



Russo Saga  Book Four

REDEMPTION

SAVAGE DUET PART ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

nicolina martin

REDEMPTION

SAVAGE DUET: PART ONE

NICOLINA MARTIN



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For my love of enemies to lovers.

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PART ONE

THE END

ONE

New York

Christian

The city that supposedly never sleeps is slowly coming back to life. It was pretty dead when I woke a couple of hours ago. At least this stiff upper lip part of Manhattan was. I sit on a bench at the edge of Central Park, a cup of coffee in my hand. I've spent the night at a hotel, I've run, showered, and now I'm overlooking the entrance to the office building where my target works. Mr. Corben Olsen. CEO of a Fortune 500 company situated on the Upper East Side. He's a short man in his fifties, donning a toupee, working out every day to stay fit. He's on his third wife and has chosen to start over with a second set of kids, the dumb fuck. His wife is almost a head taller and seventeen years younger, a former Victoria's Secret model. She has a lover, a cop who's investigating Corben's business. That's intriguing, but has nothing to do with me.

Corben Olsen is a crook whose business is going to shit. No bank with any kind of morals is lending him any more money, so to be able to maintain his lavish lifestyle, he had to go to the immoral, and turned to my uncle, Mr. Luciano Salvatore, the most ruthless mob boss on the West Coast. The

only mob boss on the West Coast after we eliminated all competition some years back.

There are plenty of underground lending businesses in New York. My guess is he turned to someone far away so that he'd feel safe up there, in his tower.

He isn't.

Payment has been due. He isn't delivering.

This is his first warning. It's gonna hurt a little. We'll see if he gets the message, or if I'll have reason to come back. My gut tells me I will.

I glance at the clock. Seven fifteen. I wonder if my brother is awake yet. Oh, fuck it. If he isn't, I'll wake him. I'm tired of hotels, and he owns a whole floor in a building down in Tribeca. He can squeeze me in somewhere. Draining the last of the coffee, I haul up my phone and thumb through my contact list, praying he'll be home, or I'll be pissed. A pissed off Christian won't be good news for Corben. A pissed off Christian won't hurt Corben just a little.

"Chris! To what do I owe this honor?" Nathan's voice is hoarse. He sounds beyond tired.

"Tell me you're in the big apple."

"I'm in a cab. Just left JFK. Got a foggy view of Manhattan across the river. Why?"

"I'm passing through. Need a place to crash."

"What's wrong with hotels, dude?"

"Brother—" He knows I hate them. I'm always traveling. I miss my house like fuck whenever I'm away. Someone else's home is the second best.

“I’m just kidding. Of course you can come by. Wanna hit the town tonight?”

“Definitely.”

“All right. Gimme a call when you get in. I’m not picking you up. I’m fucking beat.”

I don’t bother mentioning I’m already in town. I do worry a tad about Nate. He’s exhausting himself with work, always has. He should sell off a few homes, decide where to live, slow the fuck down.

“How’s the old lady? She with you?”

“Nah, Sydney’s busy running her hotel.” His voice brightens, as always, when he talks about her.

“She’s one of a kind, isn’t she?”

A stab of jealousy hits me. My wayward younger brother has found the love of his life. It struck him out of the blue. No one expected him to ever find the one, to settle down.

“She is.”

“I’m happy for you, you know it.” On the other side of the street, I see Corben walking briskly along the sidewalk. “Talk later.”

I disconnect as I watch Mr. Olsen entering the building. Anticipation builds in me as always before a hit. It’s not time yet, though. I’ll catch him either when he works late, or when his wife leaves for her lover. I expect to be here a few days.

Corben is blindly in love and doesn’t suspect a thing about his unfaithful wife. I wonder if it would be too cruel to enlighten him. Or maybe it will be enough with a couple of broken fingers.

I don't believe in love. There is no such thing. I've never seen it, never felt it. It's nothing but chemistry, people's need to copulate. It's all ingrained in our DNA.

But love?

I care for my brothers, Nate, Matteo, and Luca, and they care about me. We'd die for each other. I don't know if that qualifies. Maybe what I feel for my sister is something close to 'love'. Or maybe it's nothing but a strong protection instinct because we share a set of genes?

I glance at the clock again. It's way too early to call her, and she'll probably be in class in the morning.

Standing, I toss the now empty cup in the nearest bin, and aim for Mr. Olsen's building. Time to check that everything is in order, that the keycard with my picture and my fake name takes me exactly where I want it to.

I spend an hour playing pretend, coming and going, taking note of emergency exits and alarm systems. When I'm satisfied, it's still early, but I decide to go for breakfast, check out of the hotel, and then hit up Nate.

It's a beautiful day. Early autumn. The air is still crisp despite the sun having climbed over the canopy, but it warms the skin a little and I close my eyes, enjoying the feeling. I have my bags by my feet and wait for the car the hotel called. I like the seasons. In San Francisco it varies a little, and is mostly foggy. Nothing like here.

In the cab, southbound, I call our sister.

"Chris!" She almost squeals.

"Angel." As always, my heart warms at hearing her voice. This kid, my much younger sister, the youngest of all five of

us, is a unique flower in this family. Artsy, headstrong, living her own life and refusing to conform.

She giggles. *“How are things?”*

“Same shit.”

“Are you in town?” She sounds hopeful which makes me smile.

“Yeah, wanna meet up?”

“Why are you in town?” Her light tone turns wary.

I hesitate, contemplating for a moment if I should make life easy and just lie, but decide against it. “Business.”

She hates it. She hates what the whole rest of her family does for a living, hates our dirty money, and the wealth that comes from hurting other people. I admire her stubborn will to support herself, working two jobs, as she studies photography.

“Are you bringing any shit to my doorstep?”

“Of course not. Never.”

She is silent a few beats. *“Aren’t you ever getting out, Chris?”*

I sigh. “You know I can’t.”

“You—”

“Look,” I say, interrupting the lecture I know will come, “let’s talk tomorrow. When can you meet up?”

She scoffs. *“Fine. I have the morning off, then school, then work until late.”*

“Still serving the filthy rich?”

“Still serving the undeserving, yes.”

Angela works part time in a private club, serving drinks, scantily clad, but as far as I know she isn't offering herself up, and isn't expected to. For that, I'm eternally happy. I'd break a lot more than a finger on anyone who put their filthy hands on her. As was proven when a neighbor assaulted her. We still lived in the seedier parts of Chicago back then. She was sixteen. Nate and I beat the fucker to a pulp.

"I'll buy you breakfast," I say.

"All right, cool. Look, I gotta hop in the shower, or I'll be late."

"I'll call you in the morning. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

She scoffs and hangs up.

Yeah, I know. There isn't much I wouldn't do. Bad advice.

AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK, I MAKE MY WAY PAST THE DOOR GUARD in Nathan's building. He's got a silly red uniform, no gun, no club, no cuffs. No nothing. He's just for show. I could take him down in a second. Ignoring the old elevator with its black, steel scissor door, I take the stairs two at a time and slam my fist on Nate's door.

My slightly younger brother is uncharacteristically disheveled.

"Nate. You look like shit."

"I spent a few days in Houston cleaning up a mess. It's nothing, but yeah, didn't get much rest. Want something to drink?" He cocks his head toward the kitchen.

"Wanna lighten your heart?"

“That’s a firm no. Want a beer?”

“Sure. Got anything else other than Mexican? It tastes like water.”

“Nope.”

I shrug and accept the bottle. Nate has his little getaway in Mexico where he spends as much time as he can. He used to be there a lot more, diving, drinking, doing tourist chicks. Now he only goes there whenever he can get the love of his life to go with him. He’s turned into a different man. It’s taken some getting used to, but I like it. He seems content.

His loft is out of this world: huge, floor to ceiling windows in three directions, a sliver of a view of the river. Like himself, it’s a thing of ridiculous beauty. He was born with everything. I don’t look like a slug myself, but he’s supermodel material, the fucker. I envy him sometimes, but I’d never admit it. He works hard for our uncle, just like the rest of us, but he has somehow managed to distance himself too. These days there is no longer any dirty business for him, only the legal side of things.

I dump my bag in one of the guest rooms and take a long, hot shower. I’m frustrated. Watching the wife and the cop fuck each other’s brains out last night left its mark. It’s been a while, but tonight I’m fucking gonna make a New York socialite scream. The thought makes me hard, but I decide to save it, to let it brew. The release will be much sweeter that way.

WE SPEND THE AFTERNOON DOING ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. Vietnamese take out, reruns of old TV-shows, catching up on each other’s lives. I like it here. I like the city; I like the

distance from our uncle, Luciano Salvatore, head of the business, capo of all organized crime on the West Coast. It would be nice to see more of Nathan and his chick. And Angela. I don't think Salvatore would let me move from San Francisco, though. I'm in too deep, too snared in his claws.

“So, who are you beating up this time?” Nathan has just exited the bathroom, his hair soaked, dripping on his naked shoulders, a white towel tied around his waist. I'm putting on my shirt, way ahead of him in preparations. He wanted to go to a restaurant. I demanded a club. I'm no family man. I need a fucking release tonight, or I'll go crazy. Willing chicks don't magically hang around fancy restaurants.

“Corben Olsen. Owes a lot of money. Late. He needs a little push.”

“Little? Luci doesn't send you for 'little'.”

I shrug. “I was available. I'll break something and let him know I'll be back if he doesn't pay up. I probably *will* be back, because I'm pretty sure he can't.”

“You going back home to the foggy city after this job?”

“Yeah, unless I get sent somewhere else. I'm like a fucking nomad, man.”

He raises his eyebrows. “I know the feeling. I'll be with you in a minute, then we'll go find you a woman.”

“You know me too well.”

I give my brother a nod before I venture deeper into the club. Only a few blocks from his place. Even though a block in the Big Apple can be really fucking huge, it was still walking distance to the newest, hottest place, where everybody goes.

She's standing by the bar, long black hair, tan – when most women these days stay out of the UV-light –, legs for days, and a little golden-yellow dress. She stands out like a beacon in a place where most play it safe and wear black. Women think they're so edgy in their little black dresses, but it's the colorful ones I look for. They're more adventurous, more into playing the kinds of games I like to play.

“What do you want, love?” I lean in, my voice low, meant for her and her alone. “From the bar, I mean,” I add, letting the double entendre hang in the air.

She turns her head and measures me up, immediate interest flickering in her light blue eyes. She's wearing a ton of makeup, the smoky eyes girls are so fond of, a deep red lipstick that reeks of sin on lush lips I imagine wrapped around my cock. I'll have that makeup smeared all over Nate's expensive sheets before I kick her out in the morning.

“What are you offering?” Her voice is sultry, the sound shooting straight to my groin.

It's ridiculously easy. Being six foot three, nothing but muscle underneath a tailored suit, oozing power and self-assurance, I can get almost any girl I like in here.

I decide to go all in. “Ropes, gag, blindfold.”

She widens her eyes, glances around us, then back at me, taking stock again.

“I don't know,” she says, her voice a little shaky. “Sounds a bit... dangerous.”

“You're telling me it doesn't make you,” I lick my lips and let my gaze wander to her chest, and lower, “interested?”

She squirms, chewing on her lip, measuring me up. “I don't know anything about you.”

“Correct. And I don’t know anything about you. That’s the way I like it.”

“Maybe have a drink first? Chat a little?”

“I don’t chat.” I pin her with my gaze. Her chest heaves, her cheeks have taken on a slight blush. When she doesn’t answer, I take a step back. “Okay.” I turn and feel her hand on my arm.

“Wait!”

Gotcha. I turn back to her, taking my time. “Yes?”

“How do I know you’re not some mass murderer?”

“You don’t.” I reach out and brush my thumb across her lower lip, making her shudder visibly. “I’m no gentleman, but you’ll leave my place tomorrow morning, somewhat intact, on your own two feet.”

Her mouth falls open, her breathing changes. I can almost smell her arousal and my cock stiffens. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Alexandra,” she says on an exhale.

“I’m Christian. It’s time to make up your mind.”

“Oh God,” she moans in defeat. “I’m not right in the head, but what the hell.”

I smirk as I snake an arm around her waist and steer her out of the club, into a cab I hail. Tomorrow, she’ll be sore, and she’ll probably never want to see me again.

I like it rough.

RIDICULOUSLY SATISFIED, MY CARNAL NEEDS FULFILLED, I call a cab for the girl who can barely walk. She’s fresh from a

shower and smells of a musky sandalwood. Nathan's soap. I toss her one of my brother's shirts to give her some more decency on the way home, and give her a smack on the butt.

"Off you go, Alexandra."

"You are one sick puppy," she says as she finds her way into the shirt and grabs her purse.

"And you enjoyed every bit of it."

She shakes her head, more in disbelief than negating my claim. "Fuck off." She strides to the door, pulls it open and slams it shut behind her, probably waking Nathan. If he slept at all.

I smirk and go to make myself an espresso, glancing at the clock. Caffeine, a shower, and then off to see what our sis is up to.

ANGELA RUSSO IS A BLEND OF ALL HER BROTHERS. SHE GOT all the best features. A hint of a Roman nose, high cheekbones, almond shaped almost-black eyes, and thick, dark brown hair that cascades down her back. We used to chase her and pull her braids when we were kids. The few times we got to play innocent games.

"Looking good!" She gives me a once-over before she sits on the cheap, red vinyl bench opposite me in the booth.

"Same, girl. Exile suits you."

"I don't live in exile. I'm the only one who lives a real life, you freak. Now pay for my breakfast and make yourself useful."

"So dirty money is good enough for coffee and a bagel."

“Fuck you.”

“Watch your tongue.”

She sticks out her tongue at me and flips me off. I shake my head and shuffle out of my seat to go order us something to eat. My stomach growls. I’m depleted of energy after last night’s activities.

“Hey,” she half shouts, “pancakes too. And orange juice.”

After I’ve ordered, I fall down on my seat again as our coffee is served. “So, Angela. How’s life? Seeing anyone?”

She sighs and accepts the coffee. “Ain’t nobody got time for that.”

“You work too hard. You could live life in luxury.”

“And in the clutches of Uncle Salvatore. No fucking thanks.”

“He’s not happy with this, you know.”

Her face turns serious and she puts down the cup, her hand shaking a little. “Did he say anything?”

“He hints at it from time to time.”

“You’ve got my back, though? Right? It would kill me. I could never live that life, *him* deciding what I do, who I meet, what I fucking eat, drink and wear.”

I frown. Out of all us Russos, Angela is the one who has chosen her own path. I’d rather die than sell her out. There’s nothing more important to me than keeping my promise to her.

“You know it. I won’t let that happen.”

“Thank you,” she says and smiles faintly. “I love you to bits, Bro, but every time I meet with one of you guys my stomach clenches up a little, thinking this is it, this is when it

ends and you pull me back by my hair. Now, let's talk about something else. I found a new site yesterday, an old church a few miles from here. I'll go check it out this weekend. Want me to send you the pics?"

I smile, fighting down the unease. "I'm always interested in your work, Angel, you know it. Is it in ruins?"

"Yep. A big wonderful pile of rocks. When are you going back to San Francisco?"

"Eager to get me out of town?"

She shrugs. "Just making conversation. If you have time you can buy me breakfast again."

"I'd be happy to. I'll head home as soon as I'm done here. Couple of days, tops."

It's not a good feeling knowing I represent darkness to her, fear. But it's who I've become. There's not a thing I can do about it.

I'm not one of the good guys.

TWO

San Francisco

Kerry

“**W**ho are they?”

“Who are you talking about, sweetie?”

The young boy sitting by my feet rocks back and forth.
“The men in black. What is the red?”

A shiver slithers down my spine, even though I can't tell why. I've never seen little David Salvatore looking so worried. He's usually a quiet boy. He has his favorite toys he won't let anyone else touch. I can only put them back in the cupboard after he leaves, even though he somewhat trusts me. I'm the only one he trusts enough to talk to. But he usually only talks about his blue truck, and the Gameboy.

“Where did you see the red, David?” I sit next to him on the floor and cross my legs, careful not to come too close. He has a very specific distance he accepts.

“Floor. On the man.”

The hair on my nape stands. “Who was the man?”

“My truck is green.”

I follow his lead. There's no use continuing when he changes the subject. I pick up a blue wooden block from the box next to us. "Is this green, David?"

He laughs. It's a monotonous cackle. His face is stiff and unmoving, his eyes expressionless. "Not green."

I hold the block near his truck, careful not to touch it. "Is this the same color?"

He nods several times and waves his arm. "Same, same, same, same."

"Do you like blue?"

"Like, like, like, like."

All I can do is tread carefully as I try to find a way to reach him again. It's rare to have a conversation with David, even three or four sentences. There's no real progress to be made, though. He's seven years old, with the mind of a three-year-old.

As I leave the community center for autistic children, hop on my Vespa and push the helmet over my head, I'm overcome by a shudder. I think of the red on the floor, the red on a man. What did David really see? It was probably someone who got hurt and bled. Right? That must've been it. My imagination is running wild. Probably because the news is full of war-sized headlines about an unusual amount of murders in the San Francisco underworld this autumn.

I decide to ask his dad. I don't know how much of a trauma this is for David, but since he actually spoke about it spontaneously, I have a strong suspicion it is. It's my job to help him, so I need to know as many facts as I can get. I'll see if I can catch him as he leaves David at the center tomorrow morning.

The sun is still up, but it has sunk low and blinds me as I head home. I need to stop at a grocery store since I'm having the girls over for dinner tonight. We usually gather at my place. I have the most space and a fantastic view of the bay and the bridge. Thank you, alimony. Thank you, Evan for cheating on me and having a massive bout of guilt as our lawyers worked out the details of the divorce. I actually don't feel guilty at all for receiving the money. It's only for a few years while I try to build my own life after being his supportive wife for six freaking years. My whole adulthood. I mean to make the best of it. Between my studies to become a behavioral therapist for children with mental disabilities, and my volunteer work at the center, I have little time for a social life. So when my friends offer to come by and cook for me, I'm game even though I'm tired.

GAYLE, CHLOE AND REBECCA CHATTER AWAY IN THE KITCHEN as I set the table, a long beautiful, heavy piece made of dark oak.

Chloe works as an accountant for the center, a tall golden-blonde whirlwind of a girl, her skin a pretty, light caramel hue. We see each other almost every day.

I've known Gayle since high school. We hard-core book nerds found each other and navigated the maze that is the social life in school together, gossiped about boys, but were both too shy to approach anyone. We don't see each other a lot lately, sadly, different lives, different interests making us drift apart. She's short and curvy, with straight jaw-length brown hair, and a lot prettier than she thinks. She's still single and works all the time as she runs a bookstore with an adjacent café. She's living her dream and I'm really happy for her.

The latest addition to our little group is tall, platinum blonde Rebecca. She's a bartender at our favorite bar and ten times more outgoing than the rest of us combined. She's new in town after trying out a career as an unemployed actress in LA. A happy-go-lucky girl we adopted almost the moment we met her. She has the most contagious laugh I've ever come across. She's also extremely interested in cooking, and whips us into action in the kitchen, slicing vegetables, stirring pots and opening wine bottles.

"You should be a chef, Rebecca," says Gayle, her mouth stuffed with food, "this is fantastic."

"Why thank you! I sure as hell don't wanna serve drinks the rest of my life, but the thought never crossed my mind."

"You were too busy using your blonde locks to get into the film industry to have time to think." Chloe ducks to avoid the napkin that comes flying through the air.

Rebecca flicks a strand of her hair. "I tried to fuck my way to the top. Turns out I'm not the only one trying that method. They screw you, use you and screw you over."

"Don't ever go back to that." Gayle makes a disgusted face.

"Oh, I won't." Rebecca puts her hand over her heart. "Chef, you said? Hm. I like the thought."

We're devouring fresh pasta with a spicy vego sauce of aubergine, tomatoes and black olives. The third bottle of wine has just been opened.

"I had the weirdest experience today," I say.

Three pairs of eyes turn to me. I look at the lights from the Golden Gate Bridge in the far distance, taking comfort in the

sight. It's been my faithful companion since I was a kid. I've always lived with a view of it.

"Yeah?" says Chloe. "What happened?"

"One of the kids, a little guy who barely speaks at all." I look at Chloe. "Not mentioning names but..."

She nods. "I'm pretty sure I know who you're talking about."

"He spoke. Spontaneously. I can't make heads or tails of it. He said something about a man on the floor. And red color. On the floor and on the man. My imagination is running wild right now."

"Ohh," says Rebecca, her big light blue eyes widening. "Do you think he witnessed a murder?"

"No!" I say, a little too fast. "I mean, how likely is that? He must've seen someone hurt themselves. I need to dig a little. I was thinking about asking his dad tomorrow."

"What's his dad like? Maybe he's the one who murdered someone?" Gayle nudges Chloe and turns to her. "Right? Have you met the guy? Does he seem all right?"

"He is a little creepy," says Chloe and turns to me. "Isn't he? Seriously hot, but he scares the bejesus out of me. Strict. Always fancy suits. I've always wondered if he couldn't afford having his kid in a private care facility instead. It's almost like he's hiding him at the center."

My stomach clenches. He does give off a bit of a strange vibe. "You all watch too many movies. Come on. He's just a guy. Probably an accountant or some other boring suit-job... Oh shit! Sorry, Chloe, your job sounds incredibly fun." I grimace, embarrassed, but she laughs.

“It’s not for everyone. I like numbers. Numbers are my friends.”

“Hey, I thought we were your friends,” says Rebecca with a pout.

I listen to the conversation the rest of the night with half an ear, wondering how I’ll go about asking the dad tomorrow.

Three hugs and six cheek-kisses later, I fall into bed, my head already pounding from too much red wine. I won’t be at my best tomorrow morning.

LUCIANO SALVATORE HAS PITCH BLACK EYES AND STUDIES ME with an intensity that makes the skin on my back feel too tight.

“You wanted to speak with me?” His voice is well modulated, smooth.

I swallow hard. Chloe is right. He’s a very attractive man, tall, dark brown hair that’s always well combed, a proud Roman nose and a squared jaw shaded by a two-day stubble that seems very intentional, but there is something eerie about those dark eyes. It’s like he sees right through me.

Inhaling deeply, I fight to shake off the feeling I’m doing something really stupid. “Yeah... David said something yesterday, and I wonder how I should interpret it. I think he’s seen something that shook him and... I wonder if you know what it might be?”

Mr. Salvatore is absolutely still as he regards me. His face betrays no emotions. Again, an ice-cold trickle of unease runs through me.

“A cousin of mine was working on the garage door. It snapped closed and cut off his foot. It was a horrible accident,

and unfortunately my son happened to witness it. Does this help you, Miss...?"

"That's horrible! Jackson. Kerry Jackson. Yes, thank you. If David has been traumatized by this, he might speak about it again, maybe draw something... It's good that I know." I smile and sigh with relief. Like I figured. Nothing but an accident. "How is the cousin?"

Salvatore stiffens and his eyes turn a shade darker. "He is well. Good day, Miss Jackson. Talk again soon, yes?"

He spins on his heels and strides to his car, a black Mercedes with tinted windows. I remain on the first stair leading up to the yellow, worn-down brick building where I work, my heart pounding hard. That's an expensive car, I don't know much, but even I see that the Mercedes is something extra.

The skin on my back crawls as I walk back inside. I'm not sure what just happened. Probably nothing.

DAVID DOESN'T SPEAK AGAIN. MAYBE IT'S FOR THE BETTER? My day goes about as usual, but I can't seem to shake off the eerie encounter with the boy's father. I wonder what he does, who he is.

My phone chimes as I've just pushed on the helmet and started my Vespa. Struggling to get it off again, I fumble with my pocket and finally get the phone to my ear.

"Hi, Mom."

"Kerry, dear, what took you so long?"

"I had logistical issues." I turn off the engine and jerk the motorcycle back up on its support, placing my pink and white

helmet on the seat. “What’s up, Mom?”

“We wanted to see if you are available tonight. We’re celebrating our thirtieth anniversary and would be overjoyed if you would grace us with your presence.”

I wince. I love my parents, but Mom can be a bit much. She always gets a little tipsy, and starts nagging on me about my future.

“Aren’t you supposed to do that as a couple? I mean, go out to a fancy restaurant, get a room, all that?”

She laughs her tinkling, well-practiced laugh. *“Those days are over. Can you make it?”*

I pace back and forth on the sidewalk, kicking at pebbles. “Free food. What’s not to love?” And hanging with Dad is always fun.

“Splendid! Eight o’clock.”

I glance at the phone. It’s almost six. “Sure. See you then.”

As I hop on my Vespa and drive home, unease creeps up on me again. I don’t know why this affected me so much. No, I do know. I’ve cared for David for about a year. His behavior yesterday was way off from his usual. And then the dad’s piercing eyes, as if he saw right through me.

I’m wearing a thin dress and freeze like hell on the way to my birth home. It’s only a thirty-minute drive, thank God.

Mom has made us a lavish dinner with a perfectly tender steak, homemade fries, a salad.

“Did you know there are less flowers in the world now than only a few decades ago?” Dad swallows some wine, wipes his mouth and looks expectantly at me.

“I’ve read that, yeah.”

“The implications on the lives of nectar collecting animals are catastrophic. Butterflies, bees. Without bees we will perish. We won’t need a full-scale nuclear war to wipe us out as a human race.”

“All it takes is fewer bees?”

“Yes. They’re admirable. They work hard, live in an organized society, no wars, no crime. If a bee dies, his mates will carry him home and then go back out to keep collecting nectar.”

I smile. “I like the thought of being a queen, and having thousands of men serving me.”

“Doing nothing but eating and giving birth to thousands of children,” says my mom.

I turn to her. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

She grimaces. “I think thousands of grandchildren would be a bit overwhelming. One or two would do. When are you going to settle down and—”

“Mom—”

“Margaret!”

Dad and I have our outburst at the same time, making me laugh.

“I’m only twenty-six.”

“Give the kid a break. I, for one, am overjoyed that she got rid of that rodent and has started studying. You should be proud we have such a dedicated child.”

Mom throws up her hands. “Always ganging up on me. Evan was a fine young man.”

“Emphasis on ‘was’,” I mutter.

Dad and I exchange a glance of understanding. He never liked Evan much. My psychologist father saw right through him from the very beginning. I should have listened, but I was so happy for the attention from the opposite sex, and so terribly naive. We were seventeen when we met. We got married at nineteen.

I thought I had met the love of my life. My judgement sucked.

Honestly, I’m afraid my judgement still sucks, and I’m a little afraid to get back out there. I haven’t dated since our divorce. No one-night stand, no nothing.

At eleven, I hug my parents good night with a promise to visit more often, that I know I won’t honor, and head home. I don’t dislike them, not at all, especially not my dad whom I adore, but I live my own life and time flies.

THE NEXT DAY, DAVID DOESN’T SHOW. HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN with us according to the schedule. And not a word from home, that he’s ill. Just nothing. Filled with trepidation, I call the number that was given to us. A woman answers.

“*Carmen speaking.*” She has a hint of an accent, a smooth, delicate sounding voice.

“Is this David’s mother, by any chance?”

“*Who is this?*”

I present myself and why I’m calling.

“*David has been relocated. His father thought it was for the better.*”

I'm stunned. An ache spreads in my chest and I struggle to find my voice. "Why?"

"He said there was an incident at the center." Her voice is slightly accusatory, making my stomach clench. I know exactly what incident we're talking about. And I no longer believe a word Salvatore said about the 'accident with the cousin'. Why would he remove David from our care if what I heard was something innocent? A shudder runs through me, a chill I can't seem to shake.

"Thank you very much for letting me know."

I hang up and stare emptily out the window without seeing anything but little David who must now be confused and worried, his routine torn to pieces. What about his truck?

The lump in my throat grows.

I cry for hours. Chloe sits with me on the stairs in the gray, dank backyard with her arms around my shaking shoulders.

"It's my fault," I sob.

"It's not, sweetie. His dad's got every right in the world to move his son to another daycare."

"I know but... It was because I said what I said, right? I mean, I asked his dad, and the next day David is removed. What will become of him, Chloe? I can't—" A new set of sobs wrack my chest, tears and snot mixing on my chin.

"Ker, you did what you always do. You care. You did what you thought was best. I'm sure it'll be all right."

I snuggle closer to my friend and lean my head on her shoulder. "I wanna go out tonight. I need a drink."

"Anything, hon. I'm in. Want me to check with the others too?"

I nod.

Somehow, I drag myself through the rest of the day. My eyes are still a bit glossed over and my nose is tinted pink as I put on makeup for the evening. Every time I think of David, my chest clenches in renewed pain. I hurt him. I did that. It would have been better if I had just shut up. Why did I have to be so damn nosy?

I do wonder why he was moved. Didn't they trust us anymore? Did I say something that made his dad mistrust our care? Or does he have something to hide? The last thought makes me shudder. It's too far out. I'm not thinking he witnessed a murder... am I? I try to shake the thought.

Brushing on a second layer of mascara, I nearly fly through the roof when the doorbell rings and shove the mascara brush right into my eye, squealing with pain.

"I'm coming!"

Half blind, and with tears streaming from my aching eye, I open the door to let Chloe in.

"My God! Kerry!"

"Just a makeup accident. Have a glass of wine. I'll go wash it off."

She coos and gives me a hug before she disappears to the kitchen. I stare at my messy face in the mirror. Fuck this. I wash it off and decide for no makeup. Who cares anyway?

"Gimme a glass of that too. I'll call a cab."

Chloe shakes her head as I drain the glass in a few gulps. "You're a mess, hon. No war paint even?"

"Meh. Let's just go. I wanna get drunk."

THREE

San Francisco

Christian

I lean against the wall as I study the woman by the bar, this Kerry Jackson that Salvatore sent me for. Corben has been dealt with. He squealed like a pig. It's bliss to be back home, and this new hit is decidedly easier on the eyes. Sticking a new toothpick between my teeth, I cross my arms over my chest and fight the urge to give this shit up and get a smoke anyway. If someone had told me how miserable I'd feel quitting, I'd have punched the guy who gave me the first cig instead of greedily taking it. For fuck's sake. Life is never easy.

She's on her third shot and is definitely getting tipsy. Her long ringlets of red hair are thick and silky and I've been hypnotized the whole night by how it caresses the skin on her lower back where I can just about make out the little dimples. Her ass-hugging jeans are cut low, and the white blouse, that looks so demure and innocent from the front, has a long vertical slit in the back that shows enough for me to want to sneak a hand in there and find out just how smooth that ivory skin is.

My cock twitches and I grit my teeth. I'm not here for that, for fuck's sake. My job is to drug the kid and get rid of her.

Apparently, she's seen, or heard something she shouldn't have. Too bad. She's totally fuckable. Maybe I can postpone it a day? Or a few hours at least.

Spitting out the toothpick, I push away from the wall and slide up next to her, in the gap that just opened.

“Drowning your sorrows, sweetie?”

She jerks violently. “Jeez, you scared me!”

The expression in her dark green eyes almost floors me. It twists my guts as if someone has stabbed me. I don't know when I've seen anything so sad, and yet so fiery at the same time. I swallow hard. “So I noticed,” I say softly, suddenly afraid to scare her off. “I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention.”

“All right,” she says as her captivating eyes scan my face. She actually leans back a little and takes in the rest of my body as well. “What *is* your intention then?” Snapping her mouth closed, she suddenly blushes and puts a hand to her cheek. “I'm—I'm sorry, I'm not myself tonight.”

I can believe it.

“Can I get you something?” I nod toward the bartender, catching his attention.

“Gimme two more of these.” She gestures to the shot glasses in front of her. I raise an eyebrow. This will be a walk in the fucking park. Whether I want to fuck her, or kill her. Or both.

“What will you have, sir?” asks the bartender. A tired man in his fifties who has long since stopped being curious of his guests. Suits me perfectly.

“Give me a beer. Ale.”

Our drinks arrive in no time and I raise my bottle. “What’s eating you, then? And cheers.”

She tilts her head, flips back a few strands of hair, empties the glass with an absolutely adorable grimace, and wipes her glistening wet, lush lips with the back of her hand. The sight alone makes me semi-hard in an instant. I exhale shakily and grin at her.

“It’s a thing at work. I can’t... It’s nothing. Or, it’s not nothing, it’s a lot. I shouldn’t think about it. I don’t know if I’m stupid or... But I’ve got this really strange feeling, and I feel so sorry for the boy. It crushes me. I want to die!”

I blink. I doubt she really wants to die. Sadly, she’s about to get her wish fulfilled. “That’s... You’ve got a lot in there.” I gesture to her chest. “Got someone to talk to?”

“M’got friends.”

I look around us without seeing anyone who seems the least attentive to this girl. “Where are your friends then? I don’t see anyone here.”

She waves in the direction of the dance floor. “They’re out there somewhere. I think I broke them.”

That makes me laugh. “What?”

“I can talk. A lot.”

“If you need a fresh set of ears...”

She downs the second glass and sways. I catch her by the elbow and steady her. She’s so light, like a little bird. Her skin is warm and damp. A scent of musk and flowers wafts up as she grabs my arm.

“Thank you,” she says on an exhale. She studies my face again and squints. “You’ve got such black eyes. They’re...”

They're like voids. Have you hypnotized me?"

I'd say it's the other way around, but I don't tell her that. "You shouldn't have more of those, sweetie. You need buckets of coffee and some fresh air."

She shakes her head and looks like she's trying to gauge the situation. I chew on my lip and wince. Did I lose her there? Too much too fast? I take a light hold of her chin and turn her head toward the street. Right across is a 24-hour cafe. "Not gonna kidnap you, love. Go tell your friends you're leaving. I'll be outside. Do as you like. It's just..." I lean closer, cheek to cheek, reveling in the warmth that radiates from her skin. "It's a lot easier to talk over there than it is here." I hope by giving her the choice, and seeming nonchalant about it, will give her enough courage to follow through.

I have no interest in her friends seeing me, so I sneak out as she makes her way to the deeper recesses of the venue. Murderous thoughts race through my head as I glare at a kid with a smoke, standing on the sidewalk a few steps from me. Why am I quitting again? I can't remember.

"Hey, you got—"

"Heeeeere."

Her unmistakable light voice singsongs from behind me. Well, I'll be damned. I forget the kid with the cigarette in an instant, offer her my arm and look left and right before pulling her with me across the street. This is almost too easy. She stumbles a little in her military-style high-heeled boots and leans heavier on my arm. A thrill runs through me. I don't mind it. At all.

The cafe is brightly lit and the fluorescent light casts hard shadows on her face. She's completely *au naturel*. No makeup.

Her long, naturally wavy hair hangs heavy over her shoulders. She pouts her lower lip and blows a stream of air up along her face. She is flushed and looks a bit unsure, cautious. She also looks very young. If I recall correctly, she's twenty-six, but right now she looks like she's not even out of high school yet. Suddenly, I feel old as fuck. I'm only thirty-seven, but I've seen things, done things, that make me feel like a hundred. With a twinge to my heart, I also feel oddly protective of her. Which is, of course, a conundrum. I've actually, in all my years, never before had a woman as a target. I've never even hung with anyone like her for any reason. The women I hook up with are hardened, hot for my body, and if they care about me at all, it's because they're intimidated and get off on it. This one is nothing like it. She reminds me a little bit of my sister when she was younger, before she got jaded.

“Two coffees, please,” I say to the kid waiting to take my order, a gangly teen with a few stray strands of dark hair on his chin. I drop some coins on the counter, grab the sturdy, white cups and turn to Kerry. Who, I have to remind myself, I don't know the name of yet. She has fallen into a booth at the back and is leaning her head on her arms, taking up half the table. I slide into the booth across from her and sit on the green, worn-down plastic bench as I put down the cups.

“Coffee for the lady.”

She jerks up and stares at me, her eyes a little bit unfocused, the whites tinged red. “I think I fell asleep. Didn't sleep much last night. What time is it even?”

I pull up the cuff of my shirtsleeve and glance at my watch. “It's almost one in the morning.”

“Oh my God,” she groans.

“Need to be up early?”

She nods and takes a careful sip of the coffee.

I reach over the table and give her my hand. “I’m Christian, by the way. Russo. I’m so smitten I didn’t even introduce myself.”

She takes it and shakes it vigorously. “Kerry. Smitten?” She narrows her eyes, her small hand still holding mine.

I wrap my other hand around hers as well. She was warm in the club, but now her skin is a bit chilly. I lick my lips and her eyes dart to my mouth. Pushing down the predatory need to pull her little body to me, I smile. “Yeah. Smitten. Now, what’s making you drink the night away and having you talk to strangers because you broke your friends?”

“Oh... work stuff. I can’t really—” A tear wells up and trickles down her cheek. I reach out and stroke it away.

“What do you do for work?”

“I study behavioral science, and I do volunteer work at a center in a less fortunate neighborhood, a center for autistic children. It’s a sort of daycare setup, but most of them aren’t there every day. Some are, but some come by like once a week. We help train them with language, and simple tasks that the rest of us take for granted.”

“That’s admirable, Kerry.”

“Well, it’s where my heart lies. I couldn’t do anything else. We also have courses for the parents. Anyone is welcome. If you know anyone, I’ll give you the contact information. I always want people to spread the word. Do you have your phone? I can give you the phone number.”

I have to force myself not to gape. She met me a few minutes ago, and she’s already letting me know where I can reach her. She doesn’t need to give me her phone number, or

address, I know it anyway. I know her home address, and her parents' address as well. If I was the average Joe, though, and an ass, she'd just have given herself on a plate. Oh, girl. Too naive.

“I really don't know anyone who'd need it... but sure.”

She gives me a phone number and an address I dutifully tap into my contact list. A list stock full of mobsters, and then an address to a community center for autistic children. I shake my head, amused.

“Thanks. So, do you like your work? Doesn't it wear you out to study and work?”

“I have very little free time.”

“And yet here you are...”

She sighs. “I should have been in bed. But I had to numb my head. I felt like absolute shit today.”

“What happened?”

“I don't wanna go there. I already nagged holes in my friends' heads. Please let's talk about something else.”

“What do you wanna talk about then?”

“Well, for instance, who are you, Mr. Mysterious?”

“I'm just a boring stockbroker who happened to need to numb his head too. Too much shit at work to even begin to describe.”

“You're not married?” She glances at my left hand and then smacks her forehead. “I'm sorry. Foot in mouth.”

I laugh and flex my hand. “Nothing for me.” I nod at her own left hand. “Neither are you.”

She rolls her eyes. “Let's move on.”

I decide to steer the enticing little Miss Curious back to the matter at hand. “Tell me about your studies. Are you gonna work with kids when you grow up?”

She lets out a sigh and shoots me an embarrassed smile. “Yeah! Better topic. Again, sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it. Studies?”

In the next half hour I learn everything there is to know about the center, her studies, autism, and working as a volunteer. She’s passionate, clearly intelligent, loving. I wince, and the heart I’ve considered blackened beyond repair suddenly aches a little. The difference between us couldn’t be greater. I kill people for a living. People run when they hear the name Christian Russo. I kill for the mob. I almost only kill trash, and feel no remorse, but sometimes someone else gets in the way, and I take no pleasure in that. I also can’t back out, or I’ll sooner or later be the one someone comes for. If it stands between me and some chick I don’t know, however sweet she may be, I’ll always choose me. There’s no need to be cruel, though. There can be pain, and there can be no pain. Of course I’ll let her go without pain.

“Sounds like you love what you do.”

“Oh, I do, I really do. Most days...”

“What happened then, that has you so upset?”

“I don’t know if I should but... Well, one of the boys, he’s one of the children at the center—well was...” Her eyes gloss over. “Anyway, he said something that made the hair at my nape stand up. And I still don’t know what it means. It’s just that it must be something significant because he’s so deep in his autism, he rarely interacts with us.”

My heart takes a small leap. “What did he say?”

Kerry hesitates. “I—I shouldn’t.”

“Don’t mention him by name and you’re good. You clearly need to get this off your chest.”

She chews on her lip and fiddles with her purse, then she looks up at me, and again I get this electrical feeling when our eyes meet.

“All right. He, uhm... said he’d seen something red.”

“What red?”

“He didn’t specify. I don’t think he’s able to process his impressions.”

“And what do you think?”

She swallows visibly. “It could have been paint, right?”

I cock my head and regard her. “But that’s not really what you think, is it?”

Frowning, she shakes her head. “But I’m just stupid. I mean, if he’d only said that but...”

“What else did he say?” I tense up. Here we go.

“I asked him where he’d seen the red. It was such a stupid question. I just wanted to encourage him to keep talking.”

I nod. “And?”

“He said he’d seen it on the floor, and... on a man.”

“Could have been someone who got hurt.”

She nods eagerly. “Exactly.”

I reach over and put a hand over her twitchy hands that keep fiddling. “Then why are you so rattled?”

“I don’t know. My imagination ran amok. But then I asked his dad and he gave off this really strange vibe. Like...

intimidating. I got the feeling he said, between the lines, ‘I know where you live’.”

“Did he now?” I can picture it perfectly. Salvatore, with his bodyguards, black suit, tall and broad, staring this girl down. “Who’s his dad?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you that.”

“Confidential?”

She nods. “I think I’ve told you too much already.”

“No, you haven’t. You’re good. And whatever you say to me stays with me. I promise. So, what do you think happened, Kerry?”

My heart pounds a little harder. *Don’t doom yourself now, this is your slim chance.*

“Christian... I can’t tell. Mr. Salvatore said—” She slaps a hand over her mouth and her eyes go wide.

“Lots and lots of that name going around. And stays with me anyway.”

“Promise?”

I nod and wait for her to go on.

“Well his dad said he’d seen an accident.”

“Then it’s all good. You got your explanation.”

She chews on her lower lip, a vision that makes me want those lips somewhere else. Lush, full lips. I silently beg her not to go on.

“I don’t know. It had to be something brutal.”

“An accident can be traumatic.”

“I can’t help thinking he witnessed a—” She leans forward and lowers her voice, “A murder.”

My heart sinks to my stomach. “I’m sure it was nothing.” I don’t know why I keep trying to get her to change her mind; I put words in her mouth to prove she doesn’t know anything, when I should in fact do the opposite.

She rubs her hands over her face. I reach out and pull a strand of hair to the side. She blushes and looks down. “Yeah, it was probably nothing,” she whispers, her voice breaking.

My chest feels tight. Does she really need to die for this? It’s fucking nothing.

“And then his dad had him removed,” she sobs, her cheeks wet.

I pull a paper tissue from the pile on the table, reach over and dab her cheeks, then I grab her hand again, and hold it in both of mine. Her skin is ice cold and clammy. The air conditioning in this place is brutal.

“Are you cold?”

“A bit,” she admits.

I let her go and shrug out of my suit jacket, then I half-stand and lean over the table, wrapping it around her shoulders. “There you go. Wanna go for a walk before we call it a night? I think you need your beauty sleep.” Sadly, I’ve heard enough.

She sniffs. “You smell really nice.”

“Well, thank you. So do you.”

She stands and maneuvers her way out to the aisle. “When did you smell me? That’s ten shades of creepy.”

“Do you find me creepy?”

She pouts as she regards me, her gaze traveling along my body. “Mnooo, not really. Thank you for listening. Did I wear you out completely? You’re a great listener and—and I’m sorry if—”

“No. Not broken yet.”

She laughs and wipes the last of the tears off her cheeks. I lay my hand on the small of her back and lead her out on the street. Her little gasp as I touch her doesn’t escape me, and pleases me a lot. I like that she hasn’t come on to me. I like that all we’ve done is talk. Few dare to talk with me. Most are scared, and the women I meet only want me between their legs. I’m awed by her trust.

“Let’s walk,” I say. I’m fucking hesitating. I know what I must do, I just don’t want to anymore. There’s probably no solution to that, though. What I want doesn’t matter to Salvatore.

“I shouldn’t...”

“I completely agree. You shouldn’t. You don’t know me. I could be terribly dangerous.” I wink.

“Maybe...”

“Maybe you like danger?”

She stops and regards me, looking around us. Then she smiles that crooked smile of hers that makes me wish I was someone else, and that my reason to be here was something else entirely.

“One block of danger,” she says. “Then you can give me your phone number, I’ll go back to the club and I’ll call you someday.”

“That’s what they all say.” I sigh dramatically and roll my eyes, shaking off the feeling of looming disaster. “But fine. I’ll take what I can get.”

One block is all I need. My car is parked right around the corner.

FOUR

Kerry

I take one step toward the club, indecisive, wobbling slightly on my too-high heels, then one step toward the insanely handsome and mysterious Christian who's been all ears to my misery. Oh heck. Just around the block, get some fresh air before I call a cab and head home. I gesture for him to walk as I trot up to him.

“Take me away, or lose me forever.” It's a joke, but his head snaps toward me and my heart jolts at the quickly escaping darkness in his eyes. I swallow. “It's... from a movie, eh...”

He laughs, his eyes getting lighter again, making my heart skip a beat. “Of course.” Then he leans close, his breath fanning my ear. “But don't tease a man like that. I might take you more seriously than you'd want.”

A wave of heat rushes to the pit of my belly and shoots to right between my legs. Oh God. Maybe this is a bad idea?

“Do I need to be afraid now? I'm not normally like this, it's... I don't know. I'm sorry. I'm out of order. I'll just go back to my friends.”

I laugh, and hear how nervous I suddenly sound. Something about this man makes me say the most stupid things. I've opened up way too much to him tonight. It felt like he wanted to listen, and I needed it so terribly. I glance at him out of the corner of my eye, hoping he doesn't catch me ogling. He's more than a head taller than me. He has large, strong hands. I'm a hands girl, and his make me shiver. The physical attraction when he joined me at the bar was instant, despite me having downed some vodka. Or maybe because of. But that he's patiently been letting me babble for an hour, listening intently, saying all the right things, has made my heart melt.

He stops next to a car and puts a hand in one of his pockets as he regards me. Narrowing his eyes, he glances behind him and then back at me. "No, love. You don't have to be afraid." The car blinks twice as it clicks open, making me jerk with surprise. "Let me drive you home, Kerry."

My heart jolts in my chest.

No, you crazy girl, don't do it, it's not safe.

"I... shouldn't..."

He nods. "You're right. It was stupid. You should go back to your friends. They're probably wondering where you went. I was just thinking..." He leans forward and plants a kiss on my cheek. "I've appreciated your company. You're really easy to be with."

I'm dazzled, wrapped in a cloud of rich cinnamon, pine, a vague hint of mint. The feeling of his lips on my cheek lingers.

Christian brushes my chin with the pad of his thumb, holds it there. I wonder if he's going to kiss me.

“I’m still intact, by the way.” He winks and takes his hand back.

Oh what the hell. He is definitely no creep. I’d have felt that from miles away.

“Know what? Take me home or—” I start.

“Lose you forever?” A grin spreads over his beautiful features, making my heart stutter. I glance at his warm, strong hands, suddenly wanting to feel them on me. “It’s not ‘take me home’ you know...” His gaze makes a bolt of heat shoot straight to my pussy.

“No... it isn’t. I think I forgot.” He frowns. “What did Charlie say to Maverick exactly?”

Goosebumps chase each other along my legs. I swallow hard. “Take me to bed... Or lose me forever...”

His eyes flash, black, dangerously hot. He doesn’t move. He doesn’t speak. My heart nearly beats its way out of my chest.

“So... You know your *Top Gun*?” I ask.

He stalks a step closer.

I take a tentative step back and meet with the cold, hard metal of his car.

“Of course,” he says. “It’s more my age range. Would have figured you too young to know it.”

I scoff. “I’m not *that* young.”

He leans in and supports himself on the car, his arm next to my head. “Really now, what are you? Twenty-one?”

I inhale a deep, shaky breath. “Twenty-six. How old are *you* then? Stone age?”

His face becomes a blur as he leans in closer. I almost feel the heat radiating from his skin. “Thirty-seven. Is that an issue?” His voice has taken on a deeper tone, a rich murmur that reverberates through me.

I shrink back, but have nowhere to go, my breaths becoming erratic, embarrassingly obvious. Christian flashes a knowing smirk as he scans my face. I shake my head. “No.”

He pushes away, leaving me in heat, gasping for air.

“You should go to your friends.”

My brain isn’t connected to my mouth anymore. “What if I don’t want to?”

He grabs my arm and spins me around. “Then you’re coming with me.” He rips open the door and throws out his arm in a chivalrous gesture, inviting me to sit.

As I slide in, enclosed in silence and darkness when he shuts the door, my brain screams at me to not be a freaking moron, but my body screams louder, wanting more.

Christian jumps in behind the wheel. “Where to?”

I give him the address, my mouth dry. I take him in as we take off, his massive thighs in well-fitted suit pants, those large, strong hands, his sharp profile. His chest rises and falls rapidly, and he doesn’t seem unaffected either.

“Don’t look so scared, Kerry. We can just talk, if that’s what you want. Or I’ll just drop you off and get going.”

“I’m not scared.”

He gives me a quick glance. “Hon, you look like a deer caught in headlights.”

Do I? “Well. A woman shouldn’t go with a man she’s known for an hour.”

“No, she shouldn’t.”

A spike of adrenaline shoots through me. “But I think you’re a really decent guy.” I hope to God I’m right.

He smiles. A sight that makes my heart jump. “I love your trust, and your innocence, Kerry. I didn’t think there were any women like you left on earth.”

I exhale with relief as I see my neighborhood getting closer. “I’m nothing special.”

Christian doesn’t answer and we pull up outside my house. He shuts down the engine and turns to me. “Can I follow you to the door?”

I nod and reach for the handle.

“Allow me.” He hops out and dashes around the car, holding open the door for me as he gives me a hand for support.

I melt as I take it. “How very old-fashioned of you. I didn’t think there were any of you left.”

“Oh, we were two. I had to kill the other one. I don’t like competition.”

I laugh, and much too soon we’re at my door.

Christian glances around us. “Nice place you’ve got. Make a lot of money at the center?”

“Oh no, I live off dirty guilt money. But that’s another story.”

“Now I’m even more intrigued.”

“It’s not that interes—” I swallow the rest as he moves in on me.

“Can I kiss you?” he asks, his voice husky.

I nod.

He leans in and brushes his lips against mine. The energy between us crackles, scorches me, leaves me gasping. I cup his face in my hands and press my lips more firmly against his, yelping as he pushes me up against the door, pressing his whole body against mine. His mouth asks for entrance and I’m more than happy to give it. One single kiss robs me of every last remnant of sanity. He steals my breath, my mind, my heart.

I reach for the handle, realizing it’s locked, begin a blind, fumbling search for the key in my purse, unlock the door and push it open. We almost fall into the darkness in my hallway. Christian crushes me to him in a forceful embrace, kicking the door closed, never breaking the kiss. He pushes me in front of him, steering me into the living room until the back of my legs collide with my couch. In a moment of hesitation, I put a hand to his chest and he responds immediately, taking a step back.

“I—” I begin.

“Too much?”

I search for something to say. My body screams for him, but I haven’t been with a man since my divorce last year, and Evan was my first. I try to tell myself it’s like riding a bike, and what’s a little sex? But my brain is back, taking over.

“Know what?” he says. “You can kick me out. It’s fine. Or we can round it up with a cup of tea, and then I’ll let you sleep. Sound good?” He rakes a hand through his dark, jaw-

long hair and licks his lower lip, as if he's tasting me. The sight makes a shiver run through me.

"Sounds like a plan," I say faintly.

He throws out his arm. "Lead the way, Miss..."

"Jackson," I say. "Kerry Jackson. Pleasure to meet you Christian Russo."

He begins to hum '*Miss Jackson*' by OutKast. I groan and slap him on the shoulder. "I've heard that a million times. Don't go there if you value your life."

Christian holds up his hands and grins. "Your word is my law." He gives me a gaze that makes my knees weak. It's dark, and full of sin.

I pour water into the kettle with shaky hands, my mind spinning from the vodka, the late hour, his presence in my house.

"Pleasure's all mine," he murmurs. "Meeting you. You're ___"

"Oh my God, fuck it," I gasp, my brain shutting off entirely at the sound of his voice, silky, full of promises I suddenly want him to fulfill.

I spin around, facing him, and in a flash he has me on the counter, with himself squeezed in between my thighs. A hard length pushes against my pussy through the fabric of way too many obstacles. Heat rushes to between my legs as his hands slide up along my sides, hesitating by the swell of my breasts. When I don't object, he cups them and kneads them with rough hands as he catches my mouth again, stealing every remaining ounce of sanity along with my breath.

He pushes against me even harder, rubbing his hard cock against me, making me boneless with need.

“I want you so fucking much. You have no idea,” he groans in my mouth.

A click to my left announces the water has finished boiling. The sound snaps me out of the magic.

I nearly double over from the clenching in my belly, the need for him, paired with panic over what’s about to happen. “Christian,” I whimper, as I put my hands on his chest and shake my head. “I can’t.”

He freezes up. For a breathless moment I think he’s just gonna take me anyway, and I’m not sure I’d fight it. Our gazes meet and I widen my eyes at the predatory look on his face. Then it fades and he nods, stroking my cheek, his fingers leaving burning trails.

“I’ll go.”

I’m left gasping, wanting, desperate for more. The teacups remain empty next to me on the counter. My front door clicks closed. I sit frozen to the spot. I just said no to some probably steaming hot sex with the sexiest man I’ve ever touched. Am I insane?

On shaky legs I make my way to the front door, locking it. My phone buzzes in the purse I dropped on the floor at some point when he pushed me inside. It’s Chloe. I have fourteen missed calls. I send her a quick text, then I stumble to bed.

I don’t fall asleep until the early dawn. Putting a hand between my legs, I come once, and later once more, thinking about his strong heavy body pressed against mine. I wonder if I’m going to see him again. Did I lose him forever?

MY FRIEND AND COWORKER IS FURIOUS WITH ME.

“You could have sent one fucking text. We were so worried, Ker!”

I hang my head in shame. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t myself last night.”

“Tell me about it, girl! You look like shit. What did you do? Did you drink the whole night?” She grabs my chin and turns my head from side to side, studying the dark circles under my eyes, snickering.

I shake my head and can’t hide the grin.

She slaps my shoulder and gasps. “Get out of here! You hooked up with someone? It’s about time!”

“Well... It’s a long story, both yes and no, I guess. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Oh, I’m not letting you off the hook. Was it good? Are you seeing him again?”

“Yes. No. I have no idea. Twenty-four. I need to work. See you later.”

“You’re evil,” she shouts after me.

I flip her off.

I’m a mess. My head spins from lack of sleep and my *God*, I want to see him again. In my locker hangs the jacket he gave me last night and never took back. I sneak off to sniff it over and over throughout the day. I’m not in love, it’s just lust, but my body can’t tell the difference. My whole being tingles.

FIVE

Christian

“**S**he’s still alive?” Luciano Salvatore paces back and forth in his office, wearing down the expensive carpet. He waves at his bodyguard. “Get out.”

I stand as if on guard, my hands clasped behind my back, and watch the man in silence as he exits the office and carefully shuts the heavy wooden door.

“Miss Jackson hasn’t revealed much. She hesitates to talk about it. I need more time to assess this.”

“Time? Why time? Just get rid of her. It’s what you do. You don’t interrogate, or negotiate, or whatever the fuck you think you’re doing. You’re not hired to think. Just off the girl.”

“Uncle, with all due respect, if she has nothing on you, then there’s no fucking reason to unleash me on a civilian.”

He scoffs. “Don’t pull the uncle card on me. Your mama can’t always come to your rescue. And since when did you develop a conscience? Fuck’s sake. Do I need to send someone else?”

I twitch. “Salvatore. I have no issue doing her in if she’s a threat to the organization, but give me the benefit of the doubt here, let me observe her for a couple of more days.”

He narrows his eyes and stops his pacing. “You wanna get in this girl’s pants.”

When I don’t answer immediately, he barks out a laugh. “That’s rich. You’re sick. She’s like twelve. She *is* easy on the eye, though, I admit that.”

“She’s not twelve,” I grit out.

Salvatore waves dismissively. “Whatever. Don’t lose focus, Christiano,” he says, using my birth name, the name he knows I loathe. “Sure, fuck her, and then do what you’re told. You’ve got three days. Then I’ll send someone else. Someone with a little less—” he gives me a once over, his gaze filled with distaste, “—conscience. Roarke, probably. He knows how to get things done.”

I close my eyes and fight down the growl that wants to escape my throat. Roarke Brennan. Tall, dark, pretty as fuck and a fucking psychopath. He likes to inflict pain. He’s a ruthless monster. I know what people think of me, but I’m efficient, and I only hurt the ones who deserve it.

“She’ll be gone in three days.”

“Shame, such a pretty girl,” he says and regards me, gauging my reaction.

I let my expression remain neutral. “That all?”

He waves me off and turns towards his desk. “You’re dismissed, Christiano.”

As I hop in my car, my thoughts stray to little Kerry. I don’t even know if she wants to see me again after last night. Fuck, I had to restrain myself when she pushed me away. The urge to rip her clothes off and take her nearly had me staggering as I left her house. She smelled of arousal all over. Whatever her brain told her, her body was more than ready. I

would bet a fortune she was wet as fuck. I think she does want to see me. Besides, she still has my jacket.

She's spent the morning at the center, then she hopped on her pink Vespa, tucked her hair inside her collar, pushed the helmet over her head, and rushed to the university. Late afternoon, I think she's going home, but she goes back to the center and doesn't leave until seven.

I shake my head. My hours are usually worse, but that's still some dedication. During the day, I've unraveled a little bit more of her mystery. She's got money. An alimony. Enough for a few good years of not doing much of anything. It explains the cute townhouse on the hill, with the little garden and a view of the bay. It doesn't explain her scurrying between duties.

As she puts her key in the lock, I have my plan set. A few minutes later I knock on her door. No answer. I know she's in there. What the fuck? I ring the doorbell three times before I finally hear steps and a rattle of a chain.

She opens the door a sliver, the security chain in place. Her hair is soaking wet, flat against her head, and she wears nothing but a large, white towel wrapped around her body. My cock immediately jumps to life and my mouth literally waters. I hold up the plastic bag.

"Vietnamese. Figured you'd been working late and needed some calories."

She widens her eyes and opens and closes her mouth. "Oh my God. I didn't think you'd—" She closes the door, the chain rattles, and then she opens it. "Come in. I'll," she gestures to herself, "make myself more presentable."

“I see nothing wrong with the presentation,” I say and give her a once over.

She chews on her lip and her breathing hitches as a blush spreads on her cheeks. “Be right back.” Then she flees up the stairs.

I grin and go in search of some forks and plates, putting them on the living room table. More intimate than the table in the kitchen. She comes scurrying down after a few minutes, her damp hair in a bun, pale torn jeans, barefooted, and a white oversized shirt. Like a hurricane, she dashes through the room and picks up clothes that lie strewn about.

“Had I known I’d have a visitor,” she says breathlessly.

I reach out and take her hand, warm, soft. She smells of flowers and vanilla. “Come sit. I didn’t bring you food to stress you out, it was to take care of you and make you relax.”

She comes to a halt, a pile of clothes in her arms. “You’re right. What the hell.” She dumps them on a chair and sits down next to me on the couch. Crossing her legs, she leans over the boxes and glances inside, sniffing. “This looks delicious. You’re a gem. Thank you.”

“Help yourself.”

I’m a gem. Right. Some gem. Maybe an onyx? Hard, and cold, and black as night.

She digs in and fills her plate with noodles, rice and spicy stews. I admire her appetite. I like a girl who eats. Looking at her, I wonder where she puts it, though. She’s thin as a stick.

“How’d you know I was home?” she asks between chews.

“I called the center. You gave me the number, remember? They said you’d gone home.” The lie comes easy. I hope she

buys it.

“Oh. And oh my God, thank you. This is delicious.” Her moans make my cock twitch.

I join her in devouring the food, hungry as a wolf myself.

“You came back,” she says, and puts a finger in her mouth, sucking off the juices. When she catches me looking, she quickly pulls it out and gives me a shy glance, the atmosphere suddenly heavier, denser.

“I couldn’t stay away. You have my jacket.”

She twitches and jumps up. “Sorry. I’ll—”

I grab her arm and pull her back down. “I’m not here for the jacket, Kerry.”

Her lips part and the cute tip of her tongue darts out, licking them. “Then, why are you here?”

I could cut the air between us with a knife, it’s so thick. “What do you think?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” She swallows visibly.

“Why don’t I show you?” I say and lean in, my gaze never leaving hers.

Her pupils dilate and a gasp escapes her. I lean in closer, until her face is a blur, until her rapid breaths fan my lips. When she doesn’t move, I close the distance and taste her. Spices, flowers and that unique essence that is her and her alone. I tease her lips open, and revel in how she melts against me. She’s adorably shy. I don’t know why, I’m not usually very considerate, but I strain not to scare her. I’m lost, though, when she lays her warm little hands on my thighs. I wrap my arms around her and scoop her into my embrace, straddling her over my lap, never breaking the kiss. She yelps, but

doesn't object. Her hands caress along my arms, feeling her way over my biceps. Cupping her ass, I pull her close, pressing my hard cock against her hot pussy. Fuck me if she isn't damp through the fabric.

I rock against her as my hands find their way under her shirt, find her warm soft skin. She gasps and writhes, and I know she's mine. My hands reach all the way around her waist, such a delicate creature she is. I stroke along her sides, up to the swell of her breasts. To my great surprise, she's braless. I can't help the groan as I cup her breasts, circling her nipples with my thumbs. She mewls in my mouth and grinds against my cock. I exhale with a shudder and pinch her peaks, making her jerk and moan.

"Oh my God," she gasps.

"Take off your pants." I grab her hips and push her up, putting her in front of me.

She trembles as she unzips, her eyes hooded. My cock strains in my pants and my belly aches. Fuck me; I can't remember when I actually wanted someone like I want her. Is it the thrill of the hunt? I've never fucked someone I was ordered to kill.

As she shimmies out of her pants and steps out of them, the scent of her arousal hits me like a punch to my stomach.

"Stay. Don't move," I growl.

I take in the vision before me, the flustered girl, her glazed eyes, her shallow breaths. I could pull out my cock, push her panties to the side, and impale her in a second, but I want to savor this. She won't be mine for long.

I reach for her, hesitate, my hand hovering over her smooth thigh, feeling the heat build between us. Her eyes dart between

mine, down to my hand, and up again, her breathing coming in short gasps.

I move a fraction closer and let my palm rest on her thigh, the tips of my fingers millimeters from her panties. As I move my hand, letting it slide along the inside of her thigh, she gasps and begins to tremble. Her response to me is fucking amazing, and I haven't even touched her yet, tasted her, fucked her. I hold her dark, widened eyes as I slide in between her thighs, rub along her slit through the fabric. Her nostrils widen, her breath hitches, but she doesn't break her gaze. Her eyes nearly do me in. I'm so hard I could burst.

She bucks, and I push the fabric to the side, revealing a small patch of light red hair. I slide along her slick folds, back, forth, up to her clit, pushing against it, and back again. Kerry shudders as I rest against her opening, teasing. When I glance at her, her eyes are closed. I want her to look at me as I thrust inside. I want to see the fire I light in her.

It's as if she senses my demand. Her eyes fly open, then she stumbles back, pulls down her shirt, and corrects her panties.

"I—I'm sorry, Christian, I—" She swallows and looks down.

I nearly growl as I clench my jaw and fight down the frustration that rolls over me. My cock aches to take her, but instead I nod and force a smile. When the fuck did I become considerate?

"Don't be sorry. Did I do something wrong?"

She plops down on the couch and pulls a throw blanket over her legs, fiddling with a loose thread.

"No, I... You're great. It's..."

I gotta leave. Like now, or I'll rip that blanket off her and fuck her no matter what she says. I don't get it. She's so fucking ready, and then she just doesn't want me. And why does that make me want her even more?

"I should go." I stand. Her gaze darts to the huge bulge in my pants. Yeah, look at what you're missing. I exhale with a shudder and turn.

"Christian."

I grit my teeth and turn back.

"You don't have to go..."

My stomach clenches. All I see before me is how I bend her over, give her a long hard punishment for being such a tease, my palm turning her ass cheeks to scorching heat and delicious agony before I bury my cock in her. Does she even know what she wants? Why does she think I'm here?

I put on my nicest smile, and when she returns it, her eyes shine with trust and hope. I can't help feeling a twinge in my chest area and caress her cheek.

"I better go, Kerry."

She stands when I stand, looking adorably unsure. "I'll follow you to the door." Her voice is small, like a little girl's.

I feel like the fucking big bad wolf.

Because I am.

I jerk off in a hot shower, blue-balled like never before. I'd give her the best fuck she's ever had. What the hell is her problem? Is she afraid of me? Does she sense something is off? Or is it something else? I realize I don't know enough about her background and decide to dig a little more tomorrow.

I fall asleep to images of my mouth on her cunt, savoring her juices, her scent, her hot flesh, and picture her lips around my cock. Fuck. I gotta have her at least once. I want to wrap that red hair around my fist as I bury myself in her throat.

“UNCLE.”

“Don’t ‘uncle’ me,” mutters Salvatore on the other end of the line.

“You gotta give me more time.”

He barks out a laugh. “Not happening, Christiano.”

“When have I ever failed you?” I clutch the phone hard in my sweaty palm.

“You’re failing me right now, boy.”

“You’re five fucking years older,” I snarl. “Don’t call me ‘boy’.”

“You gotta learn some fucking respect! Get your act together. You have until tomorrow to get your dick inside her or whatever the *fuck* it is you think you’re doing. In exactly twenty-four hours, I’ll call Roarke. He knows how to finish shit.”

“But—”

“Tick-tock.”

I throw the phone across the room. The screen shatters as it hits the floor. I stare at the glass splinters as I shake my head.

“*Fuck!*”

A slender woman with flaming hair haunts me. I can’t get her out of my mind. I don’t know why. I could have a woman in my bed in thirty minutes from now, some long-legged

blonde, or any-fucking-one. So why am I obsessing over Kerry? Is it because things are looking really fucking bleak regarding her longevity and I'm doomed to snuff out her light? Or is it because she keeps pulling and pushing, teasing me blue? Is she really that innocent, or is she playing me?

With my feet propped up on the dashboard, I sit in my car outside the center, chewing on my last toothpick. I've parked a bit uphill and she doesn't notice me as she hops on her Vespa and disappears out of sight. I wait a little longer, still pondering how I'm gonna do this. Does she like force? Or does she just wanna talk? I groan. Not exactly my forte.

I start the car and head downhill as I head for her home for the last time.

It's a great shame, but I'm not letting Roarke put his dirty fucking hands on her.

She's mine.

SIX

Kerry

Chloe asked me a thousand times today what's wrong with me. I know I'm a mess. The drive home usually soothes me. I love the view, the wind on my face, the smells of the city. I'm born and raised in San Francisco. I'll stay here until I die.

Today, I don't feel it. All I see is two dark brown eyes. All I feel is his hands on my skin, burning hot. I've slapped myself mentally all day for being such a freak and backing out. I breathe him, smell him, revel in the memories. If he ever shows up again, I'll go all the way, I swear. I don't know what's the matter with me, but there's something behind that alluring facade that both scares me and excites me. I feel a dark streak in his tenderness, a demon behind his angel-like looks.

I'm probably crazy.

But something about him, when it feels as if he's letting go, as it gets intense, turns darker, demanding, possessive.

Evan was pretty bland, kind, a people-pleaser, my mom loved him. She took it harder than I did when it turned out he was cheating on me. Christian is another breed entirely and I don't know how to handle what he awakens in me.

I toss my keys on the side table and nudge the door closed with my knee as I sort through my mail.

I eat. I shower. I glance at the clock every few minutes and my heart sinks as I realize there'll be no surprise visit tonight. I kick myself for chasing him off last night.

The knock pierces the silent house. I sit cross-legged in front of the window overlooking the bay, twirling a glass of red wine in my hands, and I nearly spill the contents. I'm on my feet in a second, my heart slamming in my chest, staring at my front door as if it would bite me, then I rush over and rip it open after throwing one quick glance in the hallway mirror.

"I couldn't stay away." He hands me a small pot with fresh oregano, thyme, and salvia planted in it. "You look like a girl who cooks, and I noticed you had no fresh herbs. Do you like Italian? Have you eaten?"

I glance at the clock on the wall next to me. "It's nine forty-five. Yeah, I've eaten."

It's like he deflates. "Sorry. Want me to go?"

"No, no. Come in. And thank you. I'll go put these where they belong."

Christian glances behind him, scratches his dark stubble and steps over the threshold. As I close the door, he suddenly pushes me up against the wall and presses his mouth against mine. I part my lips and let him in, my heart jolting at yet again tasting him, feeling him. He grabs my waist and lifts me, his body flush to mine. There's a hard length pressing against my belly and a shiver runs through me.

I'm not gonna chicken out tonight. I don't care if he looks at me as if he wants to devour me, as if he craves my life force. I'll let him have it.

Suddenly he drops me and my head spins from the sudden change of position.

“I’m sorry. I can barely control myself around you. I’ll respect your boundaries. I’ve been too pushy, I know. You’re not that kind of girl.”

“What kind of girl?” I ask faintly, wobbling slightly as I make my way to the kitchen with him hot on my heels.

“The one you push up against a wall, rip the clothes off and fuck until she forgets her name. You’re like an expensive wine, you should be savored.”

“What? Like old?”

He laughs. “No. I’m old. You’re... perfect.”

I scoff. “Do you always talk like that?”

Putting the pot on the counter by the window, I turn to him and gulp as I find him standing right behind me. I lift my gaze to his, and am immediately caught in the depth of his dark eyes. I’m falling into that void. I know it, and it scares me. I know I’ll get burned, but I don’t know if I can stop it.

“Talk like what?”

“Like you always get what you want.”

He licks his lips and regards me. He’s a full head taller than I am, twice as wide, and right now he’s got me pinned against the counter. I have no escape. My heart tries to beat its way out of my chest, the air between us thick and heady.

“Do I get what I want?”

“What do you want?” My knees get weak from my own question, and I hold my breath.

“I want... to take you to bed so I don't lose you forever.” He leans in and plants a kiss on my neck. Goosebumps race across my chest and my nipples harden in an instant. Another kiss, higher up. And another. When he reaches my ear, he cups my face and straightens. His eyes are pitch black, even though I know they're a warm brown. It's like he sucks all light out of the room.

I try to laugh, but it comes out as a gasp.

“Let me take care of you, Kerry.”

“I—”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I'm not afraid,” I say. Too fast.

He laughs. “You've got that deer in the headlights-vibe again. Do I worry you?”

To my own surprise, I nod. His eyebrows fly up.

“Why? Do you think I'm gonna hurt you?”

I let out an embarrassed laugh and shake my head. “Of course not. Do you uhm... want some wine? Or something?”

He takes a step back, leaving me some room to catch my breath. “I want something, but it's not wine.”

His deep voice shoots a spike of need right to my pussy. My panties are soaked, and I swear he can smell it on me. He takes my hand.

“Stop with the act, Kerry. What if tonight was your last night on earth? How would you wanna go out? What would you do?”

“I would want you to touch me,” I whisper, trembling.

He reaches out, his hands descending on my shoulders, but then they just hover there, building heat between us. He follows the contour of my shoulders, my arms. I expect his touch and when it doesn't happen, I let out a groan. He lets his hands fall.

“Take off your pants.”

I have a pair of soft, gray pants on, not what I had imagined I'd wear the next time we met. Never breaking eye contact, I pull them past my hips and step out of them. His eyes darken several shades and I swear I hear a low growl. I suddenly feel too naked in my tank top and panties. Naked and vulnerable. I take a step back. He follows. He lifts his hand and brushes his thumb over my nipple, turning it into a hard peak.

“Tell me you want me.”

I swallow hard. “I want you.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

“No.”

“You're lying.”

I shake my head.

“Do you know how fucking much I want you?”

I widen my eyes and shake my head again. He grabs my waist and pulls me to him, putting his mouth to my ear.

“Let me show you how much.” His hand slides over my ass and dips in between my legs, pushing into my heat. “So wet for me, Ker.” He pulls my panties aside and a jolt runs through me as his fingers slide along my folds and then push inside.

I gasp and buck, speared by his fingers that begin to move in me. In. Out. Slide over my clit. Thrust inside. Pushing, prodding. I tremble in his firm hold, lost in the heavy sensation of pure want, of a need for release I had forgotten I even craved. Suddenly, he pulls out and pulls my panties down my legs. I step out of them, tremors running through me. Kneeling, he grabs my thigh and lifts it as he presses his nose against my pussy. I cry out when his tongue starts circling my clit. Teetering on the edge of an orgasm, all I can do is grab his hair and go along for the ride.

He shoves his fingers inside me again and thrusts hard as he keeps teasing my clit, his tongue expertly twirling, flicking the swollen nub. I begin to shake before I finally come apart completely, nearly blacking out, thrashing in his hold, my knees folding. He scoops me up before I fall like a rag doll and carries me to the couch. I'm so dazed, I barely register where I am.

He lets me down on my back, and moves in on me, snapping open his belt. The rattling pulls me out of my fog and as I look up, I see a man with a gaze so dark it looks like he's going to hurt me. His jaw clenches and he's the most frightening thing I've ever seen. I push at his chest and scramble back.

“Wait,” I gasp.

He grabs my ankle and pulls me to him. “No. No more waiting.” His voice is a low growl, so primal it sends spikes of heat and fright through me, a confusing mix of sensations I can't even begin to sort.

“Don't move, Kerry. Not one inch. You hear me?”

I swallow hard and nod, looking up at the magnificent male towering over me.

“Good girl.”

He grabs the hem of his T-shirt and pulls it over his head, revealing a broad chest, all muscles and hard planes, light caramel colored skin beneath a carpet of dark hair. A large tattoo snakes from his back and up over his left shoulder, with the head of a dragon sitting on the front of the shoulder, moving with the rippling muscles. On the inside of his right forearm, he has an ornamented cross, the size of my palm. He looks absolutely amazing. Tossing the shirt, he holds my gaze with his black eyes as he pulls the belt out of the loops, slowly, inch by inch. When it falls free, he leans in, catches my wrists and wraps the belt around them, tightening it and fastening it.

“Hey!” I lift my arms and pull, trying to break free, but he slams them back down against the armrest.

“Shh. Don’t move. Don’t be afraid, Kerry. We’re just... playing.”

He traces his fingertips along my arms and down to my chest, brushing past my nipples that immediately peak. He circles them through the fabric, pinching lightly, making me arch, spikes of renewed need shooting straight between my legs. He flattens his palms and caresses down along my ribcage, to where the shirt ends and naked skin begins. His hands are hot, a bit calloused, and rasp slightly as he pushes up my shirt, past my breasts, over my head, leaving it hanging on my arms.

His fingertips trace my chest down to the lower right side of my belly, to my little rose tattoo: a green stem with leaves and thorns and a deep red crown.

“Pretty.”

“I put it over my appendectomy scar. The thorns because of the pain when my appendix ruptured. The flower because I’m happy to be alive.”

Christian gives me a gaze that darkens briefly and plants a kiss on the rose. Moving up along my chest, kissing and nibbling, he makes me gasp from the heat that rushes to every patch of skin he touches.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he moans as he leans in, catching my lips. “Give yourself to me. I’ve wanted to fuck you so badly since I first saw you. You have no fucking idea how horny you make me,” he mumbles against my lips. Then he claims me, devouring my mouth, his tongue never asking entrance, but forcing its way in. I gasp as I let him take every little corner and crevice, battling him, taking back what I need as well. He tastes delicious, of spices, and him, the essence that is this man. Never breaking the kiss, he lets his hand slide down along my side, to my hip, gripping my flesh a little too hard, demanding, as if he owns my body. Nudging my thighs apart with his knee, he then dips his hand in between my legs, finding my soaked core.

“So wet,” he pants, “so wet for me, Kerry.”

I writhe under him as he thrusts his fingers inside me, pushing in deep, making me gasp.

“Do you want me here? Do you want me to fuck you?”

I’m too far gone to do anything but nod. My heart pounds like mad and everything is him, his taste, his scent, his heat.

“Tell me.”

“What?”

“Tell me to fuck you. Tell me you want me. Now.” His voice is husky, rough, demanding, leaving no room for

hesitation.

“I— I want you,” I gasp.

“Where do you want me?” He keeps thrusting in me, nothing tender about it, that demon in him I’ve seen glimpses of coming out more and more, his facade cracking.

“In... my pussy.”

“I am in your pussy. My fingers are spearing your soaked pussy, babe. Or did you need something else?” He leans in closer, pressing his rock-hard bulge against my core, igniting me, driving forth something primal I never knew I possessed. I rock against him, wanton need making me helpless beneath him.

“You— I want your cock in me. Take me, Christian. Stop teasing me!”

He pulls out his fingers and sits up. My legs shake and he puts a hand on my thigh, his palm warm as he slides it along the inside. “You only had to ask.”

Unzipping, he makes quick work of freeing himself from the rest of his clothes.

I look up and gasp. “You’re not fitting that in me!” He’s massive, a beautiful, thick cock. And too big.

“You’re not backing down this time, love. I’m not letting you.”

I widen my eyes. “What are you saying?”

His gaze is unreadable, dark, dangerous, then it softens.

“That you’re gonna love it.”

He grabs my hips and pulls me to him. I slam up my arms, pushing at his chest.

“Ah-ah.” He pushes down my arms over my head, holding them there. “Now be a good girl.”

I go still as I feel the tip of his cock against my opening. Catching his gaze, I whisper, “Be careful with me.”

“Of course.”

He applies more pressure, holding my wrists in a steel grip, pushing on, spreading me wide. It stings, no matter how slick I am, how turned on I am, my body simply isn't used to this, to his girth.

“Relax.”

“Wait,” I pant.

“Waiting's over, girl. You've fucking teased me for days. I've been patient, but I am taking your body tonight.”

My heart jolts at what he's saying. The feeling that he'd take me no matter what I said I had that first night, returns full force as he keeps pushing, deeper, filling me beyond anything I've felt before.

“Oh God!” I arch and wiggle my hips, trying to accommodate him. “*God!*”

“There's no God here,” he growls and thrusts the rest of the way.

I cry out from the shock and the pain. Christian claims my mouth, taking every moan, every last bit of breath from me. But he has gone still, leaving me a chance to come back, to adjust.

“You're terrible,” I whisper.

He grins. “I know.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

SEVEN

Kerry

Pulling back, he then slowly pushes back inside, taking care of me, making sure I'm with him, that he's not damaging me, and I adjust, and it's amazing. I've only ever been with Evan before, and I guess he was pretty average. Average in everything. He was kind, though, nothing like the sinister passion that oozes off this man.

Picking up the pace, he's still holding my arms. I moan louder with every thrust, my noises mingling with his low grunts and the sound of skin slapping against skin.

Suddenly he pulls out and grabs my hips, spinning me around and pulling me up so I'm on my elbows and knees.

"You are so fucking tight," he gasps as he pushes inside from behind.

I shudder, crying out as he hits deep, too deep, taking more than I can give.

"Careful," I squeal, trying to inch forward, to relieve the pressure.

He grabs my hips and pulls me to him, slamming me down on his cock, over and over. I have no control. He's like a mountain, all muscle, all ruthless beast. His hand finds its way

to between my legs, to my clit, teasing it, rubbing against it as he keeps thrusting hard in me.

My head spins, the pressure builds, and him in me isn't that bad anymore. Teetering on the edge, my body indecisive for a few eternal seconds, I then scream uncontrollably as my second orgasm of the night claims every cell of my body. Spasming around his cock, thrashing under him, I wail with abandon. He keeps up the pressure on my clit, giving me no reprieve, and I can't fucking believe it, but I come again, not as strong, not giving me a blackout, but still shattering me into a trembling mess.

Christian pulls me to him hard one last time, then he roars out his own release, swelling in me, twitching.

He falls on top of me, heavy, crushing me under his weight, his chest hot and slick with sweat, his cock still buried deep in me.

My whole being tingles. It was good, so good. And it was just as rough and worrying as I imagined it would be, that foreboding feeling I had that made me back off every previous time.

I couldn't back out tonight. He took what he wanted. Me. And... I kind of liked it.

"You're heavy," I pant.

He's still in me, still hard. Something tells me he isn't done. Something tells me he won't listen if I say that *I* am. It scares me and excites me. Meeting Christian, letting him in, is like allowing the naughtiest, most forbidden fantasies to come alive. The ones you never, ever meant to fulfill.

Christian grabs around my chest and pulls me with him, sitting up, still spearing me, spreading my legs wide apart. My

back rests against his sweaty, rapidly rising and falling chest. The heat he exudes makes me shudder.

His hands find my breasts, cupping them, pinching my nipples harder and harder until I squirm and mewl. It's like everything with him. It both hurts and ignites. Rocking his hips, he begins to thrust in me again, slowly, lazily. My eyes almost roll back from the sensation. I put my still tied hands between my legs, rubbing my over sensitized clit.

“Ah-ah. Put your arms over your head.”

“It hurts. I can't sit like that.”

He thrusts harder, gripping my arm. “I wasn't asking.”

A thrill runs through me at his demanding tone. “You can't force me.”

My heart nearly stops from the shock of my own bold statement. I realize he can do just that.

A low growl rumbles through his chest, reverberating through me, making me forget how to breathe. Oh my God.

His breath is hot on my ear as he leans in closer. “You really shouldn't have said that.”

He pushes me up off his cock, off his lap. His seed begins to dribble along the insides of my thighs as I stand on shaky legs, disoriented from the sudden change of position. Grabbing around my waist, he hoists me over his shoulder and makes his way up the stairs, toward my bedroom.

“Hey!” I slam my fists against his back, and kick my legs, reeling when he slaps me on my butt. Hard. “God! What are you doing? Let me down!”

“You're not going anywhere,” he growls. “Tonight, you're mine, Kerry Jackson, the sooner you realize that and submit,

the better.”

My heart thrashes in my chest at his words. *His?* I’m not his. *Submit?*

He kicks open my bedroom door and dumps me on the bed. I scramble back, my breath catching in my throat. My mind spins. I’m actually afraid. What’s he doing?

“You’re not raping me!”

He chuckles as he grips my ankle, preventing me from scooting even further back. “I’m not raping you, girl. I’m just very... convincing.”

I try to free my leg, but he holds it down in a steel grip. Climbing up on the bed with me, he then grabs my hips and flips me over on my belly. I’m trapping my own arms under my chest and struggle to get them out when yet another brutal smack lands on my butt.

“Ow!” I intensify my attempts and yelp, losing my breath when his hand descends on my butt, again, and again.

“Stop!” I choke out, tears rising in my eyes. “Please!”

He does stop then, his large, warm palm caressing scorching hot skin. “I’ll stop if you lie still, babe.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore, Christian,” I whimper, my voice pathetically small. I knew he was a beast, I sensed it in those first few moments when he pushed me up on my kitchen counter the other night. I was right. “You got what you came for.”

The mattress rocks as he shifts. I strain to see over my shoulder, to see what he’s up to, and jerk when his face appears before me. “What makes you think I got what I came for?”

His fingers trail along my back, feeling oh so good again, caressing, making goosebumps erupt all over my body. He cups my butt and I tense, afraid he'll spank me again, but he slowly strokes the tender skin and then slides in between my ass cheeks, finding my dripping pussy. He doesn't push inside, just slides back and forth, up to my rear entrance, circling it, down, collecting more moisture, back up again. I clench instinctively as he pushes against the little hole.

"I want all of you, Kerry. Every inch of your body. I want your mind, your submission, your life."

My heart stills and my mind spins. What? Life? Submission? *What?*

"You're... not getting that," I gasp, my mouth dry.

"When I'm done with you, you'll beg me to take even more." His finger slides inside my tight little hole and I gasp, clenching for all I'm worth. My reward is a slap so hard I see stars. "Don't fight me. You can't win."

"You can't take me against my *will!*" I shriek, suddenly extremely fucking sure this was the worst mistake of my life.

He pulls out his finger and turns me on my side. Taking my hands, he then unclasps the belt and loosens it until I can pull free. I stare at my hands and the reddened, slightly chafed wrists, then at Christian. I can't stop my lower lip from trembling, and I'm helpless when the tears come.

"Shh."

He pulls me into his embrace, warm, strong, and so oddly comforting even though it should be the opposite. He strokes my hair, playing with it, twirling it, then stroking over my head again. I allow myself to relax into his arms, resting my head on his broad shoulder.

“What are you afraid of?”

He keeps cooing, stroking, making me soften inside, making me warm again where I was chilled to my core a moment ago. I don't know how he does it. How does he know how to comfort me when he's the one who scares me?

“Y... you?” I stutter out, my cheeks getting hotter.

“Why?”

I don't have an answer. He's bigger than life. He's like a dark tornado. It feels as if he'll devour everything that is me and leave me in rags, broken, shattered. But that's ridiculous. He's hot as hell, a clever, compassionate listener, and... I can't even verbalize why I'm so pulled to him and yet feel like I need to flee.

I shake my head. “I don't know,” I finally whisper.

“Do you think I'll hurt you? Like for real? Beyond using a little force that both you and I know turns you on?”

Heat pools in the pit of my belly at his words and I squirm. It does. It does turn me on. I never even knew it until I met him. Until now.

When I don't answer he leans back and catches my gaze. His eyes are warm, open, searching. “I won't, baby. I promise you that. I won't ever hurt you.” His voice gets thick, filled with some emotion I can't decipher. “I— I like you, Ker.”

My heart, my stupid infatuated heart, melts at his words. I'm baffled at the realization that I had such a desire to hear them.

He sits up, pulling me into his embrace, taking my hands in his, kissing my stinging wrists. “Shower. Now. I seem to

have made a mess.” He stands, cradling me to his chest, and makes his way to my bathroom, carrying me like a baby.

Christian puts me down on the cold tiles and reaches for the faucet. As the shower runs, letting the water heat up, he fiddles with my hair. I close my eyes, lean my head back and moan. I love it. Every touch from him builds a forcefield between us, crackling with tension. His cock grows, pushing heavy against my lower back. I wiggle my ass, teasing, my pussy tingling.

“Careful, girl,” he growls. “I’ll have you on your knees soon enough, begging me to take you, but right now,” he grabs my hips and steers me under the hot stream of water, “you’re getting clean.”

It’s cathartic. He is hard the whole time, but he doesn’t let me touch him. He lathers me. Everywhere. Unsurprisingly, he makes sure I’m really clean between my legs. I squirm with need, almost growling at him as he just slides along my slit, but never enters.

“I hate you,” I gasp.

“Yeah?” He chuckles. “Good. Nurture that feeling. You’re gonna need it.”

My heart jumps. I have no idea what he means. I don’t even know if I trust him yet, or if I’m still unsure, but I just can’t seem to get enough of him. I love his hands, his heat, his deep voice, his dark brown eyes that hold so many secrets. I realize I want to know him, to see more of him. The thought startles me. I’m not one to jump into something, and still it’s what I do, what I did even the first night I met him. Is it only three nights ago? My God, I’m a mess.

Christian turns off the water, reaching for a towel, wrapping it around my shoulders.

“Teeth,” he says.

I tighten the towel around me and grab a second that I wrap around my head as I turn to look at him. “Are you serious?”

“Dental hygiene is important.”

“You didn’t seem overly worried about my health when you spanked me and fucked me until I thought I wouldn’t see the sun rise again.”

He stills, regarding me, and again something flickers through his eyes. Sadness? Then he spins me back toward the cabinet.

“Do as I say.”

I turn again and exhale right in his face. “Why? Do I have a bad breath?”

His lips tighten, then he grabs my arm and steers me toward the door. “You’re a bad, bad girl, Kerry Jackson.”

“No, I’m not,” I squeal.

Christian pushes me down on the bed, making me sit on the edge, his semi-hard cock right in front of my eyes. He grabs the hair at my nape and tilts up my head.

“Do you know what I do with bad girls?”

My suddenly spasming pussy clearly has an idea because his words nearly liquefy my core.

“No,” I gasp.

He smirks. “You’re a terrible liar. Take me in your mouth.”

My eyes dart to his cock. It looks... doable. I wet my lips and lean closer. He smells flowery from my shower gel. Freesia. He also looks absolutely mouthwatering. I lick a path from head to base before I open my mouth wide and circle my fingers around his growing length to have some control as I take him in as deep as I can.

“Hands behind your back.”

“What?” I sputter. “No, I—”

“You hold them there, or I tie them there. Your choice.”

I shake as I put my hands behind me, a heady sensation settling between my legs. He both frightens me and excites me and I’m not sure which feeling is winning, there’s a constant, ongoing battle between the flutter of worry in my chest, and my reawakened pussy that just seems to want more and more.

“Good girl.”

He steers me with his hold in my hair, pushing deep into my throat. I gag and gasp as he pulls out, but only get a moment of reprieve before he pushes inside again. Deep. Too deep. My hands fly up on instinct and I push at him, trying to break free as my eyes water. He pulls out and grabs my chin in a vice-like hold.

“You are very, very bad at following my orders. On the bed. On your belly.”

“Chr... Christian, I—”

He pushes me down and flips me over so fast my head spins, then he grabs my wrists, fetches his belt, and ties my arms behind my back.

“Christian. Please. You’re scaring me.”

A hand on my back, stroking over the curve of my ass, dipping in between my cheeks, a finger sliding along my soaked slit. I gasp and buck. He thrusts his fingers inside, shallow moves, teasing me, making me whimper, desperate for more.

“I’m thinking you like it,” he says in his deep baritone, even deeper when tainted with arousal.

I swallow hard. There’s no denying my body is responding to him in a way I never responded to my ex-husband.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, my mind spinning.

“Still no God here. Only me.” He intensifies his thrusts, adding a finger to my unsuspecting rear hole, but it feels too good and I can’t think straight. I push up my ass to meet him, forgetting I’m tied, forgetting he scares me to death. When he starts circling my clit, teasing it, as he keeps thrusting, I begin to shake.

“Say my name as you come, Kerry. I want to hear you say it. No fucking God.”

I tense, can barely get air, gasp, writhe. “Oh my God, Christian, I’m coming!” I cry as my insides begin to convulse around his fingers, which relentlessly keep thrusting, and I come undone, boneless, losing myself in the throes of the orgasm.

Then he takes me again. It’s rough, brutal, an unapologetic claiming of my body, a frightening display of the power he wields over me, and I wish I could say I don’t want to see him ever again, that it’s too much. But I can’t.

I’m lost in his hands, in his care, in his force, in everything Christian Russo.

WHEN I WAKE, I LIE GLUED TO HIS BODY, SNUGGLED IN between his arm and his chest and yet again I feel so oddly safe, cared for.

My heart nearly bursts from his skin on mine, from the feeling of his slowly rising and falling chest. My heart tells me I'm in love, infatuated, absolutely fucking crazy about this man. My mind tells me to run. Far away and fast. My mind tells me he's dangerous, that he'll keep pushing, that he'll swallow everything that is Kerry Jackson.

I doze off, and when I wake the next time, he's gone. At first, I think he's left, and my stomach clenches in disappointment, but a vague scent of coffee wafts up from downstairs, dissipating that thought immediately. China and cutlery rattle. My heart jolts. Oh my God, is Christian making me breakfast?

I don't know if I should get up, or stay in bed, but I have a feeling he has a plan, so I wrap the comforter tighter and snuggle in. Burying my nose in the pillow he used, I inhale deeply, sniffing the rich spicy scent. It does funny things to me. I tingle, almost ache. He's only downstairs, but I miss him already.

When footsteps approach, the old wooden stairs creaking under his weight, I can't pretend to sleep. I sit up straight, making sure the comforter covers my naked chest.

Christian walks in, carrying a tray. "Hey, you." He's dressed in only his dark gray briefs and a black shirt that he's left unbuttoned. I can't help how my eyes are inadvertently pulled to his ripped abs, his powerful thighs. And the bulge. Seeing him makes my mouth water.

He's not stupid. He's the most attentive person I've ever met, and a smirk pulls at his lips. He knows exactly what he's

doing to me.

“Good morning,” I say shakily, “I thought you’d left.”

“That’s no way to treat a lady. What kind of a brute do you think I am? Scoot over.” He puts the tray on the bed next to me. “Black coffee, a boiled egg, medium, I have no idea how you prefer them—”

I know exactly what kind of a brute I think he is. My aching body, and my raw pussy are a powerful reminder of that, but I don’t say it because right now everything is perfect.

“Medium, please.”

“Toast, strawberry jam and peanut butter.” He wrinkles his nose, and I do too. Then we both burst out laughing.

“Not a favorite?” he asks.

“Mmm no... But I’ll love it today.”

“I can go make new ones, what do you prefer?”

I grab his arm. “No, please stay. It’s perfect.” I pat the bed. “Come sit with me.”

The smile that spreads on his face makes my heart tremble.

Taking a sip of the coffee, I then devour the sandwich in a few quick chews. Christian puts his thumb to the corner of my mouth and wipes something off.

“Jam.”

“You can’t touch me when I eat... I lose my appetite.”

He barks out a laugh. “That wasn’t very flattering.”

My cheeks heat up. “You know what I mean.”

His gaze travels the contour of my body. “You still naked under there?”

“Mm-hmm.” I glance at his bulge, watching it grow. The vision sends a flurry of tingles through me.

“Babe. Breakfast’s over.” He grabs the tray and puts it on the floor, then he turns to me, his eyes dark and hungry. Energy sizzles between us as he reaches for the comforter and pushes it to the side. “I hope you’ve recovered, because I need you so fucking much right now.”

I scoot away, part real apprehension, part tease. “I’m sore all over. I don’t think I can go again.”

Christian pulls me to him so fast I can’t even blink. Straddling me, he pushes my arms over my head.

“You’re mine,” he growls. “You let me in your life, in your house, in your bed. You gave yourself to me and I’m taking everything.”

A shudder runs through me at his words. I’m about to object, because what he says frightens me, but then my mind turns to mush as his hand finds its way between my legs, as his mouth catches one of my nipples.

Arching into him, needing more, and more, and more of this man, I know he’s won. Again.

EIGHT

Christian

I tremble as I step out into the early San Francisco morning. The city, as always, unapologetically covered in a pink fog, getting its soft hue from the rising sun.

All I feel is Kerry, on me, around me, her scent, her warm skin, her delicious fear, her even more delicious trust. All I see is glowing red tousled hair, huge green eyes that sometimes shift to hazel, a naked face with too many emotions. She is so vulnerable, and I'm a monster.

The regret is already eating away at my heart, a dull ache in my chest. I shouldn't have gone to her last night. I shouldn't have taken her. Why do I have such a strong urge to get close when my mission is to kill her?

As I drive off, I realize something fundamental has changed. There isn't a fiber in my body that can harm this woman. I nearly double over in an unexpected stab of pain. Convincing Salvatore is going to be a nightmare. I don't know how I can fucking do that; I have no idea what to say to make him change his mind.

If I'm a monster, he's the devil himself, making the fallen angel Lucifer pale in comparison.

Fuck!

It's too early to go there, so I go home, my house suddenly so empty and cold. I catch myself wondering if Kerry would like it. I have an even better view of her beloved bridge, I have too many rooms that I don't use. I wonder what she'd do to it if I told her to knock herself out decorating it. Her home has warm colors, plants, curtains, lots of pillows and throw blankets. I like it there.

Pacing my living room back and forth, a cup of espresso in my hand, that turns into a second, and a third, I'm vibrating with life and a growing anxiety. How can I protect her?

My restless energy finally gets the better of me and I change into running gear. Plugging headphones in my ears, I put on Slipknot to drown out the images of sex and violence that run on repeat before my eyes, lock up and leave. I'm going to run until my mind is clear, until all thoughts, all worry and all my mounting fury is cleansed.

“IS HE IN?”

Ivan steps to the side. “He's having breakfast.”

I pass him and enter the hallway, the spectacular hallway, made to impress and intimidate. “Is he alone?”

“Yes. It's him and the news.”

My uncle and boss, Luciano Salvatore, sits in the kitchen. A TV is blaring out the last shootings and accidents, political crap, and the stock market. The news is nothing but snippets of info that today's fractured minds can process. He looks up as I enter, his cup stopping halfway between table and mouth.

“Christiano. What brings me the honor?”

I step up to the screen and turn off the noise.

“Got more where that came from?” I nod toward his cup.

He gestures toward the kitchen counter. “Help yourself.”

Pouring myself a cup by the long, impeccably clean, dark gray marble counter, I then sit opposite my uncle. He wears a striped dark blue and beige thick robe, his hair messy. He looks like he just woke.

“Rough night?”

He barks out a laugh. “You don’t know the half of it.”

“Can she walk?”

His grin widens but he doesn’t answer. My mind warps right back to the night with Kerry. We Salvatore/Russo men are known to play rough, whether it be in killing or fucking. I wonder if I went too far, if she’ll ever let me back in if I show up again.

Not if. When. I already know I can’t stay away.

Luci narrows his eyes. “Did you do the girl yet?”

I have no idea if he means fuck or kill.

“I’m not killing her.”

“All right—”

I’m not sure I’m hearing him right. Then suspicion grows in me.

“I’ll get Roarke, then. What’s with you, Christian? You never hesitated before.”

I fight to stay calm even though I want to throw myself at him. A fight between the two of us would be even, we’re fairly equal in height and strength. But he’s got a house full of his

people, and probably a gun somewhere within reach. Salvatore won't kill me. His sister, my mother, would never speak to him again, and she's the only one he has some amount of respect for, but he wouldn't hesitate to put me in the hospital.

“She can't pin anything on you. The blabbering of a kid, her own mind running amok, too vivid an imagination, that's all. You're being unreasonable. It's been a week. Has she spoken yet? Talked to a cop? No. What the fuck got your panties in a twist?”

“You may be right, or not, but it's not your call, nephew. I call the shots; you do what I tell you—”

“Fuck you!”

“Or I'll call Roarke. It's as simple as that.”

“He's fucking ruthless, he'd—”

“So were you! Up until some days ago. She's just some chick. There are millions out there. Get yourself in order and go back and shoot her for fuck's sake!”

I stand, a red haze clouding my mind.

“Do it, or I'll go get young Angela and rein in that fucking stray!”

It's as if I deflate, all air leaving my lungs. Sinking back onto the chair, I swallow against the choking feeling in my throat.

“Don't.”

“I've let her run loose long enough, chasing some ridiculous dream. She needs to come back to the fold, get married, pop some kids, and start engaging in the business.

My head spins. My little sister. It would kill her, forced into this life that she loathes and fears, forced to marry, forced to give up her art. *Fuck!*

I've known Kerry a few days.

My relationship with my sister has been the only semblance of love I've known, the only one I've fought to protect at all cost. I was fifteen when she came into the world, all of us made fatherless in a senseless killing as she pulled her first breath. I held the wrinkly little infant, my heart bursting in sorrow and in joy at the same time.

Fuck!

There's no option.

He *will* do it. He would destroy her, making her his little puppet. There's nothing to negotiate.

Luciano Salvatore knows our weaknesses; he owns us all.

"I'll do it."

My voice is dull, lacking all life. I close my heart and put the lid on, forcing Kerry's trusting face out of my mind. She's just flesh and electrical impulses between neurons. We all are. We all die.

There are millions of women out there.

But no other Kerry.

"I knew you'd make the right decision. She dies tonight. Now get the fuck out of here, and turn on the TV."

I storm out of the kitchen, never touching his fucking TV.

We're not only claiming lives. We're claiming souls. We're monsters.

Kerry

After Christian had let me loose again, kissed my reddened wrists and ass, and said his goodbyes with promises to return, I drag my aching, bruised body, and my delirious mind out of bed and into the shower. I smell of him and it fucks me up royally.

I skip school, I'm too tired to focus on anything, but I can't skip work.

Chloe takes me aside. "Ker. Talk to me, girl. You're a mess. What's going on?"

I sigh and rub my face, glancing at the kids and then back at her. "Remember you decided I'd met someone a couple of nights ago?"

She nods enthusiastically.

"I kinda did..."

She slaps my shoulder. "About damn time! Is he hot? Not like Evan. Please tell me he's not a new Evan."

"Oh no. He's very... different."

Chloe scans my face and narrows her eyes. "What's wrong? Something's not right. I see it in your eyes."

I wince. "He's been— He's different."

I think of the heavy spanking last night, and again this morning. It's too much and just right at the same time. I don't know how to manage what I feel about it.

"How?"

"I have this weird feeling. It's like he's two people."

My friend regards me, silence mounting between us, making something flutter in my chest. "I think you should stay away from him, Ker." Chloe is suddenly dead serious.

“What makes you say that? You haven’t met him.”

“What does your gut tell you?”

I squirm. My gut is in knots. It’s not telling me anything that makes any sense at all. “I think he’s a good guy, Chloe. I’m just... I probably have trust issues after Evan.”

She cocks her head and sighs. “Yeah, I can’t blame you. If that dude hadn’t showered you in his guilt money I’d have kicked his balls up his throat.”

I burst out in a laugh. “I’d have cheered you on.”

Her eyes glitter, back to their usual mirth. “Yeah?”

“*Keeeerry!* My doll has no head!”

I spin around. “Oh dear, Susie. We gotta do something about that. How’s she gonna be able to laugh at your jokes if she doesn’t have ears.”

“How do you know she doesn’t have ears?”

“Susie, where are your ears?”

Her hands shoot up to the sides of her head. I nod, then I glance up at my friend and mouth, “Talk later.”

She winks and disappears down the corridor. I feel a little lighter. I don’t think he’s a bad guy. At all. A bit intense maybe, and I’m really not used to a real man. Evan was my friend, more of a boy than man, my roommate. No wonder we lost our passion. If we ever had any.

As the day comes to an end, my heart flutters with a flurry of emotions. I want to see him, and at the same time I need to think, need to recover. The sun has sunk low. I’m tired and it’s pretty late already. I don’t know when he’ll show up next time. I think I need a night to myself, and at the same time I’m

afraid that he got what he wanted and now he isn't coming back, no matter what he said.

A black BMW stands by the sidewalk. My heart leaps up to my throat, and in a first confused moment I think it's Mr. Salvatore, then the window rolls down and Christian Russo peers out at me.

My mouth falls open and I steer toward him, as in a trance, my pussy aching just from seeing him, still tender from last night, now the need coming alive again.

“Wanna go for a ride?”

I fiddle with the suit jacket and pull it off me. “You want your jacket back?”

He shrugs. “You look kinda sexy in it.”

I blush. I can't believe he's here, and caught me red-handed wearing his jacket. “Ride? Where?”

“Beach?”

I gesture to my Vespa. “I can't just leave—”

“Don't worry about it. Just a short ride.”

“It's just...” I glance at my scooter and then back to Christian. I've longed for him the whole day, been hot and bothered and hoping I'll see him again. “All right. Beach sounds great. You'll bring me back, right?”

A smile that hits me like a punch in my gut spreads over his face. “Hop in.” He jumps out of the car and leads me over to the passenger side, again holding the door for me.

“Is this you kidnapping me?”

He maneuvers us through the increasingly dense traffic and gives me a sideways glance. “Would that be an issue? I don't

want it to come between us.”

I laugh. “I trust you.”

I wish he’d touch me, put his large, strong hand on my thigh, stroke upward, but he doesn’t. My whole body longs for his passionate embrace.

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

I frown and cock my head, studying him, taking in his profile, his Roman nose, his messy jaw-long hair, his full lips that can do wonders against mine. “Why’s that? You seem pretty nice.”

“Maybe I’m not such a nice guy?”

“I don’t believe that. You’re... a bit rough, but in a good way.” I smile and lick my lips.

His gaze darts to my tongue and a thrill runs through me. Then he looks back at the road. “Maybe your radar is off, Kerry.”

A tiny hint of unease nags at the edges of my mind. I narrow my eyes as I regard him. “Why do you say that?” I glance around me. We’re passing quickly through the suburbs, north bound. “Where are you taking me?”

“Beach.”

“What beach?” My heart pounds a little harder. There’s a tiny change in his demeanor, I can’t decipher it, but I’m not sure I like it. “Maybe you should take me back,” I say faintly.

“Are you afraid of me, Ker?” He gives me a brief glance and leaves the last of the residential areas, outside are only warehouses and factories.

I snap my head from staring out and back at him, my stomach plummeting in sudden apprehension. “Christian. Please take me back.” My voice quavers a little.

“I can’t.”

My chest tightens. “*What?*”

He takes a sharp turn, onto a little side road, hidden from the main road. I widen my eyes as I stare at him, my heart thundering in my chest. He rests his arm on my seat, my skin crawls from his closeness. My throat clenches up and I shrink back.

“You’re scaring me,” I choke out.

“I’m sorry about that.”

He reaches behind me and within the blink of an eye he presses a rag over my face, the sharp stench making my mind spin. I flail and fight to get him off me, but his hold on my head is like steel, unyielding. I fumble for the door handle, and get it open. A rush of fresh air fans my face, but the only thing I inhale are the fumes from the rag. My muscles tingle as they weaken and a renewed bolt of fear stabs my chest as I realize I’m about to lose. I get a leg and arm out, but Christian throws himself over me and pulls me back, slamming the door closed. Darkness creeps into the edges of my consciousness. I struggle to stay awake. I need to get away. I can’t—

A SHUDDER RUNS THROUGH ME AS I JOLT AWAKE. I CAN’T focus at first, but after a few moments I realize I’m in the backseat of a car. It smells strong of new leather. It’s dark, it must be night. My arms and legs are tied behind my back, the suit jacket lies over me like a blanket and all I can do is wiggle a little where I lie on my side. There’s a rag in my mouth and

something pressing firmly against my lips. I moan as loud as I can, but I don't think it's heard over the sounds from the car. I see the neck of a man driving, and that's all I know. My heart begins to pound too hard and my whole body goes slack with fear.

Oh my fucking God! Am I being freaking kidnapped?

Tears well up in my eyes. Why?

Why don't I remember anything?

I vaguely recall a rag over my nose. A feeling of betrayal. But I can't for the life of me remember.

My mind spins. I feel ill. Oh, please God don't let me throw up! If I throw up, I'll choke. I fight the nausea and force myself to subdue my crying because it's getting hard to breathe through my nose.

I look at the buildings we pass and try to figure out where we are, but I don't recognize anything.

A horrible, horrible suspicion grows in me. I can't shake it. Does this have something to do with David? Are they going to kill me? *They*. Who are they? David's dad? A raw sob tears through my throat and the rag slides back making me gag. Snot and tears wet the leather under my cheek, and I fight to calm my breathing.

The car suddenly comes to a stop and the engine is shut off. The silence is absolute. I hold my breath, my heart pounding in my throat. Is this it? The front door is opened and closed, then the door next to my head is pulled open and cool night air caresses my skin. There's a vague scent of salt and iron. A gloved hand comes into view. I moan from the pain when the tape is ripped off. Then this someone pulls out the soaked rag.

I inhale a deep, life-giving breath and look up. The hand strokes my forehead and wipes off tears from my cheeks. It's dark; I can only make out the outline of the man who leans over me.

“I'm sorry for this, Ker. You weren't meant to wake up.”

NINE

Kerry

I recognize the voice immediately.

“Christian?” I rasp. Everything comes rushing back. He picked me up. The ride. “Why? Oh God, why?”

He leans over me and fiddles behind my back. A thousand needles pinch stiff muscles as I can move my arms and legs again. I try to sit, but I’m too weak. Strong arms steady me and help me up. The scent of sandalwood and a hint of mint is all too well known, I woke only this morning, wrapped in it, content, warm, safe.

Christian slides in next to me on the seat. I throw myself away and try to reach the handle on the other door, but he grips my arm and pulls me to him. I lose my breath as we collide.

“Why are you doing this?” I hiccup, fighting the numbing terror that spreads like a wildfire through my whole being. “Please...”

“Ker... I wanted to avoid this. I did my best, I really did. You don’t know anything, and it’s absolute shit. I do like you. I want to think that in other circumstances...”

Circumstances? Other circumstances *what?* I hold my breath and wait for more but he's silent.

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do."

And I do understand. I did stumble over something I shouldn't have poked at. "Are you... Has this got something to do with David?"

He nods.

I gasp and grip his arm. "Please, Christian... Please. I'll do anything! I liked you... We—we had something. Please. You don't have to do this. I'll be quiet. I'll leave town. Tonight. I don't know anything. You know I don't. I'm nobody."

"I know," he says dully.

I meet his dark gaze. He looks pained. It gives me hope. Then he slides out of the car and holds out his hand.

"Come."

A part of me wants to trust him in some weird way, wants to think the connection I felt was mutual. I want to believe it'll be all right. He'll tell me to be quiet and then let me go. I put a trembling hand in his and let him help me out of the car. I stop right outside, nauseous, my knees weak. He's towering over me, standing much too close. I bend my neck and look up. His scent is so painfully familiar, his face, the dark stubble on his cheeks. My chin is still chafed after a whole night of kissing those lips. The memory of his touch makes goosebumps chase each other along my thighs. His tense eyes soften slightly.

"What are you?" I whisper. "What do you want with me?"

He swallows visibly, his Adam's apple moving up and then down again, then he sighs and grabs my upper arm in a firm,

but not hurting grip.

“Just come with me, please.”

He pulls me toward some large buildings. I see now we're in the harbor. My muscles go slack, and I stumble. I can't do this, I can't! I begin to hyperventilate, and black dots cloud my vision.

“Ker!”

I come to a little, his hands cradle my cheeks, his eyes search mine.

“It won't hurt, sweetie. I'm sorry for all this. I wish we'd met under other circumstances.”

I scream then. It sounds like a wounded animal and I can't even believe it comes from my own throat. I dig my heels in the asphalt and try to stop the onward movement. Christian presses a hand over my mouth and lifts me. I kick and flail, but he keeps carrying me, seemingly unaffected by my efforts to break free.

“Please!” I cry in his palm. “Please! I don't want to die!”

In the dark shadows behind an abandoned warehouse, next to a rusty old dumpster, with the sound of the waves lapping away at the concrete surrounding us, he lets me down. The scent of salt and rotten seaweed is strong. I hit him, try to reach his face, try to claw myself free. He pushes me up against the wall and I freeze when I feel the hard, cold metal of the barrel of a gun pressed against the softness under my chin.

I whimper and try to pull away, but I'm getting nowhere. My mind reels. I catch his gaze. There's a desolate expression in them, and I can only pray I'm interpreting it correctly. With

my heart thrashing in my chest, I cup his cheeks. He flinches as I touch him.

My lower lip trembles and new tears trickle along my cheeks, but I'm fighting for my survival. I have to be strong now. "You don't want to do this," I whisper.

A muscle in his jaw moves, his eyes dart between mine. Back and forth. I hold my breath. Wait.

His lips twist as he shakes his head. "No. I really don't."

"Why?"

"I find you... Your passion for the children. Your light. You're so different." His gloved hand moves up to my face and he strokes my cheek, touching the wetness there.

"I liked talking to you," I say softly. "Can we... can we just talk? Please? I... I liked you. A lot." I chew on my lip. I have no idea how he'll react. I hope to God he did like me enough. "I'm sorry I've been a mess, but— The night we had... I've never experienced anything like it. I— I'd love to feel you again." My hand slides down his chest, along his ripped abdomen. He tenses under my touch. I slide lower. My insides scream, but an eerie calm has washed over me in the face of death, a strength I didn't know I possessed. My hand trails lower, below his belt. My eyes dart up to meet his, and his cock grows under my caresses.

"You can protect me," I whisper. "I'll be yours, Christian. I've never wanted anyone more in my life."

He lowers the gun as his eyes dart over my face, then he moves even closer, his chest to mine. His rapidly thudding heart, and his erratic breaths reverberate through me.

"My God, Kerry. What are you doing to me?" he whispers. "You're not making this easy."

“It’s not supposed to be easy,” I rasp, my voice barely carrying. “Please take me with you.”

My stomach clenches and my heart pounds like mad. His breath on my face, his lips moving in on mine. He’s so beautiful it hurts. Knowing he’s here to kill me hurts even more.

I really hope *this* hurts *him*.

As he presses his mouth to mine, I jerk my knee up with all the strength I can muster, right up between his legs. Our teeth collide as he bends over with a roar. I shove him to the side to try to get him off me. His hand strikes out and grabs a fistful of hair, pushing me face first into the wall. I scream and try to reach the hand in my hair but lose my bearings when he throws me to the ground. The pain when my hands and knees scrape against the uneven concrete makes me cry out. He rips me over on my back with a crushing grip on my shoulder, bending over me, pulling me to him. I slam up my head, my forehead crashing against his nose. My mouth tastes of blood and I think a tooth is loose. He staggers. Clutching his face, he loses his hold on me, almost dropping the gun.

“You’re fucking dead,” he growls. A sound that makes the blood in my veins freeze.

I shuffle back, trying to escape from between his feet, but he puts a foot on my chest, pushing hard, making me lose my breath.

“Not. So. Fast,” he grits out.

He sinks down, straddling me, putting his hands around my throat. I widen my eyes and clutch at his hands, trying to grab around his thumbs, to bend them off me. His face is a mask of frightening rage and the grip tightens. Getting

nowhere, the pain where he holds me increasing, my airway tightening, I abandon his thumbs and aim for his face. Slamming the heel of my hands against his throat makes him choke out a gasp and loosen his hold. I hit him again, and then I claw his face, trying to reach his eyes.

Christian roars and abandons my throat, trying to grab my flailing arms.

“You fucking bitch!”

“Fuck you,” I spit.

I scream and thrash from side to side, trying to get loose when he gets hold of my arms and slams them to the ground above my head. The position is eerily like what he did to me last night and the thought that I fucked my own hitman sends a shockwave of hurt and rage through me.

Christian leans in, close, nose to nose, his face twisted in a sneer. “I just did that. The whole fucking night!”

“You’re sick! That’s sick!”

“I didn’t want to do this!” he roars. His hold around my wrists is bruisingly hard and I wince from the pain.

“Then don’t! Please.” My voice breaks. I’m losing and I know it.

“I don’t have a choice.” His eyes turn cold, distant. It’s as if he’s not in there anymore.

When I feel cold steel against my temple, I reel. I don’t think. My mind is blank. On pure feral instinct I dart up and put my lips to his, making him gasp, then I bite down on his lower lip, drawing blood.

His roar makes my chest tighten to the point where I can barely breathe, still I don’t let go. He flails, and fights to get

me off him. My arms get loose and as I fight to get away from him, my hand closes around the gun. I have shot a few times at a range. Evan was into it. I fiddle with it, nearly dropping it, then my finger slips into the guard. Spinning it around at the same time as Christian reacts, shouting out, I pull the trigger.

I see it in his face. I see that I hit him. His honest surprise. His wheeze. Our eyes meet. I widen mine in absolute horror over what I just did. His lose their edge, the fury, the fight.

“I’ll fucking kill you, Ker,” he gasps, blood dripping from his nose, his lip bleeding profusely where I bit him. “I’ll find you and I’ll end you.”

He’s on me, and he’s heavy, but he’s injured, and I’m filled with adrenaline. Pushing him off me, I lurch to my feet, still clutching the gun.

I look at the Christian-shaped heap on the ground, curled in a fetal position, his back to me. His breaths are heavy as he slowly shuffles around until he falls on his back, his face pale, a frozen mask, his eyes dark and hooded as they fixate on me. It’s obvious that he’s in pain. One part of me wants to dash to his side and... do what? Comfort this monster?

I’ll end you.

Looking at the gun, I realize I should kill him and save myself. But I can’t. I don’t murder people, and that’s what it would be. I’d murder him in cold blood.

I stagger back.

“I’m sorry,” I mouth, then I throw the gun as far as I can and begin to limp back to the car.

“Kerry!”

I whimper. It's the most frightening sound I've ever heard. Christian growling my name with a promise of unmentionable pain. A promise of death. I glance back at his writhing body, the sight shooting a new bolt of fear through my chest. My legs already burn after a mere few steps, my breaths wheeze, my chest aches. Tears stream down my face at what I did, at what I had to do. I don't know if the shot will kill him. I just want to get away. I want to live.

The keys are in the car. I don't know where I am, but I drive. I drive out of the docks, over hills. In the far distance I see lights, the bay, the bridge.

I have no phone. I have no idea where it disappeared to, or when. I head for downtown San Francisco, and when I see a police cruiser at an intersection, I come to a screeching halt next to it and dash out.

“Help!”

TEN

Christian

Listening to Kerry's fading footsteps, I close my eyes and reach inside, past the searing pain in my chest that's distracting me from assessing if I'm surviving or if I'm dying. I'm short of breath, so probably a lung shot to hell, collapsed. My heart is beating rapidly but steady which is a good sign. Rapid is probably because of the adrenaline and the pain and not a sign that I'll go into shock. I cough blood, so airway and vessels damaged. I can bleed out into the lung cavity, which isn't good news at all.

I pat along my chest for the entrance wound, but the clothes are in the way and I don't have enough strength to start pulling up my shirt. The shape of my phone in the suit jacket makes my heart jolt. I struggle with it for a while, bloodied fingers slipping on the smooth surface. Finally I get it unlocked and manage to find my contact list.

Eric Reed is one of the most capable people I know. I don't like him, but he's one of few I trust to maybe get me out of this mess.

"Yeah?" He sounds a bit stressed. "What's up? I just got home from a trip. Literally just dropped my bag on the couch"

At first, I only manage a gasp. He should know it's me. We don't have each other's names programmed, but most of us have other, randomly chosen, names.

"Chris?"

"I'm not in good shape," I manage to whisper.

"Where are you?" He's suddenly all business. No stupid questions.

"West— Harbor. Far off by—" I cough up a clot of blood, and some fresh. A shudder wracks my body. I don't think this is a good sign at all. "The warehouse."

"I'm on my way."

"I think I'm dying, bro," I gasp. My heart pounds even faster, a light, rapid thud-thud-thud. Not good. Not good at all. I'm losing blood.

"I'm getting an ambulance for you. Stay alive. I'm disconnecting. You'll stall me. See you in a bit."

It goes silent.

It's me, the sound of the wind and the waves. There's a chill in the salty air that's getting worse as the night closes in and the longer I lie on the uneven ground. It's very symbolic. I don't dare to move, afraid I'll do more damage. The thought that I might not make it doesn't leave my mind, and yes, there's regret. I have hurt so many people, bulldozed my way through life, fucked up from an early age. I have been looking for something I have never found.

My mind inadvertently strays to Kerry and a stab of pain shoots through my heart. A pain that's got nothing to do with the bullet wound. Great survival instincts. That lady is one of a fucking kind, and I still need to do her in. If I don't, someone

else will. She's doomed no matter what. It's all so beyond fucked.

I wasn't playing her. I really do like her. What I feel doesn't matter in this world, though.

Soon nothing will matter to me because I really don't think I'll make it. I can only take shallow breaths, and they don't give me much air anymore. I'm shaking uncontrollably and my heart flutters. The cold, analytical Christian in me concludes that I'm about to go into shock, that I am bleeding out internally.

I can't believe one tiny woman would be the one who took me down. I don't know whether to admire her or hate her.

Angela. Who'll protect her now? I pray my brothers are up for the task.

The faint sound of a siren that keeps getting stronger, and the blue lights bouncing off the facades of the surrounding buildings, give me a ray of hope.

A black Mercedes and an ambulance simultaneously come to a halt right next to me, the headlights hurting my eyes.

"Christian. Talk to me!"

Eric's voice, as if from a distance.

Slamming of car doors, a rattle of wheels on the ground. People. Needles. Fluids. I'm being lifted. Talked to. I struggle to answer, but no sounds pass my lips. I need to tell them I can barely breathe, but I can't get enough air.

The sounds become clanky, metallic, fading.

Kerry

I almost faint, falling against the side of the police cruiser. The cop comes darting out, catching me in his arms.

“Miss! What happened? Are you all right?”

My heart screams in sorrow, in pain and fright. No. I’m not all right. Not my soul. Physically, though, I have no idea. The massive adrenaline high has completely blocked out whatever agony I probably should be feeling. Rationally, I know I should hurt. I’m beaten up pretty bad.

I don’t object when he calls for an ambulance. I feel everything and nothing. They ask and ask, examine me, put needles into my veins. It takes me a while to realize that the moans come from me. Then I zone out and sleep claims me.

“YOU CAN QUESTION HER WHEN SHE COMES TO, OFFICER. SHE was given morphine on the way here. She’s asleep.”

“I would have needed to talk to her before that.”

“Her physical well-being comes first. Have you identified her yet? We haven’t gotten a name out of her, only nonsensical mumbling.”

“No. She didn’t have any ID. No phone. Nothing. The car didn’t lead us anywhere. I really do need to talk to her.”

“Later,” she concludes with a very final tone.

I like the nurse. I like how she stands like a rock between me and the cop. Trying to speak doesn’t result in anything as my tongue seems to be stuck to the roof of my mouth, so I stay quiet.

Pretending to still be asleep proves to be a blessing. I listen to feet coming and going, but for the most part I’m being left alone. It sounds as if I’m still in the ER and when I carefully

peek at my surroundings, I notice I'm behind a curtain and no one's by my side. I don't know how long I've slept, but when the drowsiness subsides, my mind starts clearing. I'm frozen inside, the night playing on repeat. I was nearly murdered. Every time I skirt that realization it's like something stabs my chest, ice cold hurt, fear, disappointment. Suddenly the thought strikes me that I'm not safe here and with a jolt I realize that I can't talk to the cop. If these men are who I think they are, I really, really can't talk to the cops. If I'm on a hit list now, I can only imagine how fundamentally doomed I'll be if I talk.

Not that it probably makes any difference, but still. And I definitely don't trust the cops to be able to protect me. I've heard too many stories about witness protection failing.

My chest aches in sorrow over my lost life as I begin to take stock of my arms and legs. They haven't removed my jeans or my bra. I'm dressed in a pale blue hospital paper gown, a blanket pulled up to my chin. I shudder from an inner chill I can't seem to curb. There's an IV line in my arm. No electrodes on my chest. Nothing that will set off an alarm.

Glancing around me, I tear a strip off the gown, pull out the catheter from my arm and wrap the strip around the little wound. I twitch when I look at my hands, scraped, bloody and swollen. My throat hurts, my back, my legs—knees especially. I'm afraid to see what the rest of me looks like. Swinging my legs over the edge of the gurney, I look for my shirt, jacket and shoes, and thank God, everything lies in a basket under the gurney. I fight the groan that wants to escape as I struggle to get back into my clothes, then I hold my breath, my heart thudding, as I peek out between the curtains. No one seems to be looking in my direction. People rush around, alarms beep.

The exit is only a corridor down and, squeezing between first responders who come rushing with a stretcher with a man covered in blood, and the wall, I exit through the ambulance garage, and quietly leave the ER.

It's still night, but the birds in the nearby park have started singing so I'm guessing dawn is near.

Finally alone, it strikes me full on what I've been through and I begin to tremble violently. I stumble into the dark park, barely sparing a thought as to whether it is stupid or not, fall on all fours on the lawn and then curl up into a shaking little ball under some bushes. I clutch my aching hands into tight fists and choke the cry that wants to escape.

I need to get home.

No, I shouldn't go home, they'll find me there.

If I go to my parents, or friends, I'll put them in danger.

My mind spins and I ache, raw sorrow and fright tearing a hole inside my chest.

I can't let anyone know.

I should leave town.

I press my fists to my chest to try to control the panic that's threatening to take over any rational thought.

Where would I go? I have everything here. I don't have a single friend or relative anywhere else in the world. I can't just up and leave. I don't even own a car.

Christian must be out of commission, maybe even dead. A stab of pain makes me double over. I liked him. I really, really wanted to explore the enticing madness that meeting him was. It was unlike anything else I had ever experienced.

It turned out he only wanted to fuck his kill.

Choking down the cry, swallowing over and over, I fight to push it away. No use dwelling, no matter how much it hurts.

So with Christian not after me... how long before someone else comes?

A part of me wants to stay curled up in the piss-stinking bushes of this park forever. No one knows I'm here. I'd be safe. But of course that's not an option. I have to get home and see to my wounds, the visible and the invisible.

I have nothing. No money. No phone. No ID. I do have my house keys, though, thank God, buried deep in my jeans pocket.

It takes about forty minutes to walk from here. Thank you, cheating motherfucker Evan, thank you alimony and my desire to live close to the vibrant city life. It's completely doable.

Taking stock of the dark park, the lit street outside the low iron fence, still heavily trafficked despite the late hour, I decide to stick to the side streets.

Everything aches. I must have twisted my ankle. My knees, elbows and palms itch and sting, my throat feels constricted, as if I have his hands around it still. I shudder every time my thoughts skirt Christian. My hurting body is a powerful reminder of how beaten up I am, but my heart hasn't even begun to grasp what happened. I see him before me as my feet steer me home, the limp getting worse and worse. I see him smiling, strong, sensual, and I see him vengeful, a vicious grin on his lips, eyes that radiate hate.

When I'm about to enter my street, I'm exhausted beyond anything I've ever experienced before. I scan the silent sidewalks, my side, opposite side, try to see through the

shadows, if a gun glints, if something moves. Finally I decide I have to take the chance. Maybe they don't know yet that I'm still alive? Maybe I'll have a respite before someone comes for me? And when they do, I'll have a plan. I *have* to have a plan.

I make use of the very last of my energy and run-limp the last few yards, unlock my front door with violently trembling hands, and sink down on the floor inside it as soon as I've slammed it closed and locked it.

I sit there, empty, staring at nothing, listening to the absolute silence. The sound of a gunshot plays on repeat in my mind, and I twitch every time I relive it. I shot a person. I shot someone I cared about, someone I shouldn't have cared about, but I didn't know that.

Stumbling to the bathroom, I wince with every step. I clamp my eyes closed from the harsh white light as I flick the switch on the wall. Even my fingertips are sore. I glance at my hand that still rests on the switch, and realize most of my nails are broken.

I lift my gaze to the mirror, recognizing I stood here earlier tonight. In another life. I still don't feel anything as I look at what he's done to me, I just study the facts. There are crescent-shaped, bluish-black bruises under both eyes. My lips are swollen and bruised, as is my nose. There's dried blood in both nostrils as well as smeared on my chin and both cheeks. I have broad, purplish strangle marks circling my throat.

A sudden wave of nausea surges through me, and I dry retch in the sink several times, my eyes watering from the pain in my throat, the taste of bile sour in my mouth. When I'm done, I lean my forehead against the cold mirror and close my eyes. I've seen enough.

I turn on the shower and shed my clothes, step by step, every move pure agony. The pain is getting worse. Maybe the morphine is wearing off? Thank *God* they drugged me. I'm not sure I could have managed the walk home without it.

The scalding water burns my skin raw, making me whimper, forcing me to focus on the physical pain instead of the shattering heart inside that seems to fall apart more and more with every passing minute.

I stand for a long time with my face turned up in the stream, my eyes closed. Unthinking. Unmoving.

When the first sob wracks my chest, it's like opening a dam. I can't stop. I scream hoarsely into the water, gulping for air when I run out of cries. My knees buckle and I slither to the bottom of the tub, drenched in heated steam, in pouring wetness, and in sorrow over what I've lost.

My life.

The mafia has put a price on my head, and my life is forfeit. I sit there forever, with the water streaming over me, hugging my knees and cry. I still feel his hands on me, his heart beating against mine, his breath, his scent, his taste in my mouth. I still feel him in me.

I wash, and wash, and wash. Soap, lather, rinse, soap, lather, rinse. Then I dry off, wrap a blanket tightly around my battered body and fall into a restless sleep on the floor in my living room.

I miss by hours when I should have called in sick to work. When I finally do, I call it 'flu' and they tell me I sound terrible.

Waking with a jolt, I suddenly know what I must do. I shake when I put on clothes, layers upon layers. I'm so, so

cold. Pulling my curtain to the side, just an inch, I peek out the window, seeing no one. I don't know if someone's out there, but I don't have a choice. I sneak out, slam my fist against my neighbor's door, my demented duplex buddy, a retired army major.

When the door opens a crack, I exhale. I didn't even know I was holding my breath. My back prickles and I can barely get air, my chest tightening. I feel unprotected under the open sky.

"Major Edwards. Can I come in, please?"

He opens a little wider, staring at me. His eyes are a light blue with a white ring circling the edge of the iris. He looks completely blank.

"Who is this?"

"It's me, Kerry, your neighbor. We share a wall. Can I please, please come in?" I rasp.

We've been neighbors for a year. We greet each other more or less every day. He hasn't got all the horses in the stable anymore.

"Miss Kerry! Of course."

With a sigh of relief, I sneak in, glancing behind me one last time before I close the door.

"What can I do you for? I have coffee. Do you want a cup? Did you hurt yourself, miss?" He peers at me, taking in my bruises.

"I can't stay, Mr. Edwards. I have a very, very big favor to ask," I chew on my lip, praying to God that he will agree to this, "I need to borrow a gun."

SAFELY BACK BEHIND MY OWN DOOR, I LOCK AND BOLT IT, make sure all my windows are closed and covered, then I sink down on the little nest I made last night in front of the patio door. It's not possible to come through the garden. It ends in a steep slope, and on the sides are my neighbors' gardens, divided by high walls. At least it would be really difficult.

I put the loaded gun under a pillow, making sure the safety is on, and wrap the blanket tightly around me again. I curl up on my side, facing the front door, listening, waiting.

Sooner or later I'll have to rise, get up, and get out. I know that. But I also know I need time.

A lot of time.

I still feel his skin on mine.

I don't know if it'll ever go away.

I don't want to think about him, but I can't seem to think of anything else. If he lives, he'll come for me. If he died, someone else will.

I should run, or maybe I should try to trust the police, but I know the mob has cops on their payroll, and how can I ever know I'm talking to the right person?

A low whining moves up my throat as the tears begin to fall again. I feel nothing but pain. Nothing. I don't feel victorious that I survived. My life has been forever changed.

I'm Kerry before Christian, and Kerry after Christian.

I hate him. And I don't.

And I'm absolutely terrified. Did he survive? Is he out there somewhere?

Who will come for me, and when?

ELEVEN

Christian

“**Y**ou’re built like a rock, Christian. Like one of those ancient ones. Grand Canyon. Indestructible.”

I blink against the harsh light.

Carmen’s voice. Carmen Payne. Salvatore’s baby mama in the weirdest arrangement you can think of.

“Grand Canyon is the absence of rocks,” I grit out. “It’s why they call it canyon. What the fuck, they put *you* on watch duty?”

“*Ay Dios mio*. As charming as ever. I’m no more pleased than you are.” Despite all her years in the States, she still has a sexy-as-hell Spanish accent, the Colombian beauty by my side.

I scoff. I shouldn’t have done that. Pain shoots through my chest, making me cough.

“What day is it?” I gasp.

“Tuesday.”

I try to think, try to remember what day it was when I tried to... tried to kill Kerry. Thursday. It was fucking Thursday!

“Have I been out five days?”

“Mm... more or less.”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“You have the strongest need for control I’ve ever seen. You’ve been awake even though you were unconscious. Your eyes have been open. You’ve freaked me out.”

“Don’t I always freak you out?”

She doesn’t answer.

Carmen isn’t overly fond of any of us. She’s the doting mom of David, and apart from that she stays the hell away from the Salvatore organization. She hates everything we do, what we stand for, but she’s loyal to the last bone to her son, and honors the agreement with his father.

“Who did you piss off to end up with me?”

She sighs. “We’ve taken turns. I ran out of luck.”

“Yeah. Fine. Tell someone else to get here. Eric. Ivan. Someone I can talk to.”

“I love you too, you arrogant piece of shit.”

I close my eyes. The scraping sound of the chair when she stands assaults my ears and I grit my teeth. When I’m alone, I drift back into blessed sleep.

“CHRIS, YOU AWAKE?”

I jolt and open my eyes. Nathan.

“They pulled you from whatever corner of the world you had holed up in?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, my brother meeting his maker.”

“I’m feeling loved today. First Carmen got pissy with me, and now you.”

“The way I heard it, it was the other way around, with you being a grumpy shit. She had a go at me over you.”

“You’d be grumpy too with a hole in your chest.” I pat down my side, my skin covered by an ugly blue gown, feeling nothing but a small bandage. “What the fuck? I thought I’d have been cut open from head to toe?”

“Yeah— You were hemorrhaging air, not that heavy on the bleeding. They didn’t have to expose your innards, it was enough with a chest tube apparently.” He pulls the chair to the bed and sits next to me. “What happened?”

My feelings about what happened are a jumbled mess. My body still wants Kerry like I need my next breath. At the same time I carry a dark heavy weight of rage at how she tricked me and beat the shit out of me. My nose and my lips are swollen. I don’t have to check to know I must look like shit. And she shot me. She almost killed me. I fucking like to live. I know for sure I don’t want to know what level of Hell awaits me on the other side. Not yet.

I also know I don’t want to talk about her with anyone. She’s nobody’s business but mine.

“Things went to shit.”

“No kidding,” answers my brother.

“Does Angela know?”

He waits a beat too long.

“She hasn’t visited?”

Nathan shakes his head.

Okay. I get it. Too close to our uncle.

“Get me out of here, Nate.”

He doesn't object. We have medical staff we can call in, and I can recuperate at home. I really need to get out of here, and I really fucking need to talk to Salvatore. Kerry is mine. She's my responsibility. She's still on his hit list, maybe even more now than before, and I don't want anyone else's filthy hands on her.

Kerry Jackson is fucking mine.

“DIDN'T GO TOO WELL, DID IT?” SALVATORE'S VOICE IS FILLED with dark mirth, a taunt.

“I'll make it happen,” I grit out. “I'll end her.”

“Resourceful little lady. How did she best one of my most ruthless men?”

I sigh, yet again reliving the moments in the harbor. I know perfectly well what happened. I thought I was the one seducing her, when in fact it was her the whole time, working her innocent female charm on me.

“As soon as I'm healed up, I'll be on it. She's dead.”

“I know she is, nephew, I know she is. When you have set your mind on something, there's no stopping you.” He turns to leave, but then looks back at me. “And I know you're well and properly motivated.”

Salvatore smirks and disappears through the door.

The mess I'm in is epic. I have no idea how I'll solve this shit.

I don't hate Kerry.

I fucking miss her.

TWELVE

Kerry

The night is silent. I sway from the lack of sleep. I can't remember when I last ate. I'm not even sure it was today. My chest is a hole. My stomach is a hole. I haven't showered in three days. That morning, after I got home, after I had showered, when my skin was red, hurting and raw, I put on two layers of soft pants, three layers of sweaters, thick socks, and I haven't removed them since. I can barely even remember what has happened since.

My scrapes are scabbed. I'm not bleeding anymore.

Walking through my dark and quiet house, I snatch up my journal and sink to the floor in front of the sliding glass doors with the beautiful view of the bay outside. I cross my legs, adjust a sock, and open a blank page.

I should be dead. I don't know when he'll come. I don't know how to take my next breath. I don't know why I don't leave.

I stare at the words. The letters jump around. I'm holding the pen wrong. I can't seem to remember how to hold it right. Tears blur my sight and I can barely see what I've written. Three days haven't made anything better. Three days with almost no sleep, no appetite and an aching vortex where my heart should be. I don't want to die, but I have no idea how to live, how to move on.

I know I should leave, but I can't think. I have no idea where to start.

The doorbell clangs and my heart leaps to my throat. I scramble to find the gun, then I run soundlessly to the front door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Chloe, hon."

"I can't open the door." I clutch the gun in my sweaty palm.

"You haven't answered any of my calls. I'm worried to death. Let me in, or I'll call your parents."

My knees nearly fold at the thought. That's out of the question. "Please don't. Call again. I'll answer."

"Open the door, Kerry. What happened? Please."

"I can't." My voice breaks. "Chloe, you don't understand."

"You're not giving me a chance to understand. Did someone hurt you?"

A raw sob rises from my throat and I sink to the floor.

"My God! Kerry. I swear, I'm calling your mom now."

I throw myself at the door, reach up, unhook the safety chain and unlock the bolt, still on the floor, trembling.

Chloe pushes open the door I lean against, making me slide over the polished wooden planks. She gasps as she shoves it closed, kneeling by my side. “My God! What happened?”

“I can’t talk about it.” My voice is nothing but a hoarse rasp. I haven’t talked to anyone in five days except for two times that first morning, when I called in sick, and with my neighbor when I borrowed the gun.

She carefully puts a finger under my chin and tilts my head, scanning my bruised, swollen face, her eyes darting to the gun that lies in my palm, my hand limp on the floor. Her lower lip trembles. “Who did this to you?”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Why? You need to go to the hospital! Have you seen a doctor?”

I grab her arm. “You can never talk to anyone about this, Chloe. They’ll kill you. They’ll kill me, and they’ll kill you.”

Her eyes widen. “Kerry, you’re scaring me.” She gently grabs my arm and helps me up. “Come.”

“Not the couch,” I choke out.

She gives me a confused glance. “Okay. Where?”

“Window.”

In front of my large floor-to-ceiling windows, I’ve nested. I have pillows, blankets, several glasses of water, a pile of used napkins. I haven’t been to the upper floor since that night. The sheets are still unchanged, soiled with his seed, and with the sweat from the long hours of what I thought was lovemaking. I can’t see them. I haven’t sat anywhere I sat with him. I live in a carefully made out Kerry-sized bubble.

She leads me there and sits with me on the floor.

“You gotta talk with me, darling. I’m not leaving here until you do. And if you don’t give me a really good reason why I shouldn’t call the cops, I swear I’ll do that.”

“No,” I whimper. “I’ll tell you. But you have to promise never to tell anyone else. Ever. You’ll understand.”

She narrows her eyes. “I’m listening.”

I swallow hard. How can I put all this on my friend? I’ve tried so hard to spare everyone. “Remember a couple of weeks back? What I told you David had said?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“And I asked his dad.”

She nods.

“That was the biggest mistake of my life.”

Chloe doesn’t move or speak; the air is getting hard to breathe. My heart slams in my chest and I have to fight to not succumb to panic.

“He sent someone after me.”

She frowns.

“To kill me.”

“Oh my God,” she gasps. “*What?*”

“That was the guy I met. Turned out I dated my own assassin.” Nausea rises in me as I say it.

My friend looks aghast. “Kerry!”

I look down on my battered hands. Bruises covering the knuckles. Palms scraped, little pebbles still in the wounds, some of them a little infected.

“He fucked me. I let him. I thought we had something. I thought he was special.” I laugh bitterly. “Then he drugged me, kidnapped me and tried to shoot me. I fought back. I shot him.” I fight not to fall into the dark vortex that always opens beneath me as I relive these moments. “I don’t know if I killed him,” I add with a whisper, my voice not carrying the words.

I jerk when her hand touches my shoulder.

“Don’t tell anyone,” I whisper.

“But you have to go to the police!”

“Luciano Salvatore ordered my murder. I live on borrowed time. I’ll live on borrowed time for the rest of my life. If he figures out you know, you will too. There’s nothing that will come between him and what he wants, Chloe. The cops won’t be able to protect you. Your whole family will be in danger. You can *not* talk. Do you understand? You’ll sentence yourself to a certain death.”

“Salvatore? David’s dad?” Chloe slumps, pinching the bridge of her nose. “How can you be so sure?”

“I am. I’ve faced his hitman. I know.”

“What do you want me to do? How can I help you?”

I stare at her, then at my hands again. “I think I need food,” I say faintly.

“Want me to cook something?” She jumps to her feet.

“I think my kitchen’s empty.”

I wobble to my feet and trail after my friend as she starts looking through the fridge and cupboards. My eyes fall on the near-dead herbs Christian gave me not so long ago, the time between then and now still feeling like an eternity. I cross the room in three long strides, rip open the window with jerky

moves and toss the plant, pot, everything as far as I can. It hits a small concrete divider at the far end of my little garden and shatters.

“*Fuck you!*” I scream and slam the window shut again.

I turn and face a gaping Chloe.

“I’m not gonna ask,” she says “I *am* gonna go to the store, though, and when I come back, I’ll cook. Promise you’ll let me back in.”

I nod. “I promise. Thank you.”

The next night, she helps me peel off my stinking clothes and get into a shower. I study the bruises and swellings, my mind detached, seeing myself as if from above, floating outside my own mind. It’s as if it isn’t my body, as if my skin isn’t my skin. Chloe clenches her jaw, but says nothing. There’s nothing to be said.

A couple of nights after that, she cleans my whole upper floor and tries to convince me to reclaim my house.

I choose the couch in the little office. He hasn’t tainted that room with his presence. I don’t have memories of him in there.

“Move in with me.” Chloe has pleaded with me time and time again. “I have space. You can’t sleep on that. It’s too short.”

I put the gun under a cushion. “I can, and I will. I refuse to drag this shit to your doorstep. I don’t think you should keep coming, because we’re pushing our luck. What if someone’s watching me? What if they see you and decide you’re a nuisance too?”

Chloe glances over her shoulder, her eyes widening. “You’re scaring me.”

“You should be scared.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

I look at her, deadpanned, and clutch a pillow to my chest. “I’ll be ready next time, I grit out.”

“They can just send another one, and another one—”

“*I have nowhere to go,*” I yell, making my poor friend flinch. My throat tightens and I pull up my legs, hugging them, rocking back and forth. “I don’t know where to go,” I whisper. “Sometimes I just wish for it to end.”

“That’s it. I’m taking you with me.” Chloe takes a step forward and grabs my arm. I pull it away and shake my head as tears begin to trickle down my cheeks.

“No. Thank you for everything. I’ll think of something. I promise.”

She shuffles her feet. “Are— are you coming back to work?”

My eyes flicker toward the window, toward the dangerous world outside, my chest tightening from the thought of putting even a foot outside. “I hope so.”

“I’ve told them you’re ill. It’s not that farfetched, is it?”

I nod. I’m not well. That’s for fucking sure.

At night I wait for the sound of someone entering my house. I wait for Christian, and my soul crumbles more and more with every passing day. Why hasn’t he come? Why hasn’t someone come? It’s been a week and a half, and I’m still alive.

It’s as if I wish for death.

Is that why I’m not leaving?

Christian

I'm back on my feet, and finally out of the freak show that is the Salvatore household. I've stuck to the far end of the west wing of the house, but the parties, the booze, and the women haven't gone unnoticed. I used to take part in that. Now it sickens me.

I've claimed Kerry's life, told my uncle I'll finish her.

In reality, despite her nearly ending me, I won't do it. I need to remove her from this city, hide her away. I'm thinking New York. Or New Orleans. Or maybe even Mexico. I won't take my shit to Angela's doorstep, but Nathan can definitely be of use, one of his many places. I have a feeling that maybe I'd have use for his woman too, someone to soothe Kerry that isn't a mafioso.

It stings somewhere deep inside that she isn't leaving her house. She hasn't set foot outside for a week. Before that, I wouldn't know, but I haven't seen even a flash of her fiery hair since I started staking her out.

Her co-worker comes by every day, until she suddenly doesn't. I perk up. A change in behavior. That is promising. Maybe she's ready to face the world again?

Kerry never spoke to the cops. It baffles me. She escaped from the hospital, and they never even knew who she was. Is she protecting me? Or does she simply recognize the fact that you don't rat on the mob?

A part of me wants to believe that she did it for me. A part of me hopes there is still something between us.

Another, more rational part, realizes it's ridiculous. She's scared. Of me. Of Salvatore. Of the world.

I did that.

I snuffed out her spark, her trust and her light.

Regret churns in my chest, aches more than the bullet wound ever did. I know she hesitated to give herself to me, but I know a part of her felt something, something that was good, and pure.

I ripped that to pieces, and now she won't even leave her fucking house.

Salvatore thinks I'll kill her. I'll let him believe that.

I won't kill her. I'll save her.

When she's ready, when she comes back out, I'll set my plan in motion. I don't think she'll like it one bit. She'll kick and scream and hate me. That's the price I'll pay for what I did to this little woman.

THIRTEEN

Kerry

The bruises are greenish-yellow, the worst of the swelling has abated, and finally I can cover them up. I'm due at work in forty minutes. I stare at my hollow eyes, trying to find Kerry in them, but she's not there. All I see is black eyes full of hate, all I feel is rough fingers around my throat.

Patting foundation on my skin, I force him out of my head. Time has not been my friend. Two weeks have made the bruises begin to fade. On my skin. Inside, I'm as raw as the moment I left that dark harbor. I'm there, on repeat, and still I find it so hard to remember. It's as if our moments together fade every time I try to remember them. I grasp for them and they flee, farther and farther into the recesses of my mind. I should know these things. I've studied this for years. Suppression mechanisms. It's not the same to read about them as have them happening to you.

I grasp for my sanity. Sanity lies in memories because memories are what makes us who we are. They slip through my fingers like smoke, a mirage, dissipating into thin air, every morning bringing me further away from who I was, closer to the unknown.

I try to hate him.

Christian.

But I can't grasp him either.

It's an empty shell that sets her foot at the center that first morning. I play my role.

Routine kicks in when I'm with the kids. I play my part. I fight for my life. I can't out Christian Russo, because that would point Salvatore to me. It would kill me. Literally. Chloe looks at me with big, worried eyes. She's come by every evening since that first night, except for the last few days, after I told her she needed to think of her own safety. She's cooked for me, sat with me. She hasn't poked, she's just been there.

I COVER MY BRUISES WITH LONG SLEEVES AND LOTS OF makeup. As the weeks pass, they fade and disappear. My frozen core doesn't thaw. I'm locked in the moments when I knew I was going to die by his hands.

My studies go to shit. I can't pretend to learn when I can't even read one sentence to its end. Instead of facing the inevitable meeting with the dean, I quit.

In the end I don't know why I fight to live. Alone in my house every night, I pace, my chest tight, my stomach in knots.

Sometimes I wish for a knock on the door. I imagine Christian coming to finish what he started.

But he doesn't, and that's where he has left me. His appearance in my life planted a dark vortex in me and it grows, and it festers. Oh, it will kill me. Just not now. I'll be forced to live with it until I either end it myself, or I finally come to the end that has been planned for me since the dawn of time.

I sit alone at night, on the hardwood floor in front of the huge windows. The bridge glitters in the distance. I sit with a cup of tea, empty inside, and pour hurt on blank pages. I write for hours. I write to remember. I write to forget. I write so I can close the book one day, tuck it away and let my pain go.

One day. One day that feels very far away.

MY PERIOD IS LATE. I DON'T THINK MUCH ABOUT IT. EXTREME stress can screw with your hormones.

I don't bleed the next month either.

With a pounding heart, I buy a little harmless-looking, pen-like white object in my local pharmacy and do what it says. I stare at it the whole night, hour after hour, unable to fathom the result, my mind blank regarding what this means.

The pen is steady as I write. I examine the feelings in my heart, the flutter in my belly, and I know it's the right thing to do. The right thing in a world with so many wrongs.

Yeah, there'll be questions, but since nobody except Chloe really knows anything dangerous, it won't be that difficult. A night out, a drunken one-night stand with a cute guy. It's what I'll tell them. My parents will frown. My friends will act up, but accept it. No one needs to know the truth. No one can know about Christian.

And Chloe... I'll pass that bridge when I get there. I'll figure something out.

*It's as if a little piece of heaven fell
down into the Hell I've been living in. I
know it will help me mend, it'll help me*

focus on something else. I need it, it gives me something to live for.

I frown as I contemplate the words. Then I nod. This is the truth. My truth.

I fall back on the bed, pressing my little journal to my chest, closing my eyes. My lips twitch into a half smile and a tear slides from the corner of my eye, along the side of my cheek and onto the sheet. I'm not entirely happy, but I'm not that sad either. Not anymore. I lay a hand over my still flat belly.

I'll live.

There is life.

And this is my life.

SADLY, THE LITTLE HOPE I HAVE FOR A LIFE TURNS INTO bottomless despair exactly nine weeks and three days after Christian Russo tore me to pieces. Mom calls. She doesn't even need to tell me something has happened.

"Kerry."

Her voice is broken. Crushed. My first instinct is to hang up. I don't want to know. Please *God*, don't do this to me.

"Your father is in the hospital. You need to come."

"Mom. Tell me now." Icy fingers clutch my chest. I don't breathe.

"He died, love. They think he had a heart attack. It happened at work. They couldn't save him."

My mother cries and cries. I turn off. I have no pain left to spare. I tell my belly to just hang in there while I have a new breakdown.

“I’ll be there.”

“Take a taxi. Don’t drive.”

I hang up, grab my leather jacket and my helmet, hop on my Vespa and go to say goodbye to my biggest inspiration in life. My idol. My psychologist father who taught me all about compassion, all about life.

This is my life. This is my non-life. I put a hand on my belly. If I hadn’t had her, or him, I’m not sure I’d be here tomorrow.

Mom sits slumped on a couch in the ward. My always elegant mother has her makeup smeared all over her face and doesn’t even seem to notice. Her eyes are vacant when our gazes meet. We hug. I still feel nothing. I should mourn. I wonder when I’ll realize my father is never gonna call me again, never gonna discuss the origin of intelligence, whether we’re all just energies swirling in a multi-colored void, the rate of abortion among American teens, how to solve poverty once and for all.

She takes my hand and we go to him.

A pale man in a white room. A sheet pulled up to his chin. A lit candle. A vase with flowers.

His features are sunken. I touch him and recoil. He’s cold, his skin still soft to the touch, but the warmth has already dissipated. Like when the chill sets in as soon as the sun sets.

I can’t cry, but my mother weeps helplessly and I hold her.

There's no one in this room to say goodbye to. He's already left.

I look to the ceiling, then out the window, and wonder if he's found the answer to all his riddles.

AFTER THE FUNERAL, AFTER ALL THE RELATIVES HAVE LEFT, I help Mom sort through his things. She doesn't want to keep one single item. I sniff his shirts, sneak some away, and revel in the stabs of pain that shoot through my chest, showing I'm still human after all.

Christian

How much fucking bad luck can one person have? Her father died. I take in her thin, black-clad shape from a distance. The day is rainy, and foggy. No rays of sun hit the mahogany casket as it is lowered into the ground. There are no relatives. Only her and her mom, clinging to each other by the grave. The rest of the crowd are his work mates, students, and friends. He was a loved man. I wonder how that feels. I hope he knew to appreciate it.

I'll give her a couple of days, but then it's time to set my plan in motion. I don't trust my uncle to stay off her back much longer. We'll leave the country. I'll take her to Nathan's condo in Mexico, then we'll find our own place, well out of reach of fucking Luciano Salvatore.

I expect resistance. I have a few Roofies ready in case I need to subdue her. Just enough for her not to fight, but not so much that she can't stand on her own two feet. I've arranged passports for us in fake names, tickets. I'm all set.

Excitement rises in me as I think about being close to her again. She'll come around, I'm sure of it. She'll understand the

hows and whys of what happened once I get to explain. I might have to tie her up to get her to listen, but in that case—so be it.

AT FIVE A.M., I PARK MY CAR ON THE SIDEWALK OUTSIDE HER house, with only a few feet to walk in case I have to drag her. My belly is full of butterflies, jittery. Christian Russo is nervous. Now that's a novelty. I don't bring my gun. I doubt I'm gonna need it, and I sure as hell don't want it to end up in the wrong hands.

The plane leaves at seven forty. It's a four-hour flight that will take us directly to Mexico City. I have a car waiting for us there, and hopefully Kerry will trust me enough by then to not make a mess and a full scale kidnapping out of this. Not that I'm beneath stealing her away. Images of her tied up in a dank basement flicker through my mind, and I'm a sick fuck because my cock stirs at the thought. A tiny woman, a thick rope, a torn dress.

Oh fuck it, Christian. You've been too long without pussy.

I know exactly why. It's not that I've been busy healing. I healed within a week. My imminent death was surprisingly easy to fix once I got the proper care. It's because I've lost my fucking appetite for anyone other than the person behind those red brick walls. All I want is her warm, soft body, her eyes to shine with trust once again, her soft lips pressed against mine.

Gritting my teeth, I glance around at the deserted street and then inhale deeply before I exit, leaving the motor running.

I knock.

I have no other reasonable means of entering. I have to knock a few more times, spying up and down the street as I

wait. Finally, I hear a rustle from inside, the clicks from the lock.

The door opens an inch. The safety chain is on. I don't see the person on the other side in the dark, but I have to assume it's her. I'll have the same chance reasoning my way in as a snowball has in Hell. Fuck!

I don't think. I act. Slamming my boot to the door, the safety chain is torn from the wood, and the door crashes open. Kerry screams. It's a scream that freezes me to the spot, that chills me to the core. Pure, primal anguish, barely human.

“Hey! I—”

Facing the barrel of a gun, I snap my mouth closed. *Fuck!*

“*Leave* or I'll shoot,” she screams.

I hold out my hands, as I measure the distance. I can take her. A bang from behind me makes me spin around and stare straight into the double barrel of a shotgun. And an old man in checkered pajamas, barefoot, and thick white hair. He looks positively wild. Determined.

“If you ever set foot in here again, I *will* shoot you. You, or anyone else. You leave Miss Jackson alone, mister.” His voice is thin, old, unused, but I don't doubt his threat. He doesn't even tremble.

Motherfucking hell!

I look over my shoulder and take one last glance at what's left of Kerry. Her face is sunken in and pale. She has dark circles under her eyes and looks as if she has just been crying.

“I'll be back,” I growl, the pain of seeing her like this making me lash out instead of trying to make amends.

With a twinge to my heart, I shove the long barrel and the old man to the side, leap to my car and speed off.

I stop after the first intersection, pulling up by the sidewalk under the large crowns of the row of plane trees, next to some houses on another street that has yet to wake.

“Fuck!”

I’m at a loss. She’s armed, and has clearly been expecting me this whole time, just waiting. Why am I surprised? I knew she’s a survivor. Rubbing my face, I groan. All my plans go to shit. I can’t protect her if I can’t get to her. I’ll have to rethink this. Approach her in a public place? Talk to her mom? Her friend? Write a letter?

I’m not used to complications. I’m not used to having to rethink everything, to not be in control. Why does she have to be so fucking stubborn?

Her worn-out features play on repeat before my eyes. I did that, and then her father died.

I took a tiny, young woman, a warm, beautiful, compassionate human being, and disintegrated her, ripped everything from her. I have crushed her. How the fuck do I even begin to mend that?

Glancing at the clock, I rev the engine and move again. I need a drink. And a cig. Fuck this shit! I grab for the toothpicks in my pocket, roll down the window and toss them. What the fuck’s the point with anything anyway?

FOURTEEN

Kerry

I fall on my hands and knees, trembling, nauseous, the gun still clutched in my hand. I force my finger out of the guard so I don't accidentally fire it.

My amazing neighbor bends over me and pats awkwardly on my shoulder.

“He has left.”

I nod, staring at the hardwood floor, at his bare feet.

“How did you—” I sit back on my heels and rub my cheeks that are still wet from a night of weeping, “know to come?”

“I always wake early. I heard you, little one. And you borrowed my gun. I knew something was very wrong. My old instincts are still intact apparently. I didn't even think.”

I stand on wobbly legs and glance out the still open door, at the empty street. My head spins. Christian is alive. He's alive. A part of me is paradoxically overjoyed, and another part of me more terrified than ever. He's alive, and he came for me. That can only mean one thing.

He's planning to kill me.

“Do— do you want some coffee?”

I very much don't want to be alone right now. Dad. Christian. I can't think straight.

“I am always happy for coffee. Black. No sugar. Sugar isn't good for my diabetes.”

I close the door behind him and lock it, staring at the safety chain that was ripped off the wood. It was never meant to stand against the forces of a furious hitman. Shuddering, I motion for my neighbor to follow me to the kitchen.

We drink in silence, both a little too shook up for casual conversation. When I fall over the table, hiding my face in my arms, he speaks, making me twitch and look back up again.

“What will you do, miss? You can't stay here. I normally wouldn't encourage anyone to take the coward's route and flee, but your life is clearly in immediate danger. You're not safe.”

I'm so surprised. My neighbor hasn't been this lucid for as long as I've known him. Maybe the edge the adrenaline gave him has kicked some synapses back to life?

“I know.” My voice is dull, void of all life. I glance around my cozy kitchen, warm colors, dark wood, a tall window to a cute little garden. The bridge in the distance. “I just don't know where to go.”

“I wish I could help you.”

I reach over the table and take his wrinkly old hand, blue veins ridging the back, brown specks from a life of sun exposure.

“You have helped me so, so much. I'd be dead if it wasn't for you.”

He nods. “Yes.”

I fall over the table again with a groan. How can I think when my thoughts run a thousand miles per hour? My feelings about seeing Christian are beyond fucked up. Standing a few inches from him, his tall, broad shape, dark piercing eyes, that tousled hair I loved to run my fingers through... Fright wasn't the only feeling coursing through me. My mind tells me to run. My heavily thumping heart, the ache in my chest, makes me remember how much I've missed what I thought we had, the pull, the need, how he listened to me, and how I thought it meant something.

Rationally, I know I was wrong, but my feelings still haven't caught up.

“I... I think I need to be alone.”

“Of course. Try to sleep. Don't worry. I shall be vigilant.”

I smile, but it probably comes off as a grimace. “Thank you.”

When he has left, I make myself a second cup of coffee. My hands are still shaking. I look at the gun next to me on the counter. I can't live like this.

A jolt shoots through me as I think of the only thing that's left for me to do. I decide to take the bull by the horns. It could be the worst decision of my life, or the best, but I decide to go directly to the source of my troubles.

I shower, get dressed and wait for the clock to strike seven so I can get to work. My mind is not where my body is. I see dark eyes, a handsome face, strong features. Christian morphs into Salvatore, and back. These men with my fate in their hands. These fucking men who think they can decide who lives and who dies. I don't want to die. I put my hands on my

still flat belly. I have reasons to live. My heart may be full of sorrow, but there is hope for life. I refuse to have that taken away.

I need an address. I hope we still have it in our files.

THE MEN IN FRONT OF THE BARRED IRON GATES STARE AT ME with hard gazes as I drive up on my Vespa and park it by a tree. I've waited for as long as I can. It's ten a.m. Friday. The day when my fate will be decided once and for all after two months of darkness. I pull off the helmet and shake out my long red hair, knowing the impact it tends to have on the male population. I don't look to charm any of these brutes, but a tiny amount of female trickery probably won't hurt.

Hands rest on what I assume must be concealed weapons. What do they think I am? A walking bomb? Well, to be honest, I feel like one. I'm angry as hell, and terrified, and fucking scorned.

I walk up to the one who looks like the leader of the pack. "I want to speak with Luciano Salvatore."

"And why would you wanna do that?"

"That's hardly any of your business," I quip, my voice a bit unsteady.

The man steps up to me. Really close. I find myself nose-to-chest with a black well-fitted suit. "You just made it my business, lady."

Tilting my head, I give the guard the hardest glare I can muster. "Mr. Salvatore will want to speak with me. And he'll be firing your ass if he finds out who you turned down at the gate. If you're lucky, that is, and firing is all he does."

I don't know where I get this crazy courage, but there's something about having been tricked, cheated, lured into a death trap and beaten, that makes me want to slap Salvatore's handsome face. And that's what I'm here to do. At least metaphorically. I don't think it's a good idea to actually lift a hand against him. Sadly.

The man looks at his buddies, and then they burst out laughing. My cheeks heat up, but I refuse to budge.

"Tell him it's about David. I'm Kerry Jackson. He knows me."

He goes silent, narrowing his eyes, then he walks a few steps to the side and speaks seemingly into thin air. After a few seconds, he nods to one of the other men.

"Take her inside." Then he turns to me. "Arms out, spread your legs."

"What?"

He steps forward and pushes out my arms, patting me down, all the way to my feet and up. He's efficient and clinical about it, but I freeze up in discomfort. It feels way too intrusive, and thank God I didn't bring the gun. I don't think that would have gone down well.

The guard nods and steps back, throwing me a curious gaze as the gates slide open. It's with an ominous feeling I walk next to the blond giant toward a two-story white house with white pillars along the front facade. The dark wooden double doors look impenetrable and suddenly I feel really small, standing in front of them. My mouth goes dry at the thought that I'm entering the nest of the man who has ordered my murder. I might never come out of here. But who can I turn to? I don't know which of the cops are on the mob's payroll,

and I refuse to leave my life in San Francisco, my mom, my friends, the little life I have.

I jerk as one of the doors open and yet another tall, beefy guard, wearing a black suit, stares me down with pitch black eyes. He's got a scar on his left cheek, and a thick, crooked nose that looks like it's been broken more than once. I open my mouth to speak, but snap it shut again as he nods. We walk in silence until we stop by a door that stands ajar where he motions for me to enter. He doesn't follow, and I step into a large room with a heavy desk at its center. Behind the desk sits the man I'm here to see. My stomach clenches and my mouth goes dry. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all?

Luciano Salvatore. Little David's dad. The man I suspect is the capo of the largest mob family in town. A shiver runs through me as I walk across the deep red oriental carpet, glancing at the dark wood bookshelves, filled with ancient-looking books, that cover all the walls except the one behind the desk that instead consists of floor to ceiling windows, showing glimpses of a beautiful garden. Next to Salvatore stands a tall, blond man, dressed in an impeccable three-piece suit despite the early hour. What's with all these men? It's like an army. Is he afraid of me, or what?

"Miss Jackson," he exclaims, and tents his hand, supporting his elbows on his desk. "What brings me the honor?"

I lick my dry lips, glance at the guard, then back at Salvatore. "Can I speak with you? Alone?"

Luciano Salvatore

I study the girl before me. I haven't seen her since that morning outside the center when she asked about what my son might have seen. It's true that there was an incident in the

garage. But it wasn't my cousin, and it wasn't a foot that was chopped off. David had slipped away from one of his caretakers, and stumbled over a very unfortunate scene.

I scared the caretaker until she cried, but I didn't lift a hand toward the old woman. I did have the man whipped who had forgotten to lock the door, though.

Miss Kerry Jackson. I don't know whether to call her brave, or incredibly stupid. She knows I ordered her execution, and here she stands, right in front of her worst enemy. Amazing. Or desperate.

Narrowing my eyes, I glance at Eric, nodding for him to leave. I wait until the door closes and then look expectantly at her.

"Miss Jackson. What brings me the honor?"

I swear her large green eyes darken, her chin juts out. "How's David?" she grits out.

I raise an eyebrow. "Is that why you came, Miss Jackson?"

She squirms visibly. I let my gaze travel her body. She has thinned out since I last saw her. The clothes hang loose. Living in fear hasn't been good for her. Shame. She was really pretty. Now she looks terrible, her eyes haunted.

"Among other things..."

"David is doing well, thank you. Let's move on to the 'other things'."

"Why did you move him?"

"I believe that is none of your business."

"Was it something I did? Or... said?"

I smirk. She knows more than well. Why is she stalling? Does she think she'll buy time? Make something more out of this conversation? Get under my skin?

“You give yourself too much credit, Miss Jackson. Now what is the real reason you came barging into my home, unannounced?”

She swallows hard, her cheeks changing color. Redheads blush easily. And bruise...

“I want you to leave me alone.”

“I can't recall ever having done anything else. I have barely met you.”

“You and I both know that's not true.”

I wait for her to continue. How far will she dare to push this?

“You sent a hitman for me, Christian Russo, if the name rings a bell? You can say whatever you want, deny it, whatever, but I know you did. I can only assume you think I know something that will incriminate you, because of what David told me.”

I throw out my hands. “I don't know what you're talking about, Miss Jackson. I'm just a businessman, I don't know anything about 'hitmen'.”

She glares at me, deadpanned. I can't help grinning. A part of me likes this girl. She almost killed one of my best men, and she's here, facing me. She hasn't talked. Time *has* been her friend, even though she doesn't know it. I realized she wasn't gonna talk when she snuck out of that hospital, when she didn't rat on Christian. It made me reassess the situation and, frankly, lose interest in pursuing her. She's obviously a clever girl who knows to stay quiet. What my nephew does,

however, is gonna be his own business regarding Kerry Jackson.

“Was that all?”

Her face contorts as she gasps for air, clutching her hands into fists and pressing them to her chest. Tears roll down her cheeks, and she looks absolutely lost as she stares at me wordlessly.

I stand and round the desk as I pick up a tissue, dabbing her wet cheeks. She smells fresh, of freesia and lavender, clean. And she’s so fucking small. The predator in me stirs from being so close to this helpless little mouse. I could have her tied up in a second, and do whatever I want with her. Does she realize the danger she’s in?

Her breathing becomes erratic as she stares up at me, innocent, wide-eyed. I think she knows, and yet she came here. I can’t help feeling a little bit of respect for her bravery.

“Please let me go back to my life.” Her voice trembles, she can barely get the words out. “Please call back your hitman. I haven’t told the police anything. You already know that, don’t you? How could I even? Everybody knows they’re corrupt. It would make me very accident prone, now wouldn’t it? And, Mr. Salvatore, I haven’t witnessed anything. I don’t know anything.”

She chews on her lip and I reach out, stroking my thumb over her chin. She’s warm and soft, and doesn’t flinch. I take a step back and look her over.

“You’re a courageous young woman, Miss Jackson, and with admirable integrity. I see the appeal. Thank you for your visit. I appreciate your passion for your work and asking about David. I’ll make sure to say hi to him from you.”

She stares at me, her mouth falling open, then she shakes her head. “No, please don’t mention me to him. It doesn’t benefit him.”

Her last words win me over. The selfless caring for David does me in.

“Please call off your hitman, Mr. Salvatore,” she rasps.

Well, I would, but I honestly can’t. When Christian has set his mind on something, he follows through, and he is clearly set on punishing this girl. Bad.

“I have no beef with you, Miss Jackson.”

She sags with obvious relief.

“But I can’t control my nephew. He’s a loose cannon, and he’s got a fixation on you. I’d have to kill him to spare you, and frankly, that won’t happen.”

Her face freezes, her whole body going rigid as her mouth falls open. I see it as it hits home. She didn’t know we’re related. Of course she didn’t. Why would she? She looks aghast and new tears well up in her eyes. Then she takes a step forward and pushes at my chest, making me take half a step back in surprise before I catch her thin wrists in my hands.

“I’m pregnant with his child!” she yells in my face, so close a drop of spit hits me.

Kerry jerks her arms out of my grip, and I let her, stunned. It’s as if time takes a short break, as if the weave that is reality, tears. I give her a once over, too surprised to speak.

Tears fall again, rolling over her cheeks.

“*You’re monsters! You’re all monsters!*” she screams hoarsely and storms out, slamming open the door so hard it smacks into the wall, no doubt leaving a mark.

Eric sticks in his head and jerks it toward the running woman, a question on his face. I wave dismissively.

“Let her run. And leave me alone for a while. I’ll call you.”

He closes the door without a word. I sink down in one of the plush armchairs, the leather squeaking under my weight, and close my eyes. There’s a Russo in her. She’s carrying Christiano’s child. That means something. I gotta talk to him and tell him to back off, because no matter what, we don’t kill our own family.

FIFTEEN

Kerry

I expect a hand on my shoulder, to be ripped back inside, the whole way, and it's not until I sit on my Vespa, on my way downhill, that I believe I'm actually leaving the monster's den. Choking down sobs the whole way home, tears and snot running, I barely see where I'm going in the dense traffic.

They're related. Christian is the nephew of the capo. I don't know why that hurts even more, but for some reason it does.

As soon as I feel safe behind my closed and locked door, and have looked through the house, I call Chloe, my hands shaking.

"Kerry?"

"I need your help!" The words rush out on an exhale.

"Anything. You know it."

"It's not a small thing, but I have no one else."

"Want me to come over?"

"Yes, please!"

I grab a throw blanket, my gun, and curl up on the couch, my eyes steady on the door, ready for anything and everything.

Despite my effort to be vigilant, I must have dozed off, because I almost jump through the roof when the doorbell chimes. I sag with relief, my heart pounding a hundred miles per hour, when I hear Chloe's soft voice.

"Kerry? You in there? Oh, hi."

I frown and throw myself at the door. Outside stands Chloe in a staring contest with my neighbor.

"She's my friend," I say, grabbing her arm and pulling her inside with a glance at the street.

"He's... He came darting, looking like he would pounce on me!" She stares behind her, as if she could still see him.

"I'll tell you. Come, coffee."

I pull her with me to the kitchen. As I prepare two cups, I fill her in about this morning. She looks aghast.

"So, he's alive? How do you feel about that?"

"Terrified! And relieved." Tears begin to fall again as my chest clenches.

"Oh my God." My friend jumps up and pulls me into her embrace. "What are you gonna do?"

"I went to see Salvatore."

She backs up and holds me at an arm's distance, scanning my face, turning pale. "You did *what*?"

"I went to see the man who wants me dead."

"Do you actually *have* a death wish? Are you *insane*?"

I throw my hands over my face. "That's not fair! You're not living my life."

“Yeah but—” Chloe gently takes my hands and pulls them away, searching my gaze.

“I had nothing else to do,” I say faintly. It finally catches up with me, the immediate danger I put myself in by going there.

“What did he say? Are you okay?”

I shake my head as new tears well up in my eyes. I wipe them off and busy myself with the coffee, handing her a cup.

“He can’t stop Christian. Salvatore doesn’t want me dead anymore, but he can’t stop Chr—” My voice breaks and I can’t end the sentence.

“What are you gonna do?”

“I need to leave. Today. And that’s where I need you. I really, really need you.”

“I’ll do anything, Kerry. You know that.”

I nod.

“You have relatives somewhere else, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I have a cousin in Chicago.”

“Can you help me get there? Can they help me settle in? I just need a couple of nights until I find something of my own.”

“I’m sure he’d let you stay months. As long as you needed.”

“I have money. I’ll arrange something, but I just need to land somewhere.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“And... This... this is a lot to ask, but can you come with me? Co-drive with me? I’m afraid to go alone. I never drive a

car.”

Chloe snaps her mouth shut and stares at me, then she looks out the window, her gaze turning distant. “Right, that’d take like three days... minimum.” She chews on her lip, frowning. “We’re gonna need to stay at least two nights somewhere... I’ll rent a car, leave it there and fly back, or I’ll die.”

“I don’t want to be seen in public, or buy a ticket for anything in my name. I really need to disappear.”

Chloe smacks a hand on the table, making me flinch. “Pack up, girl. We’re doing it! When do you want to go?”

“I need the day to prepare. As soon as it turns dark. It feels better to not leave in daylight, somehow.”

She stands. “I’ll be ready. Call me. *Finally*, you’re doing something! I’ve been so *worried!*”

“I’ve— I’ve lived in a bubble, I never thought somehow... But he came back and... things have changed.”

My thoughts stray to the little life inside me, the life I need to protect at all cost. But no one needs to know of it. Not even my best friend. I don’t know what the future will look like, where I’ll be a few years from now, but this is my reality right now, and leaving is the only reasonable thing to do at this point.

When Chloe leaves, I begin to pack, frantically rushing around, pulling open drawers and wardrobes, throwing makeup and cleansers and whatnot into a bag until I realize I haven’t used any in ages, pick them up and throw them in the garbage bin instead. Why does anyone use makeup? To feel pretty. I don’t want to feel pretty; I want to be invisible.

I call Chloe at ten p.m. Twenty minutes later, she knocks. I've been pacing my living room with my nerves in a knotted bundle, my two suitcases ready, standing right inside the door.

“Ker, it's me.”

I spring to action, open the door, give her the bags, lock up and hop into the minivan. Thirty seconds after I opened my front door, it's locked and we're on our way. I can only pray to a deity I'm not sure exists, or that at least hasn't been watching over me lately, that Christian isn't out there somewhere, watching.

LATE THAT NIGHT OR EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, IN A SMALL motel by the side of the road, outside some nondescript, run-down town, I dream of Christian for the first time.

He doesn't come to kill me. Pushing me up against the wall, he somehow rids me of my clothes and pushes his fingers inside me, thrusting, filling me, spreading me open. His dark eyes never let go of mine. They're lethal, dangerous and yet tender, searching, asking a question that I have no answer to. My heart pounds—it's not fear I feel, and it scares me more than anything.

I startle awake, sweaty, panting, my pussy aching. Still half in the dream, I realize I still want him and it makes me double over in pain. Not only can't I have him, he can never have me, or I'll die.

It was unfathomably stupid to tell Salvatore, but I didn't think.

Covering my belly, pressing my palms over the little thing in there, I wonder what Christian will feel when he learns I'm

carrying his child. Somewhere I hope it'll hurt him, that he'll feel the loss just as much as I feel the loss of my whole life.

But he's a murderer, a monster. Why would he care?

MY POOR, BRAVE, HEROINE OF A FRIEND IS EXHAUSTED WHEN we roll up outside her cousin's place, late afternoon on the third day, in a sleepy suburb outside Chicago. Seeing her, my feeling of guilt has grown exponentially, by forcing her here.

Despite having showered in the morning, I feel dirty, covered in road dust. The sun shines relentlessly and there's not a cloud in sight. The car was warm and stifling, but outside the air is crisp and some snow has fallen during the night.

"It's really winter," I say, a bit taken aback.

"Yeah," says Chloe as she presses the doorbell, "we got the sea back home. We have a weird climate."

A pale, slightly overweight man in his thirties opens. "Cuz!" He peers at Chloe from behind thick coke-bottle glasses.

"Jonathan!"

They give each other a slightly awkward hug.

"Kerry." Chloe extends her arm toward me and I take a step forward, offering my hand.

Jonathan's grip is damp and dead fish-like. "I've heard all about you!"

I throw Chloe a short glance. Somehow I doubt that, and she confirms my suspicions with a short shake of her head.

We enter a run-down little two-bedroom house, things strewn everywhere, and Jonathan doesn't even make excuses

for it. I doubt he sees it.

“You can have my room. It’s the largest.”

He pushes open a door and shows us a hopelessly messy room with an unmade bed. Chloe gives me a look and mouths ‘sorry’. I shake my head. I won’t stay more than a night, or two. A couch would have sufficed.

“What do you do, Jonathan?”

His face lights up. “I’m a software engineer. I design computer games.”

“And play them too, right?” adds Chloe.

“Oh yes! Wanna see?” His voice is suddenly filled with enthusiasm.

Both Chloe and I shake our heads vigorously.

“Maybe later,” I say. “I’m pretty beat.”

The three of us carry my stuff into the little bedroom. I get a set of new sheets and a towel, which I sniff suspiciously when no one is watching. I don’t wanna be ungrateful, but this is the dirtiest house I’ve ever set foot in.

Chloe and I say our goodbyes, hugging tightly. My chest clenches and I wonder if we’ll ever see each other again.

“Stay in touch,” she mumbles against my shoulder.

“I will!”

I’m close to crying when I watch the taillights of the car disappear around the corner, then I turn and walk with heavy steps back into my little temporary sanctuary. Today I’ll recover. Tomorrow I’ll find somewhere to live.

Christian

I stay off the radar. I get call after call. First from Salvatore, then Nathan and Eric. I answer none of them, and finally I turn off the phone. I need to think.

Parking the car, I find a spot on the top of a steep slope. From here I have a view of the whole city, the bay and the bridge. The breeze is warm and brings with it scents of flowers and dry earth. I close my eyes against the sun and relive yesterday's disastrous meeting. Her too-thin frame and her frightened eyes haunt me. What did I expect?

Well, I did expect a scared Kerry, but I also expected at least one minute with her, maybe hold her while I explained. Something...

Fuck.

I didn't expect to be chased off at gunpoint.

I lean my head in my hands and sigh. I just want to fucking see her again. Can't she be a tiny bit reasonable?

My chest tightens in agony as I think of our few moments together. I've dreamt of her warm, soft body under mine more times than I can think of. I've woken at night, my cock hard, desperate to hold her again, the instinct to just hop in the car and drive to her almost irresistible.

I wanted to be smart about it, save her from Salvatore's clutches, and see where it got me. Fucking nowhere.

It's two in the afternoon. She should be done at the center around five. She never stays late anymore, and never locks the place up, so I can't catch her alone. I perk up as a maybe mad idea forms. I can simply go inside. She's not bringing her gun there. And if she's crazy enough to do that, she must have it locked up, anything else is unthinkable. What can she do? Call the cops on me? That wouldn't get her anywhere.

My restless energy gets the better of me and I start walking along the trail. The plane tickets are lost, of course. I'll have to convince her to just come with me and we'll hide away somewhere until I have made new arrangements.

THE CENTER LOOKS ABANDONED. I DON'T SEE KERRY'S VESPA outside. She should be here. I frown as I push open the door and enter. It's silent and appears worryingly empty.

Suddenly I bump right into a young woman who comes darting around the corner. I've never seen her before. She almost falls on her butt and I have to grab her arm to steady her.

"Sorry, I—"

"I thought I heard the door. Who are you? No one's here."

Her chest heaves as she glances around us. I realize I stand way too close and probably intimidate her like hell, so I take a step back.

"It's okay, I'm just looking for Kerry Jackson."

"Oh." She takes me in and a blush spreads on her cheeks. "She doesn't work here anymore," she stutters and swallows loudly, pushing her fingers through her short dark hair.

I take yet another step back. Something in me plummets to my feet. "What do you mean?"

"She- she doesn't work here anymore."

I dash forward and grab her arm before I can think. The girl yelps and I force myself to let go. "Since fucking when?"

Her eyes widen as she staggers backward. "I think you should go."

“Since when?”

She jerks as I roar at her, then whimpers and backs up, colliding with the wall.

I hold out my hands. “I’m not gonna fucking hurt you.” I force my voice softer. “When did she quit?”

“We got the call this morning,” she whispers, her lower lip trembling. “Kerry quit and on top of that, Chloe had to take a few days off, so they called me in.”

Her eyes plead with me not to be bad, not to be what she fears I am, not to be dangerous. She *is* right, even though she doesn’t fully comprehend it. Something dark grows in me, a ragged ball of pain. I’m fucking furious, and a furious Christian Russo is bad news. I have no reason to take it out on this girl, though.

“Did she say anything else?” I grit out.

She swallows and shakes her head. “Nothing that I know of.”

“Okay, fine.” I spin on my heels and stalk out of the building, cursing Kerry to Hell. Why the *fuck* does she have to make things so complicated? It’s as if she doesn’t *want* to live.

I drive directly to her house and go knocking, wary of her neighbor. This time I have my gun. If he shows his face, he’s history.

No one. Her Vespa stands meticulously locked up on the tiny front yard. I ring the bell. Try the door. Nothing. Taking a few steps back, I scan the windows. Everything looks abandoned. My chest tightens with a premonition, but I chase it off. She’s probably just out, groceries, or visiting someone. I’ll come back later tonight.

When I pull up on my driveway, Eric sits on the stairs of my porch, leaning his elbows on his knees, looking beyond bored.

I regard him warily as I step out and walk up to him.

“What’s up?”

“We’ve tried to reach you all fucking day. Did you turn off your phone, you fuck?”

“I’ve been occupied.”

He answers with a sneer. “Luci wants a word.”

“Fine, I’ll call him.”

“Now. As in, we’re going.”

“Or what?”

Eric raises his eyebrows. “What the fuck’s got you in a twist? Just go see your fucking uncle, man.”

“Says his good little puppy.”

Eric throws out his hands. “You either come with me, without a fuss, or the next visit won’t be as friendly.”

I frown, weigh my options. “Fine. I’m going in my own car.”

“No. I’m driving you.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he interrupts me.

“Just do it, Russo.”

“All right.” I sigh. “Lead the way.”

We drive in silence. Eric ignores me completely, hostility oozes off him.

Salvatore sits on his back patio, catching the last rays of sun, a glass of red wine in his hand. No doubt from the mother country. He only drinks Italian.

“Christian! My long-lost son. Have a seat!”

I fall down on one of the chairs. The warmth in the air, and the stillness of his neatly trimmed garden is soothing, and I can't help relaxing a bit, temporarily letting my troubles sink to the back of my mind. I have no idea why it was so important to get me here. A new mission I assume. If he's sending me off somewhere, I'll disappear. I'm not leaving San Francisco until I have Kerry.

“What's so important man?”

“You've been unusually hard to catch today. What's up?”

“Just running some errands, is all.”

He narrows his eyes. “Tell me, is the girl still alive?”

I stiffen. We're going there again? He's not letting this go. I know he'll be sending someone else for her. My time is really fucking short.

“I'm on it.”

“Your 'on it' seems to drag. Not very you to be so slow.”

I'm silent. I don't know how to respond to that. He's right. I've worked with a machine's efficiency my whole life. Up until the last couple of months.

“She better be in one piece, nephew.” His voice grows darker, colder.

I frown. “As it happens, she is. What are you saying?”

“That you're letting her go. You're not to touch a hair on her head, or I'll throw you in chains and send you off to your

mama on the next flight to Chicago.”

Confusion, and a spark of hope grows in me. “Why?”

“She was here this morning, Christiano—”

“*What?*”

“She told me she’s carrying your child.”

The hair rises on my nape. “*What!*”

“Congratulations. You’re going to be a father.”

I jump up from the chair, making it topple and fall back with a loud crash.

“Well, it can happen when you don’t keep your dick in your pants,” he says with a short laugh. “I hope she was worth it, and in any case, we don’t kill family, so you’re not touching the girl. On the contrary, you’re gonna make sure she’s safe and well taken care of.”

I pace back and forth, pushing my fingers through my hair. My heart pounds like crazy. She’s pregnant? I think back on our long night together. I came in her. Over and over. I just assumed she was on the fucking pill. Why didn’t she say something?

“What the fuck?”

“Are you hearing me loud and clear, Christian?”

I stop and stare at him, then I nod. “Yeah. I won’t touch her. I’ve... I never meant to.” I lick my lips. “After I healed and got back on my feet, I knew I couldn’t hurt her.”

“Hence the stalling?”

“Yeah.”

“Well. Just this once it turned out to be a good thing. Never fail me again, though.” His voice is ice cold, leaving no room for negotiation. He isn’t happy with me, that’s for sure.

“What now?”

“I’ll send someone for her. Not you, because she’ll never trust you again.”

A stab of pain shoots through my chest. That hurt. I have to rectify that, make amends.

“Who?” I grit out.

“Nathan. Matteo. Someone who can keep their fucking cool. Now fuck off. Take a few days off. You’re a mess.”

“I don’t know where she is.”

Salvatore whips his head in my direction. “What do you mean?”

“I think she has disappeared.”

SIXTEEN

Kerry

I end up staying with Chloe's cousin for three days. I don't want to be rude, so I'm treading carefully when I ask him if I can clean up after myself before I leave. The way he lights up at my offer warms my heart, and I end up cleaning the whole place, except his gaming dungeon in the basement. I don't even dare to look down there.

I find a two-bedroom studio in the center of town, in a new apartment complex walking distance from the Navy Pier. Hiding in plain sight seems like the way to go. Lots of people around me, a guard at the door, alarms. The rent isn't cheap, but it's worth the money. I hope he won't ever find me, but if he does, I'll have taken all the measures I possibly can.

Looking for a paid job feels meaningless at this point, but to keep my hands occupied I do volunteer work at a shelter for abused women. It seems fitting, and keeps me from dwelling.

I need to furnish my place and make it feel like a home, and see if I can get a permit for a legal weapon. I've heard it's near impossible in Chicago, so I don't have much hope. There's so much to do, but filling my days with practicalities drowns out the constant nagging worry in my chest.

The women at the center teach me something I'd never have thought of myself. I pack an emergency bag. A phone that can't be traced to me. Cash. Lots of cash. Some basic clothes and hygiene products. I can escape with a moment's notice.

Chicago is nothing like San Francisco. I feel like an alien. My belly swells. I'm thin as a stick, but the little girl I carry takes what is needed and keeps growing. Oversized shirts and sweaters hide the state I'm in. In case anyone's looking.

Sitting in my new SUV at a red light by a large intersection, I see Christian for the first time. It's been six months and four days since I fled my hometown.

I always wondered if he would stay away. Or not.

He's in his car, a window rolled down, by the opposite side of the street.

My heart speeds up so fast I nearly faint. It feels as if the skin on my back shrinks. As soon as it turns green, I step on it, weaving through the traffic, more concerned with what's behind me than in front, and almost crash into the back of a truck.

I'm eight months pregnant and I nearly killed us both after seeing a mere glimpse of her monster of a father.

That night I cry bitter tears. Tears of fear, tears of a longing I had buried. I don't know if I believe he's going to kill me anymore. So much time has passed, and Salvatore didn't want me killed, but I'll never trust Christian again, and it hurts so bad.

I don't see him again after that one time.

I live in limbo.

My daughter kicks at my ribs and wants to get out. It's time. Time for life to change again.

Strangers' hands on my naked body. The pressure builds and builds. My daughter wants to meet me, fighting to get out. I don't need anesthesia. I brush them off when they try to convince me. Pain is my friend. Pain makes me float. Pain brings death, and now it also brings me life.

A warm little body on my chest. A tired old soul peers at me with dark eyes. So tiny. So vulnerable. And I *feel*. Real joy. For the first time in nine months there's something in me that isn't only frozen fear. The love is instant, the connection unfathomably deep. It doesn't matter how she came to be. She isn't him.

A tiny part inside has defrosted, the part reserved for Cecilia Jackson. There has never been a prouder mother walking the streets of Chicago.

I call my mom. There has never been a happier grandmother. Or more confused. I have barely spoken to her, and I didn't tell her I was pregnant. She vows to come, talks about moving here. I need to deflect that. I can't have anyone from my old life be seen with me. Mom can never know the truth. No one will. The secrets I carry are too dangerous.

A couple of times I've felt the skin on my back prickle. But I haven't seen him, and I'm not sure I'm imagining things. Sometimes I want to see him. Sometimes I want to show him his incredibly beautiful daughter. Just once. Just to show him what he's missing out in life. Sometimes I dream of him, of his hands on me, coaxing responses out of my body that make me wake squirming, flushed and with a deep feeling of regret.

One day a decision is made for me again, flipping the little life I have on its head.

A note on my kitchen table when I return home after a long walk with Cecilia.

A note on my kitchen table.

A note on my kitchen table with a phone number.

I'm sorry. In case you ever need me.

The realization that I need to leave town is made in seconds.

I take out all the money I can get my hands on, cut my credit cards to pieces and ditch my phone. A neighbor helps me carry down a few items and load them.

I leave two letters on the table. One for Chloe with instructions to sell my house, or rent it out. One for my mom, telling her I love her, and to not look for us. I think at least Chloe will read between the lines and understand what must have happened. Mom... Mom will be hurt, but I can't think about that.

At four in the morning, I buckle Cecilia up carefully next to me, grab my emergency bag, hop in the car and drive.

I go north. I have no plan, I just drive. Maybe I'll stop where the tank runs dry. I don't know. No one checks me at the border to Canada. I cut my passport in pieces too and burn it.

In a tiny town not far from the border, I find my sanctuary. I pay for my little house in cash. It doesn't cost much. No one knows our real identities. For the first time in a very long while a sense of peace settles in me and I can breathe again.

On a clear day I can see the US across the valley. I don't look for it. I'm never going back.

Christian

Salvatore puts people on the lookout for Kerry, and it doesn't take long until we track her down. She resurfaces in Chicago after three days, withdrawing money from an ATM. I almost laugh from the irony.

Chicago.

The home of the Russo/Salvatore clan. The city where our grandparents landed and worked themselves to an early death in a dirty factory, hoping to build a better life for their children, my mother Bianca, and her brother Luciano.

It went to shit.

Or not.

Depending on how you consider a life in luxury built on filthy money, climbing to the top of the food chain over a growing pile of bodies.

We're not your average American family, but we are what we are. When my classmates played baseball and pulled girls' braids, I learned how to shoot a gun. When I was a freshman in high school, I killed my first man. On Mom's order.

Yeah, not your average family.

"She's off limits to you, Christian."

Salvatore has brought us together for a dinner and a small family gathering. Nathan and Sydney have come all the way from their primary home in New Orleans. She's a petite brunette with doe-like eyes, rocking a small baby bump. I can't help stealing glances at her, at them holding hands, and fight the feeling of a serrated knife twisting in my chest at the thought of how I fucked it up. I'll never have that. I had my first shot ever at meeting a woman I actually admired,

respected, cared for, and I went and destroyed it fundamentally.

Next to me sits my younger brother Matteo who has unexpectedly graced us with his presence, and at the foot of the table, opposite Luci, sits Mama Bianca Russo. Both have flown in from Chicago.

Luca and Angela are missing. Luca is still only on the brink of getting into the business. He's made some foolish decisions in the past, and Salvatore hasn't forgotten them. Angela wouldn't come even with a gun to her head.

"Yeah," I grit out, "you've made that clear."

Fuck me, I'm not staying away.

"You went and screwed a hit?" Bianca's voice cuts through the room like a diamond saw through glass.

Nathan's fiancée flinches. She's not happy with what our family does, but she has chosen him, and she doesn't have much choice. Like any of us.

I open my mouth to retort, but Salvatore beats me to it.

"Your boys have a healthy sexual appetite, nothing wrong with that. And he shoots sharp!" He barks out a laugh and slams his palm to the table, making the cutlery rattle.

I exchange a glance with Bianca, hers disapproving as all hell.

"It happened," he continues. "Now, we do damage control."

Everybody looks at him, waiting for him to continue.

"Matteo. Put one of your men to keep an eye on the girl. Make sure nothing happens to her. Anyone hurts her"—he

shoots me a glance—“you take them out.”

“Got it,” says my brother.

“Sydney!” Salvatore turns to her next.

Nathan’s fiancée jumps at hearing her name. “Yes?”

“You’re to befriend this girl, keep her close. You’ll have a baby soon, and so will she. You also have more than that in common”—he looks pointedly at Nathan and then at me—“and I’m sure you’ll get along.”

Sydney gapes, opening and closing her mouth. Nathan starts saying something, but she interrupts him.

“I sort of wondered why I was here. Look, I’ve got a business to run. I can’t—”

Salvatore waves dismissively. “That’ll be taken care of.”

“I don’t work for you!”

“See it as a favor to me for letting your man out of my... shadier side of business.”

Her lips tighten into a thin white line as she glances at us all in turn.

“I’m not doing it for you,” she finally says, “but I’ll do it for a scared lonely girl who happened upon a Russo.”

She glares daggers at me, making me squirm. I had no idea Nathan had found a lady with so much bite. On the other hand, who else would have managed to capture his heart?

Salvatore slams his hand on the table again, making everyone jump. “Excellent! I don’t give a fuck about your motive. Seems we have a plan. Everybody, for now, this stays between us in this room, in the immediate family, until we have it under control. And you—” he turns to me.

“Stay away. I fucking *know!*”

I’VE WATCHED THEM FROM A DISTANCE. HER AND THE BABY girl. Luci can’t know I go here sometimes. I stay at Matteo’s. He has my back and won’t tell anyone of my desperate visits.

Funny how the things you can’t have are what you want the most.

I never meant to approach her again. I didn’t want to disturb the peace, sully the beauty and the light, the life I can’t take any part in. She hurts me by living on, by being breathtakingly beautiful and strong, by making a life for herself and our child.

I need it badly. The hurt. I deserve it.

I watch them, my girls, feeling a twisted sense of pride over what I’ve achieved. It’s something I knew I’d never experience, but here they are. My baby and my woman. Proof I’m human.

Kerry would surely disagree.

Kerry.

I think she suspects I’m around. She suspects, and she punishes me by refusing to hide, by refusing to be afraid anymore. And it works. They exist in this world, and I’m left alone and broken.

Shattered.

The little one has my eyes. I would want to hold her. Just once. I bet she’s soft. Like her mom. But I’ll never know her. She can’t know me. I’m too fucked up, too dangerous. That little lady and her mom don’t need me in their lives.

I can't figure out why she kept it. My child. No one would have blamed her if she'd have gotten rid of it. My daughter. Not even me.

This binds us. She must know this, and yet she chose it.

This ties us together forever.

I can never leave her, and I can never be with her. I hate myself, and I will always wonder if things could have been different between us, if it could have gone on a different path. The pull they have on me is stronger than anything I've ever felt. I'd go to the end of the world and back for them.

She looks so lost, forlorn. Sydney has tried to find an in to get to know Kerry, but she is a recluse and Sydney hasn't had a chance so far. I ache when I see her, and the urge to help grows. Surely she'd at least accept some money?

Finding a way into her building and bypassing the alarm is a piece of cake. I inhale her scent, sniff the little one's pillow. She smells of powder and sunshine. It makes my dark heart clench in despair.

A note on her kitchen table. Just that. I don't want to bother her, I have no right, but just that.

A note.

The next day she is gone.

Really fucking gone.

The last trace of them ends by an ATM on an adjacent street.

Kerry doesn't resurface. As the weeks pass, my whole life turns into a ball of agony, eating away at my insides.

Is she dead? How the fuck does a regular person manage to disappear completely?

“IT’S ALL RIGHT. BACK DOWN, IVAN.” SALVATORE STOPS HIS guard from jumping me as I storm into his office. “What seems to be the problem, nephew?”

“Fuck you! Fuck you and this whole fucking life!”

“So much anger. Have a seat.”

“I prefer to stand,” I grit out through clenched teeth.

“Well, I fucking insist. Get a hold of yourself. In my house you behave like a man, and not a whimpering boy. Sit, and spit it out. I’m busy.”

I remain standing. “The girl.”

Salvatore’s face is impassive. “Yes?” He supports his elbows on the desk, tenting his hands.

“Kerry Jackson.”

“Yes. Our brave little redhead. What about her?”

His fucking superior attitude suddenly gets the better of me and I snap. I shove all the contents off his desk with one swipe of my arm and lean in, nose to nose. It takes a mere moment and I’m ripped back by the brute, my arms held behind my back in a crushing grip.

“Fuck you!” I squirm and jerk. “Let me go!”

Salvatore waves his hand and the monkey behind me releases me. I square my shoulders and straighten my sleeves.

“What happened, Christiano?”

“She’s gone,” I grit. I clench my fists as heat floods my cheeks.

He frowns. “I know.”

“I can’t fucking live like this! Just— give me something to do. Any-fucking-thing. Use me. The dirtier, the better. Bury me in work or I’ll—”

I swallow the rest. I don’t know how to live anymore.

“I’ve always protected you, Christiano. Your mama literally held me by the balls once, when you joined my business. I don’t think she—”

“I was a kid back then. I doubt she feels the same now, and besides, what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her. Luciano, I need it. I need to fucking fight. I need a war zone.”

Something dark flickers through his gaze. “You were always my best man, Christiano. I’ve always hoped this day would come. I’ll find something for you. Now tell me, if she meant that much to you, why the hell did you go and follow my orders?”

I clench my jaw as nausea rises in me. I still feel her warm skin, her thudding heart, smell her fear. I still see her before me, shattered, her thin frame, her dark frightened eyes. I did that. I can’t blame anyone else.

“I hurt her bad, Luci. Bad. And now she’s gone. With my baby.”

He tsks. “You’re an idiot. You could have had everything. She’s such a pretty girl. Clever too.”

Yes.

She is.

PART TWO

ALTERUM NON LAEDERE

SEVENTEEN

Middlebro, Canada

Kerry

I shake the bottle and then let a couple of drops fall on the inside of my wrist. The content is warm, but not hot. It's close to perfect. A grunting from the little bed at the back of the other room makes me smile.

"I'm coming, honey." I jump off the kitchen counter where I've been sitting while preparing her evening snack and walk the few feet to her. Looking down at the expectant, deep brown eyes that sparkle when she sees me, my heart fills with tenderness.

"Momma," she gurgles. "Angwy."

"I know you're hungry, baby. Look what Mommy's got." I beam back at her and wiggle the bottle before her. My little Cecilia, my Cece, waves chubby hands in the air and tries to catch my arm.

"Impatient, are you? Come here."

I lift her and she molds into my embrace as I lower us together down on the bed. The night is just right. It's absolutely quiet in our house, and slightly chilly, but we're good under the blanket. My daughter lies beside me and sighs

contentedly as she gulps down the lukewarm content. I listen to the sound of her swallowing and to the low cracking noises from the tree outside as one of its branches repeatedly hits the far side of the house. I need to cut that thing down one of these days, but at the same time it has almost come to be a friend. Something I recognize, that I can trust to always be there, and that won't hurt me. It's normalcy. One of many things surrounding me I consider normal, that I need to be normal.

I look at my beautiful daughter and caress her forehead.

Cecilia Erin Jackson.

Erin to commemorate her late granddad, Cecilia because it's pretty, and Jackson... because she is one. She's nothing else, just fully, completely a Jackson, stemming from a long tradition of proud, unyielding women.

Her eyes are drowsy. She'll be sleeping any minute now. I hear a gurgling, sucking noise from the bottle and without looking at it I know it's empty. It falls to the side as she drops it. Her eyelids flutter. I should have had her eat earlier so we could have brushed her six little teeth. Now I don't want to bother her in her sleep.

But all in all that's just a tiny issue, and I know which battles to fight and which to shrug at.

I dip my nose in the angle where her neck meets the shoulder and inhale deeply, relishing her wonderful powdery baby scent. Then I stroke her silky brown hair and smile. This is what keeps me going. This is what makes me want to live.

Cecilia stirs when I get up, but she doesn't wake. She'll sleep solidly until four in the morning when she'll have her regular night fright, then she'll sleep until eight when we both wake and our daily routine begins again. One day I know I'll

have to return to the world. When she's a little older. When she needs to start socializing with other children. When it's not fair of me to deprive her of her life.

I wash the bottle, scalding water and a little detergent, shake the drops out and place it upside down on the counter. Then I dry my hands on the kitchen towel as I stare at the pitch-black window, seeing nothing but my own reflection. Anything could be out there. Everything *is* out there. Like so many times before, I see two gleaming brown eyes before me. Then I blink and they're gone.

I hope that day is still very far away.

Turning off the light, I cross the living room, aiming for my armchair. I didn't take much with me when we moved up here, but this was one of the few objects from my old life I kept. I have a fireplace. I have a huge pile of books, many of them read once already, or even twice, even more still unread. I have a small house and a huge SUV that's very, very fast if needed.

I have my daughter.

I don't have a TV, only a radio and a CD-player. I've made friends with some people who are good to know downtown. The hardware dealer, the grocery store owner, a carpenter and his wife, but they never come here, I've asked them not to, and they are still with me because they haven't asked questions. They have no idea who I really am. To them we're just Kerry and Cecilia Reed and we're running from my abusive husband. It's not a lie, not entirely, it's just tweaking the truth a bit.

He doesn't have the right to this child, does he?

He doesn't.

No, he doesn't.

And God knows he *is* abusive. I clench my teeth at the thought, and then shake it off. Water under the bridge.

My hand hovers over the book I'm currently reading, but then I look at my journal and pick it up instead. It's heavy in my hands. Or, no, it's not really heavy, it's the content that's heavy. Sad. Dark as the night outside the four walls that shield us from the cold. Opening the book, I take out the pen from between the pages of my last entry and begin to write.

October 22

He has no right. He has no right to see my baby. Am I afraid of what he'd do if he ever found us?

I feel guilt. I know I shouldn't, but still I do. Cece will never know a father, she will never experience the close and loving relation I had with my own dad. But hers is a dangerous creature, not quite human, unreal in his hate and fury. *Very* unsuitable. I glance at the shotgun that hangs next to the front door. Always ready, always loaded.

I shouldn't feel any guilt. It's for the better.

Probably, yeah.

I have replayed the events at the harbor so many times in my mind that I don't even know anymore what really happened and what are the fruits of my imagination. Were my wounds real? The bleeding, the bruises and the scrapes. Did

they really exist? He almost killed me, but at the same time I remember such a vivid knowledge deep inside that he wouldn't, that he, in his own twisted way, wanted me. In a sickening, selfish, perverted way. Just not dead.

I remember a lot of pain. A *lot*. During... and after... I spit blood-tinged saliva, my eyes were bloodshot, I cried from the pain every time I swallowed.

I look at Cecilia. My daughter. She was conceived that one night we had together, when I still thought he was someone else. It's a weird thing, that something so beautiful can come out of such a monster.

I can barely remember. It scares me.

It would be a disaster if he knew where we were, if he found us. I think I'd rather kill us both than let him lay his hands on me, on us, again. If I can't kill him first, that is.

I haven't cried a day since I found out I was carrying Cece. Before that, though, I cried my heart out in my isolation. I was so alone.

I put down the pen and flick through the pages, quicker past the darker times. I flip back and forth, dreading to catch a glimpse of even one wrong word.

Why do I even do this? Why can't I put it to rest?

But I know why. I live in limbo. Still. The protective shell I once carried inside me is corrupt and I have built an artificial one, surrounding me and my daughter on the outside, with our

move, and our anonymity. I haven't moved on, I've just put the lid on, and I know, I *know*, it's unfinished. The pain hasn't gone away, and I don't know what it'll take, what I'll have to do. I just know I have to keep us safe, and that's all I do, all I can focus on, or I'll shatter.

I wish it wasn't true. None of this. I still see the man I first met, the warmth, that tiny flutter in my belly, and it's so confusing. It hurts so much.

The writing doesn't look like my own from those first days, there are misspelled words, and jumbled sentences, and it was ink and I just couldn't go back and correct it. Instead I turned the page and kept pouring hurt all over innocent white paper. Then there are so many pages with blurry letters, the paper crumpled from dried tears and hasty words.

And it goes on and on and on.

Then there suddenly aren't. The writing looks like mine again, I write of hope, of a blessing, of a need larger than my misery.

Cecilia.

She looks so much like her father. Beautiful, unearthly beautiful. But it doesn't hurt, she isn't *him* and she won't inherit any of his malice because I will pour my love over her, and keep her safe and happy. I won't let him touch her, not mentally, not physically. I'll never let him see the beauty his violence created. He doesn't deserve it. He can live his pathetic existence. I don't care. I stroke the book in my hands as I close it and then let it fall to the floor beside me. Not much is happening. I haven't got anything to write really. I consider it a good thing. I close my eyes and allow my head to fall back against the cushion.

I am so tired.

A piercing yell startles me. Rubbing my eyes, I glance at the clock by the fireplace as I rise from the warmth of the chair to look in on my baby. I didn't know time had flown by that quickly. Through the window a moonbeam hits a poor plant I once had the ambition to care for. Now it needs not only caring, but resuscitation. I'll deal with it tomorrow.

Cecilia is content with me tucking her in and I fall onto my own bed next to hers, exhausted, on edge, my own ghosts haunting me like every night. I can't help it. I still feel his rough hands on my bared skin. I still see him before me as clearly as if he's standing in the room.

He still hurts.

Christian

His body shakes and twists as I shove the knife deeper into his chest. His arms flail and he reeks of sweat and fear. His cheap shirt is stained and crumpled. I've gotten blood on my sleeve and it infuriates me that this fat, ugly, low-life dares to soil *me* with his filthy blood. If he hadn't struggled so much this would've been over with by now. Looking at him, at his life, this place, I can't understand what makes him want to live at all.

Well, for fuck's sake, die already!

A pale face and frightened eyes fixate on mine as he tries to get up off the floor and away from the rage that has fallen upon him for unknown reasons, to both him and me. His hands keep slipping in his own pool of blood and urine, all of his chins wobble, and the noises that emanate from deep down in his throat are pathetic. I don't know what he did wrong, or whom he upset, and I don't give a shit. He's too old to be in

the business, whatever his business was, but not too old to try to save himself.

I kick him in the chest, and he falls over on his back, his eyes rolling, showing more bloodshot white than iris. Crouching next to him, I cock my head and study my handiwork. He's a goner no matter what, but I never leave work half-done. *Almost never.* I sneer and grab his head in a steel grip. He makes a terrified gurgling sound and coughs blood just before I twist his neck, the crack loud and final.

His body twitches one more time before relaxing at last, his battle lost. I hold him for a moment longer, reveling in my superiority, my heart rate soon down to its normal beat.

It's over.

As I let go, his head falls to the side, his eyes unseeing, his pupils dilated. He wouldn't have had to fight, it was just a waste of energy, the end result is always the same anyways.

Someone's demise. Blood on my hands.

Literally.

I know what they call me behind my back. *The Ripper.* I know what I've become. What I didn't use to be.

A living nightmare.

I know they fear me. Even the very people who ask for my services, and pay me well to do their dirty work.

And I don't fear fucking shit. When you've already lost it all, there's nothing that can hurt you.

Before I stand, I yank the knife out of his chest. The sound of metal grinding against his chest bone reminds me vaguely of chalk on a blackboard. I wipe the blade on his psychedelically blue, pink, and red shirt until it's clean,

leaving the piece of cloth even more eclectically tainted than before.

In the hallway I glance in the mirror once, checking for visible stains. There are none. I snap off the gloves and pocket them, correct my shirt and sheath the blade. Without wasting another thought on the heap of flesh in the other room I listen out the corridor for a moment. Shoving my fingers through my hair, I then push down the door handle with my elbow and exit apartment 494 in an anonymous complex in yet another dull city.

Done deal.

As I jog down the four floors from the dead guy's apartment, my mind at ease and my steps light, I meet a woman and a small girl. They hold hands and make it slowly up the stairs. The little blonde girl is dressed in a terrible combination of a pink ballerina skirt, purple rain boots and a red jacket. She's maybe a year and a half, or two years old at the most. I'm good with attention to details, but my experience with children is limited to say the least.

They're in the middle of a conversation and bits and pieces of it reach me as I fly past them.

I shoot off a disarming smile to the mother. I've found that people tend to rationalize when they remember things. They won't remember a pleasant experience in connection with something unpleasant. She won't connect me with the gruesome murder in her house that she will soon know about. The plump, mousy-haired woman smiles back and her cheeks blush and then we're past each other. I've already forgotten about her when I hear a familiar word.

A name.

“—Kerry—”

I almost miss the next step and have to lengthen my stride in order not to fall. I'm out of the building and slip around the corner in a matter of seconds. My car is just on the other side of the railroad. I just have to make it across the parking lot and through a tunnel, but my head spins and I fall back against a concrete wall, fighting to get back control over my breathing, my neck suddenly slick with sweat. “Get a grip, Chris,” I snarl to myself between clenched teeth. Slowly the dizziness subsides and I start toward the car with efficient strides. That name.

Kerry.

Tires on gravel are a bad combination. I probably make deep ruts in the driveway as I rev the engine and speed off. Out of this fucking town. Out of this fucking world of worn-down people and worn-down lives.

Not that the world isn't full of Kerrys, or little girls, about a year and a half old, wearing pink little dresses, ponytails, and smiles full of trust. I see them all the time. But I've been feeling particularly moody the last few days since I got the latest update from my snoop.

It's been a year. At first, I was sure she'd turn up again. People just don't vanish from the face of the earth. Then, as time went by, I backtracked and checked with my sources to make sure Kerry and the girl hadn't been found dead anywhere.

But no. They are just fucking gone.

And with every passing day my anger grows. Who does she think she is? Disappearing with my kid like that! A man

has rights. If she'd just stayed in sight, where I could've kept an eye on them.

But now...

Her dad is dead, so I can't squeeze it out of him. Chloe Becker, her former co-worker and the closest thing she had to a friend, didn't know shit and had to spend a week in the hospital after I'd been convinced. I've been tracking her mother, but after a few months it became obvious that they have no contact whatsoever.

So whom does she confide in? Who does she trust? She's not an island. Every person needs someone, somewhere.

In the beginning I had three men on my payroll, now I'm down to just one. He works on it full time and still the latest report came up with nothing.

I slam my fist on the dashboard and turn right on the I-29, leaving Sioux Falls behind me. In three days I have a meeting in Winnipeg of all places.

Canada.

I turn on the radio. When the static clears an old Simon and Garfunkel tune fills the car. I recognize it immediately. "*I am A Rock*". I'm more of a jazz person, but the lyrics are sad and as I flatten the gas pedal to the floor, steering north, they penetrate me and the words come to life carrying a deeper meaning than the two aging musicians could've possibly ever intended.

They sing of walls that no one can penetrate. I stare at the road in front of me, but asphalt is not what I see.

I see her before me. Her dark green eyes sparkling with a hesitant flirt, slightly tipsy from the shots of vodka I ordered to befriend her and to make her more compliant.

I liked it, talking to her, it was fun.

I've never cared for anybody. I never bothered to get close to anyone. Life taught me early on it was just a giant waste of energy.

I still feel it in my palms, her soft hair caressing them as I cradled her head. The memory of the deep need for her to kiss me, to give herself to me, still rages inside.

Then I went and ruined it all. Destroyed her.

What was her is just gone.

I'm more of a monster than anyone knows. Anyone but Kerry Jackson. She knows. I made her trust me, made her believe in me, in us, and then I turned on her. The shame that rolls over me, remembering what I did to her, burns hotter than the Hell I expect to end up in the day the other guy is faster than I am.

I grip the steering wheel tighter until my knuckles turn white.

I am a rock.

She's nothing.

Nothing!

So why does everything I am revolve around her?

I pull out the phone and call Salvatore.

"It's done. I'm going north."

Kerry

When her bright small talk wakes me I've slept three hours, or even less. I remember thinking about Dad, and what used to be. I don't sleep very well those nights. It still hurts. I

have a feeling he is out there somewhere, looking out for us, guarding us. I hope he is. We need it.

She waves to the birds outside the window and tries to chirp just like them. I let her down after checking she's still got her full pajamas on and hasn't squirmed out of any parts during her sleep, it's chilly on the wooden floor. Then I fall into a coma in my armchair for another hour. I dream of Dad. He cries every night because he doesn't know where we are. Guilt, and the terrible feeling of having done something irreversibly wrong, makes my insides churn. I try to reach him, to tell him I'm still his daughter, that I love him and that I'm still here even though it doesn't seem so. My hand touches his shoulder and when he turns, he's not my father. I scramble back so quickly that I fall, and I can't defend myself. It hurts so much because I could always defend myself, but not with this one. Not with Chris—

She's standing beside me, caressing my cheeks and toys with some tresses of my hair, sticking them inside my nostrils. There's a frown on her forehead. I sneeze and give her a sleepy smile.

“Want me to get up, huh?”

“Yes, Momma,” she says loud and clear. “Baba.”

I slip my feet into my thick socks and stumble to the bathroom, carrying her on my hip. Our morning routine is bliss. I fill the bathtub with warm, but not too warm, water, and then we dive in, children's music filling the cabin from the stereo, matched by splashing water and Cece's laughter. She loves really simple songs. They make her beam and yodel along. I love Simon and Garfunkel's '*Cecilia*'. But when I sing along, I tend to alter the lyrics slightly. They change depending on my mood. Today I sing of breakfast.

“Making breakfast in the mo—orning, for Cecilia in o—our house. I get up to make some coffee and when I get back my Cece’s been pouring milk a—all over.”

Her head perks up when she hears her name and then she slams her hands down hard, drowning both us and the walls with a cascade of water. I roll my eyes but then I smile. I’ll have some cleaning up to do, but it doesn’t matter.

When we’re warm and flushed, our need for each other’s skin temporarily sated, and wrapped in thick bathrobes, we make breakfast. Tea, toast, warm milk, cereal. If the weather is nice, we sit on the porch, overlooking the valley, watching the birds collect sticks, and the bumblebees attempting to fly, lazy, not knowing their season is ending. All they know is collecting nectar, flying from flower to flower. Such a blessing to live in oblivion, not knowing the cruelty of the world.

I look at my daughter. *Like her.*

I tuck away the remains of the meal, leaving the dirty plates for later, then I brush her six little teeth carefully, making up for last night. After we’re done, we dress and prepare ourselves for a walk in the woods. Cecilia toddles around me as we slowly progress into uncharted territory. To her, that is. Every step such an adventure. We’ve been walking here every day, every month, for about a year. It seems as even she has begun to know her way now.

A little hand pulls mine. “Momma, wewentabuth!” I nod and smile. “Yes, love, we’re going into the woods.”

EIGHTEEN

Christian

The landscape is so boring it turns my hair gray. Just flatlands as far as my eyes can see. I'm not in a hurry, my next hit isn't supposed to be back in town until tomorrow anyway, so I decide on a little sightseeing, taking another route to Winnipeg. A less trafficked route, leaving the I-29 for 23 that turns into 371, that turns into a number of anonymous little roads but with breathtaking and ever-changing scenery. Much more enjoyable and much less likely to bring my mind into the threatening meltdown.

I've just passed the border to Canada. I had my IDs ready, Mr. Whateveritwas, in case there'd be a flying inspection, but it was just straight ahead. Getting *out* of the States is rarely a problem.

My phone goes off in my pocket, an angry honking sound I've reserved for my uncle. I put him on loudspeaker.

"What's up."

"*Chris. Where're you at?*" His voice is dark and smooth, well-modulated, a little bit like Nathan's.

"I'm off to Canada."

“Right. The wife. How long until you get back? I have a traitor in my ranks, and I have to smoke him out. I want you to make an example out of him. I want your best work. I want the Devil himself.”

“Not a problem. Just point me in his direction. I should be back in a couple of weeks.”

“Are you fucking driving again?”

“It’s meditative. I like it.”

“I want you back as soon as you’ve finished up in Winnipeg. Take a flight.”

“Sure. Talk later.”

I disconnect without waiting for a response. I’m not taking a fucking flight. I’m in no rush to get anywhere. I haven’t got anyone I want to see, nowhere I want to be, and I’m not Luci’s lap dog. History has taught me to make my own fucking decisions.

The tank is almost dry, running on mere fumes, and my throat feels no better so I decide for a lunch break at the first place I pass. A sign for Middlebro comes up. That’s my watering hole for today, whatever it has to offer.

Not much as it turns out. It’s rural, to say the least. There’s one main street but it has what I need. A gas station, a small coffee shack and a grocery store right by it. I pull in and groan as I step out of the car. I’ve been driving more than 300 miles straight and my back is stiff and my legs numb. Inhaling deeply, I relish the fresh air. Despite its pathetic town center, this seems like a decent place to live.

At least if you have tuberculosis.

After filling up the car, I park it and march off to the little restaurant, diner, or whatever they call it. My stomach growls in protest from having been denied for so long.

Eggs, beans, bacon swimming in its own grease, a piece of white doughy bread and a large cup of black coffee. It's not the best meal I've had and, for the hundredth time this journey, I long for my favorite Italian restaurant back in San Francisco. The important thing is, though, that it refuels me enough to be able to get the next leg on this journey behind me. I stuff a proper amount of bills partially under the plate, nod at the woman behind the bar and push open the heavy glass door. Steering toward my car, I then have a change of heart and decide on some fruit, maybe a coke and a newspaper. It's always good to know what the locals are up to.

Inside the grocery store it's dusky, and a faint smell of rotten fruit and poorly cleaned floors, lingers in the air. One of the fluorescent lights in the roof flickers annoyingly. Behind the counter stands a heavy man in his sixties. He nods at me with a bored expression but then his face changes and he straightens, smiles. I see the change in him, and now that I get to see him more clearly, I realize he is no more than forty—forty-five.

Unbelievable what humans do with themselves.

“How may I help ya, Sir?” His voice is light and rusty, as if he hasn't used it yet today.

“I could use some fruit, a coke, and a newspaper.” My skin crawls. I don't want to venture deeper into this stinking hole.

I put just the right amount of demand in my voice and in a New York second, I have him whirling all over the place, gathering items on the counter before me. I cross my arms as I study the man before me, literally having to keep my telltale

signs of scorn in place, the lifted eyebrow, the curled upper lip, the cold disdain in my gaze.

He stops before me and holds up two newspapers, black and white, each less interesting than the other. His belly still quavers from the movement he stopped a moment ago.

“Which one da’ ya’ want?” he pants.

I wonder what he’d look like with a gun shoved down his throat the second before I pull the trigger. I know what he’ll look like after. Flesh and blood always looks the same. It takes effort to pull myself out of my reverie. I’m even worse than usual and this isn’t going anywhere. I feel like shit and I need to finish this.

“That one,” I say and point to whatever he’s holding in his right hand. I start sweating as bile rises in my throat and I feel my salivary glands start working overtime. I gotta get out of here. The almost fetid stench, the so-called food from the diner that rolls like heavy stones in my stomach, and the ugly man who’s undressing me with his eyes.

I flick a twenty on the counter, figuring it’ll be enough and swipe up the items in my arms. Middlebro. They’re insane. Fucking insa—

He comes running after me. “Change, mister... ya... change.” He’s wheezing heavily and stops in the middle of the street, an abandoned white blob on black asphalt, as I speed out of his world.

It’s not my kind of place. There’s nothing for me there. It’s not *my* world. The cold, damp, run-down apartment in Chicago, where I spent the first few years of my life before Mama Bianca started making some real money, flashes before me.

I'm better than that!

I've risen above it.

MRS. ERICA DAVENPORT HAS A WELL-KNOWN NAME, A husband in high politics, a mansion, private guards and some mighty enemies. She lives behind iron gates on a hill on the outskirts of Winnipeg and I've been keeping her under surveillance since Tuesday. That's four days. Her big blonde bob bounces on skinny shoulders as she makes her way through the small boutique. Her so called bodyguard carries a pair of jeans on his right arm, a Gucci bag, and a couple of glossy paper bags from the previous shop she visited on his left.

Sloppy. Very sloppy.

If she knew the danger she's in, she wouldn't occupy him with nonsense like bags and shopping. She'd have him call in three other security details from his company and she wouldn't leave her house, terrified, her shining hair a mess, her makeup smeared on her cheeks from all the crying and whining. She'd be praying to a God she's long since forgotten if he exists or not. But she doesn't. Instead she hauls out her Platinum AmEx for the third time in an hour and pays the little tough-looking, gum-chewing bimbo at the front of the store before she heads out to her limo.

All the easier for me.

Before I hit the road, I give the little twenty-something in the store one more look through the large window. Way too confident. Way too cocky. My pants grow tighter and I squirm as I adjust in my seat. Tempting. But I'm here on a job. Maybe another time.

I back out the car and weave in and out through traffic to get at a working distance to my target. Wonder who wants her dead. She seems to be stepping over corpses on a daily basis and appears anything but likable so the choices are numerous. Still, there are many of her kind out there, and most people wouldn't hire a professional.

Most people wouldn't even know where to find one.

As I follow a couple of cars behind them and watch her park outside her lover's apartment complex, the thought strikes me again it could be her husband. But remembering *he* took a little mini-vacation in Toronto with his mistress—his secretary—leaving last night, scheduled to return tomorrow morning, I doubt he would be too upset by her adultery. Disgusting people. All of them.

Waiting, my feet propped on the dashboard, the hours dragging by too slowly, I pick my nails with the tip of my blade and think of Kerry for the hundredth time since I turned off the ignition. She's out there somewhere. My *daughter* is out there somewhere, and it's eating at me. She must be a year and a half now, starting to become aware of her own self, starting to talk I figure, maybe walk. And I'm not there! The blade slips as my hands tremble and I feel a prick at the tip of my index finger. One single drop of fresh red blood forms while I look at it.

I think of death.

Someone's death. Any-fucking-one will do. A car door slams shut, and I quickly put the finger in my mouth, sucking away the metallic tasting fluid. She's not particularly likable, the blonde bitch, and tonight I'll sate my blood thirst.

It won't be pretty.

Kerry

We've been outside for two hours when it's time to go back and prepare for lunch. Cece's beginning to get tired, but I can't allow her to sleep right away. She needs to eat first, and also she'd just want to nap one more time before evening, and then it would be hell to try to make her come to rest for the night. And maybe, maybe I enjoy her company a little too much to want to be without it. But that reason I don't really articulate, because it doesn't sound quite right.

Maybe I'm beginning to feel a little lonely after all?

I swing her up in my arms and stagger. She's become a lot heavier, but I can still carry her all the way back. Cecilia snuggles up against me, her soft cheek is warm against my cold skin. I kiss her and she laughs and kisses me back. A big, sloppy, wet, absolutely wonderful kiss full of unconditional love.

Ray McGonaghan should be making a delivery today. He's a funny little man. Rather overweight, lives with his mother, breeds doves, and runs the local grocery store. He supplies me with life's necessities, like bread, milk, potatoes, meat and books when I ask for them and sometimes just when he thinks he's found something for me. He has also brought loads of toys for Cecilia. Old, inherited worn stuff, but always clean and fully functional. Legos, blocks, wooden trains, cars I wind up and then watch race across our floor, dolls of all colors, sizes and shapes. I think he might have taken a liking to us and I pray to God he won't ever come on to me in any way. I've tried to make myself as unattractive as possible. I hope it works.

I let her down with a sigh of relief. She immediately sits down, leaning dangerously to the left, and I have to lift her

again and place her on one of the chairs on the porch. I don't want her to catch a cold. I stretch my aching back and flex my shoulders. Before we go inside, I pile up the sticks I've collected on the logs by the side of the house. I always try to think ahead. Last winter was tough and there were a few days when no one could come or leave. It was only thanks to my storages we didn't freeze or starve. There's no telling what this winter will be like, but it kind of thrills me. It's back to basics. It gives me real things to focus on instead of the unreal, the surrealistic patterns that have been my life these past couple of years.

I have only got a few twigs left to pile when I hear the low distant murmur of an engine. I snap my head to the left, listening, then I react on instinct. I drop everything and swing Cece up in my arms faster than she can blink. I'm inside in no time. I look around me in desperation, then I decide to place her in the tub in case there'd be any shots fired. Rushing to the bathroom, I grab a blanket on the way and carefully set her down on it, still fully dressed. I pray she'll be protected there. She grunts a little. *Please be quiet.*

I dash back out into the main room, grab the shotgun and hide between the door and the window, barely breathing, tensed, dead frightened.

It is a car!

It stops right outside. The engine dies and I hear a door open and then quietly shut. The little hairs on my nape stand straight up. Who bothers to close the door so carefully? Someone who has something to hide? The need to glance out the window almost kills me, but I press my back tightly against the wall and remain still. I hear steps on the gravel. *Oh God!* Cocking the gun I pray silently Cecilia has fallen asleep

in the tub and won't make a noise. *Who's here? Who's sneaking up on us?* The fear nearly chokes me. Deep down I know who. I know I'll have to use my gun. And it scares me so much.

“Miss Kerry? Hello! Are ya there?”

Ray! It's Ray! Trembling violently, I have to use both hands to secure the shotgun again and hang it back up on the wall. *Oh, stupid, silly Ray.* I open the door and lean against the doorframe, somewhat casually I hope.

“Hey, Ray. Is there a problem?” I strain a smile and have to fake a cough to wipe the tears away from my eyes. I don't want to show him how much he scared me.

“Hi, Kerry!” he shouts, blissfully unaware of the commotion he caused. “I've got—”

“Hang on a sec.” I go and fetch Cece, needing a moment to calm my nerves. She sleeps on her back, her legs sticking up, looking like a turned over frog. Stopping in my tracks I decide to let her have her nap until I have had time to fix us lunch.

Christ!

I'm gonna have to have a serious talk with Ray.

He stands with his head bent, and at first I think he's ashamed over showing up despite my 'no-show' rule, but then he raises his head and kicks away a little stone as he approaches me, grinning and carefree. I feel evil, knowing that in a minute I'm going to have to wipe that smile off his face. He is such an honest, and almost childlike, human being. I'm sure he meant no harm. But our safety comes first. His ginger, fleshy grin becomes hesitant and then it vanishes as I walk down the steps to meet him. I realize I must be a frightening sight as I fight the urge to hit him.

Poor man.

NINETEEN

Christian

Erica Davenport's butler has the night off. I can drive all the way up to her residence. No guards. She's so fucking clueless, but the easier for me. The doorbell chimes cheerily and it doesn't take long before I hear a shuffle of feet.

"Who is it?" she calls through the door.

"Name's Christian, Miss. I'm here on behalf of a Vincent Mendell." She's ridiculously hung up on her young lover. I have no doubt she'll open.

The safety chain rattles as Mrs. Davenport unhooks it and then she swings the door open, hand on hip, leaning casually against the doorframe, her eyes widening as she takes in my friendly smile. As her gaze wanders along my body I almost feel dirty.

"What can I do for you?" she purrs huskily. "Did Vin... ehm, Mr. Mendell send me something?"

I cock my head, as I hold her blue gaze. "What do you think?"

She raises an eyebrow and purses her lips. "Why don't you tell me?"

Her flirting makes me want to laugh out loud. I step inside, forcing her to take a step back, then I close and lock the door.

“I’m not really here because of Vincent.”

Her smile still lingers, but a hint of insecurity ghosts across her features. Finally, a tad of self-preservation.

Too late, though.

“I’m here for you.”

I strike out, grab her hair and shove her back, slamming her into the wall. She screams, a shrill noise that could wake the dead.

“Shut up,” I snarl in her ear, pulling her hair so hard her eyes water. “This doesn’t have to be very complicated. You will hurt a lot more if you make my ears bleed. Are we clear?”

Tears stream across her cheeks as she snaps her mouth shut and all that escapes her lips are small whimpers as I pull her up the stairs.

SHE’S STOPPED CRYING.

Only random sobs wrack her battered body. Her face is bruised, her lower lip and right eyebrow are split, and a few of her ribs are most likely broken. There are reddish-brown streaks of drying blood in her almost ethereally pale hair, along with glistening fresh red. A new look of terror crosses her face as I pull out the knife. I’ve done what was asked of me, well, parts of it, and a clean cut across her throat will put her out of her misery. Then I’ll arrange for it to look like a break-in, and a random murder.

“Please, no, *please*. You don’t have to do this!” she whimpers.

I close my ears to her whining. They all beg. They all use the same words. Nothing new. It's only natural. People cling to life, even though their lives are worthless; a mere waste of air. Straddling her chest, I sadistically flick the blade before her face before I lower it to her neck.

“*Don't!*” she squeals, too weak to struggle more than a tiny wriggling that's easily subdued.

“Mommy?”

A faint voice right in front of me makes me flinch hard. Only a few feet away, in the doorway between the library and the bedroom stands a little pale girl in a pink nightgown with purple bears on it. She's carrying a giant stuffed panda and stares at me with huge questioning brown eyes.

“Mommy?”

I can't fucking breathe. She has a kid? A *kid*? Here? Neither in the preps nor during my surveillance have I seen anything that indicates a child. Inside me something screams *sloppy!* But I'm too stunned to take much notice.

Erica Davenport's eyes, or the one eye she can still open, fills with tears. “Casey,” she rasps with a shattered voice as she keeps her gaze trained on me as if daring me to move. “Casey, go back to your room. *Now!*”

I struggle to regain control, swallowing hard to get rid of the choking feeling that's overcome me. “*No, Casey. Stay.*” I pin her with my gaze, demanding her to obey me. If she doesn't, if she runs, and possibly warns someone, this might turn very messy.

The kid, the girl, takes a hesitant step toward us, drops her panda and picks it up again while her eyes flicker between me and the beaten woman on the floor.

Between my knees, the woman bends her head back and strains to try to see the girl. “Casey, *go!* Get out of here! Listen to Mommy!” There’s panic in her voice and it breaks several times. Then she fixates on me, her single eye frightened and yet suddenly fiery. “Do what you need to do, but you leave my daughter alone, do you hear me? Leave her alone!”

I still can’t believe there’s suddenly a kid. It wouldn’t have changed a thing. I’ve done lots of people who are mothers or fathers, hell, everybody can breed, there’s no great gift in that, but I’ve never, ever been in this situation. And I’ve never killed a child. And I will never...

Fuck!

There are tears on her cheeks now—the kid’s, and under me I feel the other female in the room heave her chest erratically, sobbing silently. Around my neck it feels as if something is wiring a snare tighter and tighter. I regard the girl. Tear rimmed brown eyes meet mine. With a growl I sheath the knife and stand. Pulling the woman with me by her hair, I slam her against a wall. “You didn’t tell me you had a kid!” I snarl.

“Don’t hurt her, please, she’s too young to remember anything, she can’t be a witness, she’s only three years old, *pleasedon’turther!*” she wails.

I shake her to shut her up. “You didn’t tell me you had a fucking *kid!*” I roar in her face as I keep one eye on the little one who stands as if frozen in the same position.

“You haven’t *asked!*” she hollers back.

She’s right about that.

“I’ll do anything, just don’t hurt my baby.”

“Your baby,” I sneer. “I haven’t seen you with her, not *once* in the four days I’ve been tailing you. You’re one fine mother, aren’t you? When does she get to see you? Do you book her in your agenda once a week or fucking what? Your security guy takes her out to play?”

From the look on her face I can see several things I said hit home at once. “You followed me?”

“Not once!” I hiss and shake her again. “Give me one good reason I should even think of you as a mother at all. All I ask. Just one fucking reason.”

I feel her sharp intake of air against my arm over her throat. Accuse people of being bad parents and they’re sure to forget even a death threat in their indignation.

“You don’t know anything about us,” she spits. “Nothing! I love my baby and I’ll do anything for her. If you’re here to kill me, then do it, but leave her alone!”

Her courage kind of impresses me, and she’s clearly got some motherly instincts in some of the right places. And I’m far out on the edge now. “Anything?” I ask, straining to keep my voice steady.

She nods.

I let her go and shove her toward the girl. Erica falls to her knees and embraces the little one who’s still too stunned to even cry out loud, just the silent wetness on her cheeks. She just stands there, easy prey, too innocent to even try to defend herself, her panda bear tightly held.

“You two.” I point with the knife to her and the child. “You leave tonight. Without a trace. I don’t care how you do it, but you’ll have to vanish off the face of the earth. I’d strongly recommend you leave the continent all together. Get me?”

“W—what?”

“You heard me,” I say in a low voice.

“You’ll let me live?”

There’s hope in that voice and I can’t stand to hear it. I don’t *do* hope. I turn to leave but stop in the doorway and regard them. “If you’re still in the fucking country tomorrow morning, I’ll come back for you both. And if I don’t, there’ll be others. There’s a very large sum on your head, Erica.”

“W—why? Who?”

I’ve had enough of this, but I decide to drive the nail in further. And maybe save my own fucking ass. I shrug as I lean against the doorframe. “Someone close. I’d say you can’t trust anyone.”

My hand trembles so much when I try to put the key in the ignition, I have to steady it with the other. The gravel squirts behind the car as I speed off into the night. I can’t believe I did that. I’ll have to make up a story as to why her body is missing. If she’s not gone tomorrow I’m in serious shit.

What the fuck’s wrong with me?

Kerry

I sigh and try to collect my thoughts as I wrap a thick wool blanket around my shivering body.

Cecilia is sleeping. We brushed her teeth tonight. Today was a good day. Nothing particular happened. I read a book and she played on the floor. We made pancakes. Yesterday was horrible. I almost killed a man.

I was too upset yesterday to even write about it. I'm still trembling just thinking about what happened.

We've been completely alone here for about a year now. Nobody ever comes here. That is what I've chosen, the safety and predictability I need. Only the first few weeks, when I had to have help with some plumbing, and with the repairing of the porch was when I allowed people here. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson were so kind, and they have respected my wishes ever since.

But now there's the problem with Ray.

Poor, kind, stupid Ray.

He came here UNINVITED. And I almost shot him!

God, I don't know what to do.

If I'd have shot him... then I'd have been sent to jail... and Cece would be ALONE! Or maybe not alone. She'd probably have to go live with Mom, and

then she'd be out in the open. Visible to all the predators out there.

To HIM.

That cannot happen. I have to take precautions. I might have to move. WE might have to move.

Because next time, next time someone might be following Ray here. And that someone... will be Christian.

My hands shake so much when I write the last sentence I have to stop and breathe. My chest feels too tight and the sensation of something crawling under my skin makes me gag with revulsion. I remember him so clearly, I don't even have to try very hard to feel his hands around my throat, choking me, or his lips on mine, his taste, his scent, the intrusion of both body and soul.

If he comes here... if we meet again. Then I'm going to have to kill him. It'd be him or me. I shiver at the thought and clutch my hands hard in my lap. *I hate him!* And that's not even entirely true. I glance across the room at Cecilia's peacefully sleeping form. The blanket rises and falls with her slow calm breathing. How can I truly hate someone who has given me such a blessing?

How can I kill her father?

My cheeks are hot and wet and I realize I'm crying. We have to move. That's the only solution. We're not safe here

anymore.

They say there's a storm coming in a few days. If it's anything like last year, then nobody can come here and nobody can leave. That means a few days, or maybe even weeks, of peace.

I close the journal and drop it on the table. He's always on my mind, and yet I can't see his face any longer. It's been so long. I wonder if I'd even recognize him.

I hope to God I'll never find out.

Christian

I'm restless and infuriated. I've got all this pent-up energy that hasn't gotten its release. My self-loathing has reached a new high and it's as if I itch inside. *You let her go! You fuckin' fuckin' moron!*

The twenty-minute drive along the highway hasn't done anything to calm my nerves and I need something I can't properly articulate. I aim to take a left turn toward my hotel in the east part of the center of Winnipeg, but then I change my mind and continue straight forward instead, to the vibrant core of the city, to where the bars and the clubs are.

At one in the morning, the night life is buzzing on one of the main streets. I cruise slowly, still unsure what I'm looking for. Finally, I decide to park in a poorly lit alley. Outside the air is chilly and it smells of approaching snow. I sharpen my senses and listen to the night, standing absolutely still for a few moments. The car chirps twice as I lock it and then I start

walking, a bit more at ease. I'm the biggest predator out here. No one's above me.

And I'm not below anything.

Black heavy doors. Giant bouncers on the outside, five bars and three dance floors on the inside. I don't know what made me pick the place. Inside it's foggy, multi-colored laser beams sweep through the mist, across sweaty bodies of people too drunk, or too stoned to walk straight. They seem to want to steer into me constantly. I don't really fit in, and yet I do if I work my magic, if I allow myself to transform and become one with the heat, with the mood, with the pulse. With the beat of the dance music, hard, raw, nagging and ruthless, the whiskey and the lonely girl by the bar, I suddenly know what made me pick the place, what it is I'm looking for.

People could get lost here, not to be found until the next morning. People could get killed here. I'm sure it has happened. It's that kind of place.

I feel a little less frustrated. Something's bound to happen, something that'll give me my release. I steer languid steps toward her, she has her back to me and is completely unaware I have her pinned. I almost laugh at the irony. It's the little bitch from the boutique my hit was at yesterday. She has long straight hair, charcoal black, all the way to her ass.

The sight makes my gut clench, remembering a similar sight of a red-headed woman who turned out to be my downfall.

She's wearing leather pants and a very small white top that shows a piece of her hard, trim belly.

Alluring.

I shake off the memory of Kerry and sneak up behind her, grab her hips and pull her toward me as I bend my head and bite her where the neck meets the shoulder. Hard, but not hard enough to break the skin. It's a daring move. I know it'll work. A girl like her, playing tough and hard to get, is begging for a master, for someone to just take her.

She yelps and tries to push away, her whole body screaming of indignation. I let her turn so she can see me and feel her soften already. Using the new position I press her tighter against me, letting her feel my hard cock. I already know I've won. Her eyes widen with appreciation, flirting back already.

“What's your name, baby?”

“Cherry,” she gasps.

She's not Kerry, but there are enough similarities. My heart makes an unhealthy leap in my chest. Too fucking close. “Come.”

“Where're we going?” She giggles a little too loud, too drunk to be apprehensive of the situation, and squirms in my grip, rubbing against my cock. She molds into my rough embrace, already fitting like a glove, and I know how I'm gonna pull this off.

“My place.”

This is what women always do. Fucking throw themselves at my feet. It's utterly boring. It's the opposite of what Kerry Jackson did.

And look what I did to her. To someone I actually liked.

I'm a fucking monster.

TWENTY

Kerry

Cece is restless and needy. She whines and clings. It's almost as if she doesn't feel safe. Like me. I don't know how to handle her. I have no soothing words, my own anxiousness too pressing to just wave hers off. The world *is* a horrible place and I just can't lie. So I sing to her about fairies and princesses, rainbows and daisies, hoping to distract. And finally she falls asleep in my arms. Two hours later than usual. I whisper in her ear to not let the bedbugs bite and cover her up with the blanket.

I virtually stumble to the bathroom and start filling the tub with hot water. The heater almost makes a full tub. Almost, but it's good enough. Bath foam covers the rest and gives the impression of luxury. Groaning, I lower myself carefully into the near scalding content. I have to take shallow rapid breaths and steel myself from the pain, but once I'm submerged, the heat penetrates my body and calms me.

It's cathartic.

The water makes me weightless, free, another me. I wish I lived by the sea. I've always lived by the sea, and I miss it. But I was another Kerry then. Someone ripped it from me,

I lather my shoulders and arms. Then I let my hands slide down slick skin, past my breasts, my belly, hips, thighs, bending my legs I allow my hands to slide over thin knees and shins.

On the way back up, I stop at the patch of hair between my legs and let my palm slide down to cover my mound, my fingers touching the soft, silky folds. It's been so long since I was with a man. Since I was with *him*.

Despite the hurt, the betrayal, the fear of knowing I was about to die by his hands, my body still reacts to the mere thought of Christian. That first night, when I went with him, drunk, but not *that* drunk, something about him made me trust him, and he proved me right. And devastatingly wrong.

I caress along my slit, touching my clit, circling it, back down, push a finger inside, think of his thick cock as he ravages me, robbing me of every ounce of sanity and ability to make decisions. We made Cecilia. He came in me. Over and over. I was so taken, so overwhelmed that I didn't think. I'm a grown-ass woman, but I was so lost in his caresses and demands.

Rubbing faster, I push more fingers inside, almost feeling him in me, his weight on me. I'm not even sure that night was fully consensual on my part. He took and took, held me down, demanded responses out of my body I never knew it could perform.

I know why I'm obsessing over him. There are so many factors, but two stand out in white-hot light: he made me feel more than I've felt for any man in my life, more than I expect to ever feel again, then he tried to take my life. Christian really truly meant to murder me. I know he hesitated, but it was there, I could never have convinced him not to, it was just a

slight hesitation, but if I hadn't fought back, I would have died.

Those two things combined have etched him into my very core. It's been two years and he still burns brightly in me.

I almost feel him, he's almost with me, hot, dark, demanding. My body tenses as my pussy spasms in an empty unsatisfactory release.

How can I miss him so much?

A small black bug, slowly making its way across the white panels on the wall, catches my attention.

Hey there. It's winter soon. Aren't you a little lost?

But then again, aren't we all?

Christian

The girl giggles and stumbles on too-high heels, gets her face in order, pouts her lips in an attempt to look seductive, then back to giggling again. She can't be more than twenty or twenty-one, and suddenly I feel much too old.

I hoist her up on my shoulder the last few feet to my room. Cherry giggles again. The noise grates on my ears. I think of a soft, intelligent voice, words of compassion for her work and her protégés.

Dumping her on the bed, I spin her over on her belly.

"Don't move."

She turns her face to me, her eyes are glossed over. With lust. Drunkenness. I don't know. I don't care. I need a release. I need someone, and I'll never have that connection again, the one I had with Ker. I might as well try to go back to the way I used to live my life; meaningless brief meetings.

Somewhat violent.

Opening my bag, I pull out duct tape and ropes I had prepared for Mrs. Davenport. Ripping off a piece of the tape, I put it right over the lush, red lips of Cherry, silencing her effectively. Her eyes widen and she moans her objections as I make quick work with the ropes. My pants tighten, but I don't see Cherry, I see a soft heart-shaped face, big deep green eyes and long, amazing red hair, her locks spread over her pillow as I fuck her hard, making her cry when I make her come.

“I'm gonna fuck you, Kerry. I'm gonna fuck you so hard. Now be a good girl and don't move.”

Taking off her high-heeled sandals, I then pull down her tight leather pants and lacy panties in one swift move. She's got a trim butt, clearly she's working out a lot. I don't like her narrow hips. I can't quite hold them. Kerry is slim, but she has good, wide hips, made for carrying a child.

I dart up off the bed and stare at the half-naked, squirming young woman.

Kerry, Cecilia.

Well, I'll never see them again, will I?

Putting my palm to her ass, I caress her, making her shudder, then I lift my arm and bear down on her pale skin, making it blossom instantly. She screams into her gag and tries to escape. I grip around her excuse for hips, catching her, and then I swat her again, and again, mottling her skin, making it stop-light red.

My cock grows, and something stirs in me. This is my forte. I can do this.

Cherry cries and twists.

Taking one look at her tear-drenched face, I realize with a stab to my chest that I'm not doing this as a warm-up for a fuck. I don't want to fuck her. I'm punishing her for not being Kerry.

I jump up, sick with myself. Looking around the room, I grab my bag and head for the door. I'm ruined for life. I've always been a cold fuck. Kerry opened a door to something I'd never felt before. Now that she's gone, I've closed it, and closed everything else.

Cherry's eyes are wide and frightened and in a moment of pity, I drop the bag and walk over to her, untying her hands. I collect the ropes, as I stare down at her. She's not moving, her whole body is stiff, terrified.

I'm sorry.

I think it, but the words can't seem to pass my lips.

I leave and stalk off in the night, so fucking tired of myself. Cherry will be fine. A little tender, but fine. She probably won't go with a stranger to a hotel ever again, and that's a good thing.

I find a motel on the outskirts of Winnipeg and get a few more hours of sleep, then I head back south, back home.

I don't fucking like complications There was a kid
It got messy, got rid of the bodies. Don't ever
fucking contact me again

Putting the blame on them should do it.

I drop the phone on the passenger seat, rev the engine and leave *fucking* Winnipeg behind.

They break the nondescript music for a traffic announcement. I lean forward and turn up the volume. There's

been an accident up ahead and the heavy traffic is already forming mile-long queues, so I take a sharp turn to the right on the exit I'm just about to pass and find myself, funny enough, on the route back toward whatever the name of the little place was.

Middlebro, was it? I guess I'll soon find out.

According to the latest updates there's a storm approaching, and as I glance in the rearview mirror at the sky in the north, I believe the forecasts. The clouds are heavy, a dark menacing gray, and chase each other ferociously across the canopy. I frown. I'm homesick and it looks as if the weather is going to bring me some unexpected trouble.

When twigs broken loose from the surrounding trees start whipping around outside my windows, I almost feel the rage of nature's forces inside me. It unites itself with my pounding heart and makes it quiver and swell. Winter will be here soon. There's an almost electrical tension in the air, and with all I'm leaving, and with nowhere to go, it makes me feel more alive than in a long time.

Sometimes I believe I thrive on chaos.

Chaos. I live it every day. I think of Kerry Jackson. I never could control her. She's one of very few people in my adult life who has dared to oppose me and gotten away with it. Alive.

Fuck!

It stings somewhere deep inside. Somewhere where there probably should be a heart. I curse my life. I curse my lack of control.

Suddenly I'm sick to the core, disgusted with myself for touching some random girl when the only thing I crave is a

little redhead I once fucked, and then hurt worse than I've hurt anyone else in my life. I've never played with my prey before Kerry. I didn't intend to play her, but that's how it turned out, at least that's the only way she can interpret it.

I aim my focus on driving instead. The clouds darken the sky, the wind rocks the car. I might have to make a stop soon. I'm beginning to hope the shithole I passed on the way up isn't too far away, and then I almost fucking miss it. Middlebro. I never saw the sign, and I almost drive right through it when I see the well-known yellow sign for the gas station. Shitty little place, blink and it's gone. I almost cringe at the thought, but it actually seems like a rather good idea to call it a day and find a place to sleep. Sliding into the curb on black, invisible thin ice, I have to put all my driving skill into not crashing into a trash bin. It *is* a good idea to let the weather clear before I continue.

Inside the gas station it's almost quiet, only a faint sound from a radio can be heard. The sharp stench of oil lies thick in the air. It seems completely abandoned and I stroll past a couple of shelves to see if I can find someone, anyone, doing their job. The interior design is kind of wacky. Nothing has been done with this place since the fifties or sixties, except for the wearing and tearing. Had they taken care of it, it would've been an architectural gem.

I try my voice on the emptiness. "Anybody here?"

"Yeah, yeah coming, I'm coming!" The response from the back of the store is immediate and out comes a tall and gangly teenager with a really bad skin problem. The same guy as last time. "Well, hello again, what can I do for ya?"

I don't like being recognized. Especially not here. His badge says 'Dan'. I smile. "Hey. Weather got the better of my driving. Is there any decent place to stay around here?"

He scoffs. “Wouldn’t say ‘decent’.” I grin inwardly. A soulmate. “But there’s a motel if ya go back to the cross-section and then take a right. You’ll see it. It says ‘Pond’s’. If ya’re looking for decent, though the best would be to go back to Sprague.”

I smile again and say some appropriate thanks. I’m sure Pond’s will make do.

‘Ponds Motel & Restaurant’

My stomach growls threatening. It’s late for lunch, but I hope the kitchen’s still open. This will do. I find a bored, middle aged woman behind the desk. She perks up when the door slams shut and smiles. I’m sure she was pretty twenty-some years ago. Life’s been rough on her, a front tooth is missing in her lower jaw, her skin looks like old worn leather.

“Hello and welcome to our snowy little town. I’m Elisabeth Anderson. What can I do for ya?”

She leans forward, showing off a bit of cleavage and I get the impression she might be offering more than just food and a bed. In a way, doing neither of them justice, she reminds me of that Davenport woman. The memory makes me grit my teeth with unease. I shudder and shake it off. I hope to fucking God she left the continent.

“I’m looking for a place to stay for the night. Any rooms available?”

“Will ya be staying more than one night?”

I sigh. This’ll be one long test of my patience.

She prepares some papers for me to sign. A key with a huge wooden tag attached to it appears next to the forms. I lift the pen just as an ice-cold gust of wind hits my neck and the door slams shut again.

“Ray, honey! What’s up?”

“It’s winta soon, Beth, daymn the temperature’s dropped!”

I freeze when I recognize the light voice. Fucking *hell*. It’s the fatty from the smelly grocery store. I can’t believe my bad luck. Pulling my cap down further, I stare at the forms and start writing. I virtually feel their gazes burn holes in the back of my coat.

“So... ehm, what’re ya up to, Ray?” she finally says, hesitantly.

“Yeah... I’m going up to Miss Kerry and the kid with some supplies. They might be needing that now if this is gonna get any worse, and I know she won’t eva’ agree to come down here where it’s safer.”

I freeze for the second time in less than a minute.

No.

It’s not possible.

Not here of all places. And there are thousands of Kerry’s in the world. And why would she live in Canada? And why the fuck *here*? They keep talking behind my back and when the door suddenly slams shut again my initial shock wears off in an instant.

I’m sure it’s nothing.

Nothing worth bothering about.

I fucking can’t—

“I’m sorry, I think I forgot my wallet back at the gas station. I’ll be back.” I drop the pen on the counter and push the door open just as Ray steps into his blue pick-up.

“I can call Dan!” she shouts behind my back. “Ya don’t hafta go out!”

But I’ve already covered half the distance to my car. It’s such a vague hunch, a long shot, but it’s impossible to still my beating heart. And it’s not like I have much else to do I tell myself, my growling stomach effectively silenced from the adrenaline.

When Ray rolls out from the parking lot my motor starts humming.

The hunt is on.

TWENTY-ONE

Kerry

Autumn is turning into winter and I love it. We had a couple of chilly days, with a thin layer of ice on the puddles of water. Ice both me and Cece jumped on and cracked, giggling as we ran around. Now everything is gray and muddy, though. Almost all the leaves have fallen off the thick foliage. The tree crowns stand tall, the branches pointing to the sky like desperate fingers, clutching for the faint sun.

Cecilia has outgrown her overall, arms and legs are too short. I let her play for half an hour, wetness creeping into her ankles and wrists. She's fresh faced and steaming, but her skin is cold when I decide it's enough.

I hang her muddy, wet overall and prepare a bath as I make myself a steaming cup of coffee with a little milk and read yesterday's paper. Ray brought it with the latest delivery. They warn again for the storm. It will hit tonight. Dusk is still a few hours away, and I ponder the pile of logs under my porch. I should collect more if we'll be trapped inside and it might get colder. I have to make yet another round before nightfall to gather as much as I can bring. The problem is I can't bring her. Her overall is wet. I make a quick calculation. After the bath, when she's eaten, she'll sleep, and if I don't wake her, she can

easily sleep for at least two hours and I wouldn't be gone more than one at most. A twinge of guilt stabs me, but it's necessary, and completely safe. She can't get anywhere. I will hear through the silent forest if anyone approaches for at least a mile ahead, and no one comes here. Not even Ray after being at the receiving end of my anger the other day.

It's safe.

I'll be quick and she'll never know I was gone.

Christian

He takes a funny route. I can't believe anyone lives out here. The road is bumpy, in dire need of maintenance, and becomes narrower with each turn. The shadows are getting longer. Dusk falls and I need to make a quick decision. Either I'll have to turn on the headlights soon and risk being discovered, or I make a stop on the next side road and follow his tracks on the muddy road by foot. I decide for the latter even though I'm not properly dressed and have no idea how long I'll have to walk.

As I shut down the engine a couple of hundred yards in on a very narrow path, I hear the humming of an engine coming closer and through the trees I see the blue pick-up passing me. I crouch behind a branch. That was too fucking close! He already dropped off his delivery? That seems strange. Maybe he changed his mind? I hesitate. The cold, and the fact my shoes aren't exactly built for this kind of adventure, almost makes me regret the whole thing. I could be sitting with a whiskey in the motel room flipping through cable TV channels to my heart's desire. And the fatty probably changed his mind, so I won't find out anything anyway.

But then again.

What if?

I lock up the car and start walking, the strength of the wind surprising me as it almost robs me of my breath. Plowing through the wet mix of mud and rotting leaves, my expensive Italian black shoes soon start to leak. They'll be totally wasted when this is over with, but that doesn't really matter, they've served me well and there're new ones to be had.

Sooner than I expect, I come across a large gray plastic box that stands abandoned by the side of the road. The tire tracks stop here and there is proof of a car backing and maneuvering its way in a circle. I reach out and stroke the lid, then I frown and look around. There are no houses, no signs of life. The box is locked. I reach inside my coat and unsheathe the knife, then I break open the padlock and lift the lid. There are three paper bags. I rummage through them. Groceries. A doll. A couple of newspapers. A book. Weird. Why not bring them all the way to whoever purchased them?

The road continues in one direction only. I drop the lid and keep walking, too curious to stop now. Who would go through such measures to stay hidden? Who would be so careful? The little hairs at the back of my neck stand straight up, and it's not from the cold.

'Kerry and the kid.'

I think I already know the answer. I really, really think I know the answer, and my heart suddenly pounds heavy in my chest. I have to stop for a second and catch my breath. Then I move again. More determined than I can remember I've ever been.

I shudder when I finally get to my destination. I've walked for thirty minutes, and I've reevaluated my decision many times over.

It's the end of the road. Whatever the house hides, this is what I've come to find.

It seems abandoned. It's a small cabin built out of roughly carved logs. There's no light, no smoke out of the chimney, and no indication anyone lives here. I curse. Maybe I'm not on the right path anyway? Until I see the footsteps in the mud on the yard. Two sets. Small and large. They're everywhere. A shudder runs through me.

They're here!

But where? I haven't seen any tire tracks, and there's no sign of a car. I look through a window and see a kitchen counter with some plates and glasses on it, when I try the front door it's locked and there's no stirring from within. I frown and glance out at the surrounding terrain, but the naked forest is silent and non-telling, void of human life. The treetops bend and wisp in the ever-increasing wind. I walk to the back of the house to see if I can get any clues. There is a back door, surprisingly enough, but it's locked too. A little lost, I turn the corner again and stop on the same spot I started. I had a multitude of scenarios in my head, but this was for some reason never one of them.

Kerry

The shadows are getting longer, and a new chill is entering the air. The wind increases, dusk is falling and I sense something's not right. I continue forward, carrying my load, and wave the feeling off as guilt over abandoning Cece. The walk is heavier than before, and I have to stop more and more often to catch my breath. There's just one more hill to climb and then it's downward from there, but I have to stop and lay down my burden for a moment. I gasp for air and my right side hurts. Pressing my knuckles into the side of my waist I

feel my ribs and realize how thin I've become. I have to eat more. No wonder I have less and less energy with every month. I lose weight, muscle weight. I wave the thought off to the recesses of my mind. I have more important things to think of. Cece's alone.

Clenching my teeth, I struggle forward. I have an urge to hurry. Maybe she's awake? Maybe it's a mom's instinct? She can't get anywhere, and she can't reach anything dangerous. But she'll be scared. I swallow the lump in my throat. I'll never, ever leave her again. It was a stupid, rushed decision. I know she sleeps for more than an hour, most likely two, at this time of day, and I've only been gone about an hour. But no matter how I try, sense and reason can't silence the feeling of imminent doom.

When I'm finally at the top, I stop for a moment again. From here I can overlook our house and a good part of the terrain. Everything seems fine, at least on the outside. And she *is* asleep. It's just me being stupid. Exhaling with relief, I start descending and I'm halfway down the hill when I see a movement in the shadows behind the trees by the left corner of the house. I stop and squint.

My heart stutters. There's someone standing on the driveway. Hidden from the house, but not from where I'm standing. Ray again?

No.

Not Ray.

A tall man. Tresses of dark hair wisps around a face I can't make out. I strain to see clearer, my heart pounding hard now, my breaths short and labored. I think I know before I know.

Christian.

It's Christian Russo!

I almost faint. My knees go weak. The déjà vu is all too real and the nightmares I've had for so many months, years, are suddenly real. I can't move. I can't think. Cece's in the cabin. He's outside, between my daughter and me, and I'm up here unable to even breathe, let alone run down there and take him out to protect my child. I'll die if I face him and then he'll hurt my baby. Cece's in danger if I run away and just leave her to him. And either way I'll never see her again.

Oh, God!

I knew it. I knew he would catch up with us one day no matter what I did. I always knew we wouldn't be safe until... until he no longer exists. With my own prophecies finally fulfilled, I drop to my knees and hide behind a large bush. Why did I leave her alone? I might as well have killed her. Killed us both.

Cecilia!

Maybe that's what I should have done anyway? That's what I've been thinking during my darkest hours when she was smaller, before I found a life within this new non-life—that we would have been better off dead. Maybe it would be easier to just go to him and let him do it? Let him end the endless nightmares and the fear. I see his gun before me as I saw it when he flicked the cold gleaming metal in front of me that night. The night when he shredded the last pieces of my innocence.

No!

This is not about me, or what I want! I need to fight! Not for me, but for Cece. She deserves a life, a good life. She doesn't deserve to know of him or to see him. Not even once.

She deserves my fight.

She deserves my sacrifice.

I'm not sure it's a well thought-over decision, but I decide to kill him. I take a large enough log and clutch it in my hands. It's doable. He's just a man. He's not invincible. I know because I beat him once.

He's still not trying to enter the house, and for that I'm eternally grateful. I pray I'll make it. I have to walk in a wide circle to get close enough behind him. The last ten feet or so I'll have to leap across the open, and then it will be over. I tell myself, over and over, I will make it as I keep him in sight while moving through the decaying forest. The leaves beneath my feet are wet and soft and my steps don't make a sound.

As he moves, I stop and curse, crouching behind some bushes. What's he doing? He paces back and forth outside our house before he suddenly disappears. I hold my breath. I don't think. I don't hate. I don't feel. One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand... He's gone behind the house for fifty seconds before he reappears as suddenly as he disappeared. I'm not sure if I've taken even one breath the whole time he was gone. I strain to see if he's got something in his arms or not.

He doesn't.

Good.

I'm so focused on the task I don't even have time to be afraid. I lie flat on my belly, pressed to the wet ground, and wait as he glances around him. When he turns, I move. My legs tense and with the log in the air I dash across the open and slam it with full force against his head. In the last second, he moves and screams. His arms flail as he tries to catch my arm.

I jerk to the side and try to hit him again, but he knocks it out of my hands. He grabs my coat sleeve and a seam rips as I throw myself back, slipping in the wetness, falling to the ground.

He approaches me with a wicked smirk on his handsome face, his steps measured. When he's within reach, I kick out and hit his knee. I scramble backward and dart to my feet, already running as I hear a roar from much too close behind. I run for my life, away from the mayhem, away from the devil himself.

“Ker!”

I hear him roar my name and then the eerie echo rolling off the mountains surrounding us.

‘Eerr—eerr—eerr—er—er—er—er.’

Nononononono!

Christian

I sense a movement, and spin around just in time to partially dodge what comes flying through the air. My ear takes a hit, and it feels as if it's being ripped off. The attacker slams the object at my head again, but I'm better prepared this time and almost tear off the arm of the much smaller person who slips and falls with a thud followed by a whimper.

It's a woman. With all the clothes she's wearing I only see a nose and ferociously dark eyes that glisten with hate.

Oh my fucking God, it's—

Kerry.

I can't help but grin as I approach her.

She kicks out and hits my knee so hard I almost fall. It feels as if something breaks inside it. A wave of agony shoots through me, and I roar in pain as she turns and flees.

“Ker!” I roar at her rapidly disappearing form.

I’m *not* letting her get away this time!

When I get my bearings right, she’s already halfway to the tree line. Initially, I gain on her, but my knee hurts immensely. Nauseous from the pain, I decide to go back and wait for her in the cabin instead. She’ll be back, because I have a hunch she’s not alone. That there’s something of such value in there she will risk everything for it.

Limping, I take a route with less climbing. A flash of silver catches my attention. It’s a SUV. I spend a few minutes making sure she won’t be going anywhere with it anytime soon.

Now all I can do is tend to my wounds and wait for her to come to me.

TWENTY-TWO

Christian

The lock is shit. An easy, old, rusty mechanism. It's a piece of cake to break once I've decided to. It snaps open with just the right push.

Once inside I almost fall to the floor, exhausted, drenched in sweat. Trembling from the pain, and the numbing chill, I shred my wet and dirty clothes all over the place as I slam the door shut behind me. The cabin is warm but I'm still so cold it'll take a long time before I'll start feeling my toes again. I'm still stunned. I hurt all over and wince as I move, but at the same time I'm giddy. I haven't thought about how I'd react if, or when, I finally caught up with her again.

Them.

It's them.

It's absolutely quiet inside, and I'm guessing my hunch was wrong. There's no life in here. I'm figuring the kid is with her somewhere out there in the quickly darkening and hostile surroundings. I can only hope Kerry isn't too fucking out of her mind and tries to leave by foot. It's a really long way back to any sort of civilization.

Surprisingly enough, I'm not particularly angry with her for attacking me. I'd have done the same in her position, and I can't hold it against her. Actually, I'm so fucking pleased with myself right now for following my instincts and finding they were right, that I'll let her violent outburst slip. I limp to the kitchen and pour some cold water in a glass, downing it eagerly. Finding ice in the freezer, I wrap a fistful in a kitchen towel before I roll up the left leg of my pants. I swallow hard as I look at my swollen knee that's beginning to discolor in bluish and red nuances.

Fuck!

That'd be some ligaments gone to hell. I wrap the ice around it and secure it, tying another towel around the first, groaning from the pain as I pull the knot tight. I have goosebumps all over already. It's not like I need the extra chill.

I stiffen and listen, my fingers still on the knot. I thought I heard something. If they're coming here soon, I'd better not just stand here more or less defenseless. I pull down my pant leg in a rush, yanking the fabric to get it past the knee. Then I hear it again. A soft cat-like mewling somewhere in the proximity. An animal?

No way.

I'm out of the kitchen in no time to locate the source. My heart pounds so hard I can barely breathe. If that's what I think it is... Stopping in my tracks, I can barely believe what I'm seeing and I forget about my pain, about Kerry, and fighting, about where we are and why we are here.

In the room behind the main room, in the miniature bedroom, stands an old-fashioned crib of wood and in it lays a little girl with thick dark hair and warm brown eyes.

My eyes.

She looks so much like me it almost breaks my heart. And she shows no fear at all in front of the stranger who stares at her as if he's seen a ghost, instead she raises her chubby little arms in the air and demands I lift her. I give her a trembling hand and she grabs it with tiny, tiny little fingers and heaves herself out of the crib and onto the floor. I don't even know if she can walk and I'm afraid to touch her because I don't want to scare her.

The girl, Cecilia, my child, *my* child, toddles out of the bedroom and into the next and sits down by a red little car and a black plastic baby doll. It takes me a nanosecond to get back to breathing right again, then I follow her footsteps and crouch next to her.

“Caaa,” she says and hands me the toy.

I have no doubt she's mine. And she talks!

She's incredible.

Kerry

My throat aches from the tears I don't allow, and my chest burns, but I keep running. I'm leaving Cece behind, but I'm of no use to her if I'm dead, and maybe, just maybe he doesn't know she's in there. He's getting closer but I know the terrain better and as I get to the steep slope I start sliding-running-sliding on the wet, slippery ground, faster and faster until I can't hear him anymore. I turn my head to look when my foot gets stuck and I fall on my face with an intense pain from my ankle radiating up along my left leg. It hurts so much I want to scream. Sweat drips off my forehead, and I clench my teeth not to make any sounds as I fight to get loose. I expect a killing blow any moment. Finally, I still and listen. Everything

is quiet. Too quiet. All the little hairs on my back stand straight up. He's not here. He's gone back.

Cecilia!

God! I have to get back *now!*

It takes forever to limp all the way back to the house. My ankle hurts badly, and every step is agonizing, but I push forward with only one thought in my adrenaline-drenched brain.

Save Cecilia.

There's no doubt in my mind he's already found her, and in my worst moments I see before me how he's taken her and left. Without a trace. And that I'll never find out what happened to my daughter. I sob loudly, every breath hitching on the intake. I have no doubt he is capable of anything and everything and I expect the worst.

Crouching by the same bush I hid behind before I attacked him, I study my home. It's almost completely dark outside now. The lights are on inside and I see tell-tale signs of a break-in in the faint light over my front door. I wait breathlessly for something, anything, to happen. At first there's no way of telling if he's still there or not, but then I see a shadow across the opposite wall in the living room and I start trembling, finally allowing some of my fear and a flood of relief to break through.

He's still here. Meaning she's still here too.

I have to assume she's still alive. I have no other choice. I crawl closer, knowing I'm invisible in the dark unless he suddenly decides to open the door. I don't hear anything. Why isn't she crying?

What have you done? You're her *father!* She's just a little girl!

My heart beats so hard it almost makes me faint. I have to get inside. Now. Tiptoeing to the back of the house I find that the back door is very much closed, as it should be, but I grit my teeth, nonetheless. It's impossible to enter through the main door, because he will have to be virtually hiding in the bedroom or the bathroom not to see me, and I can't count on that. I stand in the cold darkness, puffs of white appearing and disappearing before my eyes, and I want to scream. I want to step up on the porch outside the front door, *my* door, and scream at him to show himself, to let me have my daughter, and then to just, just... disappear.

Forever.

But of course I don't.

I'm at a loss. I don't know what to do. I've never been so scared before in my life. *My* life is nothing compared to Cece's and I'll do anything... *anything*...

Then I know. The kitchen window can be opened from the outside. I have been meaning to fix it, but it hasn't been done yet. I just need... I finger my pocket and haul up my keys. Barely breathing, I listen to whatever might come from the inside as I sneak up under the window and start to carve into the lower frame to try to get a grip and get it to swing open. There's a slight squeak as it does and I still completely, the seconds dragging on, but nothing happens. Then I pull it open further, the warmer air from the inside feels like a caress against my skin as it rushes out through the opening.

I listen.

I hear nothing.

What's going on?

The feeling of urgency almost chokes me. I try to heave myself up, but my thick jacket gets caught and I shed it quickly, letting it fall to the ground. Then I realize my boots will give me away once I'm inside and kick them off too before I lift my body the rest of the way, dropping first my good foot and then the other to the kitchen floor, pulling the window closed behind me. I can't have him feel the draft and become suspicious.

Needing something to overpower him with, some leverage, I grab the largest knife out of the collection by the stove. No other is missing, but I have no doubt he brought his own.

God!

I'm stupid!

What if he has a gun? What if he has my shotgun? Why didn't I bring it with me when I went out?

Squeezing my fingers tightly around the shaft, my hand slick with sweat, I slide across the floor on sock clad feet. I avoid the loose floorboard and stop by the door, pressing myself against the wall as I try not to breathe so hard.

I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

Every pore exudes it and it pounds within me with every heartbeat. All I see is how I kill him—have to kill him—snatch Cecilia from his sinister grip, and rush to the car never to look back again.

The handle of the knife almost slips out of my sweaty palm and my hand shakes so much that I have to press it to my chest for a moment. I wipe off my palm on my shirt and grip the knife tightly again.

I have to. I must. If I don't, he'll kill us. I'm scared. One part of me, deep inside, wonders if I can really kill a human being.

I feel more than hear a faint rustle of fabric in the main room and, having a sense of direction now, I make up my mind. I dash through the room and bury the knife deep in the shoulder of Christian who sits on the floor right next to my child.

She lives!

She cries. Terrified.

I would too with *him* next to me.

But she's alive!

I throw myself toward the front door and grab the gun that, miraculously enough, still hangs there. But as I move, he moves too, and I realize I've made one fatal error as he grabs Cecilia and pulls her into his lap with his good arm, clutching her tightly to his chest. I point the gun at him, *them*, and try to aim at his head. I tremble so badly I can't keep the barrel still.

"No, let her go," I sob.

"I don't think so," he counters with a grimace, his upper lip curled with anger.

"*Please!*" I cry.

It's not until now that I get to see him clearly for the first time. He's been but a blur of limbs and hair, but now...

I barely recognize him.

Oh, I do. It's him. The same high cheekbones, the intensely dark eyes, and the roguish features of his face that still come together as an almost flawless beauty, but his hair is

longer; it falls to his shoulders in unruly tresses. There's blood on his left cheek and in his hair on the same side, and at his left shoulder where my bread knife still protrudes. He's pale, his face a mask of focus and rage, and his eyes flare dangerously as they meet mine.

Promising me death.

He hugs my baby tighter to him as she twists in his grip. "Shh, Cecilia, it's all right. Lower the gun, Ker. Look at where you're *aiming* for fuck's sake." His voice is commanding, demanding, almost making me want to give in. Because I think I'll faint soon anyway.

I look at my innocent daughter, caught in his grip—a new Jackson he intends to corrupt.

No!

"If you let her go, I'll lower it," I snarl.

He smirks. "We both know that's a lie."

Christian

"*Do it!*" she roars with a strength I'd never have thought that frail body possessed.

"Let go of the weapon, Kerry. Let's talk about this."

"Don't hurt her," she wails. "Please don't hurt her. She's all I've got."

I have an eerie déjà vu from Winnipeg. Funny how long ago it seems now. Was it yesterday? I hug the little kid tighter. She's crying in distress, but I don't want her to become afraid of me so I make some cooing sounds to try to calm her.

"Ker!" I say bluntly. "The only one who's potentially hurting her at this moment is you and your fucking gun. Lower

it *now!*” I raise my arm and hold it over Cecilia’s throat instead for emphasis. I wouldn’t dream of hurting her, but the maniac before me doesn’t know that and she’s working on primal instincts right now, so I have to meet her on that level. Fighting to gauge her state of mind, and to plan my next move in this sudden mess, I can’t stop my thoughts from wandering, and I can’t help but notice that she’s afraid this time. Really, really afraid. I almost don’t recognize her. She was always so feisty.

No wonder, though, she’s a woman, a female, defending her baby.

Her eyes are bloodshot. “Please,” she hiccups. I answer with a raised eyebrow.

I see her before me like she used to be, soft, feminine, trusting. I see her under me. I see her screaming my name, but not in fear, and not in pain.

There she goes again!

Distracting me without even lifting a fucking finger!

Fuck! I want to hurt her. For distracting me. For slamming hard objects on my head, shoving a fucking knife in my shoulder and damaging my knee. For always, *always*, fucking fighting me!

She is crying, the shotgun shaking violently, dangerously swaying before us. “Please, Christian, please let my baby go!”

I glare at her frail, trembling form. I want to—No, I don’t. That’s not true. I have a child. Ker is a mother and I actually have a child, and she’s a beautiful little creature with dark hair and warm eyes. I see myself in her, and yet I don’t. I can’t believe I was ever so small, so vulnerable, so innocent. She could be hurt so easily. The thought makes me clutch her little

form harder, keeping the barrel in focus. I'll kill anyone who ever even gives her a scratch. And it won't be quick, I'll take my time, making sure they have plenty of time to re-think their decision to ever get close to my flesh and blood.

I almost let go of her in shock as I realize I could be the cause of her being in danger. That my lifestyle probably has given me a fuckin' continent of enemies.

Given *her* enemies.

TWENTY-THREE

Christian

Despite my swollen knee screaming at me in protest, I slowly get up from my sitting position into a crouch. Cecilia is still securely with me in my lap. She's my little armor right now, protecting me from her mother who's gone totally berserk. I keep my eyes trained on Kerry's dark tormented gaze and she never lets go of mine.

"All right, take it easy. I'm not here to hurt anyone, I just want to talk. Okay?" My voice is as soothing as I can manage under the circumstances. I hurt almost everywhere. It's fucking tiring.

She clutches the gun tighter. "Drop her!" she croaks, barely able to speak any more.

"I will. Okay? Just to show that I mean no harm. Just take it easy with that thing, Ker, we don't want anyone to get killed." My legs tense and I inhale, then I shove Cecilia toward Kerry as I burst up and knock the wind out of her by slamming the stock of the gun into her stomach. She stumbles back and falls to the floor, clutching her stomach, gasping for air.

Too easy.

The little one wails and stumbles toward the fallen woman. “Mu—hmhy,” she hiccups.

“Mommy’ll be just fine, she just hasn’t learned how to play with the big boys yet,” I say coldly as I secure the gun and cock it open, pocketing the two cartridges before I open the door and hurl the fucking piece as far as I can throw.

Kerry keeps her huge, frightened eyes trained on me as she scoops Cecilia into her embrace, still gasping.

I shoot her a glare as I go to the mirror and examine the fucking knife that still sits embedded in my shoulder. My mind spins from the shock that still hasn’t waned. I could’ve died. Just a few inches to the right... If I hadn’t reacted in the very last moment, Kerry would have killed me. It’s a bread knife. She tried to do me in with a kitchen tool! I’m able to flex and straighten my elbow, and I can feel my fingers. All good signs. My gaze shifts between the wound and Kerry as I see her stir slightly.

Wounded but not down. Maybe not as broken as I first thought? She’s a dangerous woman in her fear, and I want to fucking live.

“Move one inch and I’m gonna fuckin’ rip your skull from your spine. Got it?” I growl, putting as much threat into the words as I can, because I’m afraid I won’t live to see the morning if I don’t put some fright into her.

She doesn’t answer, but she doesn’t move either and I can focus on getting the blade out of my flesh. I groan as I touch it even a little. There’s only one way to do this. I give Kerry a dark glance again and then I grip the handle and pull it all the way out in one single move.

“*Fuck!*” I roar, feeling as if it’s tearing me to pieces. I drop the knife, my knees weakening for a few moments. *Get a grip!* If I faint, I’m dead. I glance at my pale reflection in the mirror. Blood oozes from my shoulder, soaking my white shirt, dying it glistening red. My face and neck are partly covered in dried blood from the wound on the side of my head. I look like I’ve been run over by a train. And I feel like it too. Glaring at the huddling woman, who doesn’t look half as bad as I do, I have to suppress the immediate instinct to slam my fist in her face. I’m gonna have to calm down before I do something irreversible. Again.

Kerry

Seeing Christian pull out the knife is so gross I can barely watch, and I turn Cece’s head away for a moment. She wiggles in my grip, crying again.

I did that... I should’ve aimed better.

I kiss my daughter on the head and whisper it’s all right, that there’s nothing to be afraid of. *Please, God, let it be the truth.* At least regarding her. There’ll be hurt for me, more hurt, I know it. That’s all he’s ever done. Hurt me. I hug her tighter and shuffle all the way back until I hit the wall when he stalks closer to us. He’s limping badly. The expression on his face is closed and I can’t read anything from it.

“Please,” I rasp.

“Please what?” he snarls.

“Please, don’t hurt her.”

He scoffs and my heart sinks like a stone. Then he smiles. Toward her. And his eyes change for a moment before they turn back to me with their frightening coldness. “Wouldn’t fucking dream of it.”

“Ple...” *What?* “You... oh.” *You wouldn’t?* “I find that hard to believe,” I sneer.

“And why is that?” he asks, raising an eyebrow, a muscle on the side of his jaw clenching and unclenching.

“Be... because you... do.” I swallow hard. I don’t want to talk to him. I don’t want to mention the things he’s done, it hurts too much to even think it. But he’s here, and I have no choice. “You hurt... people.”

His lips curl as he glares at me. “Right,” he says after a moment. “That I do. But I’m not gonna hurt her. She’s my kid for fuck’s sake. How much of a freak do you think I am?”

You wouldn’t know! “I—” My focus shatters as Cecilia’s hand comes up to stroke my chin.

“Momma, am angwy.”

I try to smile against the threatening tears. “Yes, sweetie, the man is angry, but it’s all right. Nothing bad is gonna happen.”

She shakes her head. “Angwy.” I frown. She strokes her belly. “Eatballs.”

“You... oh!”

When I look up, Christian has crouched before us, his left leg stretched out. “What?” he says, not entirely unfriendly.

“I... she... she needs to eat,” I say shrinking back from his proximity.

His gaze shifts from me to her and then back to me again. “So feed her.” He shrugs and stands, looking down at me.

It takes me a couple of moments before I understand. I lick my lips, glancing warily at him as I rise and let her down on

the floor. My ankle sends off a stab of pain.

He follows us into the kitchen, and then he just stands there, like a looming shadow, leaning against the doorframe.

“Can’t you leave us alone for one second,” I snarl. My hands shake as I bring out frozen meatballs and pasta putting them on the counter.

He scoffs. “Couldn’t really leave you alone with even kitchen utensils, now could I?”

My cheeks turn hot and I refuse to answer. I drop the heavy pan dangerously close to my right foot and then I fiddle so much with the pot I almost drop it too. His gaze burns holes in my back and my heart slams against the inside of my ribcage. I give Cece a piece of bread to chew on while she waits. She’s playing with her fork and spoon and I’m happy she seems so unaffected.

I’m not.

“I could use some of that too,” he suddenly says.

“There’s a diner down in Middlebro,”

“Tried it, it sucks.”

“So stay hungry,” I snarl.

“I need to eat, Ker, and I’m going to whether you like it or not. Here.” His voice is calm.

My cheeks burn as I turn toward him. “I’m not letting you eat *my* food! If you’re hungry, you know your way outta here and back down to town.”

“I’m not gonna fight over this—”

“That’d be a first.”

“As it is, I’m here now and you’re gonna give me something to eat.”

“Fuck you,” I mouth and turn away from him.

“What was that?” He takes a step closer.

I stiffen, stirring the boiling water intensely with a fork, unable to remember if I put salt in it or not. “You’re just going to take whatever you want anyway, aren’t you? That’s what you always do.”

“What I always do, huh?” He comes even closer.

My whole spine tingles almost painfully from his presence, it’s as if my skin shrinks. My hand around the pot handle clenches harder and harder until my knuckles whiten. I look down at the hot steam and the bubbles underneath. *I could*— I don’t even get to think the thought to its end when I feel something at my side. I make a move to look, but freeze when I hear his low voice in my ear.

“Let go of that handle. I know what you’re thinking, but think again. I’m both faster and stronger than you.” His breath is heated against my cheek. “And I’ve got a lot less to lose, Ker.”

My joints crack when I release the could-be weapon. Then I glance down at my side, realizing he’s holding a knife. My gaze darts to Cecilia, but she hasn’t seen anything and seems blissfully unaware of the tense atmosphere.

“Please, put that away,” I whisper.

The egg timer beeps, making us both jump. He takes a step back and I prepare the little meal for my daughter with violently trembling hands as I keep glancing at him. His white shirt is blackish red and glistening all over his left sleeve.

“You’re bleeding.”

He turns his head and looks at the mess. “You stabbed me.”

When he still doesn’t make any attempt to stop it, I can’t help myself. “For *God’s* sake, clean it up!”

He smirks. “Does it bother you?”

“You’re soiling my floor, and that bothers me,” I snarl. And he is. His mere presence has soiled my house, but his left hand is drenched in fresh blood and it does drip, splattering dark red on the wooden floor below him. I already know I won’t bother to clean it. I know I’ll leave the house as soon as I get the chance and never return. Ever. *If* I get the chance.

Christian looks at his side and his face twists. Then he starts unbuttoning his shirt with his right hand and I look away, my mouth suddenly dry. That never-forgotten, deep-rooted longing for him suddenly flares up as I see a glimpse of his broad chest, making my stomach clench. How, *how* can that be? Even now?

Cecilia comes and pulls my hand in the midst of the turmoil and startles me. My mind wasn’t even in Canada, but she drags me right back in an instant.

“Go feed her,” he mutters as he pulls off his shirt. He grabs a towel from the counter and presses it against the wound. “I’ll make something on my own.”

I refuse to meet his gaze and scoop her up on one hip, her plate in my other hand, leaving the little room with a sigh of relief, my heart nearly pounding its way out of my ribcage.

When I set down the plates, my gaze falls on the phone in the corner of the room, mounted to the wall. Cells don’t work

out here, so I have a landline. I only need a few seconds when he isn't watching me.

My heart drops when Christian's head snaps in the direction I'm looking. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

With a scoff, he strides over there, disconnects it and rips the plug from the cord, dropping it to the floor. His eyes are pitch black as he turns to me and holds out his hand.

“Cell.”

I lick my lips, out of breath. “I don't have one.” The lie comes so fast I didn't even think it over.

“Don't fucking lie to me.”

I shake my head. “Honest.”

He tightens his lips into a thin line as he presses the other hand to his wound, grimacing. “I'm not in the fucking mood. Give it to me, or I'll tear this place to pieces, Ker.”

Tears well up in my eyes as I limp to the front door, my ankle pounding with pain, looking for my jacket. Then I remember it's outside. I dropped it before I climbed in. I glance out the window, rain smatters against it.

“It's... It's in my jacket. Out there.”

He follows my gaze, strides through the room and pushes open the door. The wind tears through his long dark tresses, whipping them across his face. He forces the door shut again. “Well fuck it. That solves that, then. Got a computer? Any other means of communicating with the outside world?”

I glance at him warily as I, with a hand on the wall for support, get back to the table. “I have a laptop, but it doesn't have Wi-Fi. We're in the middle of nowhere. Nothing works out here.”

“I’m really fucking aware of that. I can’t believe you settled here, city girl.”

I sit down next to Cece who is eating pasta with her hands, looking between us, interestedly.

“I had my reasons,” I mutter.

Christian comes up to us, raising a hand to my face, a thumb stroking away the wetness on my cheeks. I tense up so hard I think something inside me will break.

“Yeah. I— Never mind.”

He turns and leaves for the armchair, the crackling energy between us not diminishing in the least despite the greater distance. I try not to look at him, but it’s like there’s a magnet in him, pulling my eyes back, over and over, and every time I collide with his unreadable gaze.

Finally I manage to bring my focus back to the reason we’re here. My innocent girl. I glance back at Christian one last time before I move the chair and turn my back to him. I’ll protect her at all costs. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do.

Nothing.

TWENTY-FOUR

Christian

I sit in the armchair in silence, teeth clenched to suppress the pain, as I watch Kerry feed our daughter and then disappear into the bedroom for twenty minutes, putting the little one to bed.

To my great surprise Kerry comes back out afterward. I would have thought she'd barricade herself in there. But I bet she feels a need to keep an eye on me. Her gaze is painfully dark and void of emotions as she warily sits down on the couch, her eyes trained on me.

My body has been screaming at me for a while now, and I have been biding my time. I have to spend some quality time with hot water and soap. I need to clean my shirt and look at the wound, get the dried blood out of my hair and tend to my knee. There's no way in hell I'm doing that while she's on the loose in the house.

"I have things I need to do. I'm gonna have to tie you up, Kerry. Where do you prefer I do it?"

Bouncing up off the couch her earlier look of exhaustion vanishes and is replaced by a fear so strong I can almost smell it. "*What? Wait! No! No way!*" she bellows. She has risen so

forcefully that the CD, still playing some random blues, hitches.

She tries to sidestep away from me, so I have to intervene and grip around her waist with my good arm. “I won’t hesitate to hurt you if you fight me,” I hiss in her ear. “Trust me I will, but it’s not my intention so just play along nicely and be a good girl.” I pant and wince from the pain of having to hold her still. My shoulder gets wetter, warm blood trickling along my arm.

Squirming and snarling, she tries to slam her head against my face. Her limbs are everywhere, and I realize I’m too weak. I won’t be able to hold her and that just won’t do. I shove her hard and she falls onto the couch, then I slam down on her.

“I was fucking trying to be nice,” I growl. Forcing her to stay down by sitting on her, I then cover her mouth and nose with my right hand. I could wrap my hand around her slender throat and squeeze. My fingers would probably fit all the way around. It’d be easier. It would also be sinister, cruel, a much more painful and damaging way to achieve the same result, and for some reason I have no will to hurt.

Her eyes widen and fill with tears as she tries to bend her head away, shaking it and pleading with me wordlessly to let her breathe as her legs kick behind my back, to no avail. I regard her attempts to get me off her. Even wounded and weak this is easy for me; I know what I’m doing and this will go either one of two ways: she can submit—and breathe—or she can faint from lack of oxygen.

I decide to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Leaning close, nose to nose, I catch her panicked gaze. “I can let you breathe, sweetheart, but then we’re gonna do this

my way. Got it?”

Her chest heaves and hitches as she nods repeatedly.

“Good girl.”

I let go and she inhales with a long wheeze before a stream of words start pouring out between her lips while tears trickle from the corners of her eyes.

“Ch—Christian... Please don't kill me. Please don't. Cecilia needs me, I'm her mother and she's so little. I don't care what you do with me but please don't kill me, and *please* don't take her from me, please Chr—” Her voice finally breaks, and she erupts in sobs.

I wait patiently for her to get it off her chest while I look around for something to tie her up with. When she is silent, I snap my belt open and pull it away from my waist.

Her head jerks up and then there are more tears as her eyes dart between the belt and me.

I look at her, frowning, and then at the belt and it takes me a moment to get it. Fucking hell, she thinks I'm gonna rape her? Nothing could be further from my mind. Now. Always. I might be a rough lover, but I don't rape.

“Ker, Ker... I'm gonna... I'm not...” *Fuck!* “I'm just gonna tie you up. Just that. Okay? I need to see to my wound and clean up and I just don't trust you not to leap around and plot against me. Are we clear? Nothing else's gonna happen.”

She looks miserable, but she nods.

“Put your hands behind your back.” I get up and let her turn, then I wrap the belt around her wrists and pull until she can't get out of it.

“Christian,” she whispers.

I stop and look at her.

“Please don’t take her.”

I regard her for a moment. I could reassure her I won’t, but I don’t. I don’t make promises. And I probably need the leverage.

“I need a sheet.”

“Chris—”

“A sheet, Kerry. Now!” I grit my teeth. She’s always fucking fighting me.

Her lower lip trembles as she nods toward a cupboard standing by the far wall. I straighten with a groan and limp over to it, finding piles of clothes, towels and bed linen, all neatly organized. Snatching a crisp, pristinely white sheet off a shelf, I unfold it as I head back to the couch. It’s almost criminal, what I’m about to do.

Kerry looks between my face and my hands. “What are you—”

Her eyes widen as I begin to tear long strips out of the fabric and she connects the dots. My bloodied hands leave red streaks on the sheet, and I feel almost ashamed when I begin to tie her hands and feet together. Kerry whimpers when I circle her ankles, but she doesn’t speak again.

Kerry

He didn’t answer!

I watch his back as he leaves for the bathroom. He almost shuts the door, leaving only a crack. Wriggling, I desperately try my bonds, but he has obviously done this before and I’m not getting them to slacken even the slightest. Instead I try to find the least uncomfortable position on the cushions and close

my eyes. I'm so tired. Sleep could easily claim me if I didn't refuse it. When did I get so tired? I try to listen for Cece's light snoring from the bedroom, but the noise from the water running in the bathroom drowns out all other sounds, just as his mere presence here drowns out my thoughts. I can't think coherently, my mind's just as bound as my body and I don't know what to do, how to save us. I've tried my damndest. By hiding, but he found us. By trying to hit him in the head and then stab him, but he lives.

At first, I think it's Christian who has finished in the bathroom, but then I hear that the scraping sound comes from outside my front door and then there's a hesitant knock.

Someone's knocking on my door!

My earlier drowsiness is gone in a fraction of a second and I glance at the bathroom. The water is still running and the door is closed. My heart pounds wildly. *Save us! Please! Whoever you are!*

"Kerry?" The voice is low, male, trembling.

Ray! Oh, Ray! I think I love you!

"Help," I say, not too loud, my gaze shifting between the bathroom door and the front door. I swallow hard, adrenaline flowing through my veins again. *Dear God, hear me!*

"Kerry, are you there?"

"Ray, help. Help us!" I say, a little louder, hoping my voice is strong enough to reach his ears through the raging storm, but not loud enough to alert Christian. Transfixed, I stare at the doorknob when it twists slightly. *Please, don't let it be locked!* I can't remember if it is. "I'm here, Ray," I say again, glancing terrified at the bathroom door. "Help!"

A click makes me jerk. I whimper when the door to the bathroom opens and Christian suddenly appears, filling the whole opening, his shirt wet, hanging open, top button of his pants undone. They hang loose on his hips, revealing ripped abs and a string of hair that disappears under the waistband.

My mouth goes dry. I shake my head, pleadingly.

Christian strolls out into the room, wiping his hands on a towel that has streaks of blood on it.

“Who’s there?” he shouts, throwing me a glance, before he focuses on the door.

I inhale to scream. To scream for Ray to run, to get the hell out of here, but Christian pounces on me before I can do more than open my mouth, pressing his palm over my lips.

“It’s... It’s Ray...” he says from outside the door. “Can I please come in, Kerry? It’s... It’s really windy, and...”

“One moment,” shouts Christian, then he fixates his black eyes on mine. “It’s the fatty? The fucking store owner? What the hell is he doing here? He usually comes?”

I shake my head, trying to talk, to tell him not to do anything, but all that comes out are muffled moans against his warm, strong hand.

Christian points at me. “Not a word. You hear me?”

I nod, my heart slamming, my mind spinning.

“One moment, Ray!” shouts Christian, then he removes his hand from my mouth and begins to untie me. “You value the lives of the townspeople?”

I frown and nod.

“Good. Then you and I are gonna put on a little show.”

“What?” I whisper, my eyes darting between him and the door.

“I’m your long-lost husband, sweetheart. And you’re *so* happy that I’m back, aren’t you? Shouldn’t be too fucking hard, given our history.” He smirks, and flips off the last strip of sheet, giving me a smack on the thigh. “Get up, honey.”

“Kerry?” shouts Ray.

“Just getting dressed,” Christian shouts back. “*Now,*” he then growls in a low voice meant for me, jerking me into action.

I sit up, groaning, my strained muscles aching. Christian takes my hand and pulls me up. I recoil, but he’s not having it.

“Now play along, sweetheart, give the performance of your life and save your friend. You’ve done it before. I know you got it in you.” He pulls me to him, gives me a once over, tutting as he takes in my disheveled appearance. “Well, it’ll have to do.”

Christian pulls down the handle and swings open the door, a strong gust of wind immediately stealing our breaths away. Outside stands a flushed Ray, thick fur on his head, only his light blue eyes and his round nose visible. His heavy body is hidden under an enormous winter coat.

He’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen. Hope shoots like a beam of light through my chest.

“It’s... it’s you?” he stutters and stares at Christian.

“In the flesh,” Christian says cheerily and pulls me tighter to him. Every cell in my body is screaming at his closeness, hyper aware of every patch of skin touching him. His strong arm around my waist is a threat. Behave, or else.

“Kerry?” says a dumbfounded Ray. “I, eh... Bethy at the motel told me to go looking for... the... the stranger. That he’d gotten lost...” His eyes dart to Christian, then back to me. “Are you okay? “

Oh brave, brave Ray.

“This is my husband,” I say shakily, my voice barely carrying. “He’s... he’s just visiting a little.” My eyes plead with him to connect the dots, to *please* understand the danger, to *please* remember what I’ve said about fleeing my abusive relationship.

“That’s very kind of you. I’m not lost at all, though. I’m right where I’m supposed to be. Just visiting my beautiful wife, right honey?” Christian bends over and gives me a quick kiss on the mouth.” I recoil violently, his touch burning on my lips. He puts his mouth to my ear. “Play along, love, if you want your friend to live.”

I jolt and force a strained smile. “I’m so happy he’s here.” My voice sounds robotic. Not convincing in the least. My chest feels tight with anxiety. *Please Ray, please understand. Please, please, please leave. Go home and call the cops.*

“I’m sorry you had to go through all the trouble getting here. We’d like to be left alone now. I’m sure you understand.”

Christian’s voice is full of danger, the hidden threat so lethal that even Ray seems to get it. He glances behind him, out toward the hurling twigs and leaves.

“I’m... Eh... okay.” He pales visibly, stuttering, a forlorn look settling on his face. “See you around, miss.”

“Bye, Ray.” Christian slams the door shut in his face and turns to me. “Great acting,” he sneers, “like always.”

I pull and yank to get loose, and he lets me. “When did I act?” I snarl.

His mouth twists, then he nods at the couch. “Back in your ties, love.”

“No.” My knees go weak from the mere thought. “No, please.”

Christian grabs my nape and steers me. “I don’t trust you for shit. Get the fuck back on the couch.”

Something in me dies a little when he ties me back up and disappears into the bathroom again. That little flash of hope is snuffed out. I don’t think Ray will get it. I’m not getting away from this monster.

TWENTY-FIVE

Kerry

As soon as he disappears into the bathroom, I start struggling to get loose. Maybe I can still catch Ray if I hurry? Tell him to call the police? I'm sweating and tears stream down my face as I tear my skin bloody on his belt. I twist and turn and finally, with a yelp, I fall off the couch, hit my chest on the corner of the coffee table and face-plant into a dusty red rug that's seen better days.

I lose my breath and gasp from the sharp pain. God, I hope I didn't crack a rib. Moaning, I bite my lip to not cry out, hoping the commotion won't wake Cecilia.

The rug gets wet under my cheek as the tears keep trickling. It smells of old socks. The bathroom door opens and steps approach me, the floorboards creaking under his weight. Turning my head, I find myself staring at a pair of naked feet. They're attached to a pair of legs in dark pants, the rest I can't see because I can't get my head up enough to get the angle right. And I can't say I care enough to want to look at him anyway. He doesn't speak, and after a while I'm beginning to think I've finally gone insane. There *is* a man here, standing inches from my face. I lift my head and strain to look higher. I'm not crazy. He *is* here.

Finally, with a groan, he crouches before me and I'm almost, almost relieved to find it was true, that my senses weren't deceiving me. Deft fingers start untying the knots connecting my hands with my feet. "Kerry," a voice floating in the air above me says. "We should go to bed." His voice is tired, raspy... old. He sounds old.

"I'm not going to bed with you," I respond dully, without even thinking. But it's true. It's true and I don't care what he'll say about it.

He shoves the table to the side and flips me over on my back. His eyes are like dark bottomless swamps, his fingers quicksand, his touch sucking me into depths that swallow me whole, like a dying sun, a black hole. *Don't pull me in! I couldn't live in there! How can anyone?*

"Yeah," he says tiredly. "I get that."

I barely feel my feet and I can't lift my arms. They're so heavy. I don't even care to try. He'll kill us anyway. What's the point?

"Get up, Ker," he says. "Go on." A little more edge to his voice now, less old, still tired. When I don't move, I feel his arms sneak under my back and thighs and then the ceiling comes rushing closer as he hugs me to his chest. My head spins. He smells like I remember. I used to sniff his jacket, inhaling his essence. I don't want to remember. Instead I fixate on his left shoulder. There's a gaping wound there, on the side, a little toward his backside. I've stabbed his tattooed dragon in one of its thighs. It still bleeds a little. I bounce when he drops me on my mattress.

"Get some sleep," he mutters.

I look at his back as he disappears out of my bedroom. Then the door closes almost completely and I hear a scraping sound, as if a heavy piece of furniture is being moved. I stare at the narrow crack between the door and the frame until my eyes water and I realize I'm not blinking. My arms are still so heavy. They tingle and ache when I move them. Pulling Cecilia's crib close, I lift her relaxed body, wincing when my ribs protest, and snuggle close, her back to my chest. Her scent is wonderful, powdery, clean. Innocent. The skin on her neck is so, so soft. Her breaths are even and soothing. At least *she's* not worried. That's good. My whole body aches. When I finally start feeling it, it's hard to believe I could stand up at all before. My ankle pounds with pain and each breath I take sends spikes of hurt through an area to the left in my chest. The pain makes me come back to myself a little. I can't allow myself to drift. I can't let him take control. I need to focus on what's important.

Getting us out of here.

Why has he looked for me? For us? Isn't it enough for him to have shattered the Kerry I used to be into little disjointed pieces that will never find each other again? Does he have to come and keep torturing me? What am I to him?

Why me?

I *have* to get out of here. We have to leave as soon as we can.

I don't trust that he won't suddenly decide to hurt me, or kill me, and then take Cecilia. My chest clenches at the thought and I feel utterly helpless, locked up here in my own bedroom with *him* right on the other side of that door. I keep seeing him before me: his brown eyes that can look so honest and sweet, and then turn ice cold within a fraction of a second.

I don't get him.

Is there a way to get through to him? To reach past the darkness that must exist inside such a man? To maybe make him leave us alone and realize there's nothing to win, only losses to us all. I shudder. It's not very likely, and the only thing that would happen is I would get sucked into that abyss too.

If I'm not already there? Maybe I've been there for a very long time?

Twisting and turning, I finally have to lift my baby back into her own bed because she's groaning and starting to protest.

And I can't sleep.

I end up tangled in my sheets and blankets and have to start over again, smoothing them out. And then it doesn't take long before I've wrapped myself into a messy bundle again. My whole body screams at me. He's out there. He's sleeping only a few feet away, right on the other side of that door!

This is a nightmare.

I get up and start pacing the tiny chamber, immediately feeling bodily needs I have forgotten about the whole evening. My stomach groans and whines in protest from having been denied for so many hours, my tongue feels like sandpaper and I desperately need to pee. I'm at a loss as to what to do. I turn on the little lamp on the side table and the room is bathed in a warm yellow light. I look around me for a can, or a bowl to use, but there's nothing in here but pillows, blankets, and books. Cozy things. Useless things. Items made for another life. Panic rises within when I even think of having to get past him.

What if he doesn't wake? What if he's so tired he'll sleep even if you tiptoe past him?

My pulse races at the thought, but I'm not sure enough to take the chance of bringing Cece and try to get out, though. I just want to go to the bathroom. I carefully push at the door, opening the crack a little wider, and it immediately hits something unyielding. I swallow hard and close my eyes. *Shit!* I listen but hear nothing but my own heart beats. Finally I have to say something.

"Christian?" I whisper.

"Yeah," he whispers back from the other side of the door.

I bite my lower lip to keep it from trembling. "I need to use the bathroom." At first there's nothing, then I hear a floorboard crack.

"Hang on a sec." Something heavy scrapes the floor again and then the door opens wide, Christian's tall silhouette filling it completely.

I fight hard not to recoil. "I need to go," I whisper.

He regards me for a moment. "Sure."

I glance behind me. She's sleeping peacefully. I swallow hard. It feels as if every time I see her it could be the last time. The air in the outer room is colder than in my bedroom and I shiver as I walk hastily across the chilly floor. I try to close the bathroom door behind me, but his arm sneaks in and stops it.

"I'm not peeing with you watching," I snarl.

His eyes gleam in the dark. "And what would you do to stop me?"

Every ounce of fight leaves me, and I slump back against the wall. He's towering over me in the tiny bathroom, but I

can't even lift my arms to defend myself.

“Jeez. Relax, Ker. I just need to make sure there aren't any sharp objects in here.” He starts rummaging through the cabinet and when he finds a pair of scissors he takes a step back and crosses his arms over his naked chest. “I take it you won't be trying to leave through there.” He nods at the window. “I'm not gonna check on you, but I *will* take my daughter if I find you've left.” His voice is quiet and soft, but the threat is as hard as the sharpened metal in one of his knives.

I can't help the tear that rolls down my cheek. “I just need to pee,” I whisper.

When his hand comes up and wipes the wetness off my cheek, I close my eyes and steel myself not to jerk back. It's not like I have anywhere to go with my back against the hard paneling. His fingers are warm against my cold skin, and unexpectedly soft. The memory from when I thought he was a man, and not a monster tears through me, twists in my chest like a red-hot rod. So many times that I've wished things had been different.

What is it you want?

I think I already know. I think I know what I must do.

I don't look again until I hear the sound of the door closing.

I just need some time alone first.

Christian

I sit on the couch, leaning my forearms on my thighs, staring at the wall that separates us as if it would tell me what she thinks and feels. My shoulder aches from the strain. It's

quiet and still inside. Outside the storm rages on. The cabin seems to be well built, though. It doesn't even rattle.

She takes her time. There are long silent pauses between the sounds of water flushing. Still I don't hesitate even a moment. She's in there. She won't be risking her daughter's well-being. *Our* daughter's. Finally, I hear the tell-tale squeak of the hinges and the soft whispers of her naked feet against the carpeted floor. I glance at her. I don't want to frighten her, but I don't know how not to. I notice she has a limp.

Like me.

She looks dead tired.

Like me.

The room is dusky, only lit by the little light that shines through the kitchen doorway, but I still see the pained gleam in her eyes. I'm surprised when she crouches before me, her gaze searching. I don't know for what. Something I'm sure I can't give her anyway.

"If I give myself to you... if I let you have... this—" She swallows hard and gestures to her chest. "Is that what you want? Will you leave us alone then?"

My heart makes a leap that feels totally unhealthy. Up my throat and then hitting my stomach like a rock. *Fuck, Ker...* Like I predicted. What I can't give her anyway. I don't know if that should surprise me, or not, but I realize I'm not the tiniest bit interested in her whoring herself out. That's not what I've been looking for.

"Ker—" My voice doesn't quite carry the words. "Don't offer your body to me. That's just fucking sick."

"But..." Her eyes fill with tears and her chin trembles. "What do you want, then? How can I—" She gets up and takes

a step back. “What do you want to leave us alone? Money?” She doesn’t scream, but her whisper is terse and her posture stiff.

“Go back to sleep, Ker,” I say, tired to the bone.

“I—I can’t... Not with you in the house.”

“So stay awake.”

Silence builds between us until she suddenly bursts into tears. Her shoulders shake as she turns her back to me and starts toward the bedroom. I feel like I should say something to make it better, but what she wants I can’t offer. In fact, I’m not sure I could get away even if I wanted to leave. It’s too fucking windy out there, straight out dangerous.

The door closes behind her with a soft click. She looked so small, so sad and worn. I have to fight myself to not go after her and crush her to my chest.

TWENTY-SIX

Kerry

I still can't sleep. Instead I cry. How can there be so many tears? Where do they all come from?

I'm awake when the scream pierces the room. She isn't awake, really, she's just dreaming. I pick her up and tuck her in next to me. Her squirming little body stills almost immediately. I jerk when the couch is moved again and the door flies open the moment after.

"What the fuck's going on? What are you doing?"

I glare at the black silhouette in the doorway. "Nothing's going on," I snarl. "Go away." I pull Cece a little closer and make sure the blanket covers both of us up to our noses.

"Why did she scream?" The room is dark, but I can sense his suspicion. As he takes a step inside the room my heart rate picks up.

"She always does that. Nothing happened. She's sleeping." My voice is raw and my throat dry, barely carrying the words I whisper in the dark.

"Why does she do that? You mean she just screams... for no reason?"

I roll my eyes. “Christian, she’s a baby. They do that. Now get the hell out of my room.”

Just as I say it, I realize I feel a little safer than before. I’ve done everything. I’ve hurt him—badly—I’m still alive. I even offered myself to him. The look of disgust he gave me, as if he rejected the offer from a whore, lingers as if a layer of dirt covers me. I still can’t figure out what he wants, but I don’t feel an imminent threat to our lives anymore. I hug Cece tighter, taking comfort in her slowly rising and sinking chest.

He glares at me, then his gaze wanders the room, as if searching for something suspicious-looking. Finding nothing of interest, he closes the door again and shoves the couch into place. I sigh with relief.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I’ll think of something.

Christian

Last evening has taken its toll. I hurt everywhere, even though it helped that I found some Advil in Ker’s medicine chest. I hold on to them as if my life depends on it. Between my wounded knee and the pounding ache in my shoulder it certainly feels that way.

My brain is working overtime, processing the last day—and night. More has happened in only a few hours than it normally does in a year. Things that mean something, that is. I suddenly have a beautiful little daughter. Well, I knew she existed, but I didn’t *know*. She’s fantastic. I would very much like to get to know the little kid. I want to protect her... and I think I can teach her a thing or two. Things she needs to know in order to survive. Things I’m sure her mother can’t possibly know. Wouldn’t want to know, no matter how tough she plays.

I want Cecilia safe, and happy, and I want to be around making sure she is. But I have a strong feeling Kerry won't consider herself safe—or happy—with me around. It's an impossible equation and I don't have a solution. I usually know perfectly well what I'm doing and having no sense of direction makes my head spin. It's complicated.

When the fuck did my life get complicated?

But I know when. I know exactly when.

'The name's Kerry Jackson. She knows things she shouldn't. Find her and take her out. Do what it is you do best, Christiano.'

I keep turning and twisting under the blanket, the couch uncomfortable and too short. Kerry Jackson is sleeping a mere few feet from me, and that fact alone nags at my conscience, making me relive all of our previous encounters over and over again. All of them. Over and over. It isn't pleasant. All the things I've refused to think of for so long finally catch up with me. When I tried to kill her.

When I lost everything.

No wonder I can't sleep.

While she is tucked away safely behind the bedroom door, I take the opportunity to boil two eggs and serve myself a few slices off of ham that I find in her fridge. I also wash my ruined shirt that will never look the same again, but it will have to do until we get back to civilization.

We.

I.

I don't know.

I can't fucking sleep.

She offered herself to me. As if she sees herself like nothing but a piece of meat. I don't get her. I thought she didn't want to touch me. I can't help the twitch of want, the voice at the back of my mind urging me to take the opportunity. I twist and turn and end up entangled in the blanket. I feel filthy.

Sleep has almost, almost claimed my tired body when an agonizing scream pierces the night, loud enough to drown out the whining and groaning from the storm outside. *What the fuck!* I'm up and shoving the couch to the side in a fraction of a second. She's up to something. I feel it. *How the fuck can she get out of the house from in there?*

My cheeks heat up as I push the couch back into place after yet another fucked up encounter. *'Babies do that.'* Right. My shoulder aches and I tremble from exhaustion as I fall back onto my temporary bed. I feel stupid. I don't like feeling stupid. The feeling that I have fucked up beyond what's salvageable keeps eating at my heart, making me nauseous, making me feel something I haven't felt since after I tried to do Kerry in—remorse. I'm a monster. I'm nothing but a fucking monster.

What the fuck am I doing here?

Kerry

There's a knock on our door, I'm back in San Francisco for some reason, Dad's alive but I have Cece too. When I open the door there's a crying, tormented Christian outside. I try to shut it again, but he stops me and begs me not to shut him out. Cecilia comes running, she's little still, but she can speak and she calls him daddy. When I turn around, I see my father with a gun in his hand. I turn back to Christian and he has a smoking hole in his chest. Sorry, he whispers before he falls.

And Cece screams. For her father. For what I can't give her.

She wakes with her normal chatter. I can barely lift my head from the pillow. I remember dreaming, so I must have finally slept a little. I think I dreamt of *him*.

“Momma, baba, ‘fut.”

“Are you hungry, sweetheart?” She nods.

Stumbling out of bed, I realize I've slept in jeans, T-shirt, sweater, socks... all of it. I'm sticky and dirty. I haven't brushed my teeth since yesterday morning and there's an intense pain in my stomach, from hunger I figure, even though I can't sort one pain from the other as my whole body protests when I move.

The wind howls outside our little house. Will it ever end?

Any of it?

I knock on our prison door. There's a shuffle outside, the moving of the couch, and then *he* suddenly stands in my doorway. His eyes void of light, his cheeks hollow. Like in the dream, I realize with a shudder.

“Are you still here?” I sneer.

He grins tiredly. “All these things I don't know about you, sweetheart. Like your morning mood, for instance.” His voice is dry, lacking energy.

For a moment he appears so normal, and so... so tender, I have to look away. I don't want to see. “I'm not your ‘sweetheart’,” I hiss. “And put something on, for Christ's sake!”

He's still naked from the waist up, but has wrapped himself in a blanket. The sight makes my stomach clench, and

what frightens me the most is that it isn't from fear and disgust. Not even now. Not even after last night. A shudder runs through me. The main room is cold. I need to get a fire started. It should have been done yesterday, but I was a little preoccupied.

“My shirt's still wet. Well, *hello* there.” His tone changes and his features brighten. The difference is like night and day.

I glance down and find that Cece has taken an interest in the man before me and is peeking out between my legs, smiling, waving and flirting with him. It stings somewhere deep inside and I snatch her from the floor, cradling her to my chest, stopping the little game between them. She's too little. In her innocence she still can't judge who's good or who's bad. I have a lot I need to teach her. “Can you get out of my way? I need to make her some breakfast.”

He glances at the kitchen. “Sure. Let me just have a look in there first.”

I can't believe what he's implying. “How do you expect me to cut the bread without a knife?” I snarl.

“Guess I'll have to do it then.” He shrugs and turns away from me.

I glare at his back as he leaves for the kitchen, then I let her down on the floor as I quickly go to the bathroom. It's still dark outside. It'll take a couple of hours yet before the sun comes up behind all those clouds. Grabbing a diaper, I try to remember when the last time I changed her even was. Probably before her afternoon nap yesterday. She hasn't complained but I feel like a horrible mother. Well, a horrible mother who's been under some pressure. While he rummages through the kitchen, I clean her and give her some new clothes. I keep glancing at my front door. Could we make it?

But the storm rages on without any signs of calming down and I doubt I would have a chance at collecting our outdoor clothes without him noticing. I stick to preparing my daughter for the day, then I gather a couple of old newspapers and stuff them together with some dry logs in the fireplace.

“Can I help you with something?”

I’m just about to light the match and my balance isn’t the best after the ankle injury from yesterday. I squeal as I topple over from my crouching position and sit down too hard on my butt.

“Yeah,” I mutter as I get up and strike the match, my heart pounding fiercely from his closeness. “You know the front door?”

“Yeah,” he answers hesitantly.

“Open it, get out, close it and don’t come back.” I refuse to look at him, and he doesn’t say a word.

“Angwy, Momma.”

Yes, Mommy’s angry! “Mommy’s gonna make some breakfast as soon as I’ve lit the fire, honey.” I watch the flames engulf the paper, curl it in orange and black serpentine, crumble the black letters and incinerate the news of the world. When I rise and turn, he’s still standing right behind me, his arms crossed over his naked chest. My instincts tell me to back away, but I can’t because of the fireplace. Cece’s on my right and the armchair is on the left, trapping me way too close to comfort.

“We need to talk,” he says.

“I don’t want to talk with you. We have nothing to say to each other and if you need to talk, I think you should go see a shrink.”

A muscle on the side of his cheek clenches and unclenches repeatedly.

I swallow hard when his eyes flare up. I glance down at Cece, then back at him. He follows my gaze and then he backs up a step, his lips tightly pressed together.

“Later,” he rasps and narrows his eyes, before he backs away and leaves for the bathroom.

Oh, God. We have to get out of here. I can’t help the tears that roll down my cheeks when I fall into a trembling heap next to my girl. “Come on, baby, let’s make you some breakfast.”

Christian

Kerry is snarkier than ever. I have a severe headache and I’m not in the mood for games, but I soften as Cecilia flirts with me, a little less shy than yesterday. I grin inwardly at Kerry’s anger and obvious jealousy when she spots her daughter smiling at the big bad wolf.

The day, with its few pale hours of daylight, passes agonizingly slowly. It’s cloudy, still windy even though it has abated a little. Kerry occupies herself with Cecilia, keeping her as a shield between us. I can virtually smell her fear every time I happen to catch her alone.

They eat. Breakfast, lunch.

I eat.

Breakfast.

Lunch.

Kerry plays with our daughter, reads to her, then plays some more. I pretend to read but can’t keep my eyes off them. They’re beautiful. They’re life. A streak of pain ripples

through my chest. I've never had it. Why is that? What makes me want it now? *She* certainly wouldn't see it that way, but I wonder if it isn't what I did to her two years ago that changed me. I've never felt such regret before. It has consumed me. It drove me deeper into my own darkness than ever before, made me reckless, ruthless. It made me feared and hated among the people I work with. It made me despise them all, my life and everything in it.

I look up when Kerry rises heavily, limping toward the kitchen. It's late afternoon and darkness fell completely an hour ago. If I close my eyes, I think I'll fall asleep. I force myself to get up instead. I need to stay alert.

"Ker."

"Hm?" she answers drowsily, her hand clutching Cecilia's. I take a closer look at my captives. The little one looks perfectly fine, but Kerry looks terrible, and she reeks.

"Go take a bath. Take her with you, let me do the cooking."

I see the doubt even before she opens her mouth.

"Yes, I cook. Now get the hell into some hot water. You stink."

The brief glint of gratefulness on her face is immediately replaced by a sneer, but she turns toward the bathroom.

"Ah, ah," I say before she closes the door behind her. "Take off her clothes before you go inside and leave them outside. And your socks."

Her hand clutches the doorknob until her knuckles whiten. She most certainly doesn't like me ordering her around. "Why?" she asks with poorly controlled anger.

“I don’t think you’ll be so prone to make an attempt through the window if you don’t have enough clothes.”

Her mouth opens and closes several times before she speaks. “Have you taken a look outside lately?” she hisses.

Rage rises, almost uncontrollably, inside me. Like *then...* like two years ago. She’s so fucking good at getting to me. And I’m so fucking good at letting her. “I thought you’d be grateful for a bath and that I don’t make you take *your* clothes off in front of me!” I clench my teeth, fighting to subdue the pent-up anger from all our previous squabbles. “Just go back to your bedroom then, but leave *her* with me so I can get her some dinner.”

Kerry stands as if frozen in the same position. “No... sorry,” she whispers. She pulls off first one sock and then the other. “Please, let me take a bath... with Cece. Please.”

She has no fight left in her. Her huge dark eyes plead with me and her arms hang loosely by her sides, socks still clutched in her hand.

I look at her little feet. Pale, thin. How far could she walk on those? Far enough probably. As far as she’d need to. She appears so fragile, so easily breakable, but she’s made of solid rock. She fooled me once. It won’t happen again.

I feel just like she looks. I’m just as tired and my anger drains away almost as rapidly as it rose. “I’m so fed up with you fighting me every step of the way.” My voice is hoarse, and I clear my throat before I continue, “I know you don’t like me being here. But why the fuck can’t you just accept a friendly gesture? Even if it comes from me?”

She nods unhappily. “Sorry,” she says again. “Can I?”

I dismiss her with a tired wave of my hand. “Leave her pants and your socks outside and then take the time you need.”

“Thank you.”

I’m already on my way to the kitchen and stop flat. I can’t believe my ears. ‘*Thank you?*’

TWENTY-SEVEN

Kerry

I lock the door with a shaky sigh of relief. It's the first time I get some time alone in way too many hours. I fall into a trembling heap on the soft white rug, hugging Cecilia, groaning when I accidentally twist my ankle. It's blue and swollen. It looks terrible. She squirms out of my grip and tries to reach the door handle while talking and talking, words only she knows the meaning of. And I don't have the energy to listen.

My eyes are dry and heated. I have cried too much. It's useless. Now I need to think about how to get us out of here. I need to make some real plans. He keeps threatening me with wanting to 'talk'. I really can't think of anything he could talk about that would mean anything to me. There's the one thing that burns in the vacuum between us whenever we get close. His hands around my throat. Death in his eyes. My heart shattering into a million pieces from his betrayal.

I am not talking about that. It would be like reliving it. I don't ever want him to understand how thoroughly he broke me, how pathetic I was to have fallen for him so quick, for this stranger who only toyed with me.

Cece is fresh, I bathed her earlier today. I give her the yellow duck, the soap crayons and her collection of colorful rubber fishes. She plays on the carpet, humming some song she's inventing as she sings it, while I run a steaming hot bath for me. Undressing slowly, discarding one dirty, smelly piece of clothing after another I feel like I literally peel off the last day and night. I shudder when I see the blood that has dried on both my sleeves and how bruised my wrists are. I realize it's *his* blood, from when he tied me up with the bloodied sheet, and throw the shirt away with a shudder.

Cece looks up as she hears my whimper and I force a smile toward her. *When did I start lying to my daughter?*

I turn the knobs and the water stops running. *He is twisting my mind. That's what it is.*

The hot steam has already made the walls and the window dripping wet. I put first one foot and then the other into the tub. I hope it's hot enough. And *God* is it hot! I push myself deeper, gasping, trembling, panting like when I gave birth; short, labored breaths, my cheeks already flushing from the lava-like heat. *Did I put any cold water in the mix at all?* Finally, I'm completely covered and my heart races from the effort. Leaning my head back, I close my eyes. I almost twitch when I realize I haven't thought of Christian for several minutes. I open one eye and glance at the door.

It's closed.

He's out there.

Christian Russo is a few feet away on the other side of a thin piece of wood.

Cecilia is an angel. She's playing quietly, painting the duck—and the white carpet—in all the colors of the rainbow.

I close my eyes again and let the warmth soothe my aching limbs, soften stiff muscles and penetrate deep into my core. My hands slide along my slippery skin, barely touching nipples stiff from the pain of the heat, past my belly that's more of an indentation than the soft roundness it used to be when I carried Cece. I stop when my hands cover the patch of hair, then I let my arms float weightlessly in the water.

My mind swirls. With tiredness. From the heat. From his presence.

I sit up on the edge of the tub and lather myself thoroughly. My wrists are not only discolored but actually chafed bloody from when I fought to get loose. I had no idea I struggled that hard. My left ankle is swollen, there are black and blue marks on the side of my rib cage and on my belly. I touch my neck. At least it's unharmed this time around.

For now.

I look at Cece and tears well up in my eyes. Whatever it is he wants it can't be good. My gaze wanders to the bathroom cabinet, remembering last night when he took the scissors. I wonder if he has taken more of what's in there. When Cece was a baby she had colic and screamed and screamed and stayed up all night, so finally, when we still lived in Chicago, I got a prescription for her to make her sleep better along with something for her stomach. If I can make him sleep... or at least make him drowsy... My heart speeds up. A plan is slowly forming in my mind. It could work.

I rinse off the slick soap and groan when I realize I never brought clean clothes with me to the bathroom. I wipe myself dry, but I sweat profusely and the work is soon undone.

Cece cocks her head and looks at me from top to toe. "Momma bath?"

I laugh. It's liberating. "Mommy's finished the bath. I'm just really sweaty."

She frowns, confused. I smile and pat her head, stroking the silky dark hair. She looks so much like him.

I don't want to put on my old grisly clothes, my whole being protests at the thought, but I surely don't want to walk through the main room with only a towel covering my naked body. I'm at a loss as to what to do, but finally I decide for the towel alternative, remembering he didn't want me last night even when I offered myself. With a pounding heart, I open the door just a crack, peeking out. I don't see anyone. When I push the door open a little more, it hits something soft. I widen my eyes when I find a pile of neatly folded clothes. Still not seeing him but unable to not smell the most fantastic scents of cooking emanating from the kitchen, I snatch the pile from the floor and bring it with me into the bathroom, hastily locking the door again. I shake my head and try to figure out the catch. What does he want from me? My skin has started to develop goosebumps and I quickly separate Cece's clothes from mine, putting on jeans, a T-shirt, and a hooded sweater.

I'll think later.

Christian

My shirt dried up fast, hanging over the fireplace. I'm dressed again, warm and dry, and revel in the fresh scents that stem from the bathroom. Steaming, humid air enriched with soap. It smells flowery, clean, innocent. It smells of normalcy. I like it. I sincerely hope she enjoys her bath and is in a better mood when she comes back out. I'm not used to being treated like something the cat dragged in, and especially not used to trying to show some fuckin' patience meanwhile. I've been nothing but understanding and friendly, and still, *still*, she

keeps up all the yelling and the hate-show. How do I find her trust again? How did Nate do it? How did he woo Sydney, a woman with such an intense dislike for our business, and make her his?

Of course he never tried to kill her.

A little part of me can't help picturing what she looks like right now; her pale skin naked in the tub, hot and soft...

Christian! Get a grip.

My stomach aches at the thought and I clench my hands into tight fists. I just wish—I wish I could rewind time.

Fuck!

Fighting the tearing regret in my chest, I bury myself in the art of cooking something great out of nothing. She lives on preserves, frozen meat and bread, and the only things that are fresh are a couple of apples and a half-rotten pineapple that I can salvage small amounts from. I cook rice and make a sweet and sour sauce to go with a piece of chicken that I chop and fry with the pineapple pieces.

When she suddenly stands in the doorway, she takes my breath away with her naked, innocent beauty. Her face is clean, her hair still wet and combed back. A pair of thin jean-clad legs stick out beneath a much too large, hooded gray sweater. A pang of jealousy surges through my chest, wondering who that sweater once belonged to. She can't possibly have bought it for herself. Some old lover? Someone she still cherishes the memory of?

“Well, look who honors me with her presence. Bath feel all right?”

She pulls shyly at the hem of the sweater. “It was... it felt great. Thanks for letting me.” She stutters slightly and I find

myself thinking it's cute. *Cute? Russo, really?*

“Whose giant hoodie? Either you grossly overestimated your own size, or you're being a tad over sentimental and keeping the clothes of your old boyfriends.” I say it casually, as if I couldn't care less, but my heart pounds a little too hard in my chest.

Her lips twist into a sneer. “It was my dad's, Chris.”

I lift an eyebrow and turn back to the pots, my cheeks burning. “Gimme a hand with the plates and we're set to eat in a sec,” I mutter.

I turn and hold up three plates for her. She is leaning against the door frame and seems to be studying me.

“See something you like?”

I can't help the little smile when she scoffs and snatches the plates from my hands, disappearing out into the main room.

Cecilia eats happily, sticky rice ending up on every surface within three feet of her, brownish-red sauce covering her cheeks and even a spot on her nose. I'm very pleased. Kerry sulks and refuses to eat. I try to ignore it, but it's becoming increasingly annoying.

“Kerry. Eat. It's not poisoned and you look like a stick.”

She shrugs and chases a grain of rice across her plate with her fork.

“The Amazon who beat the shit out of me once... look at you now, you can barely stand on your own.”

“What do you care?” she sneers.

“You’re the mother of my child and you’re gonna fuckin’ do your job, Ker!”

Her head perks up and I see a flash of interest in her eyes. “That’s why you’re here?”

I regard her. *No.*

“Eat. Or I’m gonna force it down your throat.”

“Oh, how sweet,” she scowls. “You care.”

I glare at her until she shrugs and starts to eat.

Kerry

I keep pissing him off. I realize I’m going to have to act softer, nicer, to try to set my plan in motion. My whole body tingles from our previous banter. I was afraid to tick him off too much, but at the same time it was thrilling in an unexpected way.

The food’s good. Too good. I haven’t eaten anything this delicious in years. And he cooked. Why couldn’t he have been just a normal guy? Why did I have to fall for a monster? A pang of sadness rips through my chest. I’ll never again have that innocent first meeting we had. Certainly not with him, but I won’t have it with anyone. I won’t be able to trust anyone ever again.

Ironically enough, by letting me take that bath, and forcing me to eat, he’s helped me to revitalize and regain some strength. Not starving anymore, clean, warm, and with fresh clothes on, I can think again. My ankle still pulses with pain and I could have used a couple of Advil, but I couldn’t find the bottle.

I have a plan. It’s risky. But it can work. I have to make him trust me, just enough not to lock us in my bedroom again.

I'll have to perform better than ever in the deception that has been my life for so long.

"Thanks. It tasted... it was really good." My cheeks heat up at how false I sound and look down at my plate but I saw a brief glint of surprise in his eyes. The embarrassment is for real, but it suits me fine to show it.

Cecilia has slithered out of her chair already and is running around, giddy, happy, blissfully unaware of the tension in the room, bouncing on the couch, crawling under the table, off into the bedroom for unknown adventures and then back out again. *Good, drain that energy. It'll make you sleep better.*

"Thanks. I'm glad you enjoyed it." He wipes his mouth, his eyes never leaving mine.

My skin crawls under his scrutiny and I itch to flee the table. I collect the three plates and dart up. "I'll do the dishes. It's the least I can do." I give him my best look of innocence, almost batting my eyelashes, fighting not to overdo it.

Christian narrows his eyes and waits a tad too long to answer. My courage sinks like a stone. He's too good. He's gonna see right through me and I'll never make it.

"Sure." He leans back and smiles.

I almost drop the plates in surprise.

He gets up and walks over to my armchair, pushing it across the floor until it sits opposite the kitchen entrance, giving him full view over me and what I'm doing. Picking up a book, he flips it open to the first page and pretends to start reading, his eyes not moving along the lines of text.

My back tingles from knowing he's watching me as I clean the table and the kitchen. My voice is the perfect blend of

sugar and hesitation when I walk up to him after I'm done tucking away the remains. "Christian."

He looks up from his book, *Of Mice and Men*. Good choice at least. For some reason I'd never have pictured him reading crap literature anyway. "Mm-hmm?"

"What do we do now? What do you want from me?"

If he's surprised, he hides it well. He looks over at a still hyperactive Cece. "I think we'll have all the time we need once she's in bed, don't you? Do what you normally do. I'm really getting into this." He waves with the book and smirks.

I'm still completely convinced he hasn't read a word. "You said..." Unease flits through my chest. "You wanted to talk?"

"Well... you're not going anywhere, are you?"

A stab of fear shoots through me. *He knows!* I have to force a smile. "Doesn't seem like it."

I smile at him whenever I get a chance, but funny enough, now that I *want* to get close, he seems to distance himself. He keeps himself occupied with the book the whole evening, but it suits me just fine. Doing rounds randomly, pretending to clean up the place, I collect the sleeping potion and all the clothes I can find for Cece and myself, and gather all the items under my bed. My mouth is dry as sandpaper and my heart pounds. I *know* he'll find out I'm up to something. He's not stupid. I know I won't make it. But I'm not worthy of being her mother if I don't try.

I read to Cece about the hedgehog and the rabbit, silent tears trickle down my cheeks as I tell the simple story I know so well. She falls asleep like she should with me right next to her. I'm so tired. Even though I'm sitting up I fall asleep over and over and jerk awake every time, my heart pounding

wildly, afraid I'll have missed the window of opportunity. Leaning over the edge of the bed, I reach for the pile of clothes. Yes, they're still there. Time to act. Time for deception.

He has moved to the couch and for a moment I think he's fallen asleep. I hold my breath as I watch him. He's so beautiful. I've tried to forget the pull he has on me, that low rumbling voice that makes my insides melt, the dark eyes that both frighten and entice. His chest rises and falls in a slow steady rhythm, but when I tiptoe closer he lifts his head from the pillow and looks at me, his eyelids heavy, his gaze lazy through a curtain of dark hair, sending a jolt through my belly. Even knowing what he is, what he does, I can still see the man behind the monster. What does that make me? Sick? Co-dependent? Brainwashed?

I force myself to walk up to him and settle on the edge of the couch, even though my whole being screams at me to run in the other direction. He makes room for me and grimaces as he moves.

“Are you in pain?”

“It's my shoulder,” he grunts and flexes his elbow before he settles into a new position. I tingle all over from being so close to him, but I tell myself I have to.

“I'm sorry, Christian.” I'm sorry I missed your throat.

“I'm sure you are. I'm sure you're sorry you didn't aim better.” *Fuck.* He's not going to be easy to trick.

“Maybe.” I strain a smile. “No... I didn't know you— I thought you came to kill me. Us. I did what I thought I had to do.”

“How do you know now I’m not here to hurt you?” He raises his eyebrows and shakes some hair off of his face.

My stomach clenches and my heart leaps to my throat. I swallow audibly. “You said...”

“Ker, fuck! I’m not. All right?” He sighs and rubs his face.

“I’m sorry. I—”

“And will you stop saying that?”

“Sorry.”

He gives me a stern look and I bite my lip hard to stop myself from saying it again. Why am I apologizing to *him*? It should be the other way around.

“You’re wondering why I’m here. Why I’ve looked for you.”

We’re both silent for a moment.

“Yeah, I—”

“I didn’t know you were going to get pregnant.”

“I didn’t plan to.” My cheeks burn. “And what does that have to do with anything?”

“It changes everything.”

I have to hold on to something so as to not hit him. I intend to cajole him into believing I trust him and don’t mind him being here. It would have the opposite effect if I cracked his nose.

“What does it change? It doesn’t change a thing,” I say, a little too edgy.

“We’re forever linked through her, Ker. Whether you like it or not.”

I swallow hard. I've felt it too. I just don't want to admit it. I dart up. "I'm gonna make some tea. You want some?"

"I'd prefer coffee."

I nod. My heart pounds. "Sugar?"

"Yes, please."

God, thanks! The medicine has no taste but it's sweet, a liquid for children. It'll be a great substitute for sugar.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Kerry

“So—” I stare at the steaming cup I’ve placed in front of him. “How do you like the book?”

He flips it around and looks at the cover. “I didn’t think it’d be your type of literature. I’d have pegged you as more of a romantic.”

“I didn’t peg you as someone who read books at all.”

He laughs. How can he have such a nice laugh? “What? Assassins don’t read books? What kind of a guy am I, then?”

“Comics. Dark. Adult.”

He laughs again and takes a sip of the steaming black liquid. I have to force myself not to follow the cup with my gaze as he puts it to his lips and drinks. Instead I take a too-large sip of my tea and burn my tongue. Tears well up in my eyes from the pain.

He grimaces. “A bit on the sweet side.”

Oh, no.

“But it’s all right. Thanks.” He takes another sip.

I tremble when I set the teacup down a little too fast.

Christian puts a large warm hand over mine to steady it, making jolts shoot straight to my core. I pull my hand out of his, rubbing the spot where he touched me.

“Are you nervous, Ker?”

There’s no use denying that. The best lie is the one closest to the truth. I nod and feel a desperate need to change the subject. “Assassin. That’s what you are? That’s what you call yourself?”

His lips tighten a little. “It’s just semantics.” He shifts and looks a bit uncomfortable.

“What do you do then?”

“I don’t think you want to know. I have no pleasant stories to tell you.”

“I think you owe me that.”

“I don’t owe—” He snaps his mouth shut and gives me a hard stare.

My heart takes a leap up to my throat, but I force myself to meet his gaze.

“What the fuck is it you think you need to know?”

“Do you work for the mafia? Is Salvatore your capo?” I swallow hard, my breath hitching. “Is he your... uncle?”

Christian frowns, his lips tightening, then he scoffs. “These are things you shouldn’t want to know. It’s not good for your health.”

“Does it matter at this point? Apparently, I know too much already. Right? Enough to get a hitman coming after me?” I narrow my eyes as I look at him.

He sighs and raises his eyebrows. “I’m not here as the hitman now, Kerry.”

“Was it in your job description to seduce me?” I blurt out.

“Fuck no. No, Kerry, it wasn’t.”

“Then why did you?” I whisper. “What was the point? It was nothing but cruel.”

He pushes his fingers through his hair and stares at the ceiling. “I don’t know how to answer that. You won’t like whatever I tell you.”

My whole soul clenches up. But I want to know. I want to know if he planned to seduce me the whole time, if he played a cruel, twisted game. Would he have killed me right after sex? In my own bed, with his seed still in me? During? Why did he seduce me? Why did I fall for it so easily? Nausea rises in me as the memories flood back.

“Did you know you were going to kill me? When I... When you followed me home?” I rock back and forth on my chair, the pain hitting me full on after having been suppressed for so long.

“Do you want to know what it is I do? What I do for a living?” he snarls.

My mind spins, and even though he clearly chickens out and wants to change the subject, I’m happy for it. I nod.

“I’m a hitman for the mob. Yes. I kill people for money. Torture if needed. There’s no sugar coating that. It’s what I do. It’s what I was born to do. And yes, Salvatore is my fucking uncle.” He looks away, at the window. “Never had much of a choice,” he adds in a lower voice.

“How can you? How can you take a life?” I whisper.
“Would you kill anyone for money? Cecilia?”

“What the fuck? *No!*”

“What’s the difference? If you don’t value life, if everyone is disposable?”

His jaw clenches and his lips tighten. “I have people I care about, people I’d die for, people I’d never harm. Cecilia is one of them.”

My lower lip starts to tremble. “Would you kill me?” I can barely form the words.

He swallows visibly. “No.”

“Why? What’s the difference now?”

“You’re—” He drains the last of his coffee and puts the cup down so hard I think it’s gonna shatter. “Stop with these fucking questions.”

I look at my hands, twist my fingers. “You seemed so nice,” I whisper. “I was wrong.”

“I can be nice. When I need to.”

“Just when you ‘need’ to? Not because you want to?”

“I’m nice now.”

“Because you ‘need’ to?”

“No.”

I look away. I feel sick and I don’t think I can keep up the act much longer. It takes too much effort. Before I leave there’s just one more question I need to know the answer to. I try to swallow the thick, frightened lump in my throat but it refuses to go away.

“How many women have you fucked before you killed them? Is that your thing?” I whisper.

I have no idea even which answer would be the least horrifying. Only me? Then it was personal and that is absolutely unforgivably evil. Or many? That would mean he’s a monster on every level possible. No answer would benefit me to hear and I already regret asking. I don’t need to know. I glance at his cup. It’s empty. I keep staring at the few drops of brown liquid that are left. My cheeks burn. I poured a lot in there. I wonder if he’ll die.

Please, don’t die. Just... sleep.

He inhales. Exhales through his nose. I don’t have to look at him to know that the muscle at the side of his jaw is clenching and unclenching. He inhales again. Exhales.

“Only you,” he finally grits out.

My eyes fill with tears as I turn to look at him. “Okay,” I whisper.

Nausea shoots up within me. Part of me already knew it. And still that wasn’t what I had hoped for. I want him to be just a monster, from the inside and out. *Why me then?* But I can’t force the words past my lips. It hurts too much. It’s time to let go. It’s time to leave. Inhaling shakily, I stand.

“I’m gonna brush my teeth, then I think I need to sleep. Could you... can you please not lock me in again? I get claustrophobic. It’s storming and all... I’m not going anywhere.” *Please. Please, please, please!* The sound of my pulse thuds loud in my ears as I wait for his reply.

He shrugs. “I trust you, Ker. I’m sure you won’t risk taking Cecilia outdoors. S’all right. I won’t barricade your door again.”

“Thanks, Christian.” And I truly mean it.

I have a hard time staying awake. In fact, I’m so tired I believe I mixed up the cups and drank the medicine myself. Cece is breathing steadily and I sit on my bed, swaying, listening to any sounds from the main room while I put on one garment at a time. A sock for her. A second shirt for me. A pullover for her—a bit tricky. Sweatpants over the jeans for me. She mumbles in her sleep but shows no sign of waking up. I don’t know how long I wait. I listen to water flushing. Soft rustling noises from clothes and towels. Creaking sounds from the springs in the couch. More creaking from springs. Discreet rustling from fabric again. Springs. Rustle. Creaks.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

I wait. Breathe. Go through the plan. Wait. Watch the faint, even rising and falling of Cece’s chest. My mouth turns desert dry the second I decide it’s time. *Oh, God. Make it work.* But God has been painfully absent in my life the last few years, and the only one I can trust is myself. I hope the medicine has had its desired effect.

Dad! Please, look out for us tonight.

I rise on shaky legs and wrap my little daughter in her blanket, then I open the door a sliver. I listen. Nothing. I open it wider and bring the little well-wrapped packet with me. Stopping for a moment, I stare at the deeply sleeping Christian on the couch. The light in the room is dim, but I can see his strangely attractive profile clearly.

Say goodbye to your daddy, Cecilia.

A sting of regret shoots through my chest. Then I act. I feel for the car keys in my jeans pocket before I carefully drop first one foot and then the other into my rubber boots. They're all I have left. My thick winter boots lie outside my kitchen window and are probably soaked by now.

I glance one last time at his sleeping form. He looks so innocent, almost boyish. I can't believe he can be so cruel, so lethal.

Carefully pulling down the door handle, I then sneak out through the smallest crack possible, cradling Cece tightly to my chest. As I close the door behind me, all the warmth and deceptive safety leaves me in an instant, ripped away by the violent gusts of wind that keep coming at us, tearing at our clothes, stealing my breath. Thank God I at least had a second down jacket, replacing the one I ditched. Doubling over, I start the slippery walk on the long slope down to where my car stands.

We're *out!* I can barely believe it.

It's dark. Really dark. The sky is probably overcast and no moonlight hits the ground. I know my way well enough, though. Carrying Cece, my left ankle hurts more and more, and finally sweat breaks out over the agonizing pain, but I continue, fueled by fear and a strong will to live.

In the dark, I nearly miss the SUV. As I feel for the handle, a feeling of hurry haunts my every move. My hands tremble violently as I click *Unlock*. The remote doesn't work, so I put the key in the lock the old-fashioned way and pull open the door, haunted, my back tingling.

"Ker!"

Oh, God! No!

His roar echoes through the dark woods, and the terror gives me extra strength. I lay a soundly sleeping Cece on the passenger's side and hop in, slamming the door shut behind me. No time to buckle up right now. My heart slams and I can barely breathe. Trembling, I manage to insert the key into the ignition and twist. Nothing.

No! I twist it again. Nothing.

I lock the door at the last moment.

"Ker! What the fuck are you doing?"

A furious Christian has followed my tracks, poorly dressed and in his impractical shoes. He yanks the door handle and then slams his fists on the window when the door doesn't open. He throws himself at the other doors, and for a moment I panic, having no idea if they are locked or not. I keep trying the key, refusing to believe my faithful SUV has stopped working, but my heart sinks with each unsuccessful attempt.

"Open the fucking door!"

I shake my head mutely as tears start falling down my cheeks. I don't want to upset Cece by screaming.

"Open the door *now!*" he roars, his voice sharper, more dangerous.

I stare emptily in front of me and just shake my head. No. No way. We can stay in here. We'll be safe from him. Glancing at him again, I scream. He's picked up a large branch and aims at the window.

I shake my head and mouth a 'no', but he backs up a step and lifts the piece of wood. "Get out of the *fucking* car!"

When I make no move to obey him, he slams it against the side window next to my head I scream again and throw myself

over Cece, spreading my jacket wide, covering her with my body. “Stop it! Stop! *Please!*”

A milky web of cracks has spread across the surface. But it hasn't broken. Maybe it'll hold? He slams at it again and again, and suddenly it breaks into thousands of little shards that rain all over me. When he grabs me there's nowhere I can go. I slap at his arms, but I'm helpless as he takes hold of my clothes and hauls me out through the opening, throwing me to the ground. I try to crawl away from the monster of a man towering over me, but he grabs my shoulders and shakes me furiously.

“What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?”

My panic intensifies into something completely unmanageable. Slamming my fists at his arms, I twist and scream, trying to get out of his grip. His arms and hands and legs and body are everywhere.

“Fucking *hell!* Stop fighting me! I won't hurt you! I'm sorry I did... I just can't let you—”

He abruptly lets me loose, making me fall back to the ground. I use the moment to take a swipe at him. He dodges my fist and grabs around my neck, spinning me over on my belly, my cheek to the muddy ground, catching my arms between his chest and my back, making it almost impossible for me to move. I squirm and yank, but I only end up even more tightly wrapped in his embrace. He's so close his hair falls on my neck.

“Let me *go!*” I scream, my insides churning with fear.

“No.”

His chest heaves as he presses me closer and I almost panic when I can't move. “I hate you!” I cry.

“So I’ve noticed.” He loosens his grip a little, still immobilizing me, though, by lying partially over me, my wrists in his strong hands. “Is it really that bad?”

His question makes my chest clench and I turn my head away. *Why did you have to be this man?* It’s as if he reads my thoughts.

“Ker...” He hesitates. His breath is hot against my cold cheek and it keeps coming in short gasps. “I wish it’d never happened.” The wind almost steals the mumbled words from his mouth before I even hear them.

But I do.

Cold wetness soaks my clothes, but that’s not the only thing that is uncomfortable. I don’t want his excuses. It’s easier when he is inhuman and frightening. I can handle that better.

“I wish I lived a normal life!” I yell. “I wish I’d never met you!”

“Yeah, I get that,” he says in a very tired voice. “But these are the cards that were given us and we’re just gonna have to work with what we’ve got. And I don’t regret it. I’m glad I met you.” He whispers the last few words, his voice even quieter than before. Thicker. Sadder.

“I’m—I’m cold,” I stutter, my teeth chattering.

In one move, he stands and pulls me to my feet. I take a step toward the car and look over to the passenger’s side. She sleeps, but she has moved and is now lying on her back, her arms falling to the sides.

“You know... the car wouldn’t have started anyway.”

“Why?” I pull the door open and reach for my daughter.

“I ripped out the starter circuit when I first got here. Didn’t want you suddenly leaving. Good hunch.”

I’m so disappointed my chest aches. I’m too tired and too cold, there’s just nothing left, not even anger. My head spins and I feel like I’m gonna throw up. I stumble as I start up the slope toward the cabin again, back to the little house I thought I’d never see again only ten minutes ago.

“So I did all of this for nothing?” I say, my voice dull. “I’m never getting away from you.”

He doesn’t answer.

Am I? Am I ever getting away from you? I stumble again. She’s heavy and the pain in my ankle radiates up along my whole leg, making me wince with every step.

“I can take her,” he says.

“No!”

“Come on. You can barely manage.”

“No.” I look at him. “Besides, you’re limping too in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Please. Kerry. I’m still stronger than you are.”

“No way,” I snarl.

He steps up in front of me and stops me. “I fucking told you! I’m sorry I hurt you.”

I stare at him. “How *dare* you! It’s too late, it’s too late. You can’t... it’s—”

“I know. I still wish it hadn’t happened. Let me hold her.”

“No!”

“Kerry, I’m her father.”

“*Father?* You’re... you’re nothing, you’re nothing but a... a... *sperm donor!*” I can barely talk because I’m so cold. And I’m angry again. I’m always angry it seems. It has engraved itself into my very soul, fear, anger, hurt.

His eyes glint in the dark. “That’s low. That’s really fuckin’ low. I’ve changed... I’m not the same man I was before.”

“Low! Who’s low? You can’t just come here, pry into our lives once more, and take, take, take. And changed? Bullshit! Why did you have to destroy my car? I *hate* you!”

He looks at me, his lips a thin line. “I can’t blame you.”

“I wish I’d never met you,” I pant as I fight on forward, step by step, pushing down the sobs that wrack my chest.

He’s quiet after that and we struggle side by side until we get back, his presence scorching my whole being. With every step I take closer to my ‘home’, it feels more and more like I’m on my way to prison. Sentenced to life.

Life with him.

Redemption continues in book two, [*Absolution*](#).



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NICOLINA MARTIN lives with her daughters, her kitties, (and her dust bunnies...) in a little house on the Swedish west coast. She escapes the long, dark winter nights by writing naughty romance with morally gray heroes, strong heroines, and all the feels.

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Dedication

To my daughters, for sharing Mom with her passion for the words.

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