

# ROONEY

USA Today Bestselling Author

Shyla Colt

Chicago Edition



**ROONEY**

SINDICATE TOWERS

SHYLA COLT

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# WELCOME TO SIN TOWERS

Towers of Sin - Built on Ashes Standing tall on the shores of Lake Michigan, Syndicate Towers is a testament to the power and influence of the most feared mafia families in Chicago.

But don't let that intimidate you. Nowadays, it's neutral ground for those who want to make their mark in the game. A place to gather, settle disputes, form alliances, and even arrange unholy marriages. And if you're looking for the ultimate VIP experience, Club Curve is where it's at. The real action happens deep beneath the surface, where the deals are made and secrets are buried in the vault. Will you dare to enter the world of Syndicate Towers and make your mark?

CHAPTER  
**ONE**

X an

THE SICKENING CRUNCH and thud of a bulky body slamming into the car and bouncing off the windshield is nothing like you see in the movies. I stare at the red smears sinking into the thin spiderweb fractures spreading across the dented glass. I grip the steering wheel to stop the tremors and freeze as a slow panic settles in. *Did I just kill a man?*

Breathing hard, I lean forward to stare down at the unmoving form that is twisted at an impossible angle. Shots ring out in the garage, breaking me out of my stupor. I duck down in the seat. Mom was right. Acting first is about to be the death of me. I bet the bitch would be proud of that.

Quiet settles over the space, and I weigh my options. In order to drive, I'll have to expose myself. I lean against the door and strain to hear what's happening around me. A face appears against my window, and I scream.

"It's okay, Xan. It's me."

"Rooney." Exhaling, I sit up and meet concern-filled dark brown eyes framed by furrowed thick brows.

"Are you okay?" He scans me through the pane of glass separating us. With his square jaw, broad forehead, and sharp cheekbones, he's always been intimidating. His expression and tone are both softer than I've ever seen them be.

“No,” my voice cracks. “Is he dead?”

“Don’t worry about that. Unlock the door.” He gestures with his hand. “Quickly.”

Exhaling, I press down the tab, and the lock pops up. Rooney yanks the door open. Leaning down, he unbuckles my seat belt, grips my arm, and pulls me to my feet and out of the vehicle.

“Where’s your phone?”

I pointed to the floor on the passenger side, where it landed with my purse. The last thing I want to do is get back in with the murder weapon.

“Okay. Stay here.”

I sweep my gaze over the area and choke back a gasp at seeing two more bodies lying on the concrete riddled with bullet holes. A scarlet puddle is gathering beneath them, staining the gray concrete. I’ll never look at the enclosed space the same way again. When I noticed the gun man aiming at Rooney’s back, I followed my instincts using my car. I hear feet pound over the pavement.

“Rooney,” I stumble away from the car.

“Those are my men.” Rising with my things in his hands, he steps in front of me as a crew of five large men in black suits steps up.

“Someone isn’t playing by the rules. I want to know who and how the hell they got in. Clean everything up.” Rooney is every inch the mafia man as he barks orders. “That was a close call. It never should’ve gotten to this point.” Rooney peers over at me. “And I didn’t get them all.”

“What?” My head swivels to the right and left.

“They’re long gone.” He hands me my things, and I hold them to my chest.

Jittery and chilled, I can’t stop shivering.

“Take a deep breath for me,” his smooth voice is soothing. Reaching out, he wraps an arm around my shoulders.



Still shocked, I go to him, seeking his warmth and reassurance. A cold numbness settles into my bones. I wrap my arms around my waist as my brain struggles to process. Tonight, I killed a man. I saw my future brother-in-law in danger, and I responded.

“Xan, did you hear me?”

“Huh,” I glance up.

“We have to get rid of your car.”

“What?” I blink. “No.” My gut twists and my heart aches as I shake my head. “I paid it off.” I worked extra shifts, took on seasonal employment, and spent a year only making essential purchases to do that. All of my hard work is being flushed.

“I’ll replace it with a better model.”

“No—” Control over my life is slipping through my fingers like someone has turned an hourglass upside down.

“Hey,” He grips my chin and tilts my face up. “I will pay the car off, and the title will be in your name. We have to do this.” His gaze bores into mine. “You saved my life. I’m going to pay you back for that. Starting now. I know what needs to be done. Going along with things will be easier, but it’s unnecessary.”

I hear the words he doesn’t say. I don’t have a choice in the matter, but he’s trying to be nice.

“What do I need to do?” I relinquish control. Fighting him is pointless. I don’t know the world we’re maneuvering through, and it would ruin my life if this got out. That can’t happen. I have no choice but to depend on him, and I hate it.

“There we go.” He flashes me a smile.

A black SUV pulls up, and he opens the door. Holding my hands, he helps me step up. I scoot to the opposite side and he slides in beside me. As soon as the door closes, the driver sets in motion.

“You’re going to have to be debriefed. A lot of information will come at you, but I know you can handle it. You’re a smart

college girl. Your sister, Carden, always brags about you to my brother.”

“She does?” I latch on to the normalcy he’s offering. My big sister took care of me our entire life. When she went to prison, it left me to fend for myself with our parents. Half a year after her release, we’re living together and healing wounds.

“She’s proud of you. It’s an older sibling thing.” He shrugs.

Finnegan Gallagher, Rooney’s younger brother, is why I live in the Tower. The luxury apartments in the top half of the multi-level building are one of the legal operations they are running.

The Gallaghers have a widely acknowledged reputation, although I have little knowledge about the lower half of the building. They are powerful Irish men who walk the gray area between legal and illegal activities and have their hands in many pies.

“You’d know. How many of your guys are there?” I toy with the necklace around my neck. The smooth flower-shaped piece of turquoise helps me stay present.

“All together? Eight.”

I shake my head. “I can’t imagine that.”

He smirks. “There’s never a dull moment back home.”

“Or here,” I mumble as we pull away from the garage.

“We need to establish a story for you. Where were you last before coming home?”

“My second job is at a strip club.”

His eyes widen, and he looks me over with a heated glance I feel to my core. “You dance?” I hear skepticism in his tone. I usually change before I head home. It helps me keep my job location a secret.

I laugh. “No, I’m a waitress. It has flexible hours and killer tips.”

“Ah. Makes sense.”

I study his expression. There have been plenty of men who’ve treated me differently after they found out about my job. Was he one of them?

“Coming home from your job late at night, you had an unfortunate run-in with a deer. It totaled your car. Because of the late hour, you called your sister, her fiancée and his brothers picked you up and called in a tow company.” He’s quick on his feet.

“Do you think someone is going to ask me about that?”

“They shouldn’t, but it’s always best to cover your ass, just in case. You’ll learn to think three steps ahead.”

I shift in my seat. How can he live with this kind of pressure looming over him? I hate what-ifs. The more I can control, the better I feel.

“Where are we going?”

“To see a man about documents and record everything we both remember about what happened today.”

Swallowing hard, I clutch my black and white striped purse with pink lips, to my belly. “I have to be at work by eight o’clock tomorrow.” I can’t allow myself to get swallowed up by this situation.

He snickers. “After everything that happened, that’s your primary concern? Your job?”

“It’s more than that. It’s a work-study. I have less than six months left and I’ll have my degree with experience. I can’t ruin that.” I keep my tone even. I’d been ridiculed my entire life for being too studious. Knowledge is power, and for those of us not born with a silver spoon it was our path to a better life.

“You’re in culinary school. What is it you want to do?”

“I’ll be working as a nutritionist.”

He’s keeping the conversation flowing to distract me, and I’m letting him. It’s the most I’ve spoken with the intense man

one-on-one.

Tall, dark, and brooding, the older Irishman keeps to himself. “I thought the Tower was safe.”

“It is. There are,” he pauses, “rules. But there are always people who test things.”

“What if they come back?” I voice the question going around in my mind. “You said one got away.”

“Let me worry about that—”

“That’s not an answer.” I won’t let him be evasive. If he thinks I’ll roll over and trust a man I hardly know, he’s insane. You can’t even trust family these days.

“I don’t think you realize how much power Gallaghers wield.” He turns to face me, showing the stern face I’m used to seeing. “I will sort this out. Things are going to get messy, and there will be fallout. Until I settle certain things, your life will look different.”

“What does that mean?” The words are invisible shackles snapping around my wrists.

“There’s a chance they’ve seen you with me. You saw what they were willing to do.”

“I’m in danger.” My voice goes up an octave.

“Possibly.” His cool demeanor irritates me.

“Possibly? Easy as that?” I snap my fingers.

“Watch your tone—”

“I saved your ass, and now it’s put a target on my back.”

“Which I’ll deal with.” He places his hand on my thigh and squeezes, grounding me. “I will keep you safe, but I need you to follow my lead. We’re in this together for the foreseeable future.”

The car comes to a stop, and my stomach plummets into my shoes. The freedom I’ve fought so hard to get is being taken.

“I’m not willing to obey blindly.”

“And I can’t always stop and explain. We’re at an impasse.”

I lick my dry lips. “It seems so.”

The door opens, and he slides out and holds his hands to me. “I think you’ll change your mind once things are further explained.”

*Is that a threat?*

Stepping out of the car I’m greeted by a redbrick bungalow kissed by the coming sun. The deep purple is yielding to a brilliant pink with hints of orange.

I turned to him, surprised. “What’s this?”

“A safe place.” He squeezes my hand. “Come on.” Soaking up the suburban area, I trail behind him. I have to admit it, but this is the last place I’d expect to find a member of a crime family hiding out.

He knocks on the door, and it swings open to reveal an older woman in a fuzzy white and gray polka-dot robe.

“Aunt Aine, thanks for having us.”

“Of course, come in out of the cold.” She steps aside, and we enter. The gray cat slippers on her feet help me relax.

They hug, and I watch warily. Is she going to be my keeper? Images of classic English literature flicker in my mind. Rooney kisses her cheek.

“This is Xan. She’s here because she saved my life tonight, and it’s put her in danger. I thought you could walk her through some procedures while I make a few calls.”

“Say no more. How about a cuppa, dear? You look like you’re still in shock.”

“It’s been one hell of a night.”

His aunt laughs. “Well, we’ll add a dollop of whiskey into our tea, then.” Her warm voice and lilting brogue are charming.

Knowing he brought me to family makes this situation a little easier to swallow.

“This is a hard life, even for those born into it,” Aine whispers as we move from the front of the house then through a parlor. I’d be obsessing over the woodworking, high ceilings, and antiques in different circumstances.

We enter the kitchen, and she guides me to a white island with a butcher block top.

“Have a seat, sweetheart.”

I climb onto a white high back stool. She moves to the stove, grabs a blue kettle, and takes it to the sink to fill it.

“Rooney’s father, Fionn, my brother, has always been a bit of a hard ass. He’s imposed some intense beliefs on his boys. They work hard to maintain the empire they’ve built. But they also value family and friends. There’s no shortage of love or loyalty. You’ve already jumped a huge hurdle.”

“What do you mean?”

“You saved his life. He’s not used to being on that end of things. Rooney has always been a bit of a problem solver. Having loose ends is his worst nightmare. In a situation like this, we’re going to be overly cautious. You’ll always have someone with you or nearby, even if you can’t see them.”

“And I’m supposed to be okay with it?”

“For sanity’s sake? I’d say yes.” Aine sits across from me. “Is it so bad to have a backup?”

“It feels intrusive—”

“Privacy no longer exists, love. They brought you into the circus, and we live life under the big top in front of an audience. I’m not telling you to be a pushover. Men like this need a woman who can stand their ground. But safety issues are not negotiable. The boys always know more than they’ll ever say. Take their caution seriously.”

“You just stop living your life—”

“No, you live it differently. I won’t tell you it’s not a sacrifice, but the perks it comes with make it well worthwhile.”

“What could ever be worth losing your freedom?”

The sadness that crosses her face strikes me as unwarranted pity.

“With the right man, protection doesn’t feel like a cage. But this is temporary for you, so there’s no need to worry.”

The kettle whistles, and I’m grateful for the distraction. The woman’s perception is unnerving. Her bluish-green eyes peered into my soul and saw the emptiness and pain. I won’t exchange the prison I clawed my way out of for a prettier cell .

CHAPTER  
**TWO**

**R**ooney

The veins in my temples pulse as I stand in the center of the sterile room. A large black cart with bright yellow bags on either end sits in the middle of a bathroom like a clue in an escape room. I stare at the janitor's cleaning kit and slowly count to three in my head as a migraine swells up.

"Explain how this relates to what happened in the parking lot."

"We realized the janitor went missing. I came to investigate and found this. Look up." Bryan points, and I tilt my head. Inside the vent, the security bars are warped.

"Shit," Someone melted the three bars that blocked access to the main HVAC system.

"Yeah. They had the floor cleaning machine here. We figure that's what they used to climb up to reach the grate. I had it dusted for prints, and it's on its way back now."

"You haven't gone in?" With no sleep and my adrenaline crashing from the attack, I'm running on fumes.

"No, I was waiting to see how you want to handle it."

"Let's go. Even if they're gone, we need to see what they've been up to." They found a gap in our security and exploited it. It never should've gotten that far. My gut twists. What had they overheard? How long has this been going on?

"I'll take point," Bryan says. The floor driver enters the bathroom, and we line the floor cleaner up beneath the grate.



Bryan scrambles up, opening the grate with the tools we'd found hidden in the cart, and pulls himself up.

“What do you see?” I ask.

“They marked the path with tape.”

Gripping the sides of the vent, I pull myself up, swearing at the reflective flagging tape stuck against the metal. This plan has been a long time in the making.

“Who's the janitor?”

“A new guy. Our old one retired two months ago. He'd been with us for three years with no complaints. I have people locating him now.”

I grunt. Bryan's on top of the situation, but it never should've happened.

“The new guy, Sam, he has no priors. His history is clean. There was nothing to tip us off.” Bryan moves forward, bumping around in the tiny vent.

“Dig deeper. This shouldn't have been possible. Somewhere along the way, we fucked up.” I'm not a fan of spaces with no easily accessible exits, and right now I'm in a tuna can. Pitch black, except for the swaths cut by our small lights. It's an ambush waiting to happen.

“Yeah. I know.” The disappointment in Bryan's voice assures me he feels the same disappointment and worry. He understands how dire this situation is.

Trapped in a metal box, I continue to low crawl, one armed like a soldier. The mag light in my right hand is my guide in the darkness that grows deeper the further we go. Sweat soaks my button-up shirt and rolls down my nape. Metal conducts heat and even with the system turned off, our activity is turning the space into a mini sauna.

Bryan stops abruptly.

“What's wrong?” I tense.

“There's a camera.”

“Son of a bitch. Is it live?” I strain to see the device as I shift to the left and aim my light. Bryan rips it down and slams it into the metal until it breaks apart. The clanging sets my teeth on edge.

“Not anymore.”

A thud echoes through the tin maze.

“Did you hear that?” I whisper.

“They’re still here.”

“Let’s have a meet and greet with our guests.” I feel like a member of the Scooby-Doo gang chasing a suspect down a mine shaft.

Doubling our speed, we hear the perp ahead of us do the same. Tensions mount as we make our way to the underground levels. All business we’ve tended to in the past three months needs to be reworked. Is this how they knew where to strike the shipments? Gaining a reputation for leaks is a death sentence. We have taken families down for far less.

My leather loafers slip on the smooth metal, and I curse. Sweaty palms and clothes made for style, not function, make me clumsy.

A loud hiss gives us pause. “The hell is that?”

“Is it gas?” Bryan sniffs.

“I don’t smell it if it is.”

Bangs reverberate through pathways. We continue forward, and Bryan hisses a few minutes later.

“You, okay?”

Bryan holds up his hand. My mag light catches red rivulets.

“Booby traps.” I aim the light down and find nails jutting out from the metal.

“Fuck. Here.” I hand Bryan the mag light. Using the end like a hammer, he bends the nails down so we can pass

through. Our pace slows to a crawl as we move forward cautiously.

The stench of burning butane hits. Heat follows, turning the metal box into a toaster oven. Heat waves dance in the air ahead of us. I slam the side of my fist into the wall. “We’re trapped until this cools down.”

“They’re smart. They used a torch—” Bryan says.

“That was the noise we heard earlier. A professional. Their timing is questionable. This happens right as we’re having shipping problems.” I slam my fist into the side of the wall next to me.

“And you have a meeting in less than six hours. Who has the most to gain?”

I scoff. “Plenty of people. It’s all about who makes their move first. Let’s let them sweat when they arrive.”

“We’ll have to move fast. This could be a trap.”

“So we backtrack. Head back to the entrance and grab something with saline.”

“Why?”

“It’ll help the metal cool faster.” I think back to the things on the cart. “I bet the puck cleaner might work.”

“What are you talking about?” Bryan asks amused.

“You know that powder shit the janitors at school used to put down.” I crawled back the way we came. I hate to lose. If this was a chess game, I’d have lost my king out the gate. We reach the entrance and I lean down to pop my head out.

“Oi. Get us half a bucket of cold water.” I scan the cart and find a mostly empty bag of salt leftover from last winter. “And mix that salt in.” I watch as the men scramble like they’re being graded on it before they return with a small black bucket.

I grab the handle, cursing when the water sloshes over.

“When we catch this guy, I’m going to enjoy destroying him.” I set the bucket onto the metal and we retrace our steps.

By the time we reach the heated metal, I'm soaked. I pass the bucket ahead to Bryan and he tips the bucket over.

The metal hisses and steam rolls up.

"I still don't trust it." Bryan shrugs out of his jacket.

"Cover me." He hands me the gun and slides across to the open hatch, hissing as he skates over the metal like a kid on a slide with a burlap sack. He disappears into the hole..

The flashlight beam slices through the darkness, revealing white feathers. Rows of elaborate, sheer, shimmery costumes line the space.

"It's the burlesque storage closet." Bryan spits out a feather, and I snicker. Splayed across a cushy purple velvet settee, he's a mockery of the performances. The show keeps our business partners entertained without being too distracted. Rolling off the impromptu landing pad, he searches the room.

Ignoring the sharp pain in my hands from the metal, I drop onto the soft furniture and join Bryan. He flips on the light, and the path of escape is clear. Mannequins lay on their side in all their creepy glory. Boxes and bins are pushed aside.

"Let's follow Alice down the rabbit hole." I follow him outside the door and into the hallway backstage.

The Lounge has a 1920s motif with round tables on the floor around the stage. Private booths and rooms are available upon request. Scantly clad girls in elaborate costumes that range from milkmaids to Vegas-style showgirls click clack by.

"Nothing looks out of place," Bryan mumbles.

A shrill alarm goes off. Women shriek, feathers fly, and the evacuation process begins. Whoever they were. We've lost them to the chaos. Someone came into our space and schooled us. Lesson learned.



FOUR HOURS LATER, I'm being kept awake by energy drinks, spite, and anger. I pace the length of my office as my brother

Finnegan sits on the windowsill.

“This shouldn’t have been possible.”

“I know, Rooney. But it happened.”

“I’m adding cameras and extra check-in procedures for the cleaning staff.”

“We’ll complete the repairs to the HVAC system by the end of the day. They’re also adding an alarm to prevent tampering.”

“Good.” I nod, pleased with our swift response.

*Knock Knock.*

“Come in,” I call out .

Bryan enters.

“What do we know?”

“The sole anomaly was a woman set to audition tonight.”

“What’s her name?”

“Tiffany Flowers. It turned out to be a fake identity, but it was a damn good one. The ID was real, but stolen. When we tracked down the real Tiffany Flowers, she was in the middle of her shift at the local hospital.”

“Fuck. So it was a woman then.”

“A former dancer, Tiffany’s background checked out with H.R. They thought she was looking to make quick extra cash.”

I nod. “They went through a lot of trouble to get in here. The cameras found were all focused on the bathroom and storage closet. Even the ones in the duct were aimed at the guiding markers to help them learn their way around. They weren’t trying to glean information.”

“The janitor still comes back clean. There’s nothing suspicious in his emails, on his phone, or in his house.”

“This doesn’t just happen twenty-four hours before a meeting that will make or break our shipping industry.”

“No,” Finn agrees. “What about our previous janitor, Denny?”

“He came into a windfall of money at B.I.N.G.O. and retired early, if you can believe it,” Bryan snickers as he shakes his head.

“Too perfect,” I grumble.

“Bingo would be easy enough to rig,” Bryan adds as he sits across from Finn.

“We should’ve seen this coming and shut it down long before we reached this point.” I spear my fingers through my mused hair. “This is sloppy. We’ve gotten too complacent. There will always be people who test the chain for a weak link. The Tower isn’t infallible.”

“How do you want to proceed?” Finn asks.

“I’m going to be late to the meeting. We’ll monitor the attendees to see their responses and listen in to the trash they’ll talk.”

“You might offend people. Time is valuable,” Finn warns.

“I’ll take the risk.” I adjust my cufflink. “When you apply heat, people sweat, and kernels of the truth pop.”

“Looks like we’re going fishing then,” Finn grins wolfishly.

I watch the monitors as people trickle in. Sinking into a leather chair, I lean forward, studying the faces of the families we sell arms to.

They shift in their seats and peer around as the meeting time comes and goes.

“What is this?” The Italian heir, Mossimo, asks. Entitled and impatient, the spoiled prince doesn’t like to wait. It hurts his inflated ego.

“It appears our host is detained,” Ivan says. The middle-aged Russian with dark hair and a bulbous nose broken many times smirks. Stocky, dark-haired, and fearless, he’s always been a bit of a loose cannon.

“Our time is money,” Mossimo barks.

“Patience is a virtue,” Seamus says.

“Maybe there’s something we need to know,” Mossimo suggests.

“There was a fire alarm earlier,”

“First missing ships, now missing appointments. Are the Gallaghers struggling?”

“That’s my cue,” I stand and rush to the private rooms. I enter, and all conversation ends.

“Gentleman, I apologize for my tardiness. I had an issue with an assassin.” People have forgotten who this family is and what we’re capable of. I’ll be investigating the ship’s interception personally. We’ll revisit our situation in two weeks.

“This delay will cost us money,” Mossimo whines.

“And we apologize for that. As an act of good faith, I hope you’ll allow me to rectify the situation.”

“We can give you a couple of weeks, but no more,” Ivan says.

“I want a discounted rate,” Mossimo says.

“You got the weapons, did you not?”

“Yes—”

“Then where’s the need for a discount?”

“To keep us loyal to you. There are other import options.”

“If you want to step outside the Tower terms, feel free.” I meet his angry gaze. Scowling, he glances away. His father catches his gaze and silences him with a slight shake of his head. *Interesting.*

“If you can’t assure us our goods are safe, the council will be called in,” Mossimo’s father, Lorenzo, says.

“As it should be.” I incline my head. “We wanted to give you all a token of appreciation.” I snap, and men walk in carrying black plastic military-grade cases.

Once they see the crate of semi-automatic rifles, it smoothes their ruffled feathers. Time is ticking on my two-week window, and I'm no closer to figuring out who our enemy is.



CHAPTER  
**THREE**

**X**an There's something about murder and fleeing from the crime scene that has turned my give-a-damn button up to eleven. Hatred burns through my body as my cocky fellow intern strolls up twenty minutes late. Swirling the expensive iced coffee, Jack stops at the desk and leans against it.

His dark hair falls across his forehead, obscuring his dark brown eyes. The dark pink pout that once melted me, curves into a devious smile that begs for me to stab him with the pen resting on my clipboard. He looks so pretty on the outside, but I know the devil that lurks within. Three years of dating showed me exactly why you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. On paper he was a catch. I wouldn't know until far too late the dangerous situation I'd walked into.

"You have my case study paperwork done, right?" His entitled tone makes me want to scream.

"Not yet." I keep my tone even and unbothered. If I give him a thread to pull on he'll try to unravel me. It's what he does best.

His brows dip, and he frowns. "You're cutting it close, aren't you?"

"Life has been busy. Please feel free to do it yourself." I dare him to take me up on the offer.

His charming exterior crumbles as he narrows his gaze and straightens. His lips press into a straight line, and he crowds

into my space, backing me closer to my chair. I've challenged him and now, like a wild animal, he needs to reassert his dominance. This is where I usually back down. Instead, I stand my ground, pushing back. It's been a year and he still has his hooks in me. It's past time I break free.

"You're forgetting your place."

"That's one thing I've never done." I raise my head. He's benefitting from my brain. I won't let him pretend otherwise. Without me he'd have been booted from the internship in the nutritional department ages ago. Creating the proper meals for different body types, and dietary needs was a science that took time to get right. He never even opened up a Google page.

"Have you forgotten how easily I could ruin your life? All your hard work would go up like that." He snaps his fingers. "With one little file sent to the right place, they'd oust you from this job. Afterward, you'd struggle to get a job anywhere but the service industry."

I bite my tongue until I taste the iron and coppery flavor of blood. How had I ever found this bastard attractive? His dark brown eyes, artfully styled hair, and attractive angular face hide the predator lurking beneath. His firm jaw, sculpted face, and fit frame are a weapon he wields with ease and grace.

"So angry." He cups my face. "I remember when you were happy to see me."

I tug out of his hold. "That was when you sent your alter ego not the real Jack."

"Does it make you feel better to lie to yourself? To pretend I was a wolf in sheep's clothing who took advantage of you?" He smirks. "You loved everything I did to you. I could play your body like an instrument—"

"You're disgusting. There's nothing you have that I want."

He chuckles darkly. Breakfast sloshes around in my stomach.

"You fight so hard for control. It only makes me miss you more." Jack trails the back of his knuckles down my cheek.

“Don’t touch me. That’s not part of our deal.”

“Maybe I want to alter the terms.”

“You can’t do that,” I whisper.

“I hold all the cards.” He reminds me.

I ball my hands into fists. My fingernails dig into my palms, and I focus on the pain to remain in the moment.

“No, that wasn’t what we agreed on.”

“Do you think men like me get ahead by following the rules?” He clicks his tongue. “I miss having a good little puppy following me around, always eager to please and obey.”

He twists my blind trust and faith into an ugly thing I’m ashamed of. I won’t let him get away with it. What we had was sacred in the beginning.

“How sad for you.”

“Excuse me.” His arrogance falters.

“Despite all your advantages, you’re here blackmailing your ex to get by, and now you’re trying to extort her for sex.” I wrinkle my nose. “It’s not a good look. I’m many things, but I’m not, nor will I ever be, a whore.”

I push away from the desk, and he jumps out of the path of the rolling wheels of the chair. With a little less than half a year left till graduation, he can’t afford to lose me as his personal homework elf.

“Bitch.”

“Funny.” I smile. “I was thinking the same thing.”

The click of heels on the Formica

floor kills the rebuttal I knew was on the tip of his tongue. High off my unexpected win, I look up at Lauren and smile.

“Morning, Lauren.”

“Morning, you two. I wanted you both to sit in on a new client evaluation. I want to see you both assist.”

Excitement smoothers the flames of anger and fear. I love helping others become their best selves. This career will allow me to serve others while protecting my heart and soul. Inadequate nutrition is hell on the system, inside and out.

Memories of brittle-breaking hair raise the hair on the back of my neck.

“Let’s get to the office and look at the paperwork.” I ignore Jack as we enter her office, and she briefs us.

We all stand to receive our guests, and my jaw drops. The svelte man in the light gray suit and diamond cufflinks with more carats than most engagement rings is the man who turned my life upside down. Rooney Gallagher’s dark gaze meets mine, and he winks.

“Mr. Gallagher. I’m Lauren Tyler. It’s a pleasure to meet you. These are my two interns, Jack and Xan. They’ll be sitting in our session and helping with paperwork if you’re agreeable.”

“I admire people with goals and dreams. I’m happy to be a part of their learning journey.” His smooth voice and Irish brogue have butterflies dancing in my stomach.

After arguing with my designated babysitter all day, I’d waited until a call distracted him, and then snuck out of the house to come to work. Had Rooney come here personally to drag me from the hospital?

I swallow down the lump in my throat.

“Xan, I’ll have you take Mr. Gallagher’s input.”

“Rooney, please,” he interjects.

“The show is yours to run,” Lauren squeezes my arm, and she and Jack walk over to the table across the room where she can observe from a distance.

“Please take a seat.” I gesture to the chair and walk around the desk, mentally doing gymnastics to keep the panic from my face.

Once I’m seated, he leans forward. His expression remains pleasant, but his eyes are full of quiet anger.

“You know why I’m here, don’t you?” Removing the checklist, I force a smile.

“To get a balanced meal plan?”

“To prove a point. There is no escape from me. This is the only warning I’ll give you.”

“I couldn’t stay,” I whisper. “I’m going to ask you a series of questions, and I want you to answer honestly,” I say in a regular tone.

He hums. “I beg to differ.”

“This internship is necessary if I want to graduate,” I whisper. “What’s your primary goal?”

“I want a diet supporting my busy lifestyle and workout schedule.” I admire his fit frame in the bespoke black suit. “Your safety comes first. Agree to follow the rules or find yourself cut off from your internship, classes, and your side job.”

This can’t be happening.

“You have three seconds to decide. One. Two—”

“Yes,” I croak. “That’s something we can definitely do for you.” I hide my real response as my body goes numb. He’s tied my hands behind my back.

The hard-fought control I’ve gained is gone. I have a new master to answer to. The bastard is backing me into a corner. He smiles and leans back in his chair.

“That’s good.”

I want to punch his arrogant face and rip the silver tongue out of his mouth. Instead, I play the role, biting my tongue as I take his information.

No one will prevent me from reaching the goal I’ve sacrificed everything for. My world will open once I have that piece of paper in my hand. I won’t have to stay in this city with shitty memories and links to a crime family that binds me to the wants and whims of others.

He's won a battle, but I plan to win the war. I refuse to be a casualty in the life he's chosen to live.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

**R**ooney  
Life keeps shitting on me like a lactose-intolerant asshole who can't stay away from ice cream. Last thing I need is a trip into hostile territory at o dark hundred, yet here I am. Pulling into the parking lot of the Play Pen. I throw my car into park and kill the engine. I climb out and open the top button of the long-sleeved button-down. Designer jeans and gym shoes round out the casual outfit meant to help me blend in.

Slamming the door of the black auto, I walk toward the neon sign on top of the black building. Inside the club, I'm engulfed by the pounding bass and the stench of contrasting perfumes and colognes. Pink up lighting illuminates a path in the darkness. Paying my entrance fee with cash, I ignore the cashier's flirty tone. Giving her my back, I walk down the dimly lit hallway, allowing my eyes to adjust to the absence of light.

I spot Xan standing on the opposite side of the room. Her large breasts threaten to spill over the white crop top she's poured into. Bending over, she delivers a large tray of drinks with a smile. She straightens, and one man grabs her wrist. Pissed, I stalk through the tables to stand behind her.

"Look. You've got security called," his tow-haired friend gestures toward me.

"Fuck off. Me and this beauty were talking."

Xan peers over her shoulder. “Rooney.” She tugs her arm free and steps away before I have to take action. I admire the soft curves and mocha skin she has on display. Her pointy heels and thigh-skimming skirt highlight her long legs.

She could easily be on the stage instead of on the floor smiling. She accepts the wad of money the tow-haired man gives her, and I wait for her to approach me. Her pace is snail-slow. I shake my head and crook my finger. Shuffling, she reaches me.

“You’re in far more trouble than I expected.”

She huffs. “What’s the problem now?”

“Do you know where you are?”

“The Play Pen. The same place I’ve worked for the past two years.”

“Smart ass. You’re in Italian territory. Do you see a problem with that?”

“No, but you do,” Xan mumbles, moving around me. I wrap my hand around her neck and pull her closer to me.

“Our truce is tentative and we don’t know who we can trust right now.”

“Rock never said a word, he just followed me.” Her handpicked bodyguard knew the proper chain of command. This wasn’t his problem to handle, so he called me.

“Because he knew this was above his pay grade.” Our lips are a hairbreadth apart, and it takes more willpower than it should not to kiss her into submission.

“I need the tips—”

“We’re leaving now, and you’re not coming back.”

“Bullshit!” She steps back out of my grasp, and I grunt as my blood ignites. I admire her spice but long to put her in her place. Everything she does begs me to take charge.

“Is there a problem here, Xan?” I glance up at the stout bouncer with a bald head gleaming under the lights and tree trunk arms crossed over his broad chest.



“No, he’s annoying, not dangerous, Ron. I know him.”

“Don’t know how you missed it, but she’s working bro,” Ron says.

“Is that right, mate?” I smirk.

His brow furrows.

“Rooney.” Xan grips my upper arm. The blood rushes from Ron’s face, and he swallows.

“Rooney Gallagher?” Ron whispers.

“At your service,” I tip my head.

“We don’t want any problems here.”

“Ron, he’s here to visit me. His brother is dating my sister.”

“That’s a problem.” Ron says apprehensively.

“What? I was working here long before they met,” Xan squawks.

“Sorry, Xan. The boss won’t like the connection.”

“Are you going to ask him?” Xan crosses her arms and rocks her weight back on her heels.

“It’d be better for you if I didn’t.” Ron takes the tray from her.

“Wait. Are you firing me?”

“Let’s call it freeing you to seek other opportunities, no love lost, or negative reports in references.”

“Time to go.” I hook an arm around her waist and pull her away.

She digs her heels in.

“Stubborn little escape artist.” I drop my arm, scoop her up, and heft her over my shoulder. She squeals, and I slap her ass. “Be still, or you’ll flash everyone in here.” I squeeze her thick thighs. “Understand?”

“You’re a fucking ass.”

I slap her ass again, and she wiggles. *Did she like that?*  
“That wasn’t an answer.”

“Yes.” The heat rolling off the word is amusing. She faces me with a fearlessness most men don’t have. It’s refreshing and more than a little tempting.

We step outside, and I lower her to the ground. “I’ll get you another job suited to your future career.”

“Are you just saying that to calm me down?”

“If I say it, I mean it.” The apprehension in her brown eyes is haunting. Someone hurt her badly, and it doesn’t sit right with me.

“Was a new car waiting for you with a title?”

“Yes,” she exhales.

“Trust me.”

“That’s an emotion that’s earned.”

“I’ve never minded work,” I smirk.

“Why?”

“You saved my life. I don’t take that lightly.”

“And yet, you try to control my every move.”

“I’m keeping you safe. There’s a difference.”

She scoffs. “I’ve heard that before. Let me guess. ‘This is for my own good.’” She throws her hand in the air.

“I don’t know who let you down, but I’m not him. We’re in this together for the foreseeable future. You can make it miserable.”

“OR obey your every whim? I don’t think so.” She shakes her head, sending her thick curls flying.

“I like your fire, escape artist, but redirect the flames. All I’m asking you to do is meet me in the middle.”

She looks at me skeptically. “I’m not one to fall for a pretty face.”

“You think I’m pretty, Xan? That’s lovely.”

“That’s not what I said.” Her flustered face makes me laugh.

I step closer, and she backs into my car. Placing a hand beside her head, I inhale her light floral scent.

“I just heard you.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.” Her voice grows husky, and her eyes dilate. The pulse in her neck jumps.

“Why don’t you explain it to me then, love?”

She licks her lips, and I peer down at her pebbled nipples. The attraction between us isn’t one-sided, and I’m tired of resisting her lure. Xan peers up at me through her long lashes, and I read the silent challenge in her dark gaze. I want to break down the walls she’s erected and see the woman beneath. *What makes a twenty-one-year-old so tough?*

“I won’t be a pushover.”

“I’m not asking you to be, love.”

“And yet, you came here and got me fired.”

I scowl. “No job is worth your life.”

“This job was ensuring I’d have a life.”

“And now I will.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” Her voice wavers.

I tuck a stray curl behind her ear. “Haven’t you learned there’s nothing out of my reach?”

“Maybe that’s where you’re wrong.”

I press my body to hers, and she gasps. The more she runs, the more I want to hunt her down and stake my claim.

“Is that right?”

“Y-yes.”

“Do you plan on teaching me a lesson, Xan?”

“Me?” her husky voice goes straight to my cock.

“I don’t think I’d mind being your student. I give control as easily as I wield it,” leaning in, I whisper into her ear, “to the right woman.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Her heart thumps wildly.

“Because I want you to know I’m not here to dominate,” I lift her chin with a finger, “unless you ask me to.”

She whimpers, and my control snaps.

I move in and trace her mouth with my tongue. She parts her lips, welcoming me. Tires skid over pavement. I glance over my shoulder and see a black van barreling down on us. Metal and glass explode as Rock rams the van from the side. Covering Xan’s body, I shield her from flying shrapnel.

Steam pours out of the mangled hood. The car horn blares as the driver slumps over the steering wheel. My men hop out and run over as I pull back.

“You believe me now?”

Xan nods, trembling as I pull her to my side.

“You okay, Boss?” Rock asks.

“Yeah. Make sure—” Shots echo through the parking lot as I drop to the ground with Xan in my arms.

“We popped him. Bastard pulled a gun.” Bryce appears as we rise, and I check Xan over for injuries.

Unlocking my door, I open the driver’s side. “Get in.”

She scrambles inside and climbs over the center console. I climb in behind her as my men move the mangled SUV. They know what to do.

Peeling out, I call in a cleaner as I return to the Tower. I’m not leaving anything up to chance. Mossimo would jump on a chance to bring our family down. Eager to move up ranks in the Italian mob, he has always tested the waters with shady dealings.

“You, okay?” I rest a hand on Xan’s knee. Shaking like a leaf, she’s clutching her seatbelt like her life depends on it.

“They could’ve killed us.” Her voice cracks.

“Not on my watch, Xan. No one will harm you.” It’s a vow I intend to keep.

CHAPTER  
FIVE

X an  
“I can’t go home.”

“You’ll be fine in the Tower.”

“No,” Shaking my head, I brush off the daze that had paralyzed me.

“My sister would lose her mind. I don’t want her to worry about this.”

“You haven’t told her about the garage, have you?”

I shake my head, and he sighs.

“That’s not good, Xan.”

“Why?” My voice is high and reedy. Carden’s sacrificed enough for me over the years. I won’t have her putting anything else on hold to help me through another crisis. Thinking of her in danger because of me is enough to make me sick.

“Talk through things.”

“Aren’t we doing that now?”

Shifting to face me, he goes quiet. I toy with the hem of my skirt. What does he see? Am I a flight risk to him? Tension tangles around my nerves like weeds, choking me and stealing away oxygen.

“Breathe.” He cups the side of my neck, running his thumb back and forth over my pulse point. “You’re safe now.”

I believe him and hate that I do. My stiff limbs thaw as the tightness in my chest eases.

“I’ve got you now. What you’ve been through is a heavy load to carry, especially if you try to do so alone.”

“You do.” Unable to filter my thoughts, I let the words fly.

“I’m different. I grew up in this life. It’s my job to take care of people and situations.”

“Who takes care of you?” I whisper.

“I do.”

“Then I’ll do the same.”

He laughs. “Doesn’t work like that. You need to talk about this shit, or it’ll corrode you from the inside.”

I nod my head. “There’s no one but Carden, and she shouldn’t have to carry anything else for me. Growing up, she spent her youth taking care of me. It’s her time to live for herself.”

“What about you?”

“I’m seeking freedom.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “You don’t have that already?”

“Not until I have my degree in hand and letters of recommendation from the hospital to give me a competitive edge over other graduates.”

“Come here.”

I stop fighting my natural inclination and let his command sink in. I climbed over the console into his lap.

“Tonight, I’m going to make you crawl for me, precious. I’m going to do all the things those big brown eyes ask me for silently.” He rubs a slow rhythmic pattern onto my back with his large, warm hand. I lean into the caress..

My breath quickens.

“I saw how you responded earlier to my spanking. You like to be manhandled, don’t you?”

I shut down, the voice protesting my surrender. I feel safe with Rooney. Admitting that to myself unchains my hidden self. The version Jack exploited and made me scared of.

“Yes,” The truth removes a weight from my chest.

“That’s a good girl, being honest about what she wants. Tonight, your job is to focus on me. Can you do that?”

I nod. “I can.”

“Let’s take this to my place.”

I lock the night’s events in a box and allow my excitement for what’s coming to grow. His large, calloused hand sings the exposed skin on my back. Everything is above the board from the outside, but I feel the weight of possessiveness as he guides me through the Tower. I can leave everything else in my life behind for the next few hours.

The elevator dings, and we step out onto his floor. Marbled tile flooring and dark blue damask wallpaper scream quiet luxury. We stop at the end of the hallway, and he unlocks the door. We step inside, and I turn to face him as the door locks shut behind me.

“I want you to take a shower and quiet your mind. When you’re ready, you’ll wait for me on the bed.”

“Okay.”

“Does the standard red, yellow, and green system work for you?”

“Yes.”

His responsible check-in eases my lingering nerves.

“Explain it to me, just for my peace of mind.”

“Green means I’m good to proceed, yellow means I’m good but slow down, and red means immediate stop.”

He nods, and I lick my lips. “Do you have a safe word?”

“Sour.”

“Excellent, pet.” The nickname, along with his smile, feels like a gift. It’s an unusual departure from his stern



countenance.

A quiet tour of the high-end, impersonal blank slate that is his space, and I'm left alone in the main bedroom. Stripping down, I turn on the shower and pull my hair into a messy bun. It's been so long since I got to play.

I wash myself down with the masculine cedar scent I associate with Rooney. After two years of nothing but my hand and B.O.B., I'm begging for a hard fuck. Rinsing away the grime, I allow hesitation to go down the drain with the dirt. I step from the shower, towel off, and sit on the end of the bed.

Anticipation and the air conditioning cause goosebumps over my flesh. Rooney enters the doorframe and folds up his sleeves. The muscles in his forearms flex, and I bite my bottom lip. I want to trace the prominent veins with my tongue.

“On your knees, pet.”

I slide from the bed and kneel in front of him, shoulders back. My breasts grow heavy, and my nipples tighten under his gaze.

He stands in front of me with his fiery gaze burning into me. “Take your hair down.”

I remove the bun and fluff my curls.

“Beautiful.” He runs his fingers through my coarse tresses. “I've wanted to do this from the first time we met. It's even softer than I imagined.”

“You have?” I whisper, surprised.

“I'm going to enjoy this just as much as you. You have such a busy brain. All those checklists you need to work through.” He buries his fingers deeper and massages my scalp.

Moaning, I lean into his hand.

“We're going to quiet all those noisy voices.” His fingers curl into a fist, and he tugs my head back. The sharp pain sends chills over my body. “You like a little pain with pleasure, don't you?”

“Yes,” I answer huskily.

“Good girl. We won’t need this.” He yanks off the towel and tosses it behind him. My nipples jut out, and a puddle pools in my core.

“So fucking gorgeous.” Releasing me, he sits on the bed, spreading his legs. “My little, pet.”

My eyes are glued to the large bulge in his jeans.

“Can’t take your eyes off my prick, can you?”

“No,” I answer honestly.

He chuckles. “Then come and take it.”

Hands trembling, I unzip his pants and free this thick cock from silk boxer briefs. The nine-inch beast twitches in my hand, and the mushroom-shaped head drips.

“Like what you see?” he asks.

“Very much so,” I whisper.

“Show me.”

I gather the sticky come with the tip of my tongue, teasing his slit. Suckling his head, I tighten my hold on his base. His eyelids lower, and pleasure swirls in the depth of his eyes. I take him to the back of my throat, and he grunts. Hollowing my cheeks, I lose myself in his flavor. Musky, salty, and savory, he feeds my voracious appetite. I bob my head, gagging on his girth. Pulling all the way off, I spit on the head, and he swears.

“Dirty girl.”

Nodding, I flick the head with my tongue as I stroke him faster.

“Choke on me.”

I take him to the back of my throat again. Tears spill out and run down my face. Gagging, I wiggle as arousal coats the inside of my thighs.

“Stop.”

I pause.

“Are you turned on by this? You like sucking me off?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Part your thighs.”

I slowly spread my legs.

He leans back. “Look at that pretty little pussy glistening for me.”

I flex my muscles, longing to be full. I swallow around his cock, and he grunts.

“Stand.”

I release him reluctantly and rise.

“Bend over the bed and put your hands behind your back.” He pushes me onto the bed, and I shiver at the sound of his belt. The leather presses into my wrists, an old friend I’ve missed as he ties them together. “Color.”

“So green,” I moan.

Rooney slaps my thigh, and I widen my stance. His hand comes down on my ass, and I grind into the bed, seeking relief.

“Count for me.” He delivers a blow.

“One.” My voice shakes when we finally reach five.

“Don’t you dare come until I tell you to,” he fists my hair and tugs. “Understand.”

“Fuck. Yes.” I pant. “Six. Seven.” Unable to do anything but take what he gives, I fight to hold back the orgasm building inside me. “Ten.”

He swipes his fingers up my cleft, gathers my slick and circles my clit, and presses his cock against my entrance. Pressing inside, he feeds me the tip, stretching my channel to fit him.

“Come.”

I shatter, and he thrusts in as my walls clamp down, and I cry out, trembling as pleasure rips through my body. Canting

his hips, he pulls me closer and brushes against the spot that keeps my orgasm going.

Our bodies slap together as he splits me wide open. I embrace the pinch and burn that turns into pure bliss as he fucks me hard. I crest again, convulsing as I scream his name, and my vision whites over. Warmth floods my walls, and I slump onto the soft bed, buzzing and weightless.

Rooney massages my wrists and wipes me down, flipping me onto my back.

“Let’s get you bundled up.” Wrapping me in blankets, he caresses my face and massages my scalp as I come down. I focus on his face, and he smiles. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired.”

“Good.” He kisses my forehead. “Rest. I have calls to make.”

I want to protest, but my eyelids are too damn heavy. Drifting into a peaceful sleep, I know I’ve misstepped. Letting Rooney behind my barriers was a mistake I can’t take back. Will I regret it?

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

**R**ooney  
The boat sways with the waves as we wait in silence, of course. The next shipment is due to arrive tonight. Carefully charting its progress, the ship has had nothing but smooth sails.

“Do you think they’re scared off?” Finnegan asks.

“They should think we’re clueless if we played our cards right. I made the ignorant queries loud enough for them to hear. It’s always easy to play the stupid role. People already suspect the Italians, so I’ve leaned into that.”

“You don’t think it’s them?”

“I think Mossimo is too stupid to set this up.” The flighty young Italian was all show with little strategy. Crossing my ankles, I lean back in the chair. It feels like a stake out with my favorite sibling. If there wasn’t so much at risk, it might be fun.

Finn laughs. “He has a father.”

“Who wishes he had another son to hand his legacy off to. The only reason the old man is still in the game is because he knows his son would fuck everything up in a matter of months.”

Finn whistles. “Shit You think Mossimo is all smoke, no fire?”

“If he’s involved at all, it’s pure muscle. No one would trust him with anything incriminating.”

“Yet, he’s asking to rework prices,” Finn adds.

“Loudly. Mossimo isn’t the only one who wants that change to occur.”

“Ivan?” Finn suggests as he toys with the lighter in his hand.

“Among others. Families are always looking to climb the ladder and be part of the Tower. I wouldn’t count anyone out if they thought they saw an opening.”

“Why us?”

“That’s the right question.” I point at him. “Is there a weakness we don’t know about, or was it the luck of the draw?”

“Unlucky, you mean,” Finn snickers. “This is the perfect time to explain how Xan saved your life and why I can’t tell my fiancée.”

“Shit,” I growl. “She ran over the man trying to kill me in cold blood in our parking lot.”

“How did you let that happen?”

“The other two assassins distracted me,” I answer dryly.

“Fuck. Did we figure out how that happened?” Finn asks.

The woman’s disappearance into the ether suggests she played a large part in how things went down.” I mutter, still furious that someone managed to pull off a murder right under our noses.

“Do you think she killed Sam to cover her tracks?”

I shrug. It looks like the janitor was in the wrong place at the wrong time. “It wouldn’t surprise me if she wanted to tie loose ends. She went out of her way not to be identified or traceable. Why would Sam escape alive?”

“Why the hell am I just now hearing about this?” Finn frowns.

“I wanted to keep it under wraps—”

“Bullshit, we’re family. We’re supposed to weather storms together.” He bumps my shoulders with his.

“Yeah, I know.” I wasn’t about to tell him I was too embarrassed. Dad brought me to Chicago from Ireland because my portion of the family business is failing. Being saved by a civilian only made me appear more incompetent. While Finn might not think that way, our father did. He didn’t tolerate failure, and it left its mark.

“How are *we* covering up Sam’s death?”

“They will find Sam in a low-budget motel with paraphernalia.” I supply him with the cover up story.

“Always sad when drug deals go wrong. We called about Sam when he stopped showing up for work, yes?” Finn asks, rolling with it.

“Of course, we’re excellent employers.” I state in a practiced sympathetic tone.

“You always have the answers, don’t you?” Finn mutters.

“It’s my specialty.”

“Why are you handling Xan’s care personally when all hell is breaking loose with shipping?” The question comes out of left field.

“Because I owe her. I explained that.” Why is he fixated on this? It’s starting to irritate me. I feel him trying to stare a hole into my head.

“And that’s all?” Finn asks, fishing.

“Ask what you really want to know, brother.” I release a deep breath and shift toward him.

“I’ve never seen you give a woman the time of day.”

“You think I’m celibate?” I ask amused.

“This is different—”

“I’m trying to pay back a life debt—” I remind him. It’s not like she watched my house for me. The woman saved my life.

“Do you honestly believe that?” The incredulity in his voice makes me uneasy. I push up the sleeves of my shirt as I start to overheat.

“I’m attracted to her and I admire her strength. It makes our interactions,” I pause, searching for the right words.

“Arousing?”

“Different,” I answer, unsure of how to explain our dynamic.

“That’s the best you can come up with? Don’t you think this is worth exploring?”

“We’ve seen what love can do. Remember the toxic wasteland that was our home growing up?” I sneer.

“That’s because they held on too long.”

I can still hear the yelling, dishes breaking, and accusations of cheating. Our parents ripped each other to shreds right in front of us.

“And it’s different with Rebecca,” Finn reminds me.

“Oh yes, the perfect second wife. How long will that last?”

“It’s been nearly fifteen years.” I hate the way he gentles his voice like I’m a child in need of comfort.

“And yet, I still remember that first fifteen and the rest, we were the second string of kids who never ranked as a top priority. He sent us away to be trained by other people.”

“That’s how it’s done.” Finn shrugs. “It keeps things impartial.”

“You plan to send any boy you have with Carden to Ireland?” I challenge him.

“No,” his answer is sharp and immediate.

“But it was okay for us?” He pauses and I smile. *I’ve got him.*

“Things are different now.”

“I wonder if you defend him because you don’t remember things like I do.”



“Maybe I choose to live in the present instead of the past, Rooney.”

Shots fired, the little shit hits below the belt and cuts like a razor blade.

“Our lives weren’t perfect, but it’s not like we wanted for much. Letting go of the bullshit weighing you down might take the chip off your shoulder.”

The rebuttal crashes down on me like a cement wave. Fin and I have always been close, and his attitude is unexpected.

He angles his body toward me. “I want you to find the same happiness and freedom I have.”

“And you needed a woman for that?” I ask snidely.

“No. It took Carden. Her puzzle pieces fit my own, allowing us to heal old wounds.”

“I’m glad you’re happy, but it’s not the road for everyone, mate.”

“Think about it,” he urges.

Normally I’d fuck a woman out of my system, but Xan isn’t the type, and she deserves better than that. I curse Fin for planting a seed that can never germinate.

Static blares from the walkie-talkies.

“We lost contact. The signal’s being scrambled,” Bryan crackles over the radio from his position beside the captain of our boat.

We watch as two large fishing boats approach the cargo ship from the left and right.

“Pirates?” Bryan’s voice is full of disbelief. Gunshots ring out. Instructed not to return fire, the men on the opposite ship stay locked away in the panic room.

“I haven’t heard of anyone else being hijacked,” I mumble.

“Cause they haven’t,” Bryan replies grimly.

“They’re targeting us,” Finn says.

“Time to defend our goods.” I brace myself as the captain turns on the engine and hits the light. Two deckhands blast the smaller boats with water cannons.

Men in all black scramble onto the deck of the cargo ship, trying to save their boats. We blast them off the ladder into the black water below. The powerful streams send their gun mounts toppling. Weaponless and unmoored, they’re floating ducks.

“Sink the boats. We only need one. The rest can pay for their crimes with a watery grave.”

Circling the pirates, we scoop one out of the waves with a hook and a net.

“Welcome aboard, asshole.”

A man forces the intruder to his knees. His beady black eyes narrow, and he spits. I kick him in the side, and he curses in a language I don’t recognize.

“Is that Spanish?” Finn asks.

“No, it doesn’t sound right.”

Doubled over, his thick black hair covers part of his round face.

“Strip him down, search him for affiliation tats, and string him up in the hull.”

I remain on the deck, watching until the boats disappear beneath the waves. Ignoring the men’s pleas from the water, I head below. Fear turned the pirate’s eyes into dilated circles with a sliver of white around them. Swollen-faced and bleeding from the mouth, he’s a far cry from a spitting rebel.

“We can make this easy or hard. Both will involve pain.”

“Eu Não falo Inglês.”

“Let me guess. You don’t speak English. But you knew when and where to attack my ship. I want to know how.”

He rattles off a chain of unintelligible responses.

“More pain then,” I turn to one of my men. “Hold his hand steady.” Walking to the table, I open a black toolbox and pull out a pair of pliers. Squirming like a worm on a hook, he fights against their hold.

Clamping down on his long thumbnail, I pull. His screams fill the cabin as I rip out his nails one by one, using his momentum as he fights against him. Shaking from shock, and slumped in the manacles, holding him up. Convinced he doesn't speak English or know who hired him, my job is done.

“Bryan, I want you to focus on everyone who works on the dock with access to manifests. Look into bank accounts and check phone records. Whoever did this has a direct link to the harbor and money to burn on hiring men who can't betray them.” Removing a knife from the kit, I stab his trachea and pull it down. Gurgling, he twitches as a puddle of red forms beneath him.

“Dump him off the side, clean the boat up, and take us back in.”

What should've ended the problem has led to another dead end.

CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**

**X**an Jack looks hungry as he walks toward me with his hands shoved in the pockets of his khakis. “Where have you been hiding, little mouse?”

“What are you talking about?” I slap the paperwork against his chest.

“I went by your apartment. Imagine my surprise when I discovered you’d moved out.” He toys with the cuffs of his designer navy button down with white birds. I tense. I can feel the waves of agitation drifting off him like heat waves.

“I obviously didn’t think you needed to know.” I scan the parking lot for others. In a hospital this busy, someone is bound to come into the well lit parking structure soon.

“That was your first mistake, thinking.” His head snaps up and he sneers.

“Fuck off, Jack.” I bark as exhaustion overtakes me. I don’t have time for this.

“And there’s this.” He shakes his head. “Suddenly, you’re mouthy and bold. Someone’s been filling your little head with lies.” He taps his forefinger on my forehead and I push his hand away.

“Oh-ho.” He chuckles.

I scowl at his laughter.

“Brave, but stupid.”

“I don’t think so. You need me more than I need you.” I pinch the skin between my thumb and my pointer finger to remain calm.

“What did you say?” His face turns red.

“You heard me. The only reason the hospital hasn’t thrown you out on your ass is me.” I’m done fearing an ex who’s become my bully.

He stares at me as silence spreads in the parking garage.

“Self-important little bitch. You got a little bit of attention elsewhere, and you forget your place.”

“No, I remembered it.” I shove my hands into the pockets of my lab coat, clutching the pen I’m willing to use as a weapon.

He hisses like an enraged snake.

“You were nothing before I decided you were worth my time. I took you out of that dump you were living in, introduced you to people who helped you succeed, and curbed all those unbecoming habits.”

Heat floods my cheeks, and I glance away. There’s plenty of truth to Jack’s words.

“And I kept you from flunking out of college. Don’t pretend that your interest in me wasn’t fake.” I retort.

“I saw a diamond in the rough that needed a bit of polish and training.”

I grind my teeth, trying not to take his bait. He’s good at pushing my buttons and flipping a situation around. I liked most of what he’d taught me, but not all.

“Does your mystery man know how filthy you can be?” He licks his lips.

“That’s not your concern.”

He chuckles. “He doesn’t know how you’ll beg for cock or choke down come like a champ, does he?”

“It’s sad how vividly you still remember.”

“I made you. I’ll let you go when I’m ready to.”

“Who says that’s up to you?”

He steps closer. “I do.”

In a stalemate, we stare each other down. I refuse to drop my head the way I’d usually do. He’s no longer my anything. I don’t owe him loyalty. He lost my submission when he turned what we had into hell on earth. He steps closer, and I retreat as I try to maintain space. My back hits the car, and he slams his fist against it, setting off the alarm.

“Time for you to back the fuck up.”

I’ve never been so happy to see Rock.

“Stay out of this,” Jack snarls.

“I don’t think you heard me, mate.”

“It’s okay. Jack was just leaving,” I say.

“The hell I was. You think I fear this meathead?” He scoffs. “Is this your new man? Downgraded, haven’t you?”

“Anything is better than you.”

He flexes, and I press back against my car. *Is he going to hit me?*

Rock opens his jacket to show off his gun holster. “I don’t bluff.”

I snatch his overcoat closed. “Rock, this isn’t a battle you can win.”

“I’ll be seeing you soon.” Jack points at me as he backs away cautiously.

“Who the fuck was that?” Rock asks.

“A mistake.”

“Rooney won’t like this.” The cuddly teddy bear vibes he usually gives me are gone. He’s intimidating in a black suit with sunglasses. He’s lowered the shades to show his displeasure.

“Does he have to know?” I ask hopefully.

“That guy’s a loose cannon.” Rock squints down at me.

“He’s all bark, no bite. His games are mostly mental.”

“Never underestimate a man’s sanity. He never expected you to stand up for yourself. This is going to escalate.” Rock shakes his head.

“I’m only here for a few more months.” I try to bargain, desperate to keep my dirty secret to myself. This situation is one I feed into. I should have stopped the snowball when it first started rolling down the hill. Now, I’m in danger of being crushed by it.

“Don’t let yourself be alone with him.”

“I won’t.” I shift my weight. “Can we go?”

“I’m going to stay until you’re in your car.”

My hand trembles as I press my key FOB. He opens the door, and I climb behind the wheel. Was Rock right? Had I misjudged what Jack was capable of? He’d come by my old apartment. What was his plan?

The wheels in my brain spin madly as I start the car and pull out the parking space. The world is shrinking in on me. My phone chimes, and I glance down to find an automatic bill for my cell phone. My money is running low, and I’m slowly sinking without the tips from the Play Pen.

My vision blurs as tears gather in my eyes. I hold them back. Tears change nothing. I’ve wasted enough time crying over hardships. My mother scolded my sister and me for crying. I clear my clogged throat and run through options. There are other twenty-four-hour spots to apply to. I can ask Rooney. He’d promised me a better job, but I’d avoided him since we slept together. He’d seen me at my most vulnerable, which made it hard to keep my walls up.

I curse when I find the man in question waiting beside my parking spot with his hands in his pockets. The navy suit highlights his fit frame and my suit fetish flares to life. I want to crawl into his lap and soak the fine material. One taste wasn’t enough to quench my thirst.

He opens the door and helps me out. Leaning against the car, he boxes me in with his larger frame. “Tell me why I shouldn’t have that entitled fuck boy taken care of.”

“Because I want him to suffer. I have plans to set into motion at the right time.”

“Why not now?” I latch onto the curiosity in his tone. He’s not saying no.

“I need to finish the internship.”

“Don’t be vague. The more I have to dig, the worse my mood will be.”

“He filmed us having sex when we were dating. I didn’t know until we broke up.” My voice cracks. The betrayal still pains me.

“Piece of shit.” He spits on the ground, expressing his ire.

“He’s been blackmailing me with the files. As long as I continue to do his homework and make him look good at the internship, he leaves me alone.”

“What was tonight, then?”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head. “Maybe he feels like his control is slipping.”

“This stops now.”

I grip his bulging bicep. “No. Jack could ruin me.”

“You’ve trusted me with everything else. Let me handle this for you.”

“Rooney,” fear seals my throat shut, so I shake my head.

Fisting my hair, he pulls me toward him. “You’ve carried this burden alone for long enough. This is the least I can offer you after you saved my life.”

An exchange of favors. He’s not riding in like a black knight. He’s trying to pay down his debt. I can accept that.

“Okay.”

“Good girl.” He brushes his lips over mine, and I shiver.



“I got you a new job with a catering company. Your first job is this weekend.”

“Thank you.”

He kisses me, and my resolve weakens.

“We shouldn’t.”

“I disagree.”

I tilt my head to the side to give him more access to my neck, against my better judgment. “We said it was for one night.”

He pulls at my skin, and I moan. “Why stop there when we both need the release?” His hands skim up my thigh beneath my herring bone patterned skirt.

I part my thighs, and he grazes my silk-covered slit.

“Already so wet for me.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and nod.

“Look at you trying to fight what we both know you want.” He circles my clit through the material, and my hips thrust toward him.

“Why not let yourself enjoy it?” He continues to tease. “Let me take over from here.” Leaning in, he nips my ear lobe and tugs. “All you have to do is feel.”

I whimper at his suggestion, desperate to leave the what-ifs behind.

“Can you do that for me, pretty girl? Concentrate on this moment only.”

“Yes,” I rasp, leaning against the car for support.

“Good.” He slips his fingers into my panties and teases my entrance with the tip of his thick finger. I contract around nothing, whining in the back of my throat.

“What’s the matter?”

“I need more.” I squirm.

“All you have to do is ask.”

“Please, Rooney.”

“There’s my girl.” He eases inside, and I tip my head back as I clamp around his seeking digit. “This tight little pussy is so greedy.” He presses in and pulls out, adding a second finger, and I’m lost in the sensation he’s creating within me. Circling my walls like a potioneer, he brews a fresh batch of hot, wet lust. He pumps into me as I rock my hips to his rough rhythm, leaking onto my upper thighs and down his hand.

Panting, I look up and see his eyes. A fathomless black, they mark me as his. Aware we’re in a carport, I struggle to remain silent as I fall into his eyes. My muscles quiver, and he groans.

“That’s it, come for me.”

I explode, locking around his fingers as my body twitches and my pussy floods. He lowers his forehead to mine as I catch my breath. Removing his fingers, he sucks them into his mouth and hums.

“Delicious.” He licks his lips. “I don’t think I’ll ever get enough.”

My heart jumps at the words. *Don’t forget, this is all about paying you back. He’s not into you that way.*

“I actually met you to bring you over to my aunt’s pub, Emerald Isle. She oversees the catering company. You’ll have time to familiarize yourself with their menu. Unfortunately, the best thing to eat isn’t on the menu.”

“Why not?” I ask, surprised.

“Because it’s for my mouth only.” He looks down toward my pussy and then back into my eyes with a smirk.

“Stop.” Heat rushes to my face, and he chuckles.

“Come on.” He steps away and offers me his arm.

“Wait. Don’t I get to clean up?”

“No. I want you to remember what I did to you all night.” He straightens my clothing, and I watch as his face softens. He’s pulling me toward him like gravity and I’m helpless to

resist. This is going to have a disastrous ending, but it might be worth it to feel this alive.

CHAPTER  
EIGHT

Rooney  
“Fellas, we’ve got ourselves a problem.” I step out of the shadows of the alleyway and into the light.

Connor’s bushy eyebrows shoot up like wiggling caterpillars. “What are you doing here, Rooney?” He shoves his hands in his pockets, and the harbor worker follows his lead. Silence settles over the darkened corner.

“I know.”

“What?” Connor swallows and glances around nervously. He looks like a child playing dress up in the expensive black suit that doesn’t fit quite right.

“I know you’ve been keeping mixed company.”

“We all have imports. You don’t corner the market on that.” He snaps.

I smile. “I know,” I repeat, watching him turn chalk white.

The freckles on his face stand out like a strange disease. “You’re mistaken.”

“I don’t think so, mate.” I snap my finger, and my boys toss Sean O’Malley forward.

“The feck did you do to me, brother?” Connor asks.

“What I do to all traitors, extort him for information. You’ve always been a squirrelly cunt, O’Malley. I asked myself why you’d grown so brave of late, and it hit me. You’re the pawn, not the king.”

His eyes move around wildly.

“Cat got your tongue?” I mock.

“You can’t prove anything.”

“Do you think I’d confront you otherwise?”

“You can’t bluff your way out of paying for your failings. Your family is slipping. This desperate attempt to shift the blame is beneath you,” Connor continues, trying to dig himself out of his grave. He took the bait, and I pull up on the hook to reel him in.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Mark, do you want to tell him what you told me?” I ask the dock worker.

“I didn’t sign up for this. You asked for information for money. I had no problem with that. But I won’t bargain with my life.”

“Spineless little shit!” Connor lunges at him, and Mark dances away as my men rush forward.

“Well done, Mark. This is where you walk away.”

Nodding, he scurries off into the night like the rat he emulates.

“You going to believe some low life prick over me?”

“No, but I have your entire conversation on tape. That’ll prove everything I need to dismiss your family.”

He darts to the left, and I grab his jacket, delivering a quick kick to his knees. I was hoping the bastard would try to run. I slam him into the brick wall.

“It’s time we have a chat.”

Rock steps up with a cloth and covers his mouth. He struggles against the drugs quickly taking hold. Rock tightens his grip, his arms bulge beneath the suit jacket, and Connor’s muffled protests turn to silence as he slumps. Tossing him over his shoulder, Rock retraces his steps to the car. There’s a code

of conduct when dealing with a member of a ruling family, but Connor O'Malley crossed a line and he did it sloppily.

There will be no gentlemanly behavior or calls to his family until I've gleaned all the information I can out of him.

"What are you planning to do?" Finnegan asks as we drive toward the Tower with extra cargo in the trunk.

"What I do best, solve the problem we've been having."

"You know you have to handle this carefully, right?"

"When a man tries to kill me, I take it personally. All bets are off here."

"Shit. I'll get started on damage control."

"Don't worry, I won't kill him."

"That's not reassuring, Rooney."

"How hurt he is depends on him. He's already caught. Lying will only make this worse." I've slipped into my zone. Leaning back in the seat.

I focus on the task at hand and the information I need to recover. When you see something rotting, cut it out at the root so it doesn't spread. I won't stop until I have the names of everyone involved.

Twenty minutes later, I'm tossing an ice-cold bucket of water at a sleeping beauty who's tied to a bench. Sputtering, Connor wakes, yanking against the restraints.

"You can't do this."

"I already am." I shrug.

"You're going to start a war." Spittle flies, and he pulls against the ropes on the bench, making it hop.

"If you topple over, I'm going to leave you there," I warn.

"Fuck you."

"As for war, you've already done that, Connor. Was this a family move, or did you branch out on your own?"

"I'm not telling you shit."

I nod. “Yes, they all say that at first. But you know who I am.”

His eyes dilate further and he struggles against his restraints.

“What you’re doing is pointless. I suggest saving energy. You’re going to need it before the evening is through.”

He continues moving as if I’ve said nothing.

“We should really show our guest some hospitality. Take a load off and put your feet up, Connor.” I gesture to my men, who come in with a brick. They place one under Connor’s heels. The pressure of the odd angle makes him squirm, but he holds his composure.

“This is called a Tiger Bench. I needed something extra special for a traitor of your caliber.”

Connor turns away from me and I laugh.

“Does the truth make you uncomfortable?” Sweat soaks his white button-down. “You know, if you hold this position long enough, you can become permanently crippled.”

His head snaps up.

“I thought that might interest you,”

He struggles anew, shifting his weight, but the ropes hold.

“I’ll ask again, did you act on your own, or was the entire family involved?”

He presses his lips into a thin line.

“Another brick.” I bark.

Rock adds a second and Connor screams.

“Who are you working with?”

Breathing heavily, he pants. “I-I can’t.”

“That’s a funny word. It doesn’t mean what you think it does. You’re choosing not to tell. There’s a difference. Let’s go with a another question. Who did you hire to kill me?”

“That wasn’t me.”

“Who was it then?” I pick my nails with my serrated knife.

“M-my partner.”

“The one you can’t share with me. How very convenient.”

“He wanted to set up a new shipping system.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” I walk toward him.

“Why?”

“Money.”

“And you went along with him because?”

He presses his lips together. I slice into his skin, watching the blood bloom on the white cloth as he grits his teeth.

“No?” I create a matching mark on the opposite side of his peck. I continue to issue small, superficial cuts, each deeper than the last. “Has your tongue loosened yet?”

“He promised to put the O’Malley’s on top.”

“Another brick,” I called, adding more pressure. He’s ready to crack. I just need to push him harder.

“No. No.”

Rock adds another brick. Tears trail down Connor’s face as he silently sobs.

“I need a name.”

“I can’t.” Snot rolls down his tear-stained face. Red, trembling, and sobbing, he holds on to the name.

“You’re more afraid of this person, then you are me?”

“He’ll ruin my family.”

“You don’t think I’ll do the same in a bloodier way?”

“Robert Tanner.” He breathes out.

“The Deputy Sheriff?” I ask, placing the name.

Connor nods. “He’s tired of waiting for the captain to retire. He wanted to create a new chain of command and force the police captain out.”



“And you were all too happy to go along with him.”

“I’m tired of being the second tier Irish around here.”

“You’ve gotten your wish, now you’ll be even less than that.”

I turn and walk out.

“Rooney.” He screams my name as I ignore him. A little limp will be a friendly reminder.

“Did you hear that, Mickey?” I met his brother, who was outside watching.

“Yeah.” He drops his head. “We knew nothing about this, Rooney.”

“I believe you. But it doesn’t change what happened. You know I can’t let this slide.”

“What do you plan on doing?” He lifts his head, waiting for my verdict.

“Help me bring down Robert, and we’ll go forward from there.”

“I can do that.” Mickey holds out his hand and we shake.

Things are finally going in the direction I need them to.

CHAPTER  
NINE

X an  
“Are you ready to stop lying to me?”

I glance up from my study guide, stunned. “What?”

“I know you have something going on with Rooney. The new car, your catering job, and the missing chunks of time when I have no clue where you are. I thought we’d gotten over our past.” Her brown eyes turn glossy. “That you trusted me.”

“I do. Why are you saying this, Car?” I toss the papers onto the desk and rush over to the couch where she sits. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

“Well, mission not accomplished.” Her voice warbles and my heart aches. “I’m your older sister, worrying is par for the course.”

“It shouldn’t be, not the way you had to.” Guilt creeps up once more. “You sacrificed your youth to raise me when our parents couldn’t.”

She places a hand on my shoulder. “And I’d do it all over again. Our childhood was hell. We both did things we aren’t proud of in order to survive. But what matters is that we made it.”

“I hate how much I weighed you down.”

“You’re wrong babe. You saved me. If you weren’t there watching my every move, trying to do what I did.” She rolls her eyes and I laugh. “Your presence led me down the right path. I don’t know where I would be otherwise.”

“But you went to jail—”

“For trying to cheat the system, I learned my lesson. That’s on me, not you.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

“No one made me steal that money, Xan.”

“But it was for me—”

“Partially. It was for a lot of other reasons, too.”

I hold her words close to my heart. “After years of being told I was a burden, it gets hard not to believe the lies.”

“But you have to fight the lies. Mom and Dad’s voices still pop into my head, too. I’m not sure they’ll ever truly go away, but we can recognize the words as lies.”

“I’m working on getting here.” Gulping, I gather my strength. “I killed a man.”

“What?” she yells.

“They were aiming at Rooney and I reacted.”

“That’s what happened to your car?” She whispers.

“Rooney told me to use the deer story, so I did.”

“Jesus, Xan.”

“I didn’t want you to worry. He’s been taking care of me.” I toy with the loose strands of the pillow.

“And now I’m more worried.”

“There were complications.” The truth boils over like water in an unwatched pot. “And now I’m terrified because he’s gotten under my skin and I’m wanting him around.”

She brushes my hair away from my eyes. “And why is that a bad thing?”

“Because it’s a business arrangement.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“That’s all he says.” I scoff.

“And that upsets you?”

“No.”

“Hmm.”

“Maybe a little.”

“Why?”

“Because I want him to protect me because he cares. There are times he looks at me and I swear I see more.”

“Maybe you do.”

“Why would a man like him give me the time of day?”

“You’re gorgeous, strong, and not about to take his shit. They’re surrounded by yes men and underlings. It’s not what they’re looking for in a woman meant to share their life. You’ve already seen firsthand how things can go sideways. It takes a certain woman to handle that.”

“I’m thinking too far into things.”

Carden frowns. “Why are you doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Being so unkind to yourself.”

“I’ve had one serious relationship, and it was bad, Car. I thought he was my knight in shining armor. He moved me in, took me to fancy dinners, private events, and taught me what I liked in the bedroom. I thought we were going to live a fairytale life.” My stomach knots, and I push past the uneasiness. “Then it turned into a living nightmare. He became controlling, mean, and possessive. Suddenly what we built together felt obscene and oppressive. I found out he chose me because I’m smart and he needed to finish college.”

“Oh, honey.” She pulls me into a hug and I let myself break for the first time with someone I trust.

The tears are cleansing. “His unacceptable behavior is not on you. Predators blend in until they grow tired of hiding their true form.”

“I know that logically, but I hate that I fell for it.”

“It was a lesson. Mistakes occur when you do the same thing over and over.”

“I’ll never let that happen again.”

“I can tell.” Car smiles. “How do you feel?”

“Better.”

“Good. Now let’s deal with Rooney.”

“No,” I cover my face, “I never should have told you.”

“Oh, come on. We can date brothers. Finn and I are together. Now it can be you,” the front door opens and she seizes the opportunity, “and Rooney!”

I lunge forward, tackling her as I try to cover her mouth with my hand.

“Do I want to know why you’re yelling my brother’s name?” Finnegan stands inside the entryway with a bemused expression.

“Tell Xan Rooney likes her.”

“Oh, he definitely does.”

“Are you sure?” I ignore how eager I sound.

“Positive. Rooney is private. He holds his feelings close to his chest, but I can see things are different between you two.”

“Because I saved his life?” I ask glumly.

“More than that.” I hear Rooney’s voice and my head pops up at the same time that my jaw drops when he walks into the room.

“Rooney?” I whisper.

“Finn said you were here spending time with Carden. I thought I’d stop by.”

“You guys have things to talk about. We’ll let you have the room.” Finn holds a hand out to my sister.

“You don’t have to.” I insist.

“He owes me a date night.” Carden winks before abandoning me.

“How much did you hear?”

“Enough. He’s right. You’re different, and it’s thrown me off.” Kneeling in front of me, he massages my thighs. “I’m not an indecisive man. I go for what I want, but the last thing I wanted to do was scare you.”

“You don’t.”

Rooney smiles. “That is a miracle.”

I place my hands over his. “You make me feel safe, even when you piss me off. That’s a big deal for me.”

His expression softens. “I know it is.” He smiles. “I’m not sure when it happened, but you made me break my primary rule.”

“Don’t date the witness?”

He laughs. “No, care about a woman beyond the pleasure we could bring each other. But you put your neck out for me first, and it short-circuited my natural inclination to think any woman I let in would hurt me. I’ve always found you attractive, but the way things went down opened me up to something deeper. In my world, it’s rare for people to help when there’s nothing in it for them.” He holds my hand. “I told you I felt indebted, but maybe that was the wrong word.”

“WHAT’S THE RIGHT ONE?”

“Connected.” He kisses my hand. “Intrigued.” My wrist. “Grateful.” He parts my legs and nuzzles my inner thigh. “I want you to be mine.” He bites the flesh on my inner thigh and I groan. “That’s never happened to me before. But I can’t ignore how badly I want you in my bed every night. I wonder what you’re doing when we’re not together, and I think of you as mine.”

“You do?”

He presses his mouth to my panty covered core and I whimper. “Mmm...hmmm.” His vibration teases me.

He presses his tongue to my clit through the soaked fabric, and I bite my lower lip. I grip the edge of the couch cushions.

“Is that what you want?”

I’m tired of living in fear of what ifs and denying myself what I really want. “Yes.”

“Good.” He kisses the inside of my thighs and slips my panties to the side. Curling his tongue around my clit, he slips his thick finger inside me.

I clamp down around him and he crooks his fingers, brushing the spot inside me that makes me buck my hips.

He hums. “That’s it pet, fuck yourself on my fingers.”

I tilt my hips and meet his rough strokes, seeking more.

“Harder, please?”

“My filthy girl needs more, doesn’t she?” He nips at my clit and I scream. “You like how I make it hurt, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I tug at his hair, and he chuckles.

“I like you like this, begging and needy.” He hovers his mouth over my pussy and I squirm. His hot breath teases me

“Please, Rooney.”

“Please, what?”

“Let me come.”

“I think you can hold out a little longer.” He circles my entrance and I groan. Flicking my clit, he pushes me to the edge and pulls back.

“No,” I cry out

“No?” He shoves two fingers in and I scream. “You’ll get what I want to give you when I decide you need it.” Pounding into my slick core, his gaze holds me captive. “Do you understand?”

I nod, and he removes his fingers and grips my cheeks tight.

“Words.”

“Y-yes.”

He presses his lips to mine, and I shudder. “There’s my good girl.” He flicks his tongue across my lips. “Open.” I part my lips and he spits into my mouth. “Close and swallow.” I do as he asks, as slick spills down my inner thighs.

“Fuck. You are a perfect little peach.” He spreads my legs wide. “Ripe for the picking.” Diving in, he thrusts his tongue deep, circling my walls. I clench around him and he moans. The vibrations make me pant.

I fight the urge to fall to pieces. *Not yet.* Pressure builds low in my belly.

“I’m close. Rooney. Please. Please.”

He pulls back. “You’re ready?”

“So ready.” He plunges three fingers deep and my walls quiver.

“Then come for me. Now.” He slaps my pussy and I explode. My eyes roll into the back of my head as the orgasm rips through my body. He pulls me onto his lap and holds me to his body.

Slumped against his powerful frame, I slowly come back to myself.

“You back with me, pet?”

“Yes.” I smile up at him shyly.

“I love the way you surrender to me. Never feel embarrassed about that.” He kisses me sweetly. “I found the person responsible for everything and I’m going to make them all pay. Knowing you’ll still be here beside me when I’m done means everything.”

“That you want me there means everything, Roon.”

Seeing him open up for me helps me move past my own demons .

“We’re the walking wounded, but we can take this journey together, yeah?”



“I have a lot of baggage.”

“Me, too. Luckily, I can afford to pay for additional luggage.”

His cheeky response sparks laughter. He joins me and suddenly the hope I’d given up on returns.

CHAPTER  
TEN

Rooney  
Rock removes the black hood from the captain's face.

"Jesus, Rooney. This was the best way to get me to the Tower?" Dale asks.

"You have a leak." I shrug. "I wasn't sure who I could trust."

"What are you talking about?" Glowering across the table, he crosses his arm over his broad chest.

"See for yourself." I toss a manilla envelope across the table and lean against the wall. His thick white eyebrows draw down as he flips through the photos and phone transcripts.

"Where did you get all this?" Dale's face is twisted with horror.

"It was easy to find once I knew the source. He sent men out for me. You know that can't stand."

"How did this happen right under my nose?"

"That's a good question. We pay a healthy sum for you to be our eyes and ears. If you can't maintain control of your men, what use do we have for you?"

Sputtering, his face turns puce and sweat glistens in the bald spot visible beneath his graying comb over. "Let me make it right."

I shake my head. “You know that’s not how this works. You mishandled things and I’m left to clean up the chaos.” I push off from the wall and reach into my jacket pocket to remove a switchblade. Opening the blade, I pick non-existent dirt from beneath my fingernails.

“Your family and I have been golden for years.”

“Which is why I find this situation suspicious.”

“That makes no sense—”

“Retirement is coming. Maybe you padded your bank account to save it for a rainy day?”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“You have four kids. Three are in college. That’s got to be expensive.” I say with mock sympathy.

“I have more to lose than gain. Those aren’t odds I would take risks for.”

Twirling the knife, I perch on the edge of the table an inch away. “You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

“N-no?” He shakes his head and I stab the tip of the blade into the wood beside him.

“Start explaining and convince me.”

“Tanner went behind my back.” His face turns from red to purple. “He’s been very vocal about how much he wants me to retire sooner rather than later. It’s been a power struggle.”

“This ain’t a good look.”

“I’m aware.” He clears his throat.

“It’s also a job that takes more than one man to orchestrate and keep under wraps.”

“I realize.”

“They compromised your police force. How do you propose we fix that?”

“His crew is loyal and loud—”

“But can you guarantee you’ll catch every officer who took part in this setup?”

“No.”

“Hmm. Sounds like an impasse.”

“We can figure it out.”

“Maybe. It all depends on how willing you are to get your hands dirty. Can you do what it takes?”

He looks down and nods. When the good guys moonlight in the gray areas, they get a taste of the dark, or find they can barely stomach the bloody work necessary when things go wrong.

“I’m not feeling confident in your answer.”

“I’ll do what needs to be done, like I always do.”

A rhythmic alarm comes over the sound system. “What the hell?” My phone vibrates.

“Bryan, what’s going on?” I ask.

“There’s a fire in the restroom near the food court. It looks like someone tried to toss a half-lit cigarette in the men’s room.”

“Who?”

“The footage shows a teen.”

“Punk kids.” I scoff.

“Wait. Now there’s another fire in the lavatory on the other side of the shopping plaza.”

“Lock the building down. There won’t be a repeat of the mystery lady who’d let the wolves into the Tower a week ago.”

“What’s going on?” Dale asks nervously.

“You tell me. It looks like trouble is following you.”

His pocket vibrates.

I remove the knife from the wood and gesture at him with the tip. “Answer it, and put it on speaker.”

“Hello?”

“Cap, where the hell are you? The station’s on fire.” The panic in the man’s voice is visceral.

“What? How the fuck did that happen?”

“We don’t know. They’re still battling the blaze. The minute we smelled the smoke, and saw it was more than a fire extinguisher could handle, we evacuated everyone.”

“Where’s the Deputy?”

*I’d like to know the same thing.*

“He’s missing in action. Last we saw him, he was inside and we haven’t been able to account for him since.”

“You think he’s dead?”

The man on the phone hisses. “I don’t know what the hell to think right now. It’s a fucking madhouse. We need you on site.”

A radio crackles, and a muffled voice comes across the line in the background. “Jesus Christ, we have a kidnapping at Memorial Hospital.”

My heart and my stomach drop to my feet. They’re making a move on my woman, and I’m stuck in a locked down building.

“Go to the security room. I need a path opened for my exit now.” Rock nods and rushes from the room.

“Every hurt that befalls my woman, I’ll deliver to you two-fold.” I tell Dale. I dial Xan, hoping she’ll answer, and prove my worst suspicions false. The phone rings until it goes to voicemail and rage threatens to take over. I push it down, maintaining control.

Bryan enters the room. “I can manually override the exits and take you out. I’ve got the tracking on Xan cued. She’s heading away from the hospital at a rapid pace.”

I finally admitted my feelings about her, and I’ve failed her. My brother rushes in from the office down the hallway.

“We’ve got ourselves some vigilante cops causing chaos. The distraction was to allow them to get a hold of Xan.”

“Fuck, did they?”

“Working on the details now. It divided the police department by who they wanted to stand with. The Captain or Deputy. We need to get contracts out there. If we spill blood, they can’t trace it back to us,” I sneer at Dale, “or him.” I compartmentalize. I can’t help Xan if I let my emotions cloud my decisions.

Issuing commands while I watch the dot continue to move. I trust Finn to do his part. The location dot stops and my heart speeds up as we traverse the building one painfully slow exit at a time. Each second we lose is agony.

“They’ve stopped.”

“The location is an alley between Kent Avenue and Tartt Street.” I know what happens to women in shady spaces.

Inside the elevator, my phone vibrates and Xan’s name pops up on the screen. I mentally hold my breath, unsure what I’m going to hear when I answer.

“Xan?”

“I need you.”

“Are you safe?”

“I have my gun against the back of some asshole’s head and I knocked Jack out for the moment.” I hear the strain in her voice.

“That’s my girl. Stay on the line with me. I’m coming for you.”

“Please hurry.”

We enter the car, and I hold my hand out to stop the door.

“You’re coming with us, Captain.” Gritting his teeth, he steps inside.

“Did they hurt you, pet?”

“They tried, but I fought.” I slam my fist into the captain’s stomach. He drops to his knees, and I kick him in the side, shoving him over with my foot as the door slips shut.

I’ve never been so torn between business and personal emotion. Shoving the feelings down, I temporarily starve off the inevitable explosion.

CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

X an Tremors shake my body as I struggle to keep the gun aimed at the stocky brunette with a dimpled chin. Dudley Do Right looked more apt to rescue a lost hiker than kidnap me. Though the bastard had help from my ex. I glance over to the right to make sure he remains unconscious.

Blood drips from his temple, and the skin around the cut has swollen and turns purple. *Did I kill him?*

“The minute pretty boy wakes up you’re going to be in for it,” my kidnapper taunts.

“Shut up.” I press the barrel of the 22 I had hidden in my lab coat pocket flush to his head. “Be a pity if my finger slipped. My arms are already growing tired and with this caliber, the bullet would bounce around your skull until it turned your brain to mush.”

The man grunts. “You’re going to regret this.”

“I’m going to fucking murder you, Deputy.” Rooney’s voice is icy and full of the promise of death as it comes over my cell’s speaker. It’s my life link, reminding me I’m not truly alone. I hate to think about what happened to my escort, Cormac.

“Rooney. Being continuously outsmarted, and out maneuvered must hurt,” the man says cockily.

“You’ve taken this too far,” an older man’s voice says.



“Ah. Captain. It’s hypocritical to hear the crooked attempt to be righteous.”

Sirens continue to wail in the distance. God, I hope the hospital got off lightly. The fire set was small to begin with, but there are so many flammable things.

“Your boyfriend took little convincing to betray you. I think he would’ve helped me for free, truly.” He says to me.

“I’m the one you should be worried about,” Rooney promises.

“What were you expecting to get out of this, son?” The Captain says.

“My shot at getting over. You hoard all the riches for yourself and ask us to look the other way for a pittance. I knew once you figured out what was going on behind your back, you’d try to sweep it under the rug. You can’t do that with what I’ve done.” *Deputy* laughs.

“What the hell did you do?” the older man asks.

“You’ll see. Everyone will.” The man’s sinister tone makes me shiver.

I muffle a hiss as my ribs protest the movement and the beat pounding in my head plays a set from a heavy metal rock band.

“You should’ve seen how excited Jack got. He got off on your fear. Is that how you like to play?” The Deputy says to me.

“Don’t fucking talk to her.” Rooney sounds like a feral animal.

I bite the inside of my cheek to remain silent.

“I’m going to hand you over to him and watch him violate you. Maybe I’ll have a go, too.”

“If you let me go now, I’ll drug you before he fucks you.” He grunts. “I like the shape of your mouth and that thick frame hidden behind your little lab coat.” He reeks of corruption and abuse of power. I shudder at the thought of the women who’ve

experienced his perverse behavior. “I’m going to enjoy showing you manners. You’re full of yourself.”

I clench my teeth together. The hairs on the back of my neck prickles. I can’t afford to wait any longer.

“Grip the steering wheel.”

“Are you going to execute me?”

“Close your fucking eyes.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Look what I did to Jack, and I dated him. Do you think I’ll hesitate to splatter your brains in this car?”

“I like a mean girl.” Jack groans, waking. I unlock the door, push it open, place one foot down, and hold my breath.

“You can run. I like the chase.”

*One, two, three.* I step down, and a hand grabs the back of my shirt. Screaming, I throw my weight forward and the blouse rips. I fall to the ground, half naked. The soggy stink of rotting garbage and urine burns my nostrils. I scoot along the hot pavement, fighting to gain my feet.

My gun glints in the sun a few inches away. The Deputy opens the door, slamming it into my shoulder. I cry out as pain rockets through my body. Rolling, I reach out, grasping the reassuring steel of the .22.

Flopping onto my back, I shoot. The acrid scent of gunpowder clogs my nose and my heart threatens to leap from my chest. Like a horror movie monster, my kidnapper keeps coming. Blood platters on his white t-shirt, showing me my aim was true. He grabs a handful of hair and I let off another shot.

“Bitch.” Releasing me, he cups his crotch. Tires drag across the pavement as vehicles whip into the alley. Seconds later, the Deputy stumbles back toward the car and Rock lifts me into his arms. Rooney stalks forward with a single-minded purpose that chills me to the bone. He kicks the deputy in the back of the knee and the man goes down like a pile of bricks.

“You come for my woman? Put your hands on her?” Pressing his foot on his back, he presses down. The Deputy cries out and he grinds his heel in. Bending over, he grabs the back of his head and yanks, forcing his back into an off angle.

Reaching into his jacket, he pulls out a switchblade. “You fucked with the wrong people. I owe you, and today I’m going to pay you back in full.” I watch as he presses the blade into his skin and drags it to the right, spitting the flesh into a thin line that looks like a necklace. “But not yet.” The smug expression is gone, and genuine fear dilates the Deputy’s bright blue eyes.

Rooney wipes his knife off on the Deputy’s t-shirt and yanks him to his feet.

The bright red liquid flowing from the smile smothers my fear. Rooney is in control of this situation. This man won’t be walking out of this alive to come for me a second time.

“Get rid of his car, and bring both men back to the Tower.” Rooney’s face twists into disgust as he shoves the Deputy toward one of his men.

Replacing his blade, he walks over to me and runs a hand down the side of my face. His thumb smooths over the apple of my cheek and I throw myself into his arms.

“I’m sorry, pet.” He kisses my temple. “I’ve got you now. Are you okay?”

“Just bruised.” I clutch at his jacket, soaking up the warmth pouring off him.

“Let’s have the doctor look you over.”

“I thought they were going to do exactly what he promised.” In the aftermath, my shield is crumbling.

“What can I do to make this better?” He kisses my temple and his men exchange surprised glances.

“Promise me he won’t walk away from this.” I bury my face in his neck.

“Done.” Tightening my legs around his waist, I allow him to carry me to the black town car.

I bite my bottom lip. “And promise me we’ll make Jack suffer my way.”

We slip into the back seat, and Rock shuts the door, blocking us from prying eyes.

“What does that look like for you?” Rooney’s undivided attention always makes me feel seen and heard.

I lean back. “Let him live in fear. Draw it out, make your presence known, and let him suffer the way he made me.”

“After I teach him what happens when you cross the Gallaghers, I can give you that.” His tone brokers no argument.

“Okay,” I whisper. Jack has earned everything coming to him.

“There’s a present waiting for you at home. I was going to give it to you tonight, but I think you could use some good news. I took care of the video.”

“It’s gone?” I whisper. His words release the chains that bound me to Jack.

“That might be what made him jump ship. He has nothing on you.”

“Did you watch?” I look down.

“Why would I need to? I have the real thing anytime I want.” He forces me to lift my head and meet his gaze.

I smile shakily. “Thank you.”

“I don’t want to leave you, but I need to handle this situation. I’m leaving Rock with you.”

“What happened to Cormac?”

He winces. “Right now, he’s in critical condition.”

I duck my head as guilt eats at me.

“Hey. The only one responsible for that is Deputy Robert Tanner, Okay?”

“It doesn’t feel like it.” My voice cracks.

“Finn and I are going to take you to Aunt Aine’s tonight. The Tower is volatile and neither of us feels comfortable with you being there. I’m not sure what the game plan is, and we need you safe to do what needs to be done.”

“Understood.” I nod solemnly. Today was an act of war. The family can’t let that go unanswered. “And I like Aunt Aine.”

“Most people do.” He smiles and I soak up the normal amid the storm we’re still weathering.

Two hours later, I’m in a clean robe, bundled in blankets, and sipping on a cup of tea.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” Carden asks, studying me with a concerned expression.

I shake my head. “I don’t.” The situation is still raw, and my soul is weary.

“It’s okay. We don’t have to.” Carden moves closer to me on the bed. “We can just sit here.”

“Is this worth it?” I toy with my tea bag. “Are we fooling ourselves into believing this is some sort of one off? The Gallaghers and everyone associated with them will always have a target on their backs.”

“That’s true.” Carden nods. “We’ve seen too much to be naïve. I think we came into this with our eyes open and weighed the pros and cons. Life is shitty everywhere. You could walk the straight and narrow and get caught in a drive-by that puts you six feet under.” She squeezes my arm. “There are no guarantees in life. Finn makes me happy.” She smiles and her eyes brighten. “He healed my heart.” She places a hand over her breast. “And that allowed me to feel safe enough to fall in love. Neither of us were looking for that, but when it hit, denying it became impossible. His life is a complicated maze that can slip into a shit show depending on the day.” Carden rests her head against my shoulder. “I won’t say the danger his family name brings is my favorite thing about our relationship, but it’s not a breaking point for me. I’d

walk through fire for him, and I know he'd do the same. That's what matters most to me."

"Loyalty is a rare thing."

"Yes, and being a Gallagher comes with perks." She flashes her ring. Others would assume she meant the jewelry, but the thing we've always longed for is family. Rooney and Finn have that in spades. "Decide what's right for you, but I like the two of you together. He's brought out a softer side. You've slowed down and stopped killing yourself by trying to do everything."

I snort. "Because he wouldn't let me."

"You need someone to do that."

"I know," I admit.

"Are you scared?"

"I'd be stupid not to be, but I can't ignore the fact that one villain in this story was my ex." I close my eyes. "I brought him into the equation on my own."

"And the boys will take care of that."

"Yeah. I know." Sniffling, I close my eyes against the hot tears leaking from my eyes. "I'm so tired."

"Then rest. Tomorrow, things will look different, and I'll be right here beside you the entire night." She rubs my back and I fall into the role of little sister seeking reassurance from the woman who'd been more mother than the one who birthed me. Exhaustion shuts my brain down against my will, and I let sleep drag me down to oblivion.

The hard truths will wait to be discovered tomorrow.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

Rooney  
“It looks like you’re in luck, Captain,” he chokes down bile as he stares down at the flailed man struggling to breathe on the concrete floor. “He overplayed his hand and gave you a chance to salvage this cluster fuck.”

I nudge the bloodied lump breathing shallowly with the toe of my shoe and he moans, unable to talk without his tongue.

“Your job is to make sure they never find out the corpse he planted in that fire wasn’t him. He’s the crooked cop who cracked under the weight of his sordid deeds. His rampage left a stain on our city, and you’re cleaning the force out. You’ll retire a hero, and our plant will take over.”

He nods and glances nervously at the thick metal exit door across the room.

“I have the names of the officers and families that funded their failed coop.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jack wasn’t a victim. He’s Deputy Tanner’s cousin. Some people are upset about the way things have been in Chicago. They want a bigger piece of the pie, and they’re willing to shake shit up to make that happen.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“You are going to do everything we tell you to.”

“O-of course.” He bobs his head.

I chuckle. “Worried?”

He clears his throat. “Excited to get things started. People have noticed my absence.”

“You were tracking down time sensitive leads in a covert undercover operation. There are officers who will back you up on that.”

His head pops up and I laugh.

“Did you think you were the only one on the take? That we left it all up to you?”

His face becomes even paler. “What are you going to do with the Bracker family?”

“I’m going to take them apart piece by piece. And you’re going to push my agenda.”

“I can’t just target—”

“You don’t have a choice.” I point, and he stares at my blood-stained finger.

“Right.” clearing his throat, he licks his chapped lips.

“You said you were willing to get your hands dirty. I’ve yet to see that.” I hand him the bloody knife. “Consider this your initiation back into the club. Put him out of his misery.”

He takes the blade with a shaking hand and lumbers over to Tanner robotically. Kneeling stiffly, he grips Tanner’s neck. The man screams in pain and the Captain dry heaves as he jabs the knife into his throat. The deputy’s body shakes as his throat rattles with the sounds of his final breath.

“This is what we do to those who fail and betray us. You got too comfortable, and it almost exposed us. Never forget how narrowly you dodged your own death. Get up. Someone will come in and take you to be cleaned up and debriefed on the alternative course of action.”

I take the weapon from his trembling hand and walk to the door. I ignore him as I exit. Time alone with his failure will do him good.

“Is it finished?” Finn stands from his chair.



“By the captains’ hand.”

“Poetic, brother.” Finn claps and I give a small bow. “Have you been keeping our friend on edge?”

Finn smirks. “It’s been my pleasure.”

“It’s time I finish my message for delivery, then. We have two women waiting at home for us.”

“Make it count?” Finn growls.

“Trust me, I’ve been thinking about how I wanted to handle this.” I walk down to the next cell and open the door. I click on the light, and Jack blinks, looking up. Straightening in the chair he’s bound to, he leans away. The dark circles under his red-rimmed, blood-shot eyes show me Finn hasn’t let him sleep.

He’s unharmed. That honor belongs to me.

“Jack. I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

“Let me go. My parents won’t stand for this. Do you know who we are?”

I laugh. “Funny how much you think of yourself.” I walk into the circle of light and his eyes grow comically wide.

“Your cousin didn’t make it.”

He tugs against the ropes, rocking the chair.

“Don’t worry. You will. I need someone to serve as a reminder to your family that there are worse things than disappearing.” I crouch down beside him. “You value wealth, appearance, and sex.” Leaning in, I grip his hair and tilt it back. “Now you’ll have to learn how to get by differently.”

“What?” His voice cracks. I press the tip of my knife to his cheek, and he freezes. Digging the sharp metal into the flesh of his temple, I pierce the skin and drag down. “Be still. You don’t want my hand to slip.” Tears flow down his face and I add a few oblong cuts on the opposite side of his face.

“Now your outside matches your fucked up soul.”

Hyperventilating, he goes limp. I slice through his pants and boxers and reveal his pale, flaccid penis. I make the first cut. He jerks awake, screaming as I score it with deft lines that he'll feel every time he goes to fuck someone else. His voice cuts out as he slumps over.

I slap him awake. "That's for the hell you put Xan through. If you so much as speak to her in any capacity not directly related to your work, this will look like a vacation. Nod if you understand."

Whimpering like a wounded animal, he complies.

"Tell your parents this is just the beginning. If any of you try to go to anyone for help, I will come and finish what I started." I leave him bleeding, humiliated, and sobbing. It's not enough, but it's a start.

Leaving the mess behind, I move to the wash station, where I clean my blade and head to the showers. With my blood lust sated, I rinse off the evidence and shift my brain toward recovery and controlling the narrative.

My men are already at work building a solid story, planting digital information and using the attacks to their advantage. We have labeled the fires in the Tower criminal mischief.

They were hired to cause chaos, and now they're booked and transported to juvie. Stories are going to break in a few days and everyone on the force who turned against us will be outed.

Stepping from the shower in the dorm like set up, I grab a heated towel and dry off. One more loose end to tie with the O'Malley's and I can rest.

I pull on the standard sweat pants and t-shirt, and take my soiled clothing to the incinerator. It only takes one slip up to catch an indictment.

An hour later, Finn and I sit at my desk on a conference call with the rest of our family.

"What do you plan to do with the O'Malley's?" Da asks.

“That’s why we brought you in. I can’t make a call that big on my own.”

Da grunts. “Send the treacherous whelps back here to Ireland. We’ll let them deal with him and keep a close eye on the progress.”

“Do we take the other families at their word?” I ask.

“It’s hard to believe they didn’t know about the brother’s actions,” Troi adds.

“Aye. I agree with your brother.”

“What do you want to do then, Da?”

“We need a common interest. I want to combine our families. They don’t get to remain an independent entity any longer. I’ll speak with their father myself. You’ve done good, son.”

“Thank you, Da. I didn’t know how deep this was going to go.”

“And the Brancher family?”

“They will have a swift fall from grace. Starting with the disgraced Deputy.”

“Keep me posted. Troi will come to help Aine with the pub expansion. I’ll make him the point of contact with the O’Malley’s. I want you to focus on rebuilding trust for the shipments.”

I leave the meeting feeling lighter, with Finn in tow and one person on my mind. I drift in and out of sleep as we make the drive across the city to my aunt’s. The front door opens to reveal Carden and Xan, and I know without a doubt I’m meeting the eyes of my future spouse.

“You’re here,” she whispers.

“I am.” I step inside and she rises on her tiptoes and captures my mouth. Moaning, I lose myself in her sweet taste, inhaling her flowery scent as I leave behind the violence and pain that filled the past twenty-four hours.

Parting, I rest my forehead against hers as we catch our breaths.

“You must be exhausted.”

“I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

“Come on,” she pulls away, tugging my hand. “It’s my turn to take care of you.” I can’t remember the last time anyone did that. I lose another piece of my heart. Giving myself over to her care, I trust in a woman for the first time in my adult life.

# EPILOGUE

Rooney

## *Four Months later*

I stare at the woman across from me at the table in the living room. Dressed in a linen cloth and festival fall leaf placement mats, it's more formal than usual. Carden came by to decorate as the two of us celebrated her recent graduation and the new job she received from Memorial Hospital.

I watch her face, highlighted by the flickering flame of the candle in the dimly lit room.

"You went all out tonight. Thank you."

"I wanted to show you how proud I am of you."

"You tell me all the time," she grins.

"And I'll keep doing it as long as you smile at me like that."

"Stop," her cheeks tint red and I smirk.

"Love it when you blush."

"I noticed," she mumbles.

"I have a present I wanted to give you."

"You threw me a gigantic party at the Pub. I need nothing else." Reaching across the square table, she grabs my hand. She has no clue that her comments make me want to give her more. In a world where people weigh and measure every action, expecting an equal exchange, she's a breath of fresh air.

“This is one you’ll want.” I pull out the chair beside me and hand her a black box wrapped in a burned yellow bow.

She lifts the lid and her jaw drops. “What is this?” her hand shakes as she lifts the printed article.

“A copy of tomorrow’s paper.”

“Prestige member of the Brancher, Jack Brancher, has been charged with sexual harassment and stalking.”

“You keep all your receipts. You asked me to wait until after you graduated to take care of this, and I did.”

She closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’ll never have to see him again. I made sure they wouldn’t require you to be in the same room to testify. He’s going to plea guilty. They want to settle outside of court and they’ve agreed to my terms. Public acknowledgment of his crimes was one of them.” I bring her hand to my lips. “I love you, Xan.”

“I love you too, Roon.”

Releasing her hand, I stand and kneel in front of her. “You’ve captured what remains of my heart. Will you keep it safe for me for the rest of our lives?”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t even seen the ring yet.”

“I don’t give a fuck about that piece of jewelry.”

I throw my head back and laugh. “I know, pet. But humor me.” I pull the black velvet case from my pocket and open it to reveal the two-karat heart halo diamond on a platinum band.

“It’s beautiful.”

“So are you.” I slip it onto her ring finger. “I want to elope.”

“Okay.” She replies almost immediately.

“This weekend. I want to get married in Ireland, just us, and Carden and Finn. I know you want her there.”

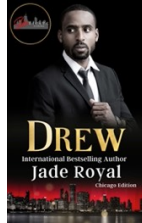
“When do we leave?”

“Now. Your sister packed for you.” Her eyes dance with excitement and she nods. Seeing her release her death grip on control has been beautiful.

“I’m ready.”

Rising, she takes my hand, and I savor the trust as I lead her from our home toward the next step in our life together.

# NEXT IN SERIES



Coming Nov. 30<sup>th</sup>

## Drew

LeeAnn, a former daycare owner, faces devastation when her business is destroyed. Drew Xander, now a vigilant bodyguard for the Ekon crime family, offers a tempting deal: provide crucial information in exchange for help rebuilding. Together, they must discover the facts behind the attacks on the Ekon family. But there's a catch—Drew doesn't trust her.

Back in college, their paths crossed, and their connection ran deep. They shared a passionate encounter, leaving an indelible mark on both of them. Now, as they grapple with their past and the dangerous present, they must navigate a risky trail to discover the facts behind the attacks on the Ekon family while LeeAnn's life remains in shambles.

“Drew” explores the power of love in a feuding war. Will their second chance lead to salvation or their ultimate downfall?



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shyla Colt is the sassy USA Today Bestselling author of the popular series Kings of Chaos and Dueling Devils M.C. This genre-hoppers stories feature three of her favorite things: strong females, pop culture, and alternate routes to happy ever after.

You can interact with Shyla Colt online via her website

[www.shylacolts.net](http://www.shylacolts.net)

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