her* go.”

I blinked, staring at a spot on Kian’s wall where either he or Reed had drawn in wax crayon, focusing on it so intently as his words repeated over and over again in my mind.

I’m not letting her go. I’m not letting her go.

I wasn’t free...I wouldn’t ever be free.

And now Travis knew I had friends. He knew I had people looking out for me, because not just anyone would do what Raf and Bailey had.

I heard Travis’s engine roaring away, and I wasn’t sure what got into me—maybe the adrenaline and terror that had been thrashing through my body—but I made sure Kian was okay, told him to stay where he was, then practically ran downstairs and flung my front door open.

They were both standing on my driveway, staring down the street, but he was gone now. Gone but not forgotten. He’d be back; it was only a matter of time.

“What a dick,” Raf murmured, then turned to Bailey. “Romeo is gonna lose his shit when—”

“Really?” I snapped, placing my hands on my hips. “Did you really need to do that, Rafael?”

He raised one brow, a ghost of a smirk shadowing his lips. “Do what, mama?”

My cheeks heated at his words, memories of last night flashing through my mind like a highlight reel. I was angry at him, but...I shouldn’t have been. I just...I didn’t know how to

react, how to sort through all of my emotions, so I told him, “Go all”—I waved my arm around in the air—“Mafia man.”

He ambled one slow step toward me, his head tilted to the side. “You saying you don’t like it when I get like that?” I blinked, caught in his trap, hating that he’d hypnotized me. “Cause, I’m gonna say you do like it.” He paused, waiting. “You like it a lot.”

My heart beat rapidly in my chest, not just from the fact that Travis had been here, standing in the very spot that Raf was now in, but because of how close Raf was. His scent wrapped around me, evoking memories of the night before and —

Dammit. He’d distracted me.

By him being there, he’d let Travis know that I wasn’t out here alone. I had people looking out for me and...shit.

“Fuck you, Rafael. You have no idea who that was and what he wanted.” My voice cracked, tears threatening to spring to life. “Just...just leave me the hell alone.” I slammed the door closed, my breath caught in my throat as I pressed against it, knowing that I was pushing him away. He was the one person that I wanted close by right now, but I wouldn’t put him at risk too. I had to protect him, just like I had to my boys. And the only way to do that was to push him away.

“Peyton?” Bailey called, her voice sounding closer. “Peyton, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Bay,” I managed to answer. “Just go back to the party.”

I wasn’t fine, I was anything but fine. That didn’t mean I wasn’t going to portray that though. I needed to be strong. I needed to keep it together, just long enough until I made a plan to get the hell out of here.

The timer had been set, and now the seconds were ticking by, threatening to explode the bomb that had just been thrown onto my doorstep.

It was now or never. I had to escape. I had to get us out of here before he came back, because his promise was just that, a

promise, but it was also a threat. A threat that I knew he would follow through with.

RAFAEL

I wasn't sure how long I'd stayed there for, staring at her front door and willing it to open. I waited until I saw her outline move from against it, listened as the sound of her footsteps moved up the stairs. Reed's soft cries rang out, followed by Kian's, and every part of me wanted to get inside that damn house.

The instinct to make them all feel better—to let them know they were safe—was so consuming, I actually stepped forward.

But then I halted, second-guessing myself. She didn't need me. She didn't want me.

I rubbed my hand down my face, backing away one step, then another, and another. She'd told me to leave her alone, and in that moment, there was no way I could refuse her. I had to walk away, for now at least.

She needed time and space. That was what I told myself as I spun around and walked to my brother's house, ready to celebrate his birthday with my parents. Mom had come out of the house for the first time in years. Her confession to us was clearly helping her, but that didn't mean I could forget everything that had happened—the childhood I had.

Sitting on the sofa, I nursed a beer, staring at the wall and not really taking part in anything. I was being a party pooper, but fuck, I couldn't help it, not when the woman next door was taking over my every thought. Not when I was pretty sure who that guy was.

Fuck. If that was her ex...I'd let him walk away. I didn't know the ins and outs, and part of me never wanted to, but

deep down, I craved to know it all. To know everything I could about Peyton. Had I just made a mistake?

I pulled in a deep breath, taking another draw of my beer when Romeo entered his living room, his cell at his ear. “Yeah, I’ll pick it up today. When do you close?” I leaned forward, listening to him. “Eight?” A quick glance at my watch told me that it was already 6 p.m. “Yeah, no problem. I’ll be there.”

Romeo pulled his cell from his ear and stowed it away in his jeans pocket as he stared right at me. “What’s up?” I asked, secretly hoping it was a job that he was going to send me on, at least that way I could keep my mind occupied for a while.

“Peyton’s car is ready.”

I cracked my neck to the side, slowly putting my beer on the table as I stood. “I’ll go get it,” I told him, not hesitating for even a second. Fate had stepped in. That was the way I was looking at it now. Peyton wanted me away from her, but she didn’t have a choice if I had to hand her car keys back, right? She’d have to see me, and then I could ask her just what the hell happened today.

“You sure?” Romeo asked, his gaze veering back to the kitchen where Bailey was playing host. She and Dad had talked for hours, their relationship probably being the best one he had right now.

“Yeah.” I headed toward the door. “It’s your party, big bro. You need to stay.” I paused, pulling on the door handle. “Where is it?”

He reeled off the address and I left, walking toward the garage that was only ten minutes away by car but at least an hour walking. I didn’t care though because it gave me time to think, time to process everything, and once I’d paid the bill and gotten inside Peyton’s car, I’d made a decision, one that she wasn’t going to like...at first.

She was trying to push me away, that was crystal clear now, and I’d stupidly let her. I mean, yeah, okay, it was only for a few hours, but I hadn’t read between the lines. A fatal mistake that I was about to rectify.

I pulled into her driveway, feeling my shoulders tense as I turned her engine off and exited her car. Making sure it was locked, I then sauntered over to her front door, rapping my knuckles on the wooden surface twice, remembering how it was only last night that I was standing here, waiting for her to answer. What had transpired after that was something I would never forget—something I wanted to repeat over and over again.

There was silence on the other end, not a single movement inside the house. A quick look at my watch told me that the boys would have been in bed by now but—fuck, what if she'd left? What if this morning had freaked her out so much that she knew she couldn't stay.

My eyes widened, my body turning to look at her driveway...she couldn't get anywhere, not without her car, which meant she was inside.

So I knocked again, this time saying, "It's me, Peyton."

I despised calling her by that name, my tongue hating the way it curled around the letters. But calling her by her nickname just didn't feel right, not in that moment.

"Go away, Raf," her voice told me, her tone fed up.

"Can't." I grinned, holding the keys in the air as if she could see me. "I have your car keys."

Two seconds, that was how long it took for her to open the door a crack and hold her hand out. "Give them to me," she demanded.

"Nope." I put them in my pocket, placing my palm on the door and pushing.

"Hey! You can't just come in here like that, Raf." Her features were screwed up, but I didn't miss the bags under her eyes and how puffy they were. She'd been crying, and I fuckin' hated the thought of that.

I silently shut the door, then locked it behind me, still not intending to give her her keys, at least, not yet anyway. I wanted answers, whether she wanted to give them or not. I didn't care that I'd told her it was okay for us to both have

secrets. I'd changed my mind...things were different now—since last night.

“I'll give them to you,” I told her, ambling past her and into the living room where I placed myself down onto the edge of her sofa, waiting...

“Raf,” she warned, following me in. She stood in the middle of the room, her arms crossed over her chest, pushing her tits up. Fuck. I swore I could still feel her soft skin against my palms. It didn't help that she was in a pair of pajama shorts and another tank. My goddamn kryptonite.

“I want answers first.” Her face paled, her mouth drooping as she glanced away, looking anywhere but at me. “You can look away all you want, mama, it don't make a difference.” I relaxed back on the sofa, determined to get some insight. I was living off of bits and pieces when it came to her. Trying to read between the lines. “I'm done guessing, Peyton.” My tone was deeper now, showing her that I was being deadly fuckin' serious. “Who was he?”

Her chest heaved as she pulled in a deep breath, her gaze finally making it back to mine. She searched me, clearly trying to see whether she could trust me or not. I was an open book... only when it came to her though.

“My ex,” she whispered, her eyes closing. “Kian and Reed's dad.”

I ground my teeth together, her confirmation no different to my hunch. “And you're running from him?” She nodded, her eyes screwed closed so tight that it was making lines on her face. “You have been this entire time?” She stuttered a breath in answer. I didn't need her to tell me everything, all I needed was her to confirm or deny it at this point. “And...” I stood slowly, causing her eyes to open. “He hurt you, mama?”

Her shoulders dropped, her body shutting down as she wrapped her arms around herself, trying to offer some comfort. She was used to doing that, that much was clear. “All the time,” she croaked out. She shook her head, but she wasn't telling me to stop my advances to her, it was more like she was trying to get rid of the memories. “The first time...” She

trailed off, looking up at me as I made it to her, my hands immediately touching her waist and bringing her to me.

I didn't say anything, just listened, knowing that she needed this—needed me and my support—to say what she needed to. “I got you, mama,” I murmured, squeezing my fingers on her waist.

“Do you?” she asked, so unsure.

“Always.”

Silence stretched, our words sinking in, and I could tell that she wanted to believe it, but there was something stopping her, until she parted her lips, all the walls she'd erected coming down as she said, “The first time he slapped me, he swore he wouldn't do it again.”

I tried my utter hardest to keep my face neutral, to not let her see the rage that was building up inside me, but fuck, it was hard, so damn hard.

“I was stupid.” She laughed, but it was so sad. “It was weeks until he hit me again, only this time it was worse.” She chewed on her bottom lip, her gaze shooting around the room, her head turning.

Grabbing her chin with my thumb and finger, I brought her attention back to me. “Focus on me, mama. It's just us here.”

“I...” She blinked, her body swaying forward and leaning on me. “I thought he'd stop, but it...it just got worse. Then I had Kian and...we moved, so it was just me and him...then Reed came along, and yeah, it just...it got worse.”

Worse. *Worse*. There was so much more behind the word worse, but I knew she wouldn't expand on it, not right now, not when she'd already confessed so much to me. And if I was honest, the thought of having details of how he hurt her wouldn't be a good thing. I'd show my anger to her, and that was the last thing she needed to see.

“So you ran?” It was a question that she didn't need to answer, but she nodded anyway. “And now he's found you.”

She let out a breath, her body leaning more on me, so I wrapped my arms around her waist, holding her up. “I don’t know how. I know I saw him at the grocery store but...”

“That was too long ago.” I frowned, looking over her head, trying to figure it out. “He would have come before now if he’d seen you there.” I paused, holding her a little tighter, and just now noticing a scar above and below her lips. I wanted to ask her how that happened, but my gut told me that I already knew. *Him*.

Fuck. I wanted to kill him. I knew how to do it and not get caught, but more than that, I knew how to make it hurt so damn bad that he’d plead for his life.

“He said he was tracking me,” Peyton said suddenly, her muscles tensing. I glanced down at her. “But I don’t understand how.”

Frowning, I let go of her, standing as I tried to put the pieces together. “Your car wasn’t here this morning.” I paced toward the door and back again, knowing it could only be one thing. I pulled my cell out, dialing the one number that would know what was happening—Remy, our in-house computer guy.

“What are you doing?” Peyton asked.

I turned to face her, opening my mouth to tell her, but Remy answered his cell in that moment. “Raf?”

“Remy,” I greeted. “I need to know options of how to be tracked.”

There was a pause, then, “What kind of options? Give me parameters.” He was to the point, something I appreciated in that moment.

“Someone I know is being tracked. Not by their car, but something within their house.”

“Normally cell,” Remy said.

“Your cell?” I asked Peyton.

She shook her head, pulling it out of her pocket. “It can’t be. I haven’t left it anywhere for anyone to get—”

“Don’t need physical access,” Remy said, clearly hearing Peyton. “It can be hacked remotely, then tracked.”

“Fuck.” I cracked my neck to the side, holding my hand out for her cell. I’d smash it to pieces and buy her a new one if I needed to. “Do I need to destroy it?” I asked.

“You can...” Remy trailed off, his tone telling me to wait as he thought it through. “Bring it to me, I’ll take a look at it. In the meantime, power it down and put it in the microwave.”

“In the microwave?” I asked, laughing.

“Yeah,” Remy replied, giving no context whatsoever, then hanging up the call.

I didn’t hesitate in turning it off, then placing it into the microwave, and as I spun around into the kitchen, Peyton was in the doorway, her teeth sank into her bottom lip, worry plastered all over her face.

“Don’t look like that, mama.” I sauntered toward her, my hands finding her hips and lifting her as soon as I was in reach.

“Look like what?” she asked wrapping her legs around my waist just like she had last night.

“I told you already.” I paused, moving us to the bottom of the stairs, then halting. I was waiting for her permission, and her small nod was all I needed to head on up and to her bedroom for the second night in a row. “I got you, mama. You ain’t gotta worry about a thing now.”

Her eyes closed, her arms wrapping around my neck as she sighed. “You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep, Raf.”

I wanted to tell her that I wasn’t, that I had every intention on keeping the promise, but her lips landing on mine silenced me. We’d forget everything and wrap ourselves around each other, even if it was just for a little while.

CHAPTER 10

PEYTON

“How’s my little sister?” I grinned at the sound of my big brother’s voice over the cell. It had been way too long since I’d seen his face. So long that I’d lost count. I frowned at that thought, not liking it one bit.

“Tired,” I huffed out, placing my hand on my swollen stomach. “I’ve all of a sudden popped.” I hadn’t been this big when I was full term with Kian, but this new baby, he was different. I was bigger now at six months along than I was at nine months with Kian. And I was feeling it...everywhere.

“Wish I could see you, P.” My stomach bottomed out, the reality of our situation sinking in. I hated being this far away from my brother, especially knowing that he couldn’t just abandon his position for a day to come and see us. If he did, it was life and death. He was building the organization after taking it over, and I knew he didn’t quite trust everyone yet.

Things like this took time. But hopefully not too much because I missed him like crazy.

“Me too,” I whispered, closing my eyes as the baby kicked again. “I just...I miss you.”

Goose bumps prickled along my skin, a warning that someone was watching me, and when I looked up, Travis’s

imposing body was blocking the doorway to our bedroom, his face a mask of darkness. He'd been listening to me.

"Who do you miss?" Travis growled out, his head tilting to the side.

"I...um...I gotta go, Ace," I blurted out, panic setting in at the silent threat Travis was imposing. "Travis just got home."

"Sure," Ace replied, sounding a little farther away now. "I'll call you tomorrow."

I nodded, not realizing in that moment that Ace couldn't see me, but I ended the call, placing my cell on the bedside table, my movements slow. The last thing I wanted was to rile Travis up, especially not with that glint shining in his eyes.

"H-hey, Trav."

Silence. But not the kind of silence that was okay, no, this was the kind that made you squirm, your fight-or-flight instincts kicking in.

"Did I tell you that you could call Ace?" he asked, his voice way too calm. It had me on edge, waiting for the visible anger to appear.

"I..." I blinked, not thinking before I responded. "He called me."

His nostrils flared, his grip intensifying on the doorframe and causing his knuckles to turn white. "Are you back talking me, Peyton?"

I shook my head, my legs coming up from the relaxed position I'd been lying in, but it wasn't so easy to move with my bump the way it was now. Before I'd even sat up, he was darting across the room, his hand landing on my thigh to stop me.

The sharp sting had me whistling air through my teeth, wincing at what I was sure would be a red handprint left behind.

"Ow, Trav, why did you do that?"

He climbed on top of me, his heavy boots on his feet scraping against the soft flesh of my legs. But it was his one hand gripping my wrists and thrashing them above my head that hurt the most. The stretch was almost too much to bear, but I kept my lips glued shut, knowing I'd talked way too damn much already.

Why did I never know when to just stay quiet? I should have learned over the last five years how to act and react when he was in a mood like this—which, if I was being honest, was more often than not these days.

His job was hard though, especially being my big brother's number two. It was stressful, but...that didn't mean I had to bear the brunt of it when he came home, right?

"You never fuckin' learn, do you?" He tutted in disappointment, his head dipping down so it was only centimeters from my face. "How many times do I have to teach you about this big, fat mouth and when to keep it shut?"

I blinked, my lips parting, about to tell him that he didn't need to tell me, I'd just made a mistake, but that move had his eyes flaring to life, his grip hardening as he jerked down so fast I didn't have time to think—time to process what was happening.

All I felt was pain unlike any other, my lips burning, a liquid all of a sudden flowing, and then wetness trailing over my cheeks and down my chin.

I thrashed, the agony so intense that I was sure I was going to pass out.

He'd bit me. He'd captured both of my lips between his teeth and bit down as hard as he could.

He didn't let go, not when I managed to get one hand free from his grip and slap his back, and not when I wailed, trying to beg him to stop.

The room was spinning, the edges of my vision going black, and then he let go.

It was almost worse now that his teeth were gone, and even though I wanted to reach up and feel what he'd done, I

couldn't. I was paralyzed as I stared up at him, my blood coating his lips and chin, a satisfied smirk spreading across his own lips.

"That will teach you to keep your fuckin' mouth shut."

I hated him. In that moment, I hated him more than he would ever know.

"Mama." His whispered voice in my ear had my body freezing, my eyes still closed as my brain caught up with what was around me—where I was and who I was with. "Mama."

My muscles tried to relax at the sound of Raf's voice but they were still on alert, my dream fresh in my mind, my memories haunting me, just like they would until the day I died.

He'll kill me one day. He'll take the breath from my body and leave me to rot.

I couldn't let the intrusive thoughts win, but the problem was, they rang true. They were a warning that I *had* to adhere to.

My body tensed, my eyes opening as the room came into view. There was a little light coming through the curtains, but not enough to signal full morning yet. We were in the same position we were when he'd laid me on the bed and cocooned me, making me feel the safest I'd ever been.

But staying like this wasn't an option, not for me.

"I have to get out of here," I told Raf, not willing to look at him.

"No you don't." He held on to me tightly, just like he had all night. The complete contrast to the night before, yet, it somehow felt all the more intimate. "You've got me now."

I didn't answer. Didn't say a word. Didn't make a move. Because the reality was, I was leaving, whether he wanted me to or not. The only difference this time was that I wanted what I would be leaving behind. But for the sake of my sons, I had

to give it up. I had to sacrifice, because the alternative didn't bear thinking about.

So for that moment, I relished in the hold Raf had on me, the way his body contoured to mine like two jigsaw pieces fitting together perfectly. Because it was only a matter of time until it was gone—until I was gone.

RAFAEL

I entered the Beretta mansion, immediately feeling at home. I'd spent so much time here as a kid, growing up in the thick of the action. But as I strolled in, something felt...off. Something wasn't right. But then, the message that I'd gotten off Romeo was a little strange too. But I never second-guessed it when it came to my brother because his mood swings were all over the damn place.

Heading toward the voices, I halted in front of Lorenzo's office. Had I been thinking logically and not worrying about the fact that Peyton was on her own for the first time since Saturday night when I'd taken her car back, then I would have stayed and listened before knocking.

But I didn't.

I just knocked, then let myself inside, instantly recognizing the foreboding man standing in the middle of Lorenzo's office.

Blinking, I slowly closed the door behind me, all conversation coming to an end as I walked in. I could feel all of their eyes burning into my skin, and a quick check of the room informed me that Lorenzo was here, along with the underboss, Dante, and my brother, Romeo.

And then *him*.

“What's he doing here?” I asked, not moving any closer. I was keeping my guard up, not prepared to let it down with him

standing smack-dab in the middle of enemy territory. Why had they called me here? I was just a soldier. What did they need me here for?

“We need to talk,” Lorenzo said, waving to the sofa, but both he and everyone else in this room knew there was no way in hell that I was going to sit down with that man standing here. We all had our guards up, but me even more so in that moment.

“Then talk,” I said, knowing that I was showing him disrespect, but I didn’t trust the man in this room, not after the last run-in we’d had with him. He’d stopped our shipment coming into the state because they’d accidentally taken a wrong turn and ended up across state lines. I’d told Romeo back then that Lorenzo should have taken him out. He was our rival, and with him gone, we’d have more territory—more control. It was a win-win. But it had been vetoed the moment I’d spoken the words.

Probably because I was only a soldier, not having a say in how things run. And maybe that opinion of taking him out was the whole reason why I was still a soldier and not ranked any higher.

“Watch it,” Romeo growled, his warning clear. Disrespect wasn’t tolerated at the best of times, but especially not in front of Ace Beckett, the boss of the Beckett Syndicate, formally known as the Stoll Syndicate before Ace killed their boss and took the operation for himself.

I blew out a breath, cracking my neck side to side. “Sorry.” I swallowed. “I’m listening.”

Ace turned, just enough so he was looking at me, but not enough where his back was turned to the other men in the room. He’d walked into the lion’s den, and by the looks of it, he’d done it alone. “I’ve been told you know my sister?” I jerked back, my gaze finding Romeo’s, but his features were shuttered—closed for business. “Peyton.”

I stilled, processing what he’d said and...wait... “Peyton is your sister?” My hands clenched at my sides, my mind working a mile a minute, trying to put all of the pieces

together. If she was his sister, then: “Why the fuck is she running away if she has you?”

It was out of my mouth before I even realized it, but it was the truth. Peyton had mentioned her brother once in passing, and I hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but now it made sense—perfect sense.

“Why wouldn’t anyone come near you?”

“You know, big brother and all that.”

He wasn’t just her big brother, he was Ace fuckin’ Beckett. His name was as feared as my father’s and that was saying something.

Ace laughed, the sound condescending and bringing me right out of my head in a heartbeat. It fuckin’ irked me to no end. What was so funny about the fact that his sister was being hurt and had to escape the violence she was living in?

“She’s running because she’s not well. She’s mentally ill.” He paused, stepping toward me. “She’s been gone months, and when I tell you I’ve had over twenty of my best men out trying to find her...” He shook his head, rolling his shoulders, clearly tense. “She has my nephews with her and...fuck...are they okay?”

“Are they okay?” I repeated back to him, sure I was stuck inside some weird time warp where nothing made sense. Not a damn thing. I reared back. “Of course they’re okay, they’re with their mom.”

His chest expanded on a deep breath, relief clearly washing through him. “Where is she now?” he asked, this time turning to face Lorenzo. He was on edge, his hands twitching by his sides.

“Romeo?” Lorenzo asked.

“She’s—”

I jerked forward. “No.” I thrashed my arm through the air, a signal for everyone to stop. “She can’t leave.” I was panicking, not sure what to do or what to say. I couldn’t confess what Peyton had confided in me. But surely her

brother would want to know, right? Brothers protected their little sisters. “You don’t understand. She—”

“She what?” Ace growled out, his tone changing in an instant. He was tall, taller than anyone else in this room by a couple of inches, and I had no doubt he could pick me up and fling me across the room like I weighed next to nothing. “She’s ill.” He tapped the side of his head. “She needs help. She kidnapped my nephews and has hidden away from us all. I just...” He huffed out a breath, his anger waning. “I just want to help my little sister.” He stared me down, his eyes darkening the longer he looked at me, then he switched tactic, his gaze zooming in on Lorenzo. “Is there a problem with letting me know where my sister is?” He paused, letting those words sink in. “Because if there’s a problem, then I’m prepared. You should know better than most the outward appearance isn’t always what it seems.”

He was here alone...at least, that was what he *wanted* us to think.

Fuck. He did have backup. Why was it I felt like we were at a disadvantage here?

Either way, it didn’t matter because there was no way in hell I was going to tell him where she was. And in that moment, all I could think about was a couple of hours ago when I’d gotten the text off of Romeo.

“You don’t understand, Raf. It’s only a matter of time. I can’t stay here. It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s not,” I demanded, grasping Peyton’s hand. She hadn’t had her attention off of the boys for longer than a few minutes over the last couple of days. She’d refused to take them to school or to let them out of the house, and in turn, I’d rejected any thought of leaving her side.

We were in this together, whether she liked it or not. My conscience wouldn’t allow me to walk away, but more than that, my heart rejected the very idea of not being near her, of not being able to see her...touch her...hold her.

So here I was, making a commitment, knowing that I was going to have to make a choice between her and the life I'd always known.

"If he gets ahold of me..." Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm scared, Raf. I'm so damn scared."

"There's not a problem," Lorenzo growled, his own silent warning to everyone in the room heard loud and clear. "Rafael here just has a little crush." Fuck, I hated how he made that sound, how he made *me* sound. I may have only been twenty, but I'd lived a life that most people hadn't. No one in this room knew what it was like to walk a mile in my shoes, yet they all sure as hell judged me without any facts.

Ace laughed, but the tension was still in the room, stifling everyone with all of the threats hanging in the air, just out of reach but there when everyone needed them.

"My sister always had a way with making men lose their minds." He rolled his eyes, a small smile on his face. "Including my best friend."

"Her ex?" I interrupted, so fuckin' fuming that I stepped forward, my hands fists at my side. "The one who—"

"You mean her *husband*?" Ace interrupted. *Husband?* "Her husband who has been out of his mind with worry because she up and left in the middle of the night with their two young kids?" He stepped toward me, just enough to tell me that he wasn't taking anymore shit from me. "Is that who you're talking about? Her husband...my second-in-command?"

"I..." I frowned, trying to piece everything together, trying to work out what was happening. Peyton had told me just enough to hint at the kind of life she'd lived with her ex—no, her husband. Fuck. She was married? She'd left that little fact out, and now all I could think about was what else she'd left out.

He'd hurt her, right? But...if he had, then why was her big brother so concerned about her? He'd have seen the signs if

her husband was abusive, surely? It wasn't like you could hide all of those bruises. So...maybe Ace was right, and I was wrong?

“And then there's the fact that she came *here*.” He paused, stepping toward me as he tilted his head. “Do you not think there was a reason she chose this area? Chose *you*?”

I blinked, trying to deny the words he was speaking but... fuck, they rang true. Had she played me this entire time? Was I that naive?

She'd known who I was from the moment she'd met me and Romeo. She'd told me that herself. So had she sought us out on purpose? Ace was right. She'd weaved me in her web and I'd been helpless to it.

A quick glance at Romeo told me that he was wondering the same thing—coming to the same conclusion.

I rubbed my chest, hating the ache that appeared.

It was like someone had just opened curtains, showing me true daylight for the first time, but it was still too bright for me to see clearly yet. I needed time and space to work it all out. The problem was, I didn't have either of those luxuries.

“I'll take you to her,” Romeo said. “It's about an hour from here.” My gut wanted me to stop him, to not believe what was right in front of me, but...I couldn't disprove it.

Ace nodded. “I'll follow you there.”

They both filed out, leaving just me and Lorenzo and Dante in the room. And for a second I wanted to stay here, but then my feet were moving, following them out of the mansion and hopping into my own car. I needed to be there. I needed to know how it was all going to go down, but most of all, I needed answers. Answers that I was sure Peyton wouldn't want to give.

PEYTON

I was trying my hardest to not be on edge, but something was swirling in my stomach, a warning that I didn't understand quite yet. So instead of overthinking it and making it worse, I kept myself busy as I waited for Raf to come back. It was the only way not to let it fester, to not let my anxiety take me over.

It hadn't mattered how much I'd tried to push him away, he'd still come back. A smile lifted at the corner of my lips as I did the dishes, the happy sounds of the boys playing nicely being my own personal playlist. Even though I knew I was on borrowed time, it still didn't stop the happiness bubbling up inside me at the idea of me and Raf.

He'd appeared at a time when I'd least expected it. He'd shown me what it was like to have a man in my life who listened to what I said, who paid attention to me, who cared about what I was thinking and feeling. I'd only ever had one other man in my life who had been like him...

The smile turned down, my thoughts taking a turn for the worse, but soft knocks rapping on my door distracted me. My stomach dipped in excitement and I hated to admit how much I wanted Raf around, but it was time I embraced it. Time I listened and believed what he said to me. Every part of my brain wanted to dismiss all of the promises he was making, but the longer he was around, the more I was starting to take notice that what he said weren't just words. His actions were speaking louder.

I wiped my hands dry and made my way down the hallway, the smile on my face turning into a full-on grin as I pulled the door open and—

“Ace?”

My heart raced in my chest, my hands starting to shake as I stared at my big brother.

“P,” he greeted, his tone gruff. “I'm here to take you home.”

The happiness that had started to bubble up dissipated within seconds, destroying all of the hope I had. This couldn't be happening. Not now. Not after finally accepting the happiness I'd been gifted.

"I'm not going back," I told him, taking a step away from him but leaving the door open, a silent signal that he could come in. What I hadn't expected was the three men who followed him—men who had been in my brother's organization for at least five years. "Ace," I warned.

"What?" he asked, leaning against the wall in my hallway and staring me down. His hair was just as dark as I remembered it, the tattoos covering his skin looking a little darker with more of them. He looked every bit the big brother I'd always known, barely changing in the last fifteen years. Only now things were different. What he said was law to the men in his organization.

Too bad for him that wasn't going to happen with me though. I mirrored him, leaning against the wall and narrowed my eyes. "I'm not going anywhere." Movement in the corner of my eye gained my attention. "Hey!" I spun around and pointed at one of the men. "You can't go up there!" He didn't listen to me though, just continued upstairs, a bag in his hand...oh my God, was this really happening?

"They're doing their job," Ace commented, sounding bored as hell.

"Ace, you don't understand." I tried to plead, pushing off the wall and reaching out to him, but he sidestepped me, almost as if he'd been prepared for me to say that to him. What the... This wasn't the big brother I'd grown up with. He was always so ready and willing to listen to me. And maybe that was yet another reason why I should have told him the truth sooner. But now there wasn't a choice. He had to know what I'd gone through, what we'd all gone through at Travis's hands.

"I do understand, P." His brows knitted together, his lips pulled down at the corners. "I'm gonna get you the help you

need.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “I’ve been such a shit big brother, but that changes today.”

I jerked forward, my hand landing on his leather jacket. “No, Ace, you don’t get it.” Tears sprung in my eyes, falling as fast as water through a broken dam. “I can’t go back to Travis. I can’t live with him. He’ll hurt me.”

Ace’s eyes softened, his hand reached up, stroking the side of my face. For a second I was sure he was believing me, but then he murmured, “He said you’d say that too.” He shook his head, disappointment flashing over his face. “I’ll make this right, baby sister, I promise, I’ll make this right.”

“No!” I wailed, my fists slamming against his chest. “I won’t let you take me back. No!” I fought him, trying to get away, because fuck, I’d made a terrible mistake going closer to him. Now he had me in his trap, something that Travis had created.

He’d pulled the wool over my eyes for years, but the moment I’d run away from him, everything became crystal clear. But Ace...he was still under his influence, and as I stared up at him, tears streaming down my face, I knew that anything I said would have fallen on deaf ears.

Travis had manipulated him, just like he always had with me, and there was no going back from that.

I didn’t think, I just spun around, running toward the playroom where the boys still were, but arms banding around my waist from behind stopped me.

“Let go!” I screamed, so loud my throat hurt, but it wasn’t at Ace who was holding me back, but at the two men who were carrying Kian and Reed out. Reed was his normal happy self, but Kian...Kian was crying and screaming, even more so when he saw how distraught I was.

I probably shouldn’t have let him see me like this, not after everything he’d been through, but the thought of them going back to Travis frightened me even more than me going back to be with him. He’d hurt them, but more than that, he’d use them to hurt me in the worst ways possible.

“Stop, P. Stop!” Ace bear hugged me, lifting me off the ground, then spun us around so I could see the boys being taken out of the house. What I hadn’t expected was for Ace to follow them out.

He wasn’t taking the boys away from me...right?

“Just calm down, P. I’ll make it better, okay? I promise.”

Yet another promise that was being made by a man who didn’t understand. And—

Wait, where was Raf? Had Ace waited for me to be alone before knocking on the door? What would Raf do when he got back only to find me gone? What—

I blinked as Ace carried me outside, the sunlight blinding me for a second until my attention veered from the SUV that the boys were being put into, to Romeo’s driveway where Romeo and Rafael were standing, staring at everything that was happening.

“Raf!” I struggled in Ace’s arms again, only this time he put me down. He knew better than anyone that now that they had my boys in their possession, there was no way I was going to run away. My boys were my life, just like my big brother used to be. But that Ace was gone. That Ace had been brainwashed by evil incarnate.

Raf stepped back, his lips spread in a straight line. “No,” he muttered, so low that I wasn’t sure he’d actually said it. But when my gaze met his, so much darkness shined from his irises, I knew he had.

The Rafael that had held me every night as the nightmares took hold was gone and in its place was a Rafael that I’d never met. This one was cold and calculated, causing me to shiver. I felt it deep into my soul, the pain almost knocking me sick.

It was only then that it clicked...they were waiting here, knowing what was happening. Had they led Ace to me? Had Raf betrayed me after everything I’d confided in him?

Shaking my head, I placed my hand over my heart and croaked out, “You’re just like the rest of them.”

He took a step forward, only halting because Romeo placed his hand on his shoulder, a silent command to stay back—to stay away from me. Indecision flashed over his features, but it was too late.

He'd assisted in ripping my happiness away from me.

He'd sentenced me to a lifetime of pain.

He'd...broken his promise.

So I turned to face the SUV at the edge of the sidewalk, stumbled down to it, accepting my fate in this world, and knowing that all I had to do now was protect the boys. The problem was, deep down, I knew I couldn't protect them from the man who helped create them.

All I could do was put myself between him and them and accept the beatings that were sure to come.

I inhaled a deep breath, jumped into the back of the SUV next to Kian, and didn't look back at all as we drove away from the little slice of heaven that I'd created.

CHAPTER 11

RAFAEL

I hopped out of my car as soon as I pulled up in front of Romeo's house. He was just ahead of me, which was why he'd managed to dart out of his car and band his arms around me, halting me in place so that I couldn't get to Peyton's door.

"Don't go in there," he warned, his tone low. "Stay out of it."

My stomach rolled, anger bubbling up as he trapped me on his driveway. "I need to talk to her," I growled, struggling in his grip. "You don't understand."

If I was honest, *I* didn't understand it either. There were so many conflicting thoughts going around and around in my head, but there was only one that shouted the loudest.

She's married.

I gritted my teeth, hating that she'd lied to me or...she'd omitted the truth. It was the same thing though, right?

I fixated on Ace as he slowly exited the SUV that had been following us. I froze on the spot as he glanced over at me, clearly not happy with what I was doing. But I didn't care, something felt off. Something wasn't right about this whole thing.

Two men got out with him, then another SUV pulled up on the other side of the road, one more man exiting and joining them as they headed up to Peyton's front door.

"Don't get involved," Romeo demanded, and let me go. My captain had spoken. I had to adhere to the rules, no matter what was happening. Because at the end of the day, I was just a soldier. A soldier that didn't get a say. A soldier that didn't know what to believe. Fuck.

"Did you know that she's married?" Romeo asked, standing next to me. I widened my stance, crossing my arms over my chest as we watched Peyton's house.

I was silent for so long he probably thought I was ignoring him. But I wasn't. I was trying to sort through the thoughts; weave my way through all of the voices screaming different things at me. "I didn't know." He hummed, a noise that told me he thought as much. "Do you think she's ill?" I asked, turning to face him. Maybe I was blinded by whatever Peyton and I had. Maybe I just couldn't see the forest through the trees. And if there was one person I would believe and listen to, it was my big brother.

Romeo shrugged, but his expression was neutral, not giving a single thing away. "I don't know, Raf, but it all feels too suspicious to me." His eyes narrowed as movement came from her house. "Why did she choose here of all places? Right next door to me?"

I swallowed. "I...I don't know." I had no idea why the little sister of the boss in the next state chose the house next door to a member of the Beretta Mafia. "She knew we were Mafia." It was out of my mouth before I'd even thought about it.

"She did?" Romeo asked, his eyes on Peyton's house.

"Yeah." I blew out a breath, turning back to look at the house just as the two men filed out again, only this time each of them had one of the boys in their arms. Kian was struggling, trying to see behind him, his arms reaching out.

"She played you," Romeo growled. "She played us all."

His words ricocheted in my head, batting around like a tennis ball thrashed between two players. There was something in my gut that didn't believe it—or maybe I didn't *want* to believe it. They said love was blind, right? Maybe this was that? Maybe I had my rose-tinted glasses on the entire time and she'd fooled us all.

I'd been stupid. So damn stupid. I felt like a goddamn fool.

My teeth ground together as Ace came out of Peyton's house, his arms banded around her as he carried her out, following the boys. Her face was panicked and pale, her hands gripping on to Ace's arms as she clearly tried to struggle.

That didn't look like a woman who was mentally ill. It didn't look like anything but a woman who was scared—terrified—of what was happening. And I'd allowed that to happen. But then...maybe that was an act too? Maybe this entire thing had been one elaborate game she'd been playing.

Her attention landed on me, the look on her face a punch in the chest as she screamed, "Raf!" She continued to struggle in Ace's arms, so he put her down, but she didn't make a move to come closer. She just stared, an unreadable expression plastered over her features.

Fuck. The way she was staring at me was so unlike the Peyton I knew.

Romeo was right, she'd played me like an expert musician, and I'd lain there and taken it. I took a step back, the reality of the situation sinking in. "No," I murmured, so low I was sure no one else heard, but by the look on her face—the shattered devastation—she'd heard me loud and clear.

I shuttered all of my emotions, needing to protect myself.

She shook her head and whispered, "You're just like the rest of them."

Her words pummeled me, knocking me sideways, and I couldn't help but step forward. I was waging a war with myself, not knowing which way to turn. Romeo's hand on my shoulder halted me. But that didn't stop the thoughts rolling

around in my head. Was I doing the right thing? Should I have stopped them? Asked her if it was true? *Was she married?*

I swallowed, cracking my neck from side to side as Peyton made her way down to the waiting SUV where the boys were. Her movements were slow and wobbly, clearly off-kilter. Maybe I should have warned her what was about to happen. Maybe I should have told her to run.

That would have started a war though. A war happening across state lines. It wouldn't have been good for anyone. Men would have been lost on both sides, not to mention the fact that the FBI and other letter agencies would have gotten involved, putting us even more on their radar.

Choosing Peyton in that moment would have wreaked havoc. This was the right thing to do—that was what I told myself on repeat as the SUV pulled away from the sidewalk. So why did it feel like my chest was being ripped open and my heart cut out with a blunt knife? Why did it feel like I was breaking apart, screaming from the inside where no one could hear me.

The pain was almost unbearable as I stood there, my feet glued to the ground, not able to look away from the road that they'd driven down.

“Raf?” Romeo shook my shoulder. “Come on, let's go inside.”

I didn't want to. All I wanted was to get in my car and drive after them, to follow her and tell her that none of this made sense, but that I didn't have a choice in letting her go.

Had I just fed her to the wolves? Or had I done the right thing?

“Raf?” a new voice called, one that had my attention moving to it. Bailey stood in the doorway of her house, a reminder that my brother had gotten the woman that he wanted, but me...I was having to give her up.

She lied to you. The thought stuck to me like superglue. Maybe she *had* lied to me, but...what if there was a reason?

What if she was just trying to protect herself? Or was I trying to find any excuse possible?

“Come inside,” Bailey continued, waving me in. She didn’t look surprised about what had transpired, which told me that she already knew.

“You knew,” I commented.

I wasn’t asking her, but she nodded anyway. “Romeo called on his way home.” She bit down on her bottom lip, her gaze moving to Romeo, seeking approval over what she just said. He’d told her time and time again that she didn’t need any kind of permission from him for anything, but after all she’d been through, she found it hard not to seek approval.

She wasn’t the only one who had been through stuff though. So had Peyton, at the hands of her sons’ dad. Or had she?

“Fuck!” I screamed, grasping my hair and pulling, needing some kind of physical pain in that moment. “I’m so fuckin’ confused.” I started pacing the driveway, knowing that Romeo would have hated the display I was putting on in the neighborhood, but I didn’t give a single shit. “None of this makes sense.”

“What doesn’t make sense?” Romeo growled, and when I turned to look at him, I saw Bailey right beside him, no longer waiting at the door to the house. Her features were that of concern, whereas Romeo just looked downright mad.

“All of it.” I threw my hands up in the air, grinding my teeth together. “The fact that she’s Ace’s sister. Her being married. The things I heard...” I shook my head, running my palm over my face to try and wake myself up. “The look in her eyes...” I stepped toward them, lowering my voice. “You don’t have that look in your eyes unless...”

“She fooled me too,” Bailey whispered, her hand clasping on to Romeo’s arm. “I didn’t want to believe it when Romeo called but...it makes sense, Raf.” She pulled away from Romeo and stepped toward me. “She was secretive, but in a

way that meant she was covering something up.” She tilted her head to the side, staring up at me.

“We all have secrets,” I told her, moving backward. “You should know that better than anyone.” She frowned, the truth not sitting right with her, but in that moment, I didn’t care. They weren’t helping, not in the way I needed them to. “I…” I moved my attention to the house next door. “I can’t be here right now.”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Romeo snapped, coming closer to me. “I mean it, Raf. You won’t just have me to answer to, but Dante and Lorenzo too.” His words hit home, reminding me who I was in the ranks and where I stood.

The reality was, it didn’t matter if I believed what Ace was saying or not, I couldn’t do nothing about it.

Peyton was gone.

The woman who had finally cracked through the hard exterior I’d created.

I was on my own again, in more ways than one, so with one final stare at her house, I spun around, got in my car, and sped out of the neighborhood, not knowing where the hell I was going but knowing I couldn’t be anywhere near here.

PEYTON

The car ride was silent apart from Kian’s soft sniffles, but Ace soon put an end to that by being his usual comical self and distracting him. He’d always been such a great uncle, at least, he had when he actually saw the boys. I could count on one hand the amount of times Ace had visited with Reed, yet, it was as if they were best friends with the way he was laughing at the faces his uncle pulled.

And here I was, my stomach in bits, my head spinning, knowing what I was going to return to. Every part of me wanted to know what story Travis had told Ace, but I could read between the lines. I knew how that man worked better than anyone, so it shouldn't have surprised me that he'd worked his magic on his best friend, my big brother. Yet, it had.

Ace had always been that constant in my life, the one person who I could turn to no matter what. But as I sat in this enclosed space with him, my gaze veering over his jeans and leather jacket and up to his clean-shaven face and dark hair, I realized that he wasn't the big brother who had protected me. Now, he was the big brother who was betraying me.

He tried to talk to me and make conversation, but I gave him the silent treatment. What was the point in saying words to him if he refused to actually listen to them? At this point, it didn't matter what I said. He'd believed the wrong person and I...I didn't know what to do with that.

Part of me wanted to tell him everything that had happened, right from that first time Travis had laid hands on me. But the reality was, he'd have just thought I was trying to tell lies, trying to build a narrative. Which would only serve to confirm whatever story Travis had told him. I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't.

You should have left the day Travis turned up.

I squeezed my eyes closed, hating the thought that popped into my brain, but only because I knew I should have. If I would have disappeared like I'd wanted to, then I wouldn't be here right now.

Letting out a breath, I opened my eyes, my gaze landing on the window as I watched the trees pass by on the country road we were driving down. Then all of a sudden, we were slowing down, pulling into a random gas station in the middle of nowhere.

My stomach rolled, a shiver passing through me at the car that was parked in the parking lot, along with the man leaning against the hood, his dark eyes focused in on us.

He'd stayed away, allowing Ace to retrieve me from my hiding place, but I should have known he wouldn't be far away.

Ace grasped my hand as we pulled to a stop, bringing my attention to him. And as soon as our gazes connected, he murmured, "I love you, P, please remember that, okay?"

A lump formed in my throat, his words sounding so true that I couldn't deny them, no matter how much I wanted to in that moment. But there was still a voice in the back of my mind refusing to believe his words, because if he really loved me, then why couldn't he see that Travis was lying? Why had he so easily dismissed the little information I'd started to give him.

Maybe this should have been my moment to confess it all to him, but what would be the point? It would only make me look worse than I already did.

So instead of saying anything back, I shuttered off my emotions and let myself out of the SUV, telling anyone who was listening, "I need to use the restroom."

If it had been just me and Travis, I never would have been able to walk into the store and request the key to the bathrooms. But Ace was there too, pushing himself out of the SUV, then making his way over to Travis. My gaze was glued to them as I moved to the restrooms, the cool key gripped in my hand. They were in deep conversation, their attention moving from me to the SUV we'd come in, then to each other. They were clearly planning what would happen next.

Letting out a breath as I entered the restroom just as the second SUV that had been following us pulled onto the lot. I locked the door behind me, needing just a few minutes. I had to process everything that had happened from the moment Ace had knocked on my door, but that was easier said than done. My brain was like a bowl full of noodles, thoughts running into other thoughts, never ending but then also cutting off randomly.

I shook my head, trying to dispel them as I used the restroom, then washed up. Bending down a little, my attention

landed on my chest and under my tank top, a glint shining—my cell, I still had my cell. Or, I should say, the burner cell that Rafael had gotten me. My main cell was still sitting in the microwave back home.

Home. It would never be home to us again.

I'd worn my favorite shorts, the problem was, the pockets on them were fake, so I had nowhere to put my cell. So I did what any woman did when they needed to store something on themselves, I pushed it down my bra. Which is why it had probably gone unnoticed.

My hands shook, excitement mixed with terror bubbling up as knocks hit the door, followed by Ace demanding, "Hurry up, P."

"Just a minute!" I called, fishing the cell out and glancing at the screen. I had no notifications, at least, not any that meant anything. Part of me was hoping Raf would have messaged, or called, or...something.

My breath left my body in a whoosh at the memory of his face just an hour ago. I had no idea what they'd told him, what story they were using, but I needed him to know...

I blinked, my gaze on the door as I walked toward it but then rested my back on it. It wouldn't stop anyone from coming inside, but my brain felt more at ease standing there. My thumb tapped on the messages icon, bringing up his name immediately. I wasn't sure what to write, what to say, so...I just rambled on, but by the time I clicked send, it was everything he needed to know, everything I needed to say.

Reading over it one last time, I committed the words to memory...

Raf, I don't even know where to start this. I don't know what you've been told but just know that everything I said to you was the truth. You were there for me when no one else was. You made me feel safe again. You gave me a freedom I didn't know I deserved. I know things are different now and that I'll never be able to see you again, but I need to tell you the truth. When I think about you, I smile. When I remember the way you held me, I feel at peace. When I think about the way you would look at me, I know that all of those feelings swirling around that I tried to deny were real. I love you, Raf. I love you with my whole heart and soul. We just weren't meant to be. It wasn't in the cards for us. But that doesn't make it not true. If there's one thing you'll remember about me, please remember that I loved you.

Tears sprung to my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I couldn't, not right then, because there was no telling when they would stop. And outside of this door, there were men who didn't care about me in the same way Raf did. They didn't listen to me. They didn't care how I felt. They just wanted to manipulate everyone and play a game that I wasn't even aware existed.

“P!” Ace shouted again.

“Coming.” I powered off my cell, not knowing if I'd be able to keep it hidden or not, but I'd try my damn hardest to. It was my lifeline, the backup that I'd needed so much over the years but never gotten. Travis knew all of the calls and messages coming in from the cell that he had provided me with. Although, he removed it more than I had it in possession. Yet another one of his punishments.

Pushing the cell back in my bra, I moved some hair out of my face, and exited the restroom, handing the key to Ace, then heading back toward the SUV but then— “Where's the SUV?” I asked, panic rising inside of me so fast that it had my head spinning.

“Headed to my place,” Ace said.

Turning, I stared directly at my big brother, his face shuttered of any emotions. “The boys?” I croaked out.

“In the SUV.” Did that mean I was going to Ace’s? If I was, then why was Travis here and— “You and Travis need a little time,” Ace continued. “So I’m gonna have the boys for a couple of weeks.” He stepped forward, a frown appearing as I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to seek the comfort I so desperately needed in that moment. “It’s just until you get better, P.”

“Get better?” I choked out, not believing what he was saying. “There’s nothing wrong with me to get *better*.”

He cracked his neck to the side, a move that Raf did so often. I missed him already. Not just because he offered a sense of security, but because...because I just missed him.

“Peyton.” The way he said my name like I’d just been caught sneaking in through my bedroom window...I hated it. And in that moment, I hated him. “Let’s not do this.”

I blinked, my gaze veering over to Travis who was still leaning against the hood of his car, his arms crossed over his chest as his attention focused solely on us.

“You don’t want to do this, Ace?” I laughed, slamming my hands down onto my hips. I’d never been afraid of my big brother, not like everyone else was. To me, he was the same Ace who had cleaned up my knees after I’d fallen over, the same Ace who had read me a bedtime story each and every night until I became a tween. But even then, he’d come and sit on my bedroom floor, telling me all about his day and everything he’d gotten up to.

We were close. Closer than most siblings. But somewhere along the way, we’d drifted apart. And it was all because of Travis.

“Do you not think there was a reason I ran, Ace?” I shook my head, hating how my eyes burned with unshed tears. “He hurt me. He’s been hurting me all along.”

Ace’s fists clenched at his side, his eyes narrowing on me. I could tell he wanted to believe me, or maybe that was me

just hoping. But his growled out, “Go to your husband, Peyton. Help is waiting for you at home,” told me that he didn’t want to hear me. He wanted everything to be just as it was. He wanted peace, but peace wasn’t in the cards for me.

“Or what?” I asked, feeling defiant. I never would have said any of this if it would have only been Travis and me here.

Ace stepped toward me, his height foreboding. I tried my hardest not to flinch, but fuck, I couldn’t help it. And he noticed, he saw it, but yet again, he ignored it. What was it going to take for my big brother to believe me? To physically witness what his best friend did to me?

My stomach bottomed out, reality setting in like tar on a resurfaced road.

“Or you don’t get to see those two little boys again.”

My breath caught in my throat, his threat not just a threat, but a promise I knew Travis would make him keep. They had me exactly where they wanted me. And I was helpless to it all.

“You’re evil,” I whispered, backing away, my feet wanting to take me as far away as possible, but my heart already deciding what I had to do as I veered toward Travis. “I hate you so much right now, Ace. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.”

He didn’t say another word as I backed away, keeping my attention on him, and letting him see just how much he’d hurt me by every move he’d made today. I’d woken up this morning with Raf by my side, my two boys the safest they’d ever been. And now I was walking into the lion’s den, otherwise known as my husband’s trap.

CHAPTER 12

RAFAEL

I cracked my neck side to side, followed by each of my knuckles. My head was pounding from the amount of drinks I'd consumed all night after leaving Romeo's. I'd wanted to hide away, to keep to myself, to process everything, but I wasn't allowed to. I had a shift guarding Luca's, the bar that Lorenzo had gifted his wife not long after they got married.

All the soldiers were scheduled to take turns standing on the door every few days. It meant that we only had to do it once a month, and today was conveniently my turn. If it hadn't been for the loud ringing of my cell from the floor an hour ago, I wouldn't have been here. Mateo always made sure the soldiers never missed their shifts. He probably took it harder than most because of what happened here a couple of years ago.

He'd been driving Lorenzo and Aida from here when they'd been crashed into and the boss and his wife kidnapped. Since then, he'd taken everything that happened at this place personally, as well as their security. So it didn't surprise me that he was standing just inside the door of Luca's when I sauntered inside with shades over my eyes.

"Rafael," he greeted, giving me the side eye as he looked at some documents attached to a clipboard. "You were supposed to start an hour ago."

I frowned. “No I wasn’t.”

He paused what he was doing, slowly veering his attention to me. “I messaged you.”

Pulling my cell out, I clicked the side button to light up the screen. “Dammit, it’s dead.” I rolled my shoulders back, feeling antsy and on edge. I’d had time to process everything, time to think things through, and I still hadn’t come to a conclusion, apart from the fact that Peyton and the boys were gone. I needed to accept it, to get on with my job, but fuck—I rubbed my chest—it wasn’t easy.

Maybe time would help? There was that saying, right? Time made everything easier.

“Charge it up in the office on the charging pad, then head to the front doors,” Mateo said, his tone brooking no room for argument. “Doors open in five.”

I nodded, then headed into the bar. It was upscale with a piano in the corner that probably cost as much as my new house. Some nights it was a chill bar with open mic nights and random singers, but nights like tonight was the complete opposite. It was club night where one of the hottest DJs in the state was doing a set. Which was why there were four soldiers here instead of two.

I quickly placed my cell on the charging pad, then headed back out front. Leo—another soldier under Romeo—was waiting, dressed all in black, just like I was.

“You good?” he asked, his gaze flicking to mine as I took up my spot a few feet away from him so that we were on either side of the door.

“I’m good,” I replied, keeping my tone neutral. It didn’t matter that I was anything *but* good, I wouldn’t let it show, not to him anyway. I was part of the main founding families, he wasn’t, which would mean he’d use any opportunity to one-up me. The politics when you were a soldier were insane, which was why I kept to myself so much.

The line was already forming around the block, the dusk evening giving way to dark night as we were given the go-

ahead to open the doors thirty minutes past schedule.

I checked IDs, putting my flashlight on them and then letting the patrons in. I'd only turned away two people because I was sure they were using fakes, so when a group of guys came to the doors, being a bit rowdy, I didn't think anything of it.

Leo took a couple of their IDs and I took three, but my narrowed eyes were on a guy at the back as he spoke to a woman in line. He was getting too close for my liking, so I signaled one of the other soldiers to take my place, then sauntered over there.

"Everything okay here?" I asked, my attention on the woman who looked like she was doing her best to get away from this creep.

"Mind your damn business," he growled.

My gaze snapped to his as I took a threatening step forward. Today was *not* the day to do that to me. "Not gonna mind my business when you're standing in my line." I hooked two fingers at him to silently tell him to come forward, then stepped back. He came willingly, laughing it up with his friends, trying to act like he was the big man. "You can go." I handed him back his ID, already turning to take my position at the doors, but then a hand landed in the square of my back, pushing me forward.

Rage thrashed through me, the need to swing around with my fist ready so high, but I contained myself, instead holding on to my anger—just barely—as I slowly turned. "Did you just put your hands on me?" I asked like I was talking to a toddler.

"Fuck you," the guy spat, squaring up to me.

I grinned as wide as I could, so damn grateful that this motherfucker came into my life right now because I needed something to let my anger out on, and his face was the perfect damn target.

"You know who I am?" I asked, dropping my arms to my sides and forming a fist.

“I don’t give a fuck who you are.” He pushed against my chest, causing me to stumble back half a step. Mistake. Big fuckin’ mistake. “I’m gonna knock you the fuck out.”

I tutted like he was a naughty schoolboy who had just been caught bullying the helpless kid in the playground. “Wrong move, motherfucker.” I swung, instantly connecting with his temple and causing him to go down. He was dazed, his friends around him backing down immediately. “Let me introduce myself.” I put my feet either side of his chest, standing over him and grabbing his collar to bring him up a little. “I’m Rafael Pagani.” I slammed my fist into his nose, relishing in the fact that blood came squirting out.

“Holy shit,” I heard someone murmur. “He’s a Pagani.”

The whispers turned louder, the line backing away as I hit the unsuspecting douchebag again, and again. Each time my knuckles hit off his face, I felt a little better—but also worse. It wasn’t working. It wasn’t taking the pain away. So I tried harder. I crouched over him, uppercutting his chin, and finally knocking him out.

“Get out of the way,” a deep voice shouted. My eyes were blurry as I looked up, the rage having taken me over completely, but when I put a voice to the name, I knew I was fucked. “Jesus Christ, Raf!” I slowly lifted up off the guy, ignoring Mateo as he grabbed my bicep and yanked me inside. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking,” I panted, feeling the blood from the guy starting to dry on my knuckles. “I was thinking that dick pushed me, so I showed him that he messed with the wrong goddamn guy.”

“Fuck me,” Mateo groaned, shaking his head. “Lorenzo ain’t gonna be happy. Especially with doing that shit here.”

“Doing what?” I asked, following him down a back hallway and to the office. Now that I was inside, my ears were thrumming, everything coming back tenfold. “Defending myself? Defending the bar?” I stepped into the office, already reaching for my cell now that it was charged.

“You should have kept your cool, Raf,” Mateo said, sitting in the leather office chair. “I know you have a lot going on—”

I cut him off, slicing my hand through the air. “No. Nothing is going on.” I widened my stance at his raised brow. He didn’t believe me, but I didn’t give a fuck. “There isn’t. Peyton is gone. She played us—*me*—there’s nothing more to it.”

Mateo reclined back in his chair, staring me down. He was good at reading people too, just like I was. “Is that right?”

Leaning against the wall, I clutched my cell in my hand. “Yeah. They think she moved next to Romeo because of who she was. Trying to cause shit between us and Ace’s crew.” I paused, hating the way my hands started to go numb. “She was trying to fuck with us.”

“And you believe that?” Mateo asked, sitting up and leaning his forearms on his thighs. I shrugged, because if I was honest, I didn’t have the brain capacity right then to know *what* I believed. “Let me tell you a little something.” He paused, making sure I was listening. “If I would have believed everyone around me when it came to Luna when I first met her, we’d never have gotten to where we are now.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What does that even mean?”

“It means...no one thought she was good for me. She stole from Lorenzo and they judged her solely on that, but only I saw the background to it, only I saw the hurt in her eyes and the secrets she kept. All it took to get to the bottom of what she was holding back was to be there—to fight for her.” He stood, maneuvering past me. “So I’ll ask you this: what does your gut tell you?”

“I...I don’t know.”

He nodded. “You do, you just haven’t listened to it yet.” He pulled the door open, parting with, “Go home, meet me at the mansion in the morning.” His lips landed in a straight line. “Lorenzo will want to talk to you about what happened out there.”

Part of me wanted to ask him to not say anything—to keep it a secret just between us—but I knew he couldn't, not just because he answered to Lorenzo, but because of the other soldiers who had witnessed it. So I nodded as he exited the room, leaving me behind in the silent space.

Fuck. Now I wasn't sure *what* to think. Mateo was the last person who I thought would say something to me about Peyton. But...he was also the only person who hadn't taken what was being said and ran with it.

Blinking, I blew out a deep breath, then lifted my cell, my heart skipping a beat as I saw Peyton's name next to a time stamp that read yesterday's date.

She'd tried to contact me?

Did she need my help?

My thumb clicked on the message, opening it up, and my entire body froze, my brain trying to soak in the words—trying to read between the lines.

PEYTON

Raf, I don't even know where to start this. I don't know what you've been told but just know that everything I said to you was the truth.

I blinked, reading the second sentence over and over again. *Everything I said to you was the truth.*

Listening to my gut was harder than I realized because right now it wasn't telling me anything. Or maybe it was and I was too busy feeling too many emotions to even register it.

PEYTON

You were there for me when no one else was. You made me feel safe again. You gave me a freedom I didn't know I deserved. I know things are different now and that I'll never be able to see you again, but I need to tell you the truth.

Never be able to see you again. Why did those words feel like someone had just sentenced me to death in an electric

chair?

PEYTON

When I think about you, I smile. When I remember the way you held me, I feel at peace. When I think about the way you would look at me, I know that all of those feelings swirling around that I tried to deny were real. I love you, Raf. I love you with my whole heart and soul. We just weren't meant to be. It wasn't in the cards for us. But that doesn't make it not true. If there's one thing you'll remember about me, please remember that I loved you.

I love you. I love you with my whole heart and soul.

Fuck. Fuck! I grasped my hair, pulling on it so hard that I was sure it was going to come out. There was no mistaking my gut now. I believed her. There wasn't a doubt in my mind. Which led to me knowing I had to find her. I couldn't let her be with her ex—her husband. If everything she'd said was true, then he'd hurt her—he'd destroy her completely.

Dammit.

I needed to find her, fast. But I couldn't just walk away, not with what I'd done out there. I had to answer to the boss first, but as soon as that was done tomorrow, I was out of here. If I had to cross enemy lines to find the woman I loved, then I'd do just that.

And with crystal clear clarity, I realized, I'd give up everything for her. I'd sacrifice everything I had. Because deep down, I knew she was telling the truth. I'd just let other people get in my head.

But not anymore. I'd get her back in my arms. And I'd spend the rest of my life making sure she was safe.

I'd sacrifice myself for her, always.

PEYTON

Silence was the one thing I could control. I may not have been able to dictate where I was going, or who I was staying with. But my voice? That was all me. So for forty eight hours, I hadn't said a word to Travis. Not when I got into his car, not on the entire drive back to the house I'd escaped from, and not in the two days that had followed.

He'd been civil, acting like the nice guy as I walked around the house, remembering every place he'd hurt me, every place he'd thrown me to the ground, every wall he'd held me up against and strangled me. The entire place was full of memories that haunted me. But I didn't let it show. I didn't let him see how much being back here—especially without my babies—was affecting me.

The chores that had been expected of me the entire time we'd been together weren't getting done. In fact, I was almost baiting him, wanting him to get his anger out because the more time that ticked by with him being nice, the more on edge I was.

He was a ticking time bomb, ready to go off at any second.

But...what if he wasn't? What if he'd changed? What if me taking the boys and running from him made him realize just how bad he was? How violent he'd become? Maybe he was just trying to get me home to show me that he wasn't the same Travis that I'd left all those months ago but instead the Travis that I'd first fell in love with.

"Ace won't like this," I whispered as Travis placed his hand on the side of my face.

Travis shrugged, his lips lifting up into a grin. For months—years—we'd been skirting around the innocent touches and longing looks to each other from across the room. But that had changed the moment I told Ace someone asked me out on a date. I hadn't realized Travis was in the same room, but I'd felt his anger as soon as I'd said it.

He wanted me. He had all along. I knew it. He knew it. We'd just never made that first move.

Until today.

"I don't care, Peyton." He pressed closer to me, pushing me against the wall and blocking me in. "I've loved you for more years than you'll ever know. But I'm not gonna sit on the sidelines anymore. You're mine. You have been from the moment Travis asked me to protect you a few years ago."

I inhaled a stuttering breath, my hands shaking as I placed my palm on his chest and felt his beating heart. "I love you too."

His grin widened. "I know you do." He pressed closer, his lips centimeters from mine. "You're mine now. Always mine. No matter what."

I swallowed at the memory, realizing how seriously he'd taken his words. But maybe I hadn't taken them seriously enough? Had I taken it too far? Maybe I'd gone overboard.

I blinked, turning to face him where we were sitting on the sofa. I had no idea what the movie was called that he'd put on, especially as I hadn't paid much attention, not when my mind was filled with a million thoughts.

Starting to second-guess myself wasn't a nice feeling, not when I wondered if they were right when they'd said I needed help. Maybe there *was* something wrong with me. Maybe the boys *did* need to be away from me. My heart raced in my chest, the idea that all of this was caused by me not sitting well.

I held my breath, berating myself for thinking about the boys and knowing the pain it caused my heart. I hated being away from them. Despised the thought that someone else was comforting them when they cried. It should have been me. *I* should have been holding them. *Me*. But I wasn't. I was stuck here, with no end in sight.

Maybe I just needed to play the game too? Maybe I needed to put on a front. It was the only option I had left, especially if I wanted to see the boys anytime soon. If I was going to do this though, I needed to do it properly. I couldn't keep doing the silent game, not if I wanted the boys back in the safety of my arms.

Were they safe in your arms though? I swallowed at my thought, bashing it away as soon as it appeared. I couldn't think like that, not right now.

"Do you want a drink?" I asked, the first words I'd spoken in days.

Travis's brow rose, his head not turning from focusing on the TV. I stood, waiting for his answer, but when it didn't come after thirty seconds, I headed into the kitchen, poured myself a glass of water, then went back into the living room, only this time sitting a little closer to Travis.

My hands started to shake, my gut swirling at being that close to him, but I'd do anything to see my kids—*anything*.

Travis stretched his arm out, picking up the clicker and muting the movie. Each of his movements was slow and purposeful as he turned on the sofa, lifting his leg up so now we were only inches away from each other. This was it. This was the moment he'd tell me how much he'd changed, how he wanted us to be a proper family, how he wanted me back. Then I could tell him whatever I needed to, to sate him, and we'd get the boys back. That was my entire plan right now. I hadn't thought past it, not yet. The first port of call was getting my boys in my arms.

"Where's my drink?" His voice was soft—deceiving.

"I...I asked if you wanted one." My words came out harsher than they'd meant to, and it probably didn't help that I shrugged my shoulders too. But I was so frustrated. That wasn't what I'd expected him to say, and I'd been locked in this prison with him as my guard, not able to go anywhere or do anything without him being *right there*. It had crossed the line when I needed the bathroom for the first time, and since then, the anger had been building up to impossible heights.

But I had to tamp it down. I couldn't let it bubble up, not like I'd been used to doing while I was on my own. I was back under the control and rules of this house now. I had to remember that.

“Are you giving me attitude, Peyton?” His tone changed in an instant, his eyes darkening, warning me of what was to come.

I backed away a little as I shook my head. “No, sorry.” I started to stand, my fight-or-flight kicking in. “Let me—”

His hand shot out, his fingers gripping my wrist so tight that I could feel my pulse thrumming through my hand. “Did I say you could leave?”

“I wasn't leaving,” I murmured, berating myself for continuing to talk. “I was just going to get you a drink.”

He stared at me, his eyes narrowing as he looked me up and down, a grin appearing on his face. “I don't want a drink.”

Frowning, I tried to readjust myself, his grip getting harder. “But you said...”

“I said what?” he asked tilting his head to the side. He was taunting me. I hated when he did that because he made me second-guess myself. Just like I'd been doing not ten minutes ago about our entire history. Mind games. He was a master at them.

I should have known the calm Travis wouldn't last long. How fuckin' stupid was I to think that he would have changed? Every time...every single time I thought things would be different, and they never were. Well, actually, that was a lie. They were different—they were worse.

“You asked where your drink was.” I yanked on my arm once, twice, three times, then he let go, causing me to fall back into the cushions. The back of my head smacked against the hard edge of the stupidly huge sofa that Travis had wanted. “Fuck.” I rubbed at the spot, the thumping taking my breath away for a second.

“What did you just say?” he growled, leaning over me and boxing me in.

Dammit. I closed my eyes, realizing my mistake way too late, but the impact had knocked the sense out of me, or maybe it had knocked some sense *into* me, because as his hand grasped around my throat, squeezing, I moved as fast as I could.

Jerking my knee up, I kicked him in the nuts, knowing it was the only thing that would have stopped him at that point. And I was right, he fell to the left, just long enough for me to scramble up off the sofa and make a run for it. I had no idea where I was going, but I had to get as far away from him as I could. The problem was, it didn't leave many options considering I couldn't get out of this stupid house.

"You should know by now," he taunted, his voice getting closer. "No matter where you run to, I will always fuckin' find you." He laughed, the sound manic, causing goose bumps to spring up all over my skin.

My breaths were gasps as I took the stairs two at a time, trying to make it to one of the bathrooms upstairs so I could lock myself in, but as soon as I got to the top of the stairs, his palm landed on my back, knocking me forward. My knees slammed against the floor, pain shooting through them at the impact.

I wanted to curl up in a ball. I wanted to protect myself against him. But all of those instincts I'd learned over the years had faded while I'd been away. My reactions weren't as fast, and before I knew it, he'd spun me onto my back and was on top of me, his face inches away from mine.

"Please, Travis," I begged, already knowing that it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference. "Please don't." Everything was happening too fast, just like it always did. Travis had always had a way with keeping me on edge, then pouncing when I least expected it. It was one of his talents, if you could call it that.

His nostrils flared, the anger presenting so clearly. *This* was the Travis I knew, and it had taken such a little thing to bring him out.

“You can beg all you want, Peyton.” He reached between us, grabbing the waistband of my leggings. “But you know how much I like that.” He pushed his hips forward, showing me exactly how much he liked it.

Vomit gurgled up, threatening to let loose at his words and actions. I’d been so furious over the last few days that I hadn’t taken stock of everything. It was the calm before the storm, and now...now I was smack-dab in the middle of a tornado, its intensity sure to break me into a million pieces.

I opened my mouth, about to plead again, but his palm connecting with the side of my face and lip soon shut me up. He’d been trying to get me to talk for days, and now he didn’t want to hear a thing. I couldn’t win with him—I never had been able to.

My hands grasped his biceps, trying with all my might to keep him at bay, but it was no use because within seconds he was ripping the material of my leggings, batting away my hands, then shoving his own pants down.

He was going to rape me. It wasn’t the first time, and with clarity, I knew it wouldn’t be the last.

I’d had hope before all of this, a secret plan to run away and escape from the life I’d wound up in. But now...now I didn’t have an option. They’d effectively kidnapped my sons and were using them to get me to behave, as if I was a sullen teenager who had broken curfew.

So when he lined himself up and pummeled his erection into my dry hole, I knew this was my destiny, I just had to accept it. The more I fought, the worse it would be. I closed my eyes, imagining anything but what was happening in that moment.

I’d take all the hits. I’d take all of the punishment. I’d take the rapes. If it meant seeing my kids and being their mom, I would take it all until my last dying breath.

Travis thought he could break me, but he had no idea what a mother would do for their kids.

CHAPTER 13

RAFAEL

“What the hell were you thinking?” I winced at Lorenzo’s booming voice, the temptation to put my hands over my ears almost too strong to resist. “You made a scene in front of Luca’s, not only that, but the fuckin’ police were called.”

The boss paced behind his desk, smoke more or less coming out of his ears. He wasn’t just mad, he was *big mad*. Fuck.

“The guy could press charges, then you’d be in jail.” He paused, staring daggers right at me. “What use would you be to me behind bars?”

My nostrils flared at his words, reality sinking in. If I was behind bars, then I couldn’t find Peyton, and right then, that was all that mattered. I needed to bide my time in this office, take what Lorenzo had to give, then do what I needed to. Any other time, being called into this office to be put in my place would have made me feel like utter shit. But not this time. This time I was just counting down the seconds until he was done.

I swallowed, my attention turning to Dante who was in front of the desk and Mateo who stood like a silent warrior near the door. My attention was zooming in and out, my mind wandering elsewhere. Dammit. Stay focused, Raf.

“I fucked up,” I admitted, knowing it was what they wanted to hear. “I just...” I blew out a breath, running my hand through my hair. “There’s no excuse for it. I just fucked up and lost my temper.” It was the best I could do, but also the only thing I knew they would accept. Excuses didn’t fly with the Berettas.

Dante huffed out a laugh. “You are a Pagani...” He trailed off, the implication clear. Paganis were known for their anger, but my father had honed his in, just like Romeo had, but that didn’t mean they didn’t have times where they lost it too, where the tether they kept on it snapped, allowing their rage to run free until they could get it back under control.

I was the same. The only difference was, I didn’t have as much practice at it as they did.

Lorenzo crossed his arms over his chest, staring me down. “Your punishment is to do a shift at Luca’s every week for the next six months.”

I nodded, accepting it. It could have been a lot worse. Most of the soldiers hated working at Luca’s, but I didn’t mind, especially when it was the normal piano bar nights. It was the club nights that I hated with all the rowdy college kids.

There was no doubt in my mind that Lorenzo wanted to dish out more than that, and if I really thought about it, the fact that he’d been so lenient should have alarmed me, but it didn’t. I had other things to worry about.

“You can go now,” Lorenzo said, sitting down behind his desk, his attention no longer on me. “I don’t want to see you in my office again for the foreseeable future.” It was a warning to keep a low profile, one that I knew I wouldn’t be keeping, not if I followed through with my plan, but he didn’t need to know that, no one did.

I left his office without a word, my head down, wanting to get out of the Beretta mansion as quickly as possible. I’d woken up with a completely different energy this morning. It had been three days since Ace had turned up and taken Peyton and the boys. It may not have seemed that long, but it felt like a goddamn lifetime to me.

Maybe it was knowing that I hadn't stopped them. Or maybe it was the fact that I was trusting my gut, believing everything she'd told me, which meant that she was in more danger than anyone knew.

I ground my teeth together, walking faster, needing to get on with my mission as quickly as possible.

As soon as I was in my car, I sped down the driveway, through the now open ornate metal gates that kept everyone out of the mansion, then got comfortable for the long drive ahead.

My mind was a whirl of thoughts as I drove, trying to piece everything together, trying to make sense of it all. Peyton had turned up out of the blue, but she'd also kept to herself. That was until she'd seen Bailey hurt. That had been the trigger for her.

I gripped the steering wheel harder, my knuckles cracking in the process. There was no way the reaction she had that day that Gio hurt Bailey was anything but genuine. And then there was Kian...fuck, how could I have believed anything but what I'd seen with my own two eyes?

Pulling into the familiar street, I didn't take a look at any driveway but hers. Her car was still parked there, and I was sure it wouldn't be the only thing they'd left behind. Maybe there was evidence that I could collect to prove to everyone that we weren't being played by her. Failing that, maybe I could figure out where she was.

My car stayed at the sidewalk, and I didn't take a single bit of notice at what was around me as I ran up her driveway and to her front door. It only took me seconds to pick the lock, which was probably why she'd had so many locks on the door from the inside.

The smell hit me like an avalanche speeding down a cliff. It was Peyton: her flower scent that I loved to breathe in so much when she was around. My head started to spin as I made my way inside, first checking the living room, then the playroom, and finally heading into the kitchen.

I paused, remembering the morning after I'd spent my first night here. Peyton was in the middle of the kitchen, my T-shirt covering her body. She was naked under the piece of clothing, and everything in me had wanted to wrap my arms around her, fling her over my shoulder, then have my way with her.

But I hadn't been able to because the boys had been at the table, eating their breakfast. My gaze snapped to the highchair that was in the same position it always was. There was even some food still left on it.

Fuck. I hated this. I should have done more. I should have fuckin' listened to her.

I'd failed the one woman I cared most about in this world. She'd probably never forgive me for what I did, but that wouldn't stop me from finding her—from saving her.

With renewed energy, I jerked forward, opening each cupboard, looking on the top of them, searching for something—anything—that could help me. But there was nothing there, other than food and random letters. Dammit. I spun around, ready to run upstairs when a body in the doorway stopped me.

“What are you doing?”

I cracked my neck to the side, not wanting to answer my big brother. “Move,” I ground out, standing as still as a statue as my father walked in behind him, his gaze trained on me. I hadn't seen him since Romeo's party, the day that her ex had shown up. Even then though, I hadn't spoken to my father; our relationship had gone to shit, and if I was honest, in that moment I didn't care at all. I had way bigger things to worry about.

“Not until you tell me why the fuck you broke in here.” Romeo glanced around the room. “What are you looking for?”

“Evidence,” I snapped back. “Now move.”

“No.”

I inhaled a deep breath, taking three steps back until I hit the counter, needing the space from him before I exploded. I didn't have time for this—time for him. I had to find something to lead me to her.

“You don’t get it,” I told him, gripping on to the edge of the counter, needing something to keep me rooted to the spot. “I *have* to find her.”

“She played you, Raf.” Romeo shook his head, disappointment shining in his eyes. “How can you not see that?”

I ground my teeth together, wanting to say a thousand things all at once, but I couldn’t. “No, she didn’t.” I stepped forward, remembering how I’d stood between Peyton’s legs only feet away from where I was standing when we first kissed. It sounded stupid, but I could still feel her here, as if she’d never left. “You didn’t see what I saw. You didn’t hear what I heard.”

“Raf,” Bailey’s soft voice spoke out from behind Dad. I had no idea when she’d turned up, but if I was honest, I didn’t want to hear what she had to say. She’d made her mind up. “Please just listen to Romeo and your dad. We don’t want you to get hurt.”

I laughed, I couldn’t help it. The goddamn audacity of what they were saying to me. I tried to keep a lid on it. Tried to be calm, but dammit, it was hard when I had no one in my corner. Was that how Peyton felt when I hadn’t intervened with her brother? Fuck.

“I love you like the sister I never had, Bailey, but that don’t mean I’m gonna stand here and listen to this bullshit.” I shook my head, my hands clenched at my sides. “No one ever doubted you. No one questioned what you’d been through. So why are you questioning her?”

I waited for an answer, but all she did was look at Romeo, questions shining in her eyes. It was him who answered, “Ace told Lorenzo that she’s mentally ill, Raf. What more do you need?”

“What do I need?” I blinked, moving closer, now only three feet away from my big brother. “All I need is what I saw with my own two eyes.” I tapped the side of my head. “I saw the way she reacted when Gio hurt Bailey.” I paused, my gaze veering to Bailey, then back to Romeo. “I saw the way she

flinched when someone got too close to her.” My breaths came heavier. “I saw the way Kian reacted when she got hurt on that goddamn brick outside.”

“Kian?” Bailey asked, her voice a whisper. “He was always so...he...” She blinked rapidly, almost as if she was finally seeing properly. “The day at the barbecue...”

“Yeah. That was nothing to the way he screamed when Peyton was hurt, but it was his words when I got them all inside that I should have listened to when Ace came. I should have fuckin’ done something.” I spun around, throwing my fist at the first thing it could connect with—a cupboard door. It blasted through the wood, splintering.

“What did the boy say?” Dad asked, speaking for the first time.

My muscles tensed as I met his stare, my heart beating a mile a minute in my chest. I didn’t want to talk to him. I didn’t want to have to explain all of this to them.

“Peyton was trying to reassure him that she’d be okay, and then...fuck...” I scrubbed my hand down my face, feeling like the worst person in the world as more memories pushed to the forefront of my brain. “He said: ‘when Daddy would hit you and you made the ouchies better? Will it be like that, Mommy?’”

“The boys’ dad...that’s Ace’s best friend?” Dad asked, and I nodded in confirmation. “What else?” He stepped past Romeo, coming closer to me. “What else was said?”

My shoulders started to loosen at the prospect that they were believing me. Dad wouldn’t have asked me what else if he didn’t, right? I hated the fact that I was hoping like hell that he was on my side, but I wasn’t sure. I didn’t know what to think anymore, so I opened my mouth, telling them everything I’d remembered, every little move she’d made or comment she’d said.

“I asked her if he’d hurt her.” I squeezed my eyes closed at the memory. At the utter devastation on her face when I’d outright asked her.

“What did she say?” Bailey asked, her voice a mere whisper.

“She said...” I opened my eyes, zoning in on my father. “All the time. That the first time he’d hit her, he swore he wouldn’t do it ever again.”

Dad nodded. “But he did.” It was a statement, not a question. “Do you think the brother knows?”

Hope built in my chest at Dad’s words. He believed me. I could see it shining in his eyes. “I don’t know. I...I don’t think so. The way she spoke about her brother doesn’t equate to him knowing.”

“So her husband played Ace too,” Dad tutted. “Ace ain’t gonna like that when he finds out.”

Romeo spun around, his normally expressionless face full of rage. “The fuck? You’re believing this?”

“Son,” Dad started, placing his hand on his shoulder. “I only met the girl in passing once, but even I could see the darkness and pain living inside her. That doesn’t come from just anywhere.” He paused, his attention moving to me. “Your brother needs us, Romeo.”

Silence hung in the air, everyone’s emotions high, until Romeo turned back to face me and asked in a calm tone, “Is she really worth everything that will come our way? We’re going against direct orders.”

I didn’t hesitate. “As worth it as Bailey was to you.” I let that hang in the air, knowing what we’d done and what we’d risked to save Bailey. “I love her, big bro. I love her but I let her down. She’s in danger.” I didn’t want to think about the reality of what she was most probably trapped in, because as soon as my mind went there, I couldn’t do anything else, the rage taking over and turning me into a bull that could only see red.

“We’ll find her,” Dad said, stepping forward.

“The three of us,” Romeo tacked on to the end, moving closer and bringing Bailey with him. I chanced a quick look at

her, seeing the sorrow in her eyes. The veil had been lifted, and now she could see clearly, just like I could.

So I pulled my cell out, clicked on Peyton's name, and shot off a message to her:

RAFAEL

I'm coming to find you. And as soon as I have you in my arms again, I'm never letting you go.

I hit the send button, and just as I did, I realized that this number was the burner cell that I'd given her. Her usual cell was... I stepped forward, opened the microwave, and there it was, sitting in the middle, exactly where Remy had told me to put it.

"This is the first clue," I announced, holding it in the air.

I prayed that it would hold the information we needed, but I wouldn't get my hopes up, not yet, not until I knew her exact location and I was on my way to save her.

PEYTON

I prodded at the fresh cut on my lip, the bright purple bruise next to it fading into the old brown bruise that was displayed on my cheek, courtesy of Travis's fist. Every part of me wished it would go back to how it was in those first two days, where I used my silence as a weapon and felt like I held at least one card. But now...now I knew I didn't hold any.

Travis was in charge. He said when I could leave the bedroom. He told me when I could eat. When I could drink. When I could use the bathroom. When I could shower. He was

commanding every aspect of my life, controlling it all. And I was helpless but to let him.

I wasn't stupid enough not to know it was wrong, that I was in danger. But what was I supposed to do? There was no way out, not unless I left my kids behind. And the thought of them being left to Travis...I shivered. There was no way I was going to let that happen. And besides, I'd witnessed him arming all of the doors and the windows. So even if I wanted to attempt to escape, he'd catch me in seconds.

He wasn't going to risk that though, not after I'd run in the middle of the night the first time to flee him. He'd gotten wiser and I...I'd lost all of my fight. I'd lost all sense of purpose.

So for now, I'd accept the beatings. I'd accept his rules. I'd play stupid for him. Then when the time was right, I'd be able to get my sons back, and then I could...I could what? Escape? Run away just for him to find us again. Only the second time would be so much worse, worse than it already was.

I was trapped—we were trapped—with no way out. And I...I was going to die at his hands. He was going to make sure he'd be the one to steal my last breath from me. I knew it deep down in my very soul, and now it just felt like a waiting game, counting down the days, hours, minutes, until he finally lost himself to his rage and went too far.

All the help I was sure I would have was gone. My husband had played every single person he came into contact with, but then, that was what a master manipulator did.

“She’s not good,” I heard him murmur. My eyes widened, my attention focused on what was happening in the bedroom. I hadn't been able to shut the bathroom door on the account of Travis ripping it off its hinges in a rage two days ago. So it meant I could hear him as clear as day. “She’s getting worse, Ace.”

Worse? I shook my head, rage bubbling up inside me. I'd get in trouble for what I was about to do, but that was my brother on the other end of the line which also meant...

My eyes widened, all of the dark thoughts circulating my brain making way for just one: the boys were on the other end of the phone. “Can I talk to him?” I blurted out.

Travis spun around, his muscles tense as he stared me down, his gaze hitting off every single bruise that he’d given me. At this point, being able to see a patch of skin that wasn’t in a state of repair was unlikely.

He blinked, his jaw ticcing. “I’m busy,” he grunted. “Why don’t you go and take a nap?” He pointed at the bed to emphasize his point, but I wasn’t going to let this drop. It had been nearly two weeks since I’d spoken to my boys. Fourteen days since I held them in my arms. I was desperate.

“Please,” I begged, coming closer to him, but only so that I could make sure Ace could hear me. “I just want to talk to Kian. I miss him.” I paused, my hands in front of me in a prayer motion. “Please just let me say hi to him.”

Travis shook his head, his anger flashing over his features and staying there. I’d pay for this, but if it meant I got to hear Kian’s sweet voice, then I didn’t care.

He pulled the cell away from his ear, taking two steps toward me as he held it out, then whispered, “That was a mistake, Peyton.” I swallowed, my hands starting to shake in terror for what would come after this. “A big fuckin’ mistake.”

I swallowed against the lump in my throat as I took the cell out of his hand, wanting to look away but not able to because his stare had me caught in his web. “Hello?” I croaked out down the line.

“P?” my big brother’s voice murmured. “How you doing?”

Blinking, my muscles ached to turn around, to put my back to Travis, but I couldn’t. He stepped closer, making sure he could hear both sides of the conversation. There wasn’t more than an inch between us. His body was imposing, towering over me, his chest twice as wide as mine, the outline of the muscles he’d built over the years showing through the material of his T-shirt.

“I’m okay.” It was a lie, but then, I was used to lying. The one time I’d told the truth I wasn’t believed, so what was the point? At least the lies were taken without a second thought. “Can I talk to Kian?”

There was a pause, some shuffling, then, “Sure. One sec.”

I heard murmuring in the background, then a new voice said, “Mommy?”

My heart skipped a beat in my chest, my lips instantly pulling into a huge grin. “Hey, Kian.” Tears sprung to my eyes, but I knew I couldn’t let them fall. I couldn’t let him hear that I was upset. There was no way. “Are you having fun with Uncle Ace?” I tried my hardest to sound upbeat, to put on a front to the only other person in this world that knew what I’d gone through—had witnessed it.

“He lets me eat cookies before dinner.” He sounded disappointed at that fact.

I laughed, the sound forced. “So you’re having dessert before dinner?”

“I guess...” He trailed off, someone saying something in the background. “Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“When are you coming to get us?” His voice sounded so sad, and it immediately broke me. We’d never been apart, always joined at the hip.

“I...” My gaze set on Travis, trying to figure out what *he* wanted me to say, but also what the answer would be. I was desperate to see my boys, even more so now that I’d heard Kian’s voice. “I’m not sure.” Travis didn’t give anything away. “Soon, okay?” Kian was silent for so long that I pulled the cell away from my ear to double-check that the call hadn’t dropped. “Kian? You still there, bud?”

“I’m here,” he whispered. “I just want to see you, Mommy.”

I hiccuped a sob, hoping to hell that he hadn’t heard me. “I know. But Mommy is...Mommy is sick at the moment.” It

was the only thing I could say, the lie that the men around me had been telling.

“You’re sick?” I could hear the concern in my gentle six-year-old’s voice, and I cursed myself, realizing that I shouldn’t have said that to him. He was the one person that would take it to heart, but also, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d overheard someone talk about me.

I had no idea what was happening outside of this hell—otherwise known as the house Travis had moved us into when I was pregnant with Kian. He was sheltering me, keeping me locked away, all so that he could do what he wanted, when he wanted, and there was no one around to stop him.

He was having the time of his life, especially when he ripped the cell out of my grip, ended the call, then pressed closer to me. His patience was gone, snapping like a tree in the middle of a storm.

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Done what?” I backed up a step, then another. If I distracted him...

“*That.*” He rolled his shoulders back, preparing himself, loosening up. Fuck. “I didn’t give you permission to talk.”

“I know but—”

“I’ll teach you to keep your goddamn mouth shut,” he roared, his hand grasping me around my throat. His force caused me to slam into the wall, the back of my head hitting off the hard surface. “I’ll put a goddamn muzzle on you if I have to.” He pushed himself against me, his entire body plastered against mine. “You’d have thought you’d learn your lesson by now.”

“Travis!” I screamed as his grip tightened, taking all of the air out of me. I clawed at his hand, needing some kind of relief, to simply inhale a breath, but it didn’t matter what I did, he continued on.

“Never do that again, do you understand me, Peyton?” I nodded, so fast my head spun, or maybe that was the lack of oxygen. “I don’t know how long it’s going to take for you to

get it.” He shook his head, tutting at me. “But...” He pressed his face closer, the edges of my vision turning black. “You’ll learn your place once and for all, even if it takes an entire year.” He slowly unfurled his fingers from around my neck, sure to leave bruises behind. “And until you know how to behave, you can kiss goodbye to ever seeing or speaking to Kian and Reed. Your privileges are revoked.”

I gasped, my hand moving to my throat, rubbing at the soreness. He was breaking me apart piece by piece, not caring in which direction I shattered. All that mattered to him was having ultimate control. And he was getting it more and more every day.

But as I slid down the wall, my blurry eyes on him, I knew I wouldn’t survive. I’d take my last breath in this house, whether at his hands...or my own.

CHAPTER 14

RAFAEL

RAFAEL

I don't know if you're reading these, but if you are, just know that I'm not gonna stop until I find you.

RAFAEL

Dad and Romeo are helping me now. We're doing some digging. I have your old cell.

RAFAEL

I had a dream about you last night.

RAFAEL

Holding you in my arms all night was the best night of my life.

RAFAEL

I miss you.

My thumb flew across the screen as my gaze scanned all of the undelivered messages, signaling that she didn't have her cell on. But that didn't stop me from messaging her whenever I thought about her. I needed her to know that I was here. I wasn't giving up on her. Or us. I'd fucked up, I'd let her brother take her away, and I would do *anything* to get her back and make sure she was safe, even if it meant in the end I'd have to walk away from her.

I shook my head, hating that final thought.

"Put your cell down," Dad gritted out. "Someone will see the light and the last thing we need is to be spotted."

He was right, so I quickly pressed the button on the side to lock my cell, eradicating the light. It was dark out with just me and him casing out a house that we were told was part of Ace's operation. This wasn't the first time over the last few days that we'd been sitting in an enclosed space together.

We'd talked, but not about anything other than the plan going forward and how to get Peyton back as soon as possible without causing an all-out war. There was an unspoken understanding between us that the family issues we had were put on the back burner. It didn't mean they wouldn't come to light again though, because they would. But not yet. There was a time and a place.

And this wasn't it. Not while we were watching the house, waiting for something to happen. We were still in our state, not crossing over to enemy lines, but if this *was* a house Ace used, within our territory, then he was breaking a treaty he and Lorenzo had.

He probably wasn't that stupid, but it was a lead, and at this stage, *any* lead was something we'd follow. It was worth checking out, and it also meant we had a cover story if anyone else asked why we were out here.

"It's been two weeks, Dad," I murmured, trying not to lose hope, but it was so damn hard when all we kept hitting was brick wall after brick wall. I'd given Remy her cell the day I'd found it, and I still hadn't heard anything from him. My hope

was starting to dwindle into nothing. “What if we never find her?”

“We will,” Dad growled out. “And we’ll find those two boys too.” He paused, turning to face me. “And we’ll bring them home to you.”

Both he and I knew the implication of his words. We’d be going against Lorenzo’s orders—we already were—but if it meant they were safe, then that was all that mattered. I frowned as something occurred to me and couldn’t help but blurt out, “Why are you helping me?”

“You’re my son,” Dad said, so simply it was as if he was talking about the weather outside.

“But you don’t have to be here.” I hated the way my stomach rolled at the thought of my dad getting into trouble with Lorenzo. My father may have been Antonio Pagani, one of the most feared men in the country, but that didn’t mean he had no one to answer to. There was a hierarchy for a reason. “You’re putting yourself at risk—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there, son.” He turned in his seat to face me fully, although I was only able to see part of his face thanks to the streetlight outside of the car. “I fucked up when I was younger.” He paused, the tension in the car getting thicker as we both thought about the unspoken truth of his words. “I didn’t do right by your mom. I should have listened to my gut back then and not Luca.” He paused, the tension in the car rising to brand-new heights. “I should have done a hell of a lot of things differently.”

I swallowed, digesting his words and letting them roll around my mind, trying to figure out if I believed him or not. There was so much I didn’t know, so much that had been kept secret. But maybe it was supposed to be that way. Maybe knowing would have done nothing but cause more pain.

“So when it comes to you and Romeo,” he continued. “I... I know I need to do better. It’s why I made the effort with Bailey. She’s part of our family now. And you...your gut is telling you Peyton is in danger, right?”

I didn't hesitate. "Right."

"Then we listen to it and I support you in any way I can." He shuffled in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with what we were talking about. But it was needed. For both of us. "I'm trying, Rafael. I'm trying my hardest to mend what I broke all those years ago."

"I can see that," I told him, inhaling a breath. I wanted to say more, but I just didn't know *what* to say.

We were both silent for a while, thinking things over. I'd held on to so much hate over the last few months that it hadn't just caused me to pull away from my dad, but my mom too. And it was her who I'd always been closest to.

"I—"

"Someone's coming," Dad interrupted, lowering in his seat.

All talk was forgotten about as I snapped my head around, staring at the house as a man left, then got into an SUV, much like the one that Ace had been inside of ten days ago.

"We gonna follow him?" I asked, already reaching for my belt, then clicking it into place.

"You bet your ass we are," Dad replied, starting the engine.

I grinned, feeling like everything was slipping into place. I wasn't on my own in this, and neither was Peyton. We were going to save her, even if she didn't realize it yet. I just hoped we could get some solid leads before we were too late, because the alternative didn't bear thinking about.

PEYTON

The room was spinning so fast I could have sworn I was on a ride at the fair. My eyes were closed, my back flat against the mattress as I kept deathly still, too scared to make any sudden movements. I wasn't sure what had woken me up, but the moment I started to come around, I felt like I'd been hit by a damn truck.

My muscles ached in places they never ached, my stomach rolled, my head spinning. This wasn't good.

Slowly, I started to sit up, keeping my eyes closed as I inhaled deep breaths. I didn't feel this bad after one of Travis's beatings, which incidentally had only been two nights ago. He was due to lose his shit at any moment, it was just a matter of time.

The longer I'd been alone in this house with him—four weeks at this point—the more I noticed the patterns, the mood swings. The way he would go silent for a while right before blowing his casket on me. He'd been silent for an entire day again, a sure sign his anger was on its way.

“Peyton?” His sleep-ridden voice had my eyes snapping open, my head turning to face him where he was lying on the other side of the bed. The move had my hand pressing against my stomach, vomit threatening to come up. Uh-oh.

“I don't feel well,” I managed to rush out as I darted off the bed and into the bathroom. The door still hadn't been hung back on its hinges, and deep down I knew it never would be. That would mean that I'd actually have privacy, and that wasn't going to happen with Travis anymore. He'd been crystal clear on that.

Travis hadn't left my side from the moment I'd gotten into his car at the gas station. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered why Ace hadn't said anything about him not being at work, but then, he was probably using me—and my non-existent bad mental health—as an excuse.

I made it to the toilet just in time to empty the contents of my stomach down it, sweat beading on my forehead as the sound of his footsteps came closer. Sunlight was beaming into the bathroom through the window, informing me that morning

had broken hours ago. Somehow my sleep had gotten all upside down, the concept of time intermingling and getting lost.

There was no routine, not with it being just me and Travis. Well, that was unless you counted the days between the beatings. That was our new routine now.

“What’s wrong with you?” Travis’s gruff tone told me that he wasn’t happy with what was happening in front of him, but unlucky for him, I couldn’t stop the damn vomit from coming.

“I’m sick,” I managed to say, resting my head on the top of the toilet bowl and giving him eye contact. He leaned against the doorframe, a pair of slacks resting on his hips along with an open shirt. There was something about him when he first woke up that made me remember what it was like when we first got together. How he was kind and caring, and protective, but not in a controlling way, more like an “I want to look after you” kind of way.

That got lost somewhere along the way and in its place was the Travis who had to control and manipulate everything. Sometimes I missed the old Travis. Times like this were when I missed him most. I just wanted the man back who had doted on me. Who had held my hand while we were sitting on the sofa. Who didn’t berate me for everything I did.

A muscle in his jaw ticced as he stared me down, indecision on his face as he stepped forward and searched in the cabinet above the sink. *This was the old Travis.* “Where’s the Pepto Bismol?” he asked, the sound of bottles crashing against each other ringing out in the room.

“It should be—” I cut myself off as my face went cold, my stomach swirling, and then I was throwing up again. Although, I had no idea how I was managing it because there couldn’t have been much content left to bring back up.

“It’s not here,” Travis announced, his footsteps retreating so that he was just outside of the bathroom. It wouldn’t even have occurred to him to come and help me—not like he would have in those first few months we’d gotten together—but if I was honest, I didn’t want him to.

I wasn't sure how long passed between throwing up, then resting my head, then throwing up again, but it must have been long enough to make Travis second-guess what was happening because he said, "You need something to settle your stomach." I nearly laughed at the way he said it. There wasn't an ounce of concern in his tone, just matter of fact. He couldn't have me sick, not if he wanted to repeat everything to my body that he'd done over the last few weeks. He'd taken from me over and over again—raped me, beat me. He'd stolen all of my choices, but most importantly, my free will. There was nothing left to give, and maybe this was my body's way of saying enough was enough.

It needed to end. Whether that was through his hands, or my own.

Standing slowly, I held on to the counter, turning the tap on and throwing some water on my face to feel a little normal again. Not that it worked, but it was worth a try, right? I could see Travis in the reflection of the mirror on the front of the cabinet door, but when I opened it, he was gone.

I searched for the pink bottle but came up empty. And just as I was about to say that there wasn't any, Travis appeared again, this time completely dressed, his expression a mask of indecision.

"I'll go get you some Pepto Bismol." He sounded so unhappy about it, his chest heaving on each breath, but I didn't have time to think about it, not when my stomach was rolling again and I was darting for the toilet.

I wasn't sure how long I stayed there, my head feeling like part of the toilet system by the time I finally felt okay enough to stand. But it was as I was swilling my mouth out that it occurred to me...the last time I'd been sick like that was when I was pregnant with Reed.

Stilling, I stared at myself in the mirror, my eyes as wide as saucers as I tried to do the math on my last period.

It couldn't have been that long ago. It just wasn't possible.

My shaking hands opened the cabinet again, but this time my fingers clasped on to the thing I needed most: a pregnancy test. Everything was blurring together as I robotically moved back to the toilet, did what I needed to on the stick, then rested it next to the sink.

I systematically washed my hands, waiting for the time to be up. Part of me didn't want to look at the screen and get the answers my brain already knew, but I was reaching for it anyway, staring at it, and not believing what I was seeing on the digital display.

Pregnant. 5–6 weeks.

Pregnant. I was pregnant. I placed my hand on my stomach, feeling butterflies swarming at the prospect of another baby, but all of the happiness washed away to sadness the moment I realized I was bringing another human into *this* situation. Having Travis as a father—

Wait...

5–6 weeks...

Holy shit. It wasn't Travis's baby. It was Rafael's.

I blinked, not even thinking as I rushed over to my bed, pounced on it, then flung the door of my bedside table open. I then reached on the underside where I'd taped the cell that no one realized I'd had. I'd stored it there the night Travis and I had arrived here, knowing that when the time was right, I'd be able to pull it out and use it.

And this was the moment. This was my out.

I hated the idea that a child was going to save me, but...it was. I finally had hope bubbling up inside me. But also love. So much love for a baby who hadn't taken its first breath. I had part of Raf inside me. We'd created this together and...I started to tear up. I needed to tell him. I needed him to know what I knew. And I only had a limited amount of time.

Grabbing the charger, I darted back into the bathroom and plugged it in, waiting for the screen to power on as I picked the test back up, not believing what I was seeing.

A baby. I was going to have a baby and—

“What the fuck is that?”

My eyes widened, my body jerking so violently that the pregnancy test flung out of my hand, clattered to the floor, then slid toward Travis. His eyes were so dark I could see my reflection in them as he dropped the grocery bag with a big pink bottle inside it, then stepped forward, reaching down for the white-and-blue stick, then staring right at it.

“Pregnant,” he murmured, his lips lifting on one side, but that smirk soon dropped as he continued to look at it—as he read the words and numbers. I saw the exact moment it clicked. The way his hand formed a fist at his side; the way his eyes narrowed as he stared at me. But it was his growled “You fucked someone else?” that truly terrified me.

He dropped the test onto the floor, and I watched in horror as he lifted his boot-covered foot and crushed it. The plastic crunched together, the sound so loud that my heart pounded in my chest. I needed to get away from him. I needed to get the hell out of here, but I was trapped in this room with nowhere to go.

“It was that piece of shit who was on your driveway that day I came to that shitty fuckin’ house, wasn’t it?”

I shook my head, not knowing what to say or what to do. I could have denied it, but there was no use. He’d seen the time frame on the test, and those tests were so accurate. I couldn’t lie myself out of this, and if I was honest, I didn’t want to. Fate had done this. Destiny had played a part in all of this.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” I whispered, trying to buy time as I backed myself into the corner. Some people may have thought that was a mistake, but at least with a corner you had two walls that could protect parts of your body.

“Yeah, you fuckin’ do, you dirty little whore!” Spittle flew out of his mouth at his words, his body jerking forward as he ran at me, tackled me farther into the wall, then grabbed the sides of my face. His fingers crushed into my skull, his thumbs

pressing against my cheekbones as he pulled me forward, then lobbed me back, cracking my head against the hard surface.

“Travis!” I pleaded, grabbing for him again, however he just let go, not giving me traction, but also not letting up as his hand slapped me once, then again, and a third time.

“You think I don’t know who that was?” He laughed, his hand pressing around my throat, a move that he’d loved since he’d kidnapped me and held me hostage in this house. I had a permanent necklace of bruises framing my neck. All different colors and different stages of healing.

“He—”

“He what?” His pressed his nose against mine, staring me down. “He’s Rafael Pagani. Antonio’s son.” He shook his head, pushing his forehead into mine. “I did my fuckin’ research, Peyton. Why the fuck do you think I sent Ace to get you?”

I stuttered in a lungful of air, cringing at the smell of his breath on me. “You didn’t do it well enough the first time though, did you?” I smiled, losing all of my will to take this lying down. What was the point in going down without a fight? This time I had something *right here* that needed saving. It wasn’t just about Kian and Reed anymore. I knew they were safe with my big brother. Ace may not have listened to me, but he would protect them at all costs, just like he had with me when I was a kid.

But this baby? All this baby had was me.

“I’m gonna kill you,” he announced, so softly, so matter of fact that it was even more scary than if he would have shouted it. “But first, I’ll get rid of that bastard in your stomach.”

My eyes widened, my arms coming around my front, but I wasn’t quick enough.

His fist pounded into my stomach and I screamed, thrashing out and raking my nails down his face. I was done. He may have stowed away my sons, but there was no way I was going to let him hurt this baby—my baby, *Raf’s baby*. I was done with Travis having all of the control.

“I hate you!” I screamed, throwing my arms out. My hand connected with the side of his face, and I knew instantly that I shouldn’t have done that. I’d made it worse, but then, it didn’t matter what I would have done at that stage, it was all going to blow up in my face anyway.

He grabbed my arms, yanked me from the wall, then threw me across the bathroom like I was a rag doll. My shoulder hit off the edge of the toilet, a crack reverberating through me, but I didn’t have time to process it because he was on top of me, pounding his fists down on my face, my chest, my stomach, any part of my body that he could make contact with.

Each hit felt harder. Each hit felt like he was trying to punch *through* me.

“Stop!” I screamed, but that just caused him to throw his fist at my mouth, then my nose. “No,” I gurgled, feeling him lift up off me. I thought he was done, the raging monster standing above me, blocking everything out, but one swift kick to the stomach followed him getting off of me.

I rolled onto my side, bringing my legs up to offer some kind of protection, but his heavy boot stamped on me again. Reaching out, I grasped his ankle, all of my strength gone, and as I let go, my hand fell to the floor.

“You created this,” he ground out, placing his boot on my hand. “You make me act like this.” He pushed his foot into my hand, the sensation of the small bones popping and crunching making me cry out in agony. “I’m this monster because of *you*. It’s all *your* fault.”

I shook my head, the move making me even more dizzy than I already was, but then the pressure from his boot was gone. Everything was fuzzy, time moving in chunks as his outline moved a little to the left.

“I’ll make you pay for this,” he said, sauntering toward the door. “I’m gonna hit you where it hurts most.” He turned, grinning at me. “Your sons.”

And with those parting words, I heard his footsteps pound out of the bedroom and down the stairs. A door slammed shut,

then another, then the unmistakable sound of a car engine roared to life and he was gone. I was alone again, just like I used to be every time he'd hurt me. He hadn't done that since I'd been back—gotten into such a bad rage that he'd needed to escape afterward. Which told me that this entire time I'd been here with just him, he'd been in control of every hit, of every word, of every sexual assault. He hadn't "seen red" or "blacked out" he was attempting to break me down.

But this...this had broken him. And now I was afraid it was going to be the end.

Your sons.

I heaved in a breath, willing my body to move, to do something to save my sons from his wrath, but...

My hand moved to my stomach as liquid poured from somewhere on my head, pooling around me. Wetness coated me almost everywhere, but I wasn't sure what it was from, or where. I just knew that everything hurt. Everything ached. Everything was turning black.

My eyes fluttered closed, darkness threatening to take me away, but then I heard something...

Beeping bounced off the walls, over and over again. I didn't know where it was coming from, but it was enough to have my eyes opening again. And as I turned my head, a flashing light on the wall drew my attention. It was rectangle, glowing with the sound of the beeps.

My cell! I'd forgotten about my cell.

Rolling over, I cried out, the agony darting through my ribs taking my breath away. I had to wait, count myself down, then shuffle my body across the floor. Reaching up, I ground my teeth together, telling myself that I could do this. I could make it to the cell. I could get out...

I clasped the edge of the counter, trying to haul in shallow breaths so it didn't hurt so much. I groaned, the sharp pain mixed in with the throbbing almost too much to bear. My fingers slipped, blood from *somewhere* causing me to lose my

grip. But I had to do this. I had to get help. And that cell was my last hope.

My hand connected with the rectangle piece of equipment, tears streaming down my face from pain but also relief. I knew I didn't have much time. If he changed his mind and came back, there was no doubt that he would finish the job off.

I tugged on it, feeling something try to hold on to it—the charging cable—but then it pulled loose causing me and the cell to tumble to the floor. I grabbed for it, my breaths coming thick and fast at the possibilities. I didn't read any of the messages that popped up. There were so many, all with the name “Rafael” at the top of them. But then I stopped on one, the one message that told my gut to call *him* and not anyone else.

My eyes teared up as I read the words over and over again, looking at the time stamp and seeing that it was only from two days ago.

RAFAEL

I'll never stop looking for you. Ever. Because I love you too, mama.

Mama. I could almost imagine him saying it in my ear. I wanted him here. I wanted him close by. I needed him, more than I needed my next breath.

So I hit the call button, realizing too late that I'd pressed the video and not voice. And then he was answering, his words muffled as my ears rang. I'd done too much, tried too hard to move, and now it was taking me away.

I opened my mouth, croaked out, “I love you, too,” then everything went black, darkness taking over, and for the first time in weeks, I was at peace.

CHAPTER 15

RAFAEL

I rolled my shoulders, hating how much the button-up shirt I was wearing clung to me. I'd been working out more in the last couple of months which meant that my clothes were getting a little tight across my biceps and shoulders. I wouldn't have noticed if it hadn't been for the fact that I practically lived in T-shirts and jeans over the last couple of weeks.

Romeo, Dad, and I had done some deep dives into Ace and his crew. We'd found out the basics, but without help from Remy, there was no way we were going to get as much information as we needed. And every single lead we'd followed had come up empty. The house we'd been sitting in front of turned out to be nothing connected to Ace. It was a dead end, just like everything else had been. Which was why even though today was my auntie Rosa's birthday and Lorenzo was throwing a huge-ass party for her, I was going to take my opportunity to talk to Lorenzo—to tell him my theory.

And with Dad and Romeo at my side, I was hoping he'd listen. If he didn't...it didn't bear thinking about because I knew deep down that if I had to walk away from this—from my family and everything I'd grown up in—for her, I would. I'd made the mistake of letting her go once, and there was no way in hell that I would do that again.

Right now though, I needed to focus on the task at hand and the fact that the mansion was full to the brim of Mafia members. It wasn't just the Beretta Mafia that was here, but other factions of The Enterprise too. Uncle Luca—Auntie Rosa's late husband and Lorenzo's father—set up The Enterprise so that all the Mafia families in the state wouldn't be constantly fighting. It had worked, until one of the members, Gio, had tried to break out and in the process hurt Bailey.

Now though, things were calm...for them.

It soon wouldn't be though because whether Lorenzo approved it or not, I was going to Ace in the next state over. I was done trying to bide my time. If the evidence wasn't there, I'd go straight to the horse's mouth.

"Raf!" I spun around at the sound of Sofia's voice, just able to catch her as she threw herself at me. "I feel like I haven't seen you in months!"

She squeezed me and I squeezed her right back. Lorenzo's little sister—my cousin—had been the only girl in the family growing up, so it made sense that she was the most protected. Yet even she had gotten hurt underneath all of our noses.

So what did that mean for Peyton? She had no protection at all.

Fuck. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

"You good?" I asked Sofia as I pulled away, smiling down at her. I'd always been good at being able to mask my feelings, probably something that came with learning how to analyze people by their movements and actions.

"I'm good." She hooked her arm through mine. "Ma wants to see you."

I laughed, allowing her to lead me through the crowd and into the dining room where Rosa was situated, bossing the caterers around. "Are you sure you put enough salt in this?" She picked up a spoon, tasting what looked like pasta sauce, then pulling a face. "I knew you wouldn't do it right."

"Ma," Sofia called.

“One minute.” She waved her hand at Sofia, not bothering to look at her as she directed her words at the caterer. “Go outside, across the main lawn, and you will come to another house. There’s a man sitting outside, let him know I sent you and he will hand you the *correct* sauces.”

“Ma,” Sofia admonished, letting go of me and marching up to Auntie Rosa. “Tell me you did *not* use Dante and Navy’s house to cook food when Lorenzo paid for caterers!”

Auntie Rosa huffed and rolled her eyes. “Of course I did. These people don’t know how to cook! Besides, mine is always better so...” She trailed off, shrugging, then finally noticed me. “Rafael!” She shuffled over to me, faster than I thought possible, and wrapped her arms around me much in the same way Sofia had. “I’ve missed you.” She placed her hand on the side of my face, raising a brow. “Your ma misses you too.”

My stomach dropped at her words. “I know.” I’d had every intention of going and seeing her, but I’d been so occupied over the last few weeks with doing intel that if I wasn’t crashing on my new sofa—the only piece of furniture in my new house that was way too big for just me—then I was out following leads with Dad or Romeo. “Did she come today?”

Rosa shook her head, her eyes saddening. “Maybe one day she’ll make it back here.”

“I’m sure she will.” I smiled down at her, the both of us knowing the real reason behind all of my mom’s pain and anguish over the years. I didn’t want to stand here thinking about the past though, not when I had my future to take into consideration. Which reminded me... “I’m gonna go find my dad.”

She nodded, a pleased look on her face before she spun around, tasting more of the food while Sofia tried to wrangle her out of the dining room. It would never happen though, not with Auntie Rosa. Cooking authentic Italian food was her passion.

Grinning at the pair of them, I then left, heading back into the main section of the mansion, searching for my dad. When I

hadn't found him inside, I ventured outside. The lawns were packed with tables and even a gazebo with a dance floor beneath it. It looked more like a wedding than a birthday.

There were too many people for me to do a quick scan around and be able to find them, so I pulled my cell out, shooting a message off to Romeo to ask where he was. His reply was instant, so I stowed my cell away and headed toward the back of the lawn and closer to the house Dante and Navy lived in.

Romeo was there, along with Lorenzo and Dad, Aida was by Lorenzo's side and Bailey by Romeo's. Tension built within me the closer I got to them, my stomach swirling with emotions that I couldn't place. Something was off, maybe it was knowing that we were going to talk to Lorenzo about everything today. He wouldn't be happy with what we'd been doing—digging around without his permission—but the way I saw it, we didn't have a choice.

“Hey,” I greeted them all, joining them mid conversation.

No one answered me, and that was when I realized Remy was there also, looking sheepish as hell as his gaze met mine. “Sorry, Raf,” he murmured.

“Sorry?” I frowned, looking to Dad and Romeo for answers, but neither of them looked at me, they were too intent on watching Lorenzo. “What for?”

“I didn't find anything on Peyton's cell.”

The blood drained from my face, my fingers tingling as I turned to Lorenzo. *He knew.* “I can explain,” I began, holding my hands out in front of me.

“Explain?” his rough voice asked as his dark eyes turned their focus on to me. “Explain how you've been doing intel on people that you didn't have permission to follow?” His jaw locked, a sure sign that he was majorly pissed off. “You went behind my back.” His voice got a little louder, gaining the attention of the people next to us.

“I know,” I started. “But—”

“I told him to,” Dad interrupted, stepping forward. “I outrank him and I told him to do the intel.”

“Uncle Antonio,” Lorenzo warned.

We all knew the truth. This was all my doing, and although my dad was trying to protect me, he couldn't, not this time. “I'd do it again,” I said, shrugging. “I love her.”

Lorenzo laughed, practically spitting venom as he stepped toward me. “You love her?” He shook his head, his dark eyes focusing solely on me. “Loyalty and blood, Rafael. Do those two things mean nothing to you?”

I blinked, staring right back at him, knowing that this was probably the wrong answer, but I refused to say anything but the truth. “She—” The buzzing of my cell in my pocket gained my attention, but it wasn't that that had me stopping mid-sentence, no, it was the distinct sound of a video call coming through. I never video called anyone.

Then I saw her name.

Peyton.

“What the fuck?” I whipped out, causing all of their attention to come to me, but I was too busy clicking the answer call and— “Peyton? Mama?” I swallowed, my mouth going instantly dry at the image of her on my screen. The conversation around me didn't matter anymore, not now, not now that I could see her beautiful face that was goddamn destroyed. “What the fuck has he done to you?” I fumed.

I felt someone press at my back, then someone at my side, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen. I couldn't stop staring at the nightmare before me.

“Peyton! Answer me.” I shook the cell, almost as if she could feel it, but she couldn't. Her eyes fluttered closed, blood covering her face, bruises already marring her skin.

“Fuck,” Dad murmured. “We didn't get to her in time.”

We didn't. I'd been biding my time, trying to find what I needed to so that we could do this right, but I shouldn't have. I should have gone straight to Ace and *made* him listen to me.

Made him see the truth. But I wasn't sure it would have worked. What was that saying? You could lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.

"I love you, too," she croaked, then a second later, the cell tumbled to the floor, showing more of her body and the blood surrounding her.

"She's going to die," I gritted out, feeling a lump building in my throat so much that I could barely breathe. "Peyton!" I screamed, so loud it echoed outside. "Fuck!" The screen went black, the call dropping and I...I didn't know what the hell to do.

I spun around, already running toward the mansion, not taking any notice of the people around me, not until I got to the main doors and Mateo was standing there, blocking me.

"Raf," he started. "Turn around. Go to Lorenzo's office."

"No," I growled, my hands clenched at my sides. "Get the fuck out of my way."

He tilted his head to the side. "For you to do what?" He paused, taking a step away from the doors. "Do you know where you're going?" He had a point, but I wasn't willing to answer him. "Let Lorenzo find out where she is. Let him use his connections."

"He won't—"

"He will." Mateo placed his hand on my shoulder, squeezing. "He told me to stop you. This isn't just a *you* thing now. We were lied to." He nodded as he could see the realization take place. "This is now an us thing, a Beretta Mafia thing."

My feet felt like they were moving the slowest they ever had as I made my way toward the stairs and then hooked a left to Lorenzo's office. Everyone was already in there—Dad, Romeo, Lorenzo, Dante, Christian, and now me and Mateo.

"Does someone want to explain what the fuck is going on?" Lorenzo demanded, stopping in the middle of his office and clearly wanting answers right then and there.

“Ace was lied to,” I blurted out. I didn’t have time to explain everything, not right then, so I had to do the quickest and most condensed version. He wanted answers, I’d give him answers. “Peyton was being abused by her ex. It’s why she ran away with her sons. She was never ill, she was running. He found her and I think he lied to Ace who then came here and got her. Now she’s hurt and we need to get to her...now!” The more I spoke, the louder I got. I couldn’t help it. I was also hyperaware that I’d just blurted out so much information, but I wanted to say more.

Lorenzo was silent for half a minute, clearly processing everything I’d just said. “You’re certain of this, Raf? Because if I put my neck on the line and you’re wrong...”

“Did her bruised and bloodied face on that call not give you enough goddamn evidence?” I fumed.

Lorenzo stepped forward, pointing his finger at me. “Emotions are high right now, Rafael, so I will have some leniency, but don’t forget who the fuck you’re talking to.” He raised a brow, puncturing his point home as he lifted his cell in silence. Seconds later he said, “Ace? Got a problem.” A pause. “Your sister is hurt.”

My ears popped as I listened to Lorenzo talk, hoping like hell he could get through to Ace. Everything sounded like I was standing in a wind tunnel, the room spinning, the need to get to her so intense that it was almost too much to handle.

“You’re closer than we are,” Lorenzo suddenly said, walking around to his desk and writing something down. “It’ll take two hours for us to get there...what hospital will you take her to...she’ll need a hospital, Ace. I only saw her face, but fuck...it’s bad.”

My stomach rolled, anxiety and terror all rolling into one. I had to get to her. I had to make sure she knew that I loved her too.

“We’ll meet you there,” Lorenzo suddenly said, then pushed his cell into his pocket. “Dante, Christian, you stay here.” He stepped toward me. “Rafael, you ride with me and Mateo. Romeo and Uncle Antonio, follow behind.”

He didn't say another word and neither did I, not when we filed out of the mansion, not when we got into the bulletproof SUV Lorenzo always rode in, and not when we sped down the driveway.

Time was of the essence, but there was something niggling at me, something telling me that I wasn't quick enough.

PEYTON

“Peyton?”

Something landed on my shoulder—the one that had crashed into the toilet—and it woke me immediately with a start, the pain so unbearable I cried out. “Ow!” I winced, trying to sit up with my eyes still closed.

Nope. That was a mistake.

“No, stay down, P.” I blinked, the voice sounding familiar, and when my vision finally cleared, the blurriness going away a little but not completely, I saw the outline of my big brother. What was he doing here?

“Ace?” I frowned, the move causing my face to throb. “What are you doing here?”

He kneeled down beside me, his hands hovering over my body, not touching, but just held above me, almost as if he was too scared to come any closer. “What happened, P?” he asked, his tone quiet and broken.

I swallowed, my hand reaching down to my stomach as the memory of the pregnancy test flashed in my mind. *No.* “The baby,” I gasped out, reaching for Ace. My bloody fingers staining his skin as I made contact with his arm.

“Baby?” He held my hand in his, placing it on the side of his face as he came closer. “What baby, P? Who did this to you? What happened?”

I closed my eyes, feeling the tears spring to life. I couldn't hold them back, not anymore, because deep down...deep down...I *knew* Travis had accomplished his mission. If the pain in my stomach wasn't enough to go by, then the wetness on my thighs was.

"I told you," I started, feeling the roughness of my voice as I opened my eyes back up and stared at the shattered face of my older brother. "Travis." His eyes swirled with questions, then answers, and finally acceptance.

And all the while, I lay there, not moving an inch, utterly wrecked at the truth I knew, the reality of what Travis had done to me. He hadn't just hurt me this time...

"How long?" Ace growled out, letting go of my hand and moving some hair out of my face.

I sniffled, trying to move again, but it hurt too much, mentally and physically. "I...more or less from the beginning."

Ace stared down at me, his expression turning to stone. Now *that* was the Ace that everyone was scared of. *That* was the Ace who would take your life in an instant and not regret it. He was the big brother I needed in that moment, not the one who had been manipulated by my husband.

"You should have come to me, P," he growled, lifting up onto his haunches. "You should have told me."

I nodded, because I should have. I shouldn't have let it go as far as it did, but without all of that pain, I wouldn't have had Kian and Reed and— "Where are the boys?" I lifted up, not caring a single bit that the entire room was spinning around me and I had to reach out to Ace to feel like I wasn't falling. Panic rose up so much that I couldn't quite catch my breath.

Ace frowned, trying to keep me upright, but I could see how his gaze was thrashing around my body, taking stock of me. He halted on my neck, and there was no doubt he was seeing the bruises there. "They're at home."

“No.” I tried to lift up, wincing and groaning in pain, but then my head went fuzzy, more fuzzy than usual. “He’s going to hurt them. He said he was going to hit me where it hurt the most.”

Ace stood suddenly, causing me to fall back to the ground. “Over my dead fuckin’ body will that motherfucker get near my nephews.” He yanked out his cell, shot off a message, a pinged reply came a second later. “Done. He’s on the blacklist.”

Holy shit. The blacklist. My heart pounded, knowing what happened to people who went onto the blacklist—onto Ace’s blacklist. Their time on this earth was numbered, but they always knew about it. It was a game of chase to Ace. He’d told me about it once, but that didn’t appeal to me, but now...now I wanted to know all of the ins and outs.

“Ace,” I slurred, my hand reaching up but missing him. “I...I don’t feel—”

“Fuck.” His arms banded around me, lifting me effortlessly within seconds. “Stay with me, P. Don’t close those eyes.”

I tried not to, I really did, but it was so hard. He cocooned me, his pine scent the last thing I remembered as everything turned black, snatching me away from the pain that was consuming me and bestowing me with complete numbness.

CHAPTER 16

RAFAEL

My knee bobbed up and down to an erratic rhythm, my entire body on edge the closer we got to our destination. I'd heard the name of the hospital when Lorenzo had told Mateo where to go, and the navigation system was keeping us informed on how long it would take until we arrived.

Two minutes.

Nerves thrashed through me, my mind spinning and working a mile a minute.

What state would she be in when we finally got there? How bad was she hurt? Would she even want to see me?

I love you, too. Her last words to me echoed over and over in my brain as we pulled into the emergency room parking lot.

You have arrived at your destination.

My stomach bottomed out as Mateo pulled up right at the entrance, murmuring that he would come and find us after he'd parked, but I wasn't paying attention to him as I jumped out, not wasting a second or waiting for my boss.

I needed to get to Peyton. I needed to see her in the flesh. Her bloodied and bruised face had haunted me the entire two-hour drive here. But now as I got to the doors, terror jerked me back, gluing me to the spot. I'd betrayed her. I'd helped put

her in this position. If I would have fought harder for her that day in Lorenzo's office... If I would have made them see what I had seen...

But...even I had doubted the truth of what was happening thanks to the men higher ranked than me. It wasn't like I had a choice to go against them. There was a hierarchy for a reason.

No, you always had a choice.

I ground my teeth at my thought, hating how it was the truth. You always had a choice. At times it may not have felt like it, but it was all down to what you were willing to give up—willing to believe in.

“Raf?” Lorenzo called from beside me, pulling me out of my own head. “You going in?” My heart raced in my chest as I turned to face him. Whatever he'd seen on my expression must have made him realize what I was thinking because he stepped closer, telling me, “We all make mistakes, Raf. No one is perfect, but it's what you do when you realize you've made a mistake that matters. It's how you react to situations that means the most.”

“I let her down,” I croaked out, hating how I felt like I was breaking apart. I should have been strong, not just for Peyton, but for my boss too.

“You did,” Lorenzo said, matter of fact. “But now is the time that you decide to never let her down again.” He paused, raising a brow. “You walk through those doors, and as soon as you cross that threshold, how you're feeling no longer matters. All that you should be concerned about is her. Capiche?”

I nodded, swallowing against the lump in my throat as I counted to ten. I'd give it ten seconds to pull myself together, because as soon as I was in that building, I had to be as strong as I could. I had to be the one person that Peyton could rely on. I had to prove to her that I would never turn my back on her again.

It would be a long road, but I was in it without a shadow of a doubt.

So I headed inside, Lorenzo walking beside me as I went right up to the desk and asked for Peyton.

“Last name?” she asked, sounding bored as hell.

“Um...” My heart pounded in my chest as I realized I had no idea what her last name was. Ace’s was Beckett, but if she was married, then—

“Ace said they’re on the third floor,” Lorenzo said from beside me, already walking off toward the stairwell. Mateo chose that moment to walk in with my dad and Romeo, and although I wanted to get to her as soon as I could, I stayed at the back of the group, needing to build myself up to this moment. Needing to just...breathe. Now that I was here, it was all the more real, and as soon as we entered the third floor and I saw Ace, I lost it, my Pagani temper rearing its ugly head.

I ran at him, not stopping as I collided with his body, tackling him straight into the wall.

“Raf!” Lorenzo shouted, but I didn’t take any notice of him as I pulled back, rearing my fist, then slamming it right into his face.

“You should have protected her!” I shouted, my throat hurting with how loud I’d said it. “Where the fuck were you this entire time?”

Ace’s eyes connected with mine, a calmness on his face that I’d only ever seen on my dad and Lorenzo. This was a man who never let his emotions get the better of him. Or at least, didn’t let anyone see them.

“I’m gonna let you have that one hit, Rafael.” He paused, pushing me off of him with one swift motion. “Because you’re right, I should have protected her better than I had.” He rolled his shoulders, cracking his knuckles, and all the while I gave him a death stare, wanting to take every bit of my anger out on him, but knowing that *he* wasn’t the real issue. We had a common enemy now. “But know your damn place. And know that you are a guest in *my* territory.”

“We’re aware of that,” Lorenzo said, pulling me back. Ace had several men with him, just like we did. We all stood

opposite each other in the hallway, blocking the path for anyone else, but not a soul said a word about it. “But don’t think I’m not aware that your sister was living in my state the entire time she was married to that piece of shit.”

“They were just over the border,” Ace countered. “And we never conducted business there.”

Lorenzo shrugged; a move I didn’t think I’d ever seen him do before. “Doesn’t matter. Both you and I know that you should have declared it.” Lorenzo paused, coming shoulder to shoulder with me. “So how about we have a clean slate from here? For Peyton’s sake.”

Everyone was silent for so long I wasn’t sure we’d come to a truce—not that I wanted to because I needed someone to let my rage out on, and right then, he was the perfect candidate.

“Deal,” Ace said, spinning around and putting an end to it all. Fuck, I hadn’t expected that. “They have a room we can wait in.” He walked away, his men following him, then opened a door on the right. “The doctor is on his way to give me an update.”

No one said anything as we all entered the white room complete with what looked to be uncomfortable light-blue hospital chairs lining the edges of the walls. The tension was building, my anxiety climbing higher and higher, then finally, after fifteen minutes, the door opened and a man wearing scrubs walked in.

“Family of Peyton Draper?” I stepped forward, and so did Ace. The rest of the men in the room paid attention, listening intently, but they all stayed seated, knowing this was for me and Ace to hear. “I…” The doctor pulled in a deep breath, looking about as tired as we all felt. “I’ll start with the historical injuries.”

“Historical?” Ace asked, his timbre so deep I swore I could feel it vibrating. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means the injuries she’s had that show healing in a way that wasn’t done right.” I frowned. “She shows historical fractures to her ribs, one on her arm, her cheekbone, and her

collarbone.” He was silent for several seconds. “These are classic signs of an abusive relationship, but I have no hospital records to prove this.” The doctor was to the point, not elaborating, and part of me wondered if this was standard procedure to tell the family things like this—if it was ethical—then I remembered who Ace was, who we were. Rules didn’t apply to men like us. They never had and never would.

“Noted,” Ace said, tilting his head to the side. The doctor nodded, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he read between the lines. We were in Ace’s territory, and the doctor clearly knew who he was. “And her injuries from today?” Ace asked moving the doctor along.

“The new injuries will take a while to heal, but with the correct medical treatment, I expect her to have a full recovery. Her shoulder and hand are broken, her shoulder may need surgery but we will know more when the specialist comes down to see her. There was a three-inch gash on the back of the head that has been glued and stitched.” The doctor shuffled on the spot, his gaze veering between me and Ace, not focusing on one of us for more than ten seconds at a time.

“What else?” I asked. I needed to know it all. I needed to know what I was stepping into.

“She has bruises over her body, and a rape kit has been administered...” He trailed off, the impact of what he was saying hitting me like a ton of bricks. I was gonna kill that motherfucker, there was no doubt about that. And it would be painful, just the way he deserved.

“When can I see her?” I asked, already stepping forward.

The doctor let out a long breath and closed his clipboard. “She’s sleeping at the moment but I’ll get a nurse to come and get you so you can sit with her.” He nodded, turning around, but then halted at the last second. “She’s on the list for the OBGYN to come down and check her out too after the loss of the baby.”

My face paled. “Baby?” I echoed.

The doctor clipped his head in confirmation, completely unaware of what his words were doing to me. “She was about six weeks along, so it’s classed as an early miscarriage, but it can still cause issues, so best to be on the safe side and get checked.” And with that, he exited the room leaving me standing there dumbfounded.

She was pregnant. Six weeks pregnant.

I turned, doing the math in my head, my attention focusing on my dad as my legs gave way. My knees collided with the floor, everything moving in slow motion. Part of me wondered if I was jumping to conclusions, but I knew I wasn’t. I just knew it.

“She said the baby was yours,” Ace whispered from behind me, sounding just as broken as I felt in that moment. I’d promised myself that I’d be strong when I came in here, but here I was, shattering to pieces in a room full of Mafia men.

“It’s okay, son,” Dad said, crouching down in front of me. “Let it all out now,” he told me, his voice lowering, but not enough that everyone else wouldn’t be able to hear him. “Because the moment you see her, you need to be strong. You need to be there for her in a way that you’ve never been there for anyone else.” He tapped the side of my face, demanding my attention, and when I looked him dead in the eyes, he continued, “We’ll make him pay for this. But right now, Peyton needs you.”

He was right. She needed me. But...I needed her just as much. I needed to hold her. I needed to tell her that it would be okay, that I was by her side and had no intention of leaving.

But it was then that I realized that she wasn’t the only one that needed me...

I turned my head to face Ace, croaking out, “The boys...” I cleared my throat, getting to my feet as I tried to pull myself together. I had to be the strong one now. “Where are my boys?”

Ace's eyes flashed at my words, but I didn't care. Those boys didn't belong to him, or their piece-of-shit father, they were my boys now—my responsibility.

“They're safe.”

I nodded, my muscles tense. “I want extra security on them at all times,” I demanded.

Ace cracked his neck to the side, clearly pissed off with what I was saying, but I didn't give a fuck because if he couldn't make sure they were safe until I'd put something in place, then he needed to tell me now.

“Already done. Travis won't get near them.”

I had to take his word for it, for now at least because first, I needed to see Peyton. And it was that moment that the nurse walked in, so I followed her dutifully, not aware of anything around me or the route we took. It was only as she stopped outside of a private room that I finally switched on, pulling myself together, and pushing my shoulders back.

This was it. This was the moment that I could finally start making amends.

She opened the door, and it was as if she'd punched me right in the middle of the chest, knocking the air out of me.

I shuffled inside, hearing the click of the door behind me as the nurse left. And then it was just me and her.

Her eyes were closed, her chest moving up and down. I couldn't help but scan her body, taking note of the cast on her hand and the swelling on the side of her face. But that was nothing compared to the dried blood in places and the dark purple bruises mixing with darker brown ones, a sure sign that all of this wasn't fresh.

Her eyes fluttered open, trying to focus on me, but then they closed again. I hadn't expected her to lift her good hand, but she did, followed by a whispered, “Raf.”

Butterflies swarmed in my stomach at my name coming out of her mouth, and I couldn't help but dart over to her, then take her hand in mine. It was the first time I'd touched her in a

month, and fuck...I'd missed it. I'd missed her, more than she would ever know.

"I'm here, mama. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere." I leaned down, placing a soft kiss on her cheek. "I'm never letting you leave ever again. You're stuck with me, forever."

PEYTON

I could sense he was around me before I felt him clasping my hand. There was a peace in knowing that he was here. A sense of being whole for the first time since I'd been taken from the happy home I'd created when I ran away with my boys.

So much had happened in the last month, but the most important thing was me appreciating just how lucky I was to have found Raf. He may have been a decade younger than me, and a soldier in the Mafia, but to me, he was just Raf, the man who had listened to me, the man who had held me after my nightmares. The man who had fathered my child.

A lump formed in my throat, so big that I couldn't open my eyes yet, not at the thought of what I already knew to be true. No one needed to tell me that I'd lost our baby, I could already feel it—the loss, the emptiness festering inside. The sadness overtook me, and I couldn't help but squeeze his hand a little tighter, needing the connection to him now more than ever.

"Peyton?" he whispered, his tone gentle and low. "You awake?"

I nodded, not able to form words, but I opened my eyes instead, finally seeing him for the first time since Ace had carried me out of my house two days ago.

"I won't be like the rest of them ever again," he blurted out, standing so he could come even closer to me. I cringed, hating how those had been the last words I'd spoken to him.

They were so far from the truth, but at the time, it was the thing I thought would have had most impact.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his one hand holding mine as his other cupped my cheek. I flinched at the move, but not because I thought he'd hurt me, but because I was sore all over, pain radiating from parts of me that I didn't even know existed. "Fuck, mama. I won't hurt you; I promise." His tone was shattered, the sadness clear for me to hear.

"No," I croaked out, feeling like I'd been swallowing rusty nails with how dry my throat was. "It hurts all over. It's not you."

Raf's eyes widened and he reached for a bottle of water, then snapped the lid open and handed it to me. I didn't want to let his hand go to have a drink, but I didn't have a choice because the other one was in a cast, just one of the many injuries I'd sustained thanks to Travis. At least they'd decided against surgery for my shoulder. That was a positive I was clinging to. I'd only heard that in passing, not officially, but it had stuck in my mind in between naps I never seemed to be able to stop taking.

My breath stuttered out of me as I handed Raf the water back and asked, "Where's Travis?" As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew I didn't care about the answer to that, because there were two people more important. "Where are the boys? Are they okay?" My words came out rushed, not quite making sense.

Raf smiled down at me, stroking the side of my face. "Ace has them at his place with extra security." He paused, something dark crossing over his eyes. "I'm going with Ace later to get them and take them home."

"Home?" I asked, confused on what he meant.

"Yeah, mama. Home. Me, you, and our boys."

"Our boys?" I choked out.

"Yeah. Ours." His lips lifted into a small smile and my heart raced in my chest. Raf wasn't just here for me, but he was there for my boys, the two most important people in my

life. “And while I’m doing that, Dad and Romeo are going to escort you home.”

“They are?” I asked, frowning. Part of me wanted it to be Raf to take me home. I didn’t want to be away from him—not yet—but if it was a choice between him being with me or Kian and Reed, it would always be them. It had only been a couple of days. “Already?”

Raf nodded, leaning down so that he was centimeters from my face. “Yeah. You’re at risk being here, so we’re breaking you out.” He laughed, the sound so enticing I wanted to hear it over and over again. This was the Raf I needed.

“Breaking me out?” I couldn’t help but smile. It didn’t matter that my entire face ached at the move because I’d missed this. I’d missed *him*.

“Yep.” He moved a little closer, his eyes focused on me, his lips turning down. “I’m so goddamn sorry.” His brows knitted, his eyes veering to what I knew were bruises around my throat. “I fucked up big-time. I let someone else get into my head. I allowed them to dictate what I should do.” He paused, his eyes shining with unshed tears, and it just about broke me. “It’s all my fault. You going back there. You not seeing the boys. You...” He rubbed his chest with his palm. “The baby...losing the baby. Losing our baby.”

My stomach bottomed out, him confirming what I already knew, but that didn’t make it any easier to process. “No,” I whispered, feeling a sob bubble up. “It’s not your fault. He... he knows how to manipulate people. It’s why I’d never told anyone.” I tried to sit up a little, and with Raf’s help, I managed it. “No one would have believed me, but you, Raf... you did.”

He shook his head. “Not when it mattered, I didn’t.” His face fell, his emotions plastered all over his features. “The time you needed me most, I was gone. I didn’t stop them taking you.”

I placed my casted hand on the side of his face, grinding my teeth at the pain. “It wouldn’t have worked. You know that.” I waited for him to look me in the eyes, and when he

did, I continued, “You’re a soldier, Raf. You couldn’t have done anything without going against Lorenzo. I know how this works. I grew up in this life.”

“It doesn’t matter, I should have done *something*.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” I leaned forward, pressing my forehead to his. “Because now there’s proof. Now Ace saw with his own two eyes.” I pulled back a little. “He’s on his blacklist.”

Raf raised a brow, knowing what that meant without me having to expand. “Not if I get to him first,” he growled. I didn’t know why his words had my stomach dipping—in a good way—but they did. Maybe it was because he was being protective, or maybe it was because I knew I’d never have to be trapped with my husband again if they both followed through.

It was all over. We were done. It was just a matter of time now until it could be official. And until then...

“Hold me?” I asked,

“Hold you?”

I swallowed, closing my eyes as I tried to keep my tears at bay. But it was hard, so damn hard, when all I wanted was to curl up into a ball and sob my heart out. “Yeah. I just...I need to know you’re here. I need to know I’m not going to wake up and it was all a dream.”

Three seconds passed. Then five, then ten. He stood, taking off his jacket, then slowly moving me over a little. I winced, groaning in pain, but as soon as he was on the bed, he put his arms around me. My head rested on his chest, my breaths coming a little easier as I listened to the sound of his heart beating.

“Never again, mama. I’ll never let you go again.” He pressed his lips to my forehead. “I vow to protect you always and forever.”

I closed my eyes, letting that sink in, and finally, for the first time in a month, closed my eyes and fell asleep without worrying about what I was going to wake up to.

CHAPTER 17

RAFAEL

My muscles were locked tight, all of my wits about me. I couldn't even describe how I felt being trapped in the back of Ace's car with one of his men next to him, driving around in *his* territory. I was on edge, my gaze constantly flicking out of the window, on high alert. I wasn't sure where we were going exactly, but all I knew was that I would be coming out of there with my boys in my arms.

They were all I could think about, consuming every thought in my mind. Were they okay? Did they have any idea what was going on around them? Had they overheard things? Were they happy? I inhaled a stuttering breath. Were they sad?

I swallowed, trying not to let it all take over and consume me, but it was hard when I was driving further away from Peyton, leaving her in the hands of my father and brother. If there were two people in this world that I trusted most, it was them. But that didn't make it any easier walking out of that hospital without her next to me.

But the fact was, there was no way in hell that I was going to let Ace get the boys and bring them back to her. I'd be the one to make sure they got back safe and sound. They were my responsibility now.

“I didn’t know,” Ace all of a sudden said. I whipped my head up, taking stock of the way he was sitting as he continued to drive. His hand rested on the top of the steering wheel as his eyes flicked up, his attention capturing mine in the rearview mirror. “I didn’t know what was happening to Peyton.” He shuffled in his seat, slowing down at an intersection, then stopping completely. “If I would have known...” He trailed off, his unspoken words hanging in the air for us all to interpret.

It would have been so easy for me to judge him. To tell him that he should have been watching her closer, or that he should have believed her when she told him the day he found her here. But I’d be a hypocrite. There had been a couple of days there where I’d second-guessed everything—where I’d gone against my gut.

“He manipulated you all,” I said, shrugging. It was the truth. “He was good at that.”

There was silence, then the man next to him—Zander—grunted, “Never trusted him. You already know that, boss.”

Ace grasped the steering wheel tighter, his knuckles turning white at the force. “I know, Z.” He glanced at him, a silent conversation going on between them, much like there always was with Lorenzo and his captains. “I figured it was because of what happened all those years ago.”

Zander raised a brow, and I was fascinated to see how they were interacting. It was clear that Ace wasn’t just his boss, but his friend too. “You mean when I caught him being rough with my cousin?” Zander shook his head, turning his attention to the road ahead. “I warned you the day you told me him and P were together. I fuckin’ told you to keep an eye on him.”

Ace exploded, slamming his palm down on his steering wheel over and over again with so much force I was surprised the thing was still fuckin’ attached. “I trusted him, Z!” he roared. “I fuckin’ trusted him. He was my best goddamn friend.”

Zander tilted his head to the side, not looking at him as he whispered, “So was I, but you didn’t listen. You blocked out

the signs and now look where she is.” Zander rolled his shoulders and I winced, knowing that there was no way in hell I would have spoken to Lorenzo like that.

The silence stretched as we continued driving and then turned into a driveway, not as long as Lorenzo’s but with the same kind of security. Only this was grander, the huge circle fountain in front of a sprawling mansion telling everyone of the money Ace had. I wasn’t surprised by it, but it just didn’t have the same kind of history that the Beretta mansion had.

“Feel better now that you had your say?” Ace asked, switching the engine off and turning in his seat to face Zander. When he nodded, he ground out, “I don’t want to hear another word on how much I fucked up. All I want to hear is how the hell we’re gonna catch the motherfucker and make him pay.”

“I’m already on it,” Zander said, opening up the door. “He tried to get in here when you got the call about P. As soon as he saw the extra security, he bolted. He knows we’re hunting him. It’s just a matter of time now.”

I relished in what he was saying, but part of me wanted it to be known that they weren’t going to handle this alone. I wanted my say. I wanted to take some revenge on that piece of shit. I wanted to avenge not only Peyton and the boys, but my unborn baby too.

Grinding my teeth together, I tried not to think about the loss as Ace got out, followed by Zander, but I couldn’t help it. I was trapped inside my own head, the what-ifs taking over and creating a world where Peyton hadn’t lost the baby.

But it wasn’t our reality. It wasn’t meant to be in the cards. Not yet.

A plan was in place for us, that was what I kept telling myself over and over again as I got out of the back of the vehicle and took four steps forward until I heard commotion in front of me.

“Raf!” Kian shouted, so loud that it echoed. I couldn’t stop the huge grin spreading on my face as his little legs ran as fast as they could. It was all I could do to drop to my knees and

hold my arms open for him. As soon as he was close enough, he dived at me and I wrapped him up, then stood, twirling us around and taking in a huge breath.

He was safe. He was okay. *He was safe. He was safe.*

I pulled back, pushing some hair out of his face—he really needed a haircut but he only let Peyton touch it. “Hey, bud.” A lump formed in my throat at that sad look shadowing his eyes. “I missed you so much,” I choked out.

“I missed you too.” His little arms wrapped around my neck, so tight, as if he would never let go. And I didn’t want him to. I wanted him to stay safe in my arms for as long as possible. “Where’s Mommy?” His eyes widened, his head swiveling as if she would be right here with me. But when he couldn’t see her, his lips turned down.

“Mommy is...” I trailed off, my gaze turning to Ace as he walked out of his house with Reed in his arms, babbling away. “I...” Fuck, I didn’t know what to say. How was I supposed to explain that his mom was in the hospital. Well, technically, by the time we got home, she wouldn’t be there anymore, but right now, she was.

“We’re taking you to see Mommy,” Ace said, his tone off.

Kian frowned, turning in my arms but not letting go of me. I held him a little tighter, promising in that moment that I would never allow anyone to hurt him or his mom again. I’d take my last breath on this earth before I allowed either of them to be caused any more pain.

“Is Mommy okay?” He tilted his head, and I could just imagine the look he was giving Ace. That boy had a way of seeing down into your very soul.

“I...” Ace’s eyes widened, turning their attention to me. He didn’t know what to say, but neither did I. The problem was, there was no way we could keep it secret, not once he’d seen his mom.

So I inhaled a deep breath, cleared my throat, and murmured, “Mommy is in the hospital at the moment. She got a little hurt—”

“Was it Daddy again?” Kian interrupted, blinking several times, waiting for an answer, but when I didn’t say anything right away, he continued, “Daddy always hurts Mommy.” He shook his head so fiercely. “I don’t like when he’s mean.”

My stomach dropped; my heart racing a mile a minute in my chest. I couldn’t stop staring into Kian’s eyes, but it was Ace’s words that finally gained my attention. “I’m sorry, Kian.” He stepped toward us, reaching out and touching his back. “If Uncle Ace would have known what Daddy was doing...” He trailed off, the unspoken words not needing to be said in this moment. “I’m so sorry.”

Kian smiled at Ace, forgiving him instantly. “Can we go back to Mommy now?”

“Yeah, bud.” I turned, walking back to Ace’s car, done with being here for a minute longer than we needed to be. “Let’s go home to Mommy.”

PEYTON

My gaze flicked around the room, my nerves taking me over and consuming every part of me. It wasn’t just because I was about to leave the safety of the hospital, or the fact that Rafael’s dad and older brother were standing in the room guarding me—literally. No, it was the idea that Travis was still out there. He wasn’t going to let this drop, not now that everyone knew the truth.

Murmurs of him running away were rampant among my brother’s crew, but I knew deep down that Travis wouldn’t run, not for long anyway. His craving for control would be too much for him to contain. It was just a matter of time until he was back. But this time I’d be prepared—we would be prepared.

It didn't make me any less on edge though because when someone knocked on the door, I snapped my head to the right, panicking when it started to open. But Raf's dad was straight over there, jerking it closed and stopping whoever it was in their tracks.

"I have the discharge paperwork," a small voice said followed by ruffling of papers.

"I'll take it," Raf's dad—Antonio—replied, taking the papers from her, then closing the door. He glanced down at them quickly, then made his way over to me where I was sitting in the corner of the room on a chair. "Ready to go?" he asked me, his eyes softening as I met his stare.

I pulled in a breath, trying to center myself and get my shaking hands under control, but it was hard when all I could think about was me being out in the open, the perfect target for my husband. We'd been waiting for two hours to get these papers so we could leave, so it wasn't like it had come as a surprise to me, yet it felt all the more real now.

"You'll be safe," Romeo said, stepping forward, clearly able to see how apprehensive I was. His usual blank expression was on his face as well as a don't-fuck-with-me kind of attitude. "There's me and Dad, then we have two soldiers and Mateo waiting at the entrance for us." He smiled awkwardly. "He won't get to you."

I pushed my shoulders back, standing up slowly and wincing at the move. "I'm not worried," I told them, my voice croaky. Neither of them said a word, but I could tell by their raised brows that they didn't believe me. But I had to present a front because if I didn't, then I'd allow the thoughts to take over, and once they had, there would be no going back.

I'd started over once, and right now, even though I knew I had support all around me, it felt exactly the same. Like I was running, just waiting for him to catch me and hurt me even more. I was a ticking time bomb.

Neither of them said anything as I limped over to the waiting wheelchair, then closed my eyes as Antonio pushed me out of the hospital. I tried to keep all of my thoughts at bay

as they loaded me into a black SUV, then all piled in with me apart from two men who got into the car behind us.

No one spoke a word as we drove away from the place that had saved my life.

He'd nearly killed me. There was no doubt in my mind that if Ace wouldn't have gotten there when he did, I would have taken my last breath on that floor, surrounded by my own blood, just like Travis wanted me to. That had been his goal that night, to take everything away from me, including my own life.

And even though I was still breathing and I had my two boys on their way back to me, there would always be a missing part now. A what-if hanging over my entire life. Travis may not have killed me, but he'd murdered part of me that would never come back.

"We'll be there in an hour," Antonio said, patting my hand that was resting on my lap. I slowly turned my attention to him, keeping deathly still as I attempted to keep all of my broken parts together, just long enough until I was on my own again. But I was also thankful for the interruption of my own brain because the more I was left to think, the more the darkness took hold, threatening to never let go. "We've got you now, bella. You don't have to worry anymore." He paused, his lips lifting into the barest of smiles. "You're one of us now."

One of us.

I grasped his hand, silently thanking him because I just couldn't find the words, not in that moment, not when I was sure I was going to shatter into a thousand pieces in front of them all. My head pounded, the pain in my ribs stabbing me over and over again, but all of the physical aches were nothing compared to the agony in my heart.

My hand hovered over my stomach, a sob bubbling up. He'd killed my baby. He'd taken away what me and Raf had created.

How could I love an unborn baby so incredibly much when it wasn't any bigger than a peanut? The grief was debilitating. I couldn't look past it, not when we pulled up outside a huge house in a quiet neighborhood, and not when Antonio helped me to the front door and it opened.

Voices made their way to us. Voices I recognized immediately. And then they were running to me. Two little boys who owned my heart and soul. It hurt so damn much to kneel down and take them both in my arms at the same time, but I didn't care, not then, not ever. Because finally—*finally*—they were back in my arms, safe and sound.

“Momomomomom,” Reed repeated over and over again.

“I missed you so much, Mommy,” Kian gasped out, holding on to me with such a fierce grip.

“I missed you too,” I choked out, tears running down my face. “I missed you so so much.”

We didn't move for what felt like hours, but in reality it was only minutes. I wanted to stay attached to them for as long as I could, but the pain was becoming unbearable, and it must have been plastered all over my face because the next thing I heard was, “Boys, let Mommy come in and get settled and I'll make ice cream sundaes.”

Ace. I glanced up at him, hating the sorrow I saw reflected in his eyes. *I love you*, he mouthed, followed by, *I'm sorry*.

I nodded, smiling at him, knowing I didn't need his sorry. He'd been just as manipulated as I had. And maybe I could have held that against him. Maybe I could have been mad for him not seeing the signs. But it wasn't his fault. It wasn't anyone's fault but the man who did it.

Now wasn't the time for dissecting the past, but instead focusing on the future. A future that wouldn't be full of violence or suffering. A future that wouldn't have me on tenterhooks every single day.

A future with Raf.

I turned to face him, knowing he'd been waiting so patiently for me from the moment the door had opened and I'd

stepped inside. His lips pulled up into a grin as he moved toward me, his hands wrapping around my waist and bringing our bodies together as he whispered, "Welcome home, mama."

Home. I smiled, inhaling a deep breath, knowing that it would never be this house that was my home, but the man standing next to me.

Raf had shown me what it felt like to love somebody unconditionally, but more importantly, to be loved without consequence.

Raf was my home. Forever and always.

EPILOGUE 1

RAFAEL

I wrapped my arms around her from behind, my palms resting on her stomach on instinct. My imagination couldn't help but wonder what she would have looked like now if she was still growing our baby in her belly. Two months had gone by in the blink of an eye. So many things had happened over those eight weeks, yet things also stayed the same.

Travis was still on the run, just like he'd been from the moment he left Peyton to die on the floor of the bathroom. I ground my teeth at that thought, hating how it had come up so easily, along with the mental image of her bloodied face when she video called me.

But the difference now was, she was safe, between myself and Ace, we were making sure of it. If one of the soldiers from the Beretta Mafia weren't watching the house, then Ace had permission to send some of his. We were working as a team, just until it was all officially over. But it meant we were all in limbo, on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

We were still in our state, but right on the edge so that we were closer to Ace. I was just over an hour away from the Beretta mansion, and an eighty-minute drive away from Ace's place. It was the perfect distance between the two, but that didn't mean I forgot where I belonged. The Beretta Mafia

blood ran through my veins, and my loyalty was to them...and Peyton.

The best thing of it all though was that Peyton and the boys were living with me now. They taught me that it wasn't the house that made the home, but the people inside of it.

"Dada," Reed called, hobbling over to us, then handing me one of his toys before flouncing back into the living room. I grinned, not correcting him, because to him, I was the one constant man in his life. When he'd first said it a couple of weeks ago, I'd been shocked as shit and hadn't known how to react, but when Peyton hadn't told him to call me Raf instead, I went with it. We'd both been gaging the other, and it was then that I realized we were on the same page. We were in it for the long haul.

I had no intention of ever leaving, so I would be a father to Reed, just like I would be to Kian. They may not have been biologically my kids, but in my heart, they'd carved out their own little sections that no one else could ever replace.

"You okay?" Peyton asked, turning in my arms so that she was facing me.

I nodded, placing the toy on the counter, then burrowing my face in her neck. The road to recovery hadn't been easy for her. She'd needed so much help, but the problem with Peyton was that she hated to accept it. So it had been a constant battle for us all, but Ace had finally put a stop to her refusals. I had no idea how he'd done it, but I was damn grateful. It was probably that sibling bond, just the same as Romeo and I had.

"Just thinking about what could have been," I whispered, holding her a little tighter. Her breath caught, and I hated how I'd taken her to that place but...I couldn't help it. It was a weird feeling, mourning something that I'd never seen. But it was the possibility of what *could* have been. Every week I thought about how far along she would have been. Whether we'd have started to tell people now that she would have been past the three-month mark.

Our lives would have been on an entirely new track, if only I hadn't have let her walk away with Ace that day. But

the reality was, she wouldn't have let me stop her anyway, not with her boys in the car, ready to be taken from her.

We'd had so many conversations over the last couple of months, trying to figure out if anything I would have done would have changed the outcome, and the conclusion that we came to was that the moment they had taken the boys, she would have done anything and acted however they wanted her to just to make sure they were okay.

She was a fierce mama bear, but I was a cutthroat papa bear, and I'd sworn the moment I saw her in that hospital bed that I would never let her down again. Or the boys.

"I love you," I whispered, pulling away just enough to look into her eyes. It wasn't the first time I'd told her, and it wouldn't be the last. I'd let her know every day for the rest of our lives just so that she didn't forget.

She sighed, her lips lifting up into a sated smile. She was happy—happier than she'd ever been. At least, that was what she kept telling me. "I love you too, Raf." She lifted up onto her tiptoes, pressing her lips against mine. And I wished that her brother wasn't in the next room because, fuck, I wanted to take her on every damn surface in this room.

I groaned, pulling back, then burrowing my face in her neck again. "I want you so bad right now, mama."

She made a noise in her throat, telling me that she agreed, but goddamn, there was nothing we could do about it. We'd learned over the last month to take those little pockets of time when the boys were at school or they were having a nap. But most of all, we'd learned that being open with everything and anything was how we worked best.

There was a time where I was certain I never would have told her about my day, but there was a strength in being able to tell the person you cared most about about your entire day and never get judged on it.

"P?" Ace called. "You ever gonna get your ass in here, or what?"

I closed my eyes, trying to calm myself and my fuckin' erection down as Peyton pulled away, a grin on her face that told me she knew exactly what she'd done to me, the devious woman. I laughed, shaking my head and moving toward the glass sliding door that opened up out onto the backyard. Distraction always worked better than anything else, right?

There was a brand-new swing set and climbing frame I'd had installed last week, an addition that both of the boys loved. The house I'd bought was slowly starting to fill up with things that told you a family lived here, exactly how I'd imagined it when I first bought it. My gut had told me this was the one the moment I'd viewed it, just like it had the second I'd laid eyes on Peyton that day outside of Romeo's house.

Cracking my neck to the side, I stepped away from the glass door and ambled into the living room where Ace was leaning against the wall, talking animatedly with Peyton who was sprawled out on the floor with Reed climbing all over her.

"So you'll come, then?" Ace asked, his gaze veering to me as I entered the room and leaned against the doorframe.

"Of course I will," Peyton huffed out in only the way a little sister could with her big brother. "Just tell me the time and place and I'll be there."

"Be where?" I asked.

"Ace wants some help with his house," Peyton told me. "Needs to renovate it."

I nodded. "Needs a woman's touch, huh?"

Ace's jaw ticced, the movement not going unnoticed by either me or Peyton. "Something like that." There was something about the way he said it that intrigued me, that made me want to do some digging. He'd been coming around a little less often over the last couple of weeks. I understood that he was the boss in his state, but this felt different. There were times he was here—like now—where he'd be physically here, but you could tell that his mind was elsewhere.

I knew that feeling better than most because it was how I'd survived during the month that Peyton was gone. I ground my

teeth together, not wanting to think about it, but it was damn hard when I could see the physical scars marring her body, but that was nothing compared to the mental ones that fuckface had left behind.

My mind was going a mile a minute, not able to take anything in that was going on around me, not until the loud ringing of Ace's cell rang out.

He pulled it out, his nostrils flaring at whatever he saw on the screen, then placed it next to his ear. I couldn't hear what he was saying because he moved to the other side of the room, his gaze centered on Peyton.

"You got him?" I heard him murmur. He probably thought nobody heard him, but I did. Crystal clear. Goose bumps prickled over my skin as his attention moved to me, his eyes so dark they were edge-to-edge black now.

"I gotta go," he announced after ending the call. He maneuvered over to Peyton, kissed her on the cheek, spoke to the boys, then walked right out of my house, but not without me on his tail.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Nothing."

I moved a little quicker, blocking his path to his SUV. "Nah. That wasn't nothing." I rolled my shoulders back, letting him see that I could feel something was off. "Who was that?"

"I'm gonna say this to you once, and once only, Rafael." He practically spat my name out of his mouth. "Remember your damn place."

"I do know my place," I countered, not backing down. "My place is to make sure nothing and no one gets to your sister." I paused, waiting to see if he would say anything to that. "Which is why I'm gonna ask you straight and expect an honest answer: Have they found Travis?"

Ace's lips flattened into a straight line, clearly not wanting to tell me anything. But finally he growled, "Yeah. They have him."

I nodded, not thinking for a single second as I demanded, “I’m coming with you.”

“Like hell you are.” He moved around me and pulled the driver’s door open. “Stay in your territory.”

I didn’t hesitate, getting into his passenger seat, then shooting a message off to Peyton to let her know that I had to go somewhere with Ace. I had no doubt that her gut would tell her something was going to go down. But I also knew that the relief she would feel once this was over—once Travis was finally gone—would outweigh everything else.

“I can’t guarantee your safety,” Ace warned, turning the engine on.

“Don’t need your safety,” I told him, shooting off another text, this time to my dad and Lorenzo to let them know what was happening. I’d learned from my mistakes of not keeping my boss in the loop. It was dangerous to not have backup, and even though I knew they wouldn’t be there, they knew where I’d be thanks to sharing my location with them on my cell, and that was good enough in that moment.

“Last chance,” Ace warned, throwing the car into reverse.

I turned to face him, my eyes narrowed. “Let’s go kill this motherfucker.”

He raised a brow, his lips lifting in the barest of movements, then floored his car, speeding us out of the neighborhood and to the revenge that we both so desperately needed.

We’d both let Peyton down over the years, and even though we were trying our best to make amends and make her feel the safest she ever had, we both knew that ultimately, she needed him gone, forever.

She’d get her wish. And I’d be able to finally put to use all of those torturing lessons my father had taught me. It was time for revenge, only this dish wouldn’t be served cold, instead it would be scorching fuckin’ hot.

EPILOGUE 2

ACE

I walked inside the building slowly, allowing all of the anger I'd tamped down over the last couple of months to come bubbling to the surface.

This was it. This was the moment I'd been waiting for.

Placing my hand on the door handle, I turned, just enough to see Rafael—my sister's boyfriend—directly behind me. Part of me had known that there was no way he'd let me do this alone, and even though this was *my* territory, I allowed him to come along. After all, Travis had hurt him too.

I ground my teeth together, flinging the door open, hating my last thought. Travis had been my best friend since I was a kid. He'd always been the one person I went to, the one person who I could rely on, so when he'd come to me and told me he was in love with my sister a decade ago, I hadn't questioned whether he would treat her right, I'd just assumed it. That was my first mistake.

Peyton was twenty at the time, trying to get ahead in life even though she'd come from nothing, just like me. But I'd tried to give us the best life I could, especially after Dad was murdered.

I shook my head, not willing to go there, because if I did, I'd lose it completely, and the one thing I needed right then

was to be in control—to have my wits about me.

“I placed him on the hook, boss,” Maverick grunted as I sauntered inside, already taking my jacket off and rolling my sleeves up.

“What is this place?” Rafael asked. The building was on several levels, and from the outside anyone would have thought it was a fully functioning factory, but inside, it was so much more than that. The building was the main hub that I worked from, as well as a place where members could crash if they had nowhere else to go. There was a recreation area, a bunch of offices, even a shooting range. But it wasn’t any of those floors we were going to. No, we were heading to the black site, otherwise known as the basement level.

“It’s my version of your boss’s mansion,” I told him, not willing to say more than that. He may have been my sister’s boyfriend, but he was still part of the Beretta Mafia, my rivals in the next state. We had a truce, a treaty, to keep the peace. For now, at least.

I made my way over to the elevator, clicking the button, then getting inside. It was one of those ones where you had to pull the door up and down yourself, so as soon as we were situated inside, and on our way down, I told him, “You stay in here until I send someone to get you.”

“What? No, fuck that,” Rafael blurted out, pushing his shoulders back and trying to square up to me.

I raised a brow, pursing my lips at him. “Do as you’re fuckin’ told otherwise I’ll have you escorted out of here.” I stared him down, allowing him to see how fuckin’ serious I was. He had no idea the amount of patience I was showing in that moment. But as he backed up a step, I knew he understood. We didn’t have time to fuck around, not knowing that Travis was so close to us.

Pulling the elevator door open, I stepped into the darkened room where one of my men—Zander—was standing. He’d known Travis nearly as long as I had, so I knew there was no way he wasn’t going to be here for this. He’d been the one to call me, and I’d let him know that Rafael was with me. He

knew me well enough to know that the usual plan of his torturing to begin with was going to change.

“Travis,” I greeted, walking closer and grinning like a damn fool at the sight of his legs and wrists bound together with rope. His wrists were attached to a huge metal hook that was hanging from the ceiling. His feet just about touched the floor, but as soon as I picked up the controls, I raised him a little, just enough so that he couldn’t feel the comfort of the ground below him anymore.

“You’re here to answer for your crimes,” I started, pacing in front of him with my hands behind my back. I was trying to be matter of fact, to not lose my shit big-time. It was taking every ounce of effort not to though.

He laughed, the sound echoing in the otherwise empty room. “What crimes?”

I halted, rage slamming through me at impossible heights as I jerked forward, wanting to cause the maximum damage possible. But that wasn’t what this was—yet.

“The crimes against my sister. The murder of my unborn niece or nephew.” My heart skipped a beat at my last sentence, the grief flowing through me, but it was nothing compared to my sister’s. I wanted to stick to the script, but it was hard when my former best friend was the one on trial. “Why?” I asked, half expecting an answer, but knowing deep down that I wouldn’t get one. “Why would you do that to my sister?” For a decade he’d been hurting her, controlling her, pulling her away from the only family she had—me. And I’d been fuckin’ oblivious to it. I’d been so damn busy building the syndicate that I’d lost sight of my little sister.

Then I’d pulled the ultimate betrayal and believed him over her. Over my own flesh and blood. Never again. Never again would I stop paying attention to her or entrust her safety to anyone but me. I’d learned my lesson, which was why I went to my sister’s at least once a week, and always observed what was around me. I wouldn’t be caught unaware again. Ever.

I'd nearly lost my baby sister at his hands when he'd left her for dead in the bathroom. My stomach rolled when I thought about her when I'd walked in there. She was surrounded by blood, bruising marring her skin, her shoulder sitting at a weird angle. But it was the emptiness in her eyes that day that had haunted me the most. She'd lost herself while in his captivity, and I'd helped facilitate that. My chest burned, the need to hurt him so intense, but also the need to punish myself taking over. I didn't know how Peyton had forgiven me, but she had, and I'd never take that for granted.

I stepped to the side, gaining my control back. He wanted me to lose my shit. He knew me better than most people—knew exactly what to say to me to make me snap. But I wouldn't let him. He was done manipulating me. And I was done letting him have any kind of control.

I slowly took my seat, staring up at him, waiting to see if he would answer my question.

The blacklist punishment ran like a courtroom. I always gave the person on the hook the opportunity to plead their case, and usually they thought they would somehow get out of it, that their words would resolve them. The difference now was that Travis knew that wouldn't be happening—it *never* happened.

“The floor is yours,” I announced, leaning back in the chair that resembled a throne. It was all black, the velvet on the seat and the arms so soft that I always found myself stroking it as I listened.

“Fuck you,” Travis spat, yanking on his binds.

I tilted my head to the side, staring at the man who had been my number two from the moment I'd killed Vance Stoll and taken the syndicate from underneath him. Most of the men had come with me, but there had been some who didn't. Travis had been by my side when I dealt with each and every one, and out of that the blacklist and its punishment was born.

There was no one that knew this better than him.

But what he didn't know was that I had a secret weapon.

“Let him in,” I called, grinning like a damn fool as Travis’s eyes widened. The elevator door was pulled open, and then I heard his footsteps. Rafael was a Pagani, a family name known throughout the entire country. His father—Antonio—was a master torturer, and even though having him here right now would have been a hoot, I knew Rafael needed to have his say—enact his revenge for what he’d done to him.

“What the fuck?” Travis spat, yanking on his binds, but it was a mistake, one that he realized as soon as they tightened around his wrists. “You’re a fuckin’ traitor!” Travis screamed at me.

“Nah,” I said, sounding bored as hell. “The only traitor in this room is you.” I stared at him, waiting until his gaze met mine. “Rafael is going to have some fun with you now.”

Rafael grinned, rubbing his hands together in excitement as he maneuvered over to the tools that had been laid out. I always watched as the person on trial was punished, usually by Zander, but today was different. Today was Rafael’s turn.

I watched, fascinated as Rafael went through each instrument on the table: pliers, several knives, a blowtorch, and a taser, amongst other things.

Hours slipped by, blood dripping to the floor, followed by piss when Rafael tasered him ten times in a row. I observed in sick fascination, picking up all of the intel I could, and I was sure Zander was too who was standing just feet away from me.

“She deserved it!” Travis screamed all of a sudden, his eyes focusing in on me again. “Just like your father did.” He laughed, the sound making me shiver. “It was me who snitched.” His lips lifted up into a smirk. “I was the reason Lance sent the order to end him.”

My body jerked upwards; my muscles so tense I could barely move. I’d watched my father be murdered in front of my very eyes. I’d held his hand as he took his last breath. I’d promised him I would look after my sister. He’d sworn he hadn’t done what they said, and over the years, I hadn’t believed it, but now...now I did.

Travis had always been against me; it had taken me nearly twenty years to realize that.

I pulled my gun out of its holster on my waistband. I never went anywhere without that. I'd learned my lesson a long damn time ago to always have a weapon on you, and if you didn't, then you needed to know what around you you could turn *into* a weapon.

"Your time is up," I announced, straight to the point. I pulled the trigger, doing my signature kill: one bullet in each thigh, one in each forearm, and finally, one between the eyes.

He was gone, but his actions would haunt all of us, whether we realized it or not.

You may have guessed it, but Ace is getting his very own series! The Beckett Syndicate was born out of this book! You're not ready for the journey Ace is about to take you all on! You can pre-order his book here:

[Consumed by His Power](#)

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About the Author

Abigail is the author of over twenty novels; her favorite to write being anything full of angst and drama. Her writing space is her safe haven where she can get lost—and tortured—in the world of her characters.

When not writing, Abi is mother to two beautiful daughters, a black cat, a chocolate Labrador, and three guinea pigs.

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