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GUESTS

m a r c h e t t i m e n b o o k t w o

VEE TAYLOR

SECOND GUESS

Vee Taylor

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book, while strictly a work of fiction, is not a horse-and-carriage romance. I do not condone these situations or actions between characters, it is simply a work of fiction. There are no characters in this book based on anyone. It is just part of my imagination.

This book has heavy mentions of kink play, voyeurism, exhibitionism, anal play, breast play, nipple annihilation, bully, degradation, praise, CNC, Dub-Con, drugs and alcohol, sex trafficking, human trafficking, bully romance, Mafia, kidnapping, and murder.

There are also organizations that don't exist in today's world, so because this is a work of fiction, we can safely also assume these are stretched to fit our imagination.

AUTHOR'S NOTE PART II

This is the second book in the Marchetti Men series. While it can be read as a standalone, there are a lot of characters whose stories grow, and I highly suggest reading *One Chance* before moving to this book.

With that said, Chelsea's story has been annoying me before I even started *One Chance*, so I hope you enjoy her journey.

Dedicated to those who never let others yuck their yum.



1

Chels

Present

The city that never slept, where fantasies and nightmares came to life, where dreams were made and shattered in equal measure. Las Vegas, the city of sin, had a grip on me I couldn't shake. I felt alive amid the chaos and decadence. This was my playground, my kingdom, and nothing could stand in my way.

I have vacationed here every summer with my family since I could remember. Growing up in San Diego, the weather was endless sunshine, so going to a place where vices wandered freely opened a world for me.

I was born the perfect child. The only girl. A vision of golden locks and tanned skin. I was treated like the queen and always got whatever I needed and wanted. My parents made me live in a bubble, claiming it was to protect me from the world. I never went to a traditional school, had friends outside our family, and never ate out at a restaurant. I hated it.

It was when my parents passed away due to a tragic, unknown reason when I was in high school that this image shattered. I remember the bittersweet feeling the day they died because I was freed from the person I was forced to be for the last few years and could finally be myself.

I started partying and drinking the day my parents died, and got so fucked up at their funeral that I spent the next morning in a stranger's bed losing my virginity. I was seventeen when I popped my first Molly. My bedpost was practically broken with how many men I used for pleasure. I lived and breathed in that world, so it made sense why Las Vegas drew me in. I was obsessed with sinning.

Growing up as the golden child and being seen as the perfect little girl, got old fast. As a child, everyone commented on my bleach-blonde locks that flowed down my back or my bright-blue eyes. I had a "Cali-girl" accent and hated that I was molded into this person and, like a prisoner, stuck behind metaphorical bars. I wanted to prove to everyone how different I was.

My brother, Ronan, was five years older than me, but at the age of twenty-one, he was forced to take care of his fucked-up younger sister. In hindsight, I know he had a lot on his plate, and I was grateful he dropped out of college to stay with me. It forced him to grow up quickly; honestly, he became a major square. I was too consumed with avenging the image that everyone saw of me, and didn't have time to appreciate what he did for me.

Now, if it weren't for my three friends, I could almost guarantee I would be in a ditch somewhere. Daphne, Maeve, and Tatum worked at the same breakfast spot I did. Although, we were all very different personality-wise. None of them knew I worked only so I had something to do during the day. My parents died and left us with a boatload of cash. I didn't have access to it until I turned twenty-one, but there was no financial need for me to work.

A light tap came at the door and interrupted my thoughts. I pulled it open to see my bags had been delivered. I was only here for twenty-four hours, but you would think I was taking a week-long trip.

“Thanks!” I squealed at the bellman. He rolled his eyes.

It was a common response to my personality. I was boisterous and loud and often came off as phony and vapid. It was my hidden tool, though. Come off looking like a bimbo and then whip out gut-wrenching insults. They never saw it coming.

“Welcome back to the penthouse, Ms. O’Brien.” After dropping my bag, the man bowed and scurried out of the room. This trip wasn’t any different than the other times I had been here. I’d lied to my friends and told them I had to help my brother this weekend, and took off work to have a little taste of Sin City. I was craving something that would put me over the edge. When I thought about it too long, it was pathetic to be coming to a city alone—to party alone.

“Let’s find out what little dress you can conjure up this time.”

I pulled on a taut, low-cut baby-blue minidress that brought out the iciness in my eyes, and ran a hand down my body after I slipped it on. I was blessed with curves of a porn star. My large hips, bottom, and breasts were spilling out of the dress. I would be the envy of every girl at the club, and the object of desire for every man. It was perfect.

I curled my long blonde hair into loose waves and threw on more makeup. Once, I dated a guy in my good-girl phase, and he told me he loved women who weren’t high maintenance. I’d dumped him on the spot.

I’ve always obsessed over my hair, makeup, skin, shoes, and nails. I wasn’t easy to be with, and quite frankly, I didn’t care, nor did I need a male companion on my arm. A therapist would tell me it was part of my trauma from my parents dying, my incessant need to look perfect, and then my quick

obsession with the underworld and what it stood for. I didn't care because I didn't have a therapist.

I strode in my five-inch heels down the long carpeted hallway, then pressed the lobby button on the elevator. The clock told me it was well into the early hours of the night, which was the perfect time for immorality to come out and play.

The club was inside the lobby, so I didn't have to walk far, and when I got to the entrance, the line wrapped around the corner. Instead, I walked right up to the bouncer.

I batted my eyelashes and said, "Chelsea O'Brien."

He looked down at his list and nodded. As he opened the velvet rope to let me in, a roar of groans and annoyances came from the line.

I threw my hair over my shoulder and sauntered into the club's darkness.

"Ah." The crisp scent of spilled vodka and sweaty people wafted through my nose.

"Home." I laughed and walked over to the bar.

I was here for one reason. I hadn't had a good fuck since the last time I was here a couple weeks ago, and my core was desperate for a release. There was one big problem—vanilla sex didn't do it for me. I needed some excitement, because throwing me over the bed and giving me a few little thrusts was the most boring thing. These experiences, for me, were like hunting. I had the whole thing down to a science, really.

Sit at the bar and sip a few vodka sodas while chatting aimlessly with the bartender. Once I gained enough liquid courage, I turned toward the center of the club and leaned my elbows against the back of the bar. Hoisting my cleavage come while radiating golden-girl energy usually persuaded a mark to come slithering toward me.

It took me ten minutes to decide if they would give me even a taste of excitement. Usually, I could tell by the crudeness of

their approach. The more docile puppy dog would fuck me missionary into old age. The grittier, the closer the mark was able to satisfy me sexually. It was a challenge of sorts.

To this day, I've never received an orgasm from a man. I just wanted to find someone who would be able to appease me in the bedroom. Yet, they all seem to see me as ditzy Barbie. It was often a failure that created a darker circle of frustration.

I leaned my elbows back on the bar, and with the blue dress radiating in the club's glow, a puppy came crawling to mama. In the darkness, he had the same golden locks I did, except his were pulled up into a tight bun on top of his head. He had a thick beard and the physique of a wrestler. He wasn't tall but very broad-shouldered.

He would do.

"You here alone?" he asked, sliding in next to me.

"No." I giggled. I leaned into him so he could hear me. "My friends are just out there. It's so hot," I drawled.

I would never let the men know I was here alone. For one, because of, well, safety, duh. Second, I still wanted to maintain the good-girl façade because I didn't want them to know my dark side. I liked keeping it a secret, and enjoyed teetering the line between good and evil.

"You are so hot." His alcohol-infused breath reeked of desire.

"Thanks." I giggled.

I took a good look at him. He was handsome enough, but I was desperate for a means to an end. None of these pleasantries were quite necessary. Plus, I was already tired from the pulsing music and the social atmosphere.

"Wanna go to the bathroom?" I winked at him and whispered.

He grabbed my hand, and his touch didn't do anything for me. *Shit, this wasn't a good sign.* I attempted to trick my brain

into believing his fire and appetite would bring me through the droves of pleasure.

He guided me toward the exit.

“Wait.” I pulled on his arm, forcing him to stop. “Where are we going?” I gestured to the dark, shadowy corner of the club.

“Let’s go up to my room. I’ve got one of the suites in this hotel. It’s not far.”

Ugh. I rolled my eyes, thankful the dim lights of the club hid my exasperation. Staying inside this club was where sin grew. If we went out to the bright lights of the casino, it would be a major cockblock. I appreciated living in this deep world of sin and drugs, but the real world? They still got to enjoy the golden child, and that person certainly wouldn’t ever admit they wanted an audience while they took a cock deep into the back of their throat.

Turning on my charm, I pulled myself closer to him and heaved my breasts into his body, pressing into him. My hand slid to his pants, where I fingered the waistband of his jeans.

“I don’t want to go out there.” I bit the very top of his ear. “I want you to take me in here.”

I pulled him into the corner. I wish I could say I hadn’t been here before, but the darkness and I were good friends. It was hidden from any onlookers on the dance floor. Still, if you were exiting the bathroom and paying attention to where you were going, you would see two shadowed figures getting it on.

But my favorite part? The security camera pointed right at us. In a perfect line of vision, the person sitting behind it could see our bodies enmeshing.

The stranger ripped down my straps and sucked hard on my pebbled nipples.

“These are so fucking big and perky.” Most men were enthralled with my breasts. While I appreciated them, they didn’t serve me in anyway. I saw them all day long. I get that

they're big; they're in my face all day too. Why would I want them in yours?

I feigned a moan and said, "Yes, you like that?"

"Fuck yeah. You are such a babe."

Come on. Rip off my panties, let me suck your cock. Do something. This dance was exhausting for me.

"Put on a show for them," I whispered while biting hard on his lower lip, drawing a bead of blood.

"What the fuck?" The guy lifted a hand to examine the pain I had left behind.

My doe eyes just exaggerated, feigning innocence.

"Oops." I thrust my tongue deep into his mouth, lapped up the very hint of iron, and swallowed our saliva.

He unzipped his pants, and his large erection sprouted through. Ugh, he couldn't even take them off all the way? *Snooze.* I guess I had to switch directions in my mind. Clearly, this man wouldn't be able to give me the show I desired, but maybe a good lay would take the edge off. God, I felt like such a dude saying this.

I let him edge inside of me. My eyes heated with fevered passion. He's got one thing going for him—at least he was big and girthy.

I turned on the heat. My eyes blazed straight into the camera. I threw my head back in a lustful moan as his appetite grew and the pounding against my core quickened.

My lips parted. My eyes rolled and I cried louder, hoping that someone from the bathroom would hear us and get curious. But I couldn't take my eyes off the camera while knowing the hotel had a twenty-four-seven security staff watching me desperately unfurling from my good-girl persona.

My attention snapped to the man who was calling me.

"Hello?!" His thrusts slowed to a languid pace.

“Why did you stop?” I puffed my lips out in disappointment.

“What are you watching?” He turned toward the camera while pulling out, and liquid dripped down my thigh.

When he realized what I was doing and who I was performing for, he looked back at me.

“Are you watching the security camera while I fuck you?” There was no point in fighting this with him. This guy wasn’t going to do it for me anyway.

“Yeah.”

“Why?” he questioned while his erection leaked precum onto the floor. God, what a picture this must be. My lips turned into a small smile.

“Because I like people watching.”

The man pulled up his zipper, and his eyes were filled with a dark fury.

“You are fucking weird.” I laughed psychotically at him. He certainly wasn’t the first person to tell me this and wouldn’t be the last.

“Fucking disgusting,” he added for effect before stomping off.

Before pulling my dress up, I looked straight at the camera and licked my lips. I threw two fingers into my core and leaned against the cold black wall. Deep in the shadows, I shoved them inside me and continued thrusting. The heat exploded from me as my ravenous hunger increased. The pressure burned inside me; I was so close.

“Ah.” I writhed onto my fingers, but the orgasm never came.

The itch to taste the sin diminished, and cool satiation passed over me. I opened my eyes and stared into the camera while dragging my fingers out. One by one, I licked myself off them; my lips turned up, knowing the person behind it was

aching to touch. Call me cocky, but my confidence was one of my favorite features.

I moved my dress back into position and fluffed up my hair. After taking a few steps forward, I blew a kiss at the camera, then followed the exit sign out.

I threw my hair over my shoulders as the bright casino lights beckoned me forward. I adjusted the look on my face, and within moments, the dark shadows left and the golden girl was back.

With one glance back at the dark, pulsating club, I gave a sad smile. In another lifetime . . .



2

Chels

Six Months Later

“I can’t believe you are getting married already!” I squealed while throwing a bunch of glitzy and sequin dresses inside a bag.

“I know. I just didn’t want to wait, you know? I guess I don’t really see the point. We live together. We act like a married couple, so we may as well.”

Tatum and the girls were sitting around her living room as we packed for her bachelorette party in Vegas. She and Julian had gotten engaged a month ago, but their wedding was only a couple weeks away.

“I cannot believe Julian is letting you go to Vegas alone.” Daphne huffed in the background. She was always the most logical one.

She was sitting on one of the leather couches with her feet up on the coffee table. We were like yin and yang together, but

we'd connected the most between the four of us. They do say opposites attract—and they do, in our friendship, at least.

“He’s not. Not only will James have to be with us the entire time, but Christian and his brother, Alex, are going to meet us at the club. Julian promised he would let us stay in the room ourselves, but going to the club alone was a hard no.”

I yawned. This was why marriage or relationships weren't my thing. I hated the fact that a man could control where I went and who I went out with. I knew Julian was some Mafia man, but that didn't mean I would ever allow a man to tell me I needed security. Though it worked for Tatum.

“I am so happy we are going with the Vegas queen here,” Maeve chimed.

When Tatum had asked me about going there for her bachelorette, it was hard for me to say no, but I wanted to scream at her. Vegas was my place. I wanted to keep it mine, but she was so insistent. I wanted to keep the part of me I loved stuck in the shadows of Sin City's nightclubs. I finally folded and agreed to show them around after Tatum begged.

“It's really nothing.” My cheeks reddened.

We spent the rest of the afternoon packing up our outfits and then James, Tatum's bodyguard-slash-driver, loaded the four of us in the car to make the four-hour drive. I felt bad for him because we had been three shots in and were blasting 2000 Britney through the car the entire ride.

“Shit,” I grumbled, hoping the girls wouldn't hear me.

This was the hotel I always came to. I was hoping we would stay at any other hotel since there were dozens on the Strip. I assumed we were staying here because Julian booked the best, and The Palace was truly a taste of luxury.

It was a large hotel with multiple towers. Unlike the others, it had no immediate theme, other than being over-the-top. It was modern, up-to-date, and held Vegas's most expensive poker tournaments. When I exited the car, I took a deep breath, and the word “home” wafted through my ears.

“Holy shit! This is amazing, T,” Maeve exclaimed, joining me on the circle drive where the valet was already grabbing our bags.

“What room are we staying in?” I asked, hoping they wouldn’t say the penthouse. It felt too much like home. There was too much sin and too many morally gray activities that went on in there.

“Isn’t it beautiful?! Julian wanted us to get the top suite, but I insisted that it felt like a sleepover, so we compromised with just the two-bedroom suite in the Marble Tower.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief, thankful it wasn’t my penthouse.

“Are the boys here already?” Daphne asked.

“I think they’re inside getting us checked in. Let’s go meet them,” Tatum responded.

We walked into the cream marble lobby. The slot machines’ pings echoed through the vast hotel. It was modern, sleek, and full of people who were enthralled by Sin City.

“Boys!” Tatum screamed through the bustle of noise. She bolted straight for Julian, who happened to be checking in at the same time as us, even though they were only meeting us that night at the club.

Julian was handsome in a frightening sort of way. He was covered in tattoos, and his shoulders were broad. He wore all black and almost appeared to be today’s modern-day Hades, Lord of the Underworld. Next to him was Christian, one of his bodyguards. He stood out from the group because he had lighter brown hair pulled back with gel. He was the largest of the guys, both in height and muscle size. His presence was intimidating, but we have all grown to know him as a golden puppy.

The third body, I didn’t recognize. He was clean-cut compared to the rest and wore a pair of khakis with a pressed white button-down. He had a gray bag slung over his shoulders, which weren’t as broad as Julian’s, but he was

definitely taller than him. His black hair was shorter and gelled back without a single strand out of place. Unlike the other two gentlemen, he had no visible tattoos, and honestly, by the way he was standing all stiff and annoyed, he looked so out of place. As we walked closer to him, his deep-brown eyes were full of exhaustion. There were swirls of golden fire inside of them. They were so haunting and quite interesting.

Otherwise, his tight jawline, that appeared like it could snap a jawbreaker without effort, his large hands, and his tanned skin were so similar to Julian's. There was such a familial appearance to them. Too bad he looked like a golden boy. We would be a vision together. The blonde and the brunette were clean-cut. There was absolutely no way he would ever begin to satisfy me in the bedroom.

"Alex!" Tatum went and gave her future brother-in-law a kiss on his cheek.

Maeve whistled from the corner. "What the heck is it with these Marchetti men? They are all so *hot*."

Daphne giggled, and I stared at her.

"You know about a secret brother I don't?" I whispered to her, and she blushed.

I linked my arm through hers while we walked over to them.

"Hey, I am Chelsea, but these girls just call me Chels." I reached out to shake his hand when we approached them.

He stared at my hand like I had venom spewing from it, then looked down at my toes and back up very slowly, as if he was undressing me with his eyes. He yanked up my tight skinny jeans and the low-cut bodysuit I was wearing. For me, I was quite covered up, but I never felt more naked.

"Uh, okay," I said before he got to my face.

The silence was louder than the noise in the casino.

When he finally got up to my eyes, that emptiness I'd seen earlier was deeper. The dark-brown eyes were a deep-black hole full of despair.

He coughed once, and the noise was unnerving.

“You look terrible. Cover up.” He turned around and went to the check-in desk without so much as another word.

“I am so sorry.” Tatum came over to me and gave me a big hug. “He usually isn’t like that.”

I brushed lint off my shoulders, like I physically had to brush off his comment.

Julian came by and grabbed Tatum by the waist.

“He’s grumpy because his campaign for governor is going awry. A real sunshine,” Julian said as he dropped a kiss on Tatum’s cheek.

“Barf,” Daphne retorted.

“It is totally whatever,” I lied. “Let’s just go and party, please, and leave these boys alone.”

I shook my shoulders, and couldn’t imagine the future governor of our state would be the same dickhead that said that to me. God, he sucked and definitely wouldn’t get my vote.

I went over to the desk to get us checked in while everyone was mingling. Alex had already sulked off and, I presume, checked the guys in.

“Hi, I am checking in for Tatum Sloane.”

The attendant behind the desk was a very attractive man in his early thirties. His face was chiseled, and even though he was dressed in his uniform, he looked like a book cover model.

“Yes, of course, ma’am. Can I see your ID, please?”

I grabbed my driver’s license from my purse and handed it to him.

“I’m on the reservation, but it isn’t in my name.”

After typing viciously on his computer, he excused himself to go to the back. A few moments later, he was accompanied

by an older man.

“Ms. O’Brien. I am so sorry. I didn’t realize this was your reservation. We have the penthouse available and will move your friends to that suite. Again, our apologies for not realizing it was you.”

“Hold on. Wait. I didn’t make the reservation. A friend of mine did. We wanted the smaller suite. It is just fine.”

The older man nervously typed while looking at me. The other attendant was staring at my chest like it was going to light on fire in front of his face. He could barely keep the drool inside.

“Please, Ms. O’Brien. It is absolutely our pleasure to have you back. We have all your friends’ suitcases already being transferred upstairs.”

Ugh. There was no point in arguing with him. He was just doing his job.

“Okay, thank you so much,” I drawled, licking my lips for effect. In that moment, the younger attendant stood, then wiggled his legs to quickly adjust the bottom of his suit pants. Of course, he was hard. He was just another puppet in this world I could play around with.

I grabbed the papers they handed me, and the older gentleman left with a nod.

“This may be crossing a boundary, but if you are ever curious, there is a club that would love for you to join us. It’s just off the Strip. Call the number on the back, and a car will come to pick you up. We open at one a.m.”

He handed me a business card and winked at me. *Gross.*

“You are right, it is unprofessional.” I grabbed the card off the desk and walked to where my friends were now halfway through a margarita.

“The boys left?” I mused.

“Yeah, after you kicked them out,” Daphne grumbled in her typical grumpy tone.

I gave her a big hug, something she detests, and a kiss on the cheek.

“I love you too.” She smiled back at me. We had the type of friendship where she grumbled and I leaked the golden into her.

“Anyway.” I turned toward the rest of the group. “They heard you were marrying Julian Marchetti and upgraded us to the penthouse.”

“The penthouse!!” Maeve squealed, grabbing my hands and jumping up and down.

“What is that?” Tatum just asked.

“Oh my God. It is like an entire tower. There are two floors, four bedrooms, a private butler, a private chef, and an automatic table at the nightclub in the lobby. It is a freaking dream. I cannot believe you got us upgraded.”

She embraced me, and I offered a meek smile. I hated lying to my friends, but I didn’t want to broach the truth with them.

“Yeah, you are so lucky, T.”

“Julian is going to be so jealous.” She laughed and then linked arms with me. I grabbed my bags, and we headed up to the penthouse tower.

After an elevator ride up to our room, we were greeted by the butler.

“Welcome ba—”

I shook my head and glared daggers at him. If looks could kill, he would be dead.

“Hello, my name is Chels, and these are my friends. Thanks for upgrading us.” I grabbed his hand and shook it. The poor guy looked so confused but eventually grasped on to what I was trying to put out there.

“Welcome to the penthouse. Your bags have been delivered and placed in their respective rooms. There is one room downstairs and then three upstairs.”

He opened the door, and the sparkling Las Vegas skyline stood before us. I loved the way the lights twinkled in the darkness. It was the perfect mirage for the sin that breathed inside the streets of this place. A marriage of light and dark. The perfectly gray city for the most morally gray person I knew.

Me.

“I’ll take the room downstairs if you guys don’t mind?” I asked, heading toward the room where I knew my bags would already be. It was my preferred room. It was the smallest of the four bedrooms and the darkest since it was inside the suite. I loved the way I could just let the shadows envelop me.

“Are you sure? You are the one who got us the upgrade,” Maeve asked at the door, looking around the small room.

“I love it in here. It is cozy.” I offered a smile, and she left. The girls squeaked upstairs as they were welcomed with large rooms with sweeping skyline views.

I threw my stuff on the bed and then jumped on top of it, staring at the ceiling. If blood could run cold, mine would be ice right now. I felt so close to getting caught in the lie I lived. A second life I loved keeping to myself, yet my friends almost understood it. It was exhausting to keep up with this duality, yet I didn’t know what I would do without each part of me. The dark and the light couldn’t mix. I closed my eyes and let the darkness pull me under.

“Wake up!” Hands pushed on my ankles, and through the foggy vision, I glanced at Daphne.

“Here I was thinking I was in a kinky sex dream,” I murmured through my daze.

Daphne laughed in the corner before saying, “I told you guys we should just keep letting her sleep.”

“No, we gotta go!” Tatum whined.

“What time is it?” I asked when I finally got up from the bed.

“It’s ten! We gotta be at the club in an hour. Get up and get ready. We are wearing black, so the bride can be in white.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Shit, I’m sorry you guys. I will get ready quick, I swear.”

Maeve and Tatum left the room and presumably went upstairs to get dressed while Daphne lingered at the door.

“This was on the ground while you were sleeping. I figured you didn’t want the others to see it, so I grabbed it before they could.” She threw a crumpled piece of paper on the bed before leaving the room.

What was she talking about? I walked over to the bed. It was the piece of paper the hotel attendant gave to me. I opened it slowly, and it wasn’t any larger than the size of a business card.

Madam Curity’s

Presents Voyeurs & Exhibitionists Alike

A kink club for those who like to watch and be watched.

Masks required.

All welcome.

1-6 a.m.

I turned the card over, and just a phone number was scratched onto it. How weird. I had never heard of a kink club. It had to be a place that only weirdos went to. Not something a good girl like myself would ever attend. Either way, I put it in my bra. I’m not sure why, but I did and continued to get dressed.

Because I wanted Tatum to be the star, I chose a modest—well, for me—black silk dress that hit me midhigh, and wore a strapless bra because the neckline was gathered a bit and melted into my cleavage. I chose a pair of lace-up stilettos, and my makeup was darker than normal. In fact, I looked nothing like me. This outfit was darker than I ever would wear, and for once, I was dressed like the sin that lived inside of me.

“Whoa,” Daphne said from my bedroom. I spun to face her from the adjoining bathroom. Contrary to me, she always wore black, so seeing her in black jeans and a low-cut black top was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Thanks, D.” I walked over to her.

“Hey, listen, about that paper you saw. I just found it. It’s not like—”

“I don’t judge. I know the others may see you as this big party girl, but I also know one day, when you decide to tell your story to us, it will help us figure out a clear path to the real you.”

I smiled softly at my friend and gave her a small hug. This was too melancholic for me right now, so I walked us out to the living area. The bartender was making our drinks, and we grabbed the first two and downed them. Daphne because she hates anything social, especially nightclubs, and me because, well, who knows?

“Here comes the bride,” Maeve sang from the top floor. Both of them glided down the stairs.

Tatum was beautiful. Her curves were similar to mine but more even, where I really had a large chest, my backside wasn’t as evolved. She had on a tight white bondage dress and was sporting a small veil.

“This veil is so dumb.” We all laughed before agreeing but still forced her to wear it out.

“The boys are going to meet us out, but I promise you won’t even see them there. This night is for us!” Tatum told us.

“Cheers!” We clinked our glasses in unison.

Because we were gifted the penthouse, the girls insisted we go to the club in the lobby. When we walked in, I couldn't help but notice the dark corner where I had lived in my sin just a few months ago. We rounded the center of the club to where the booths were in the VIP section. Tatum had ordered us a round of drinks, and at this point, we were all feeling quite tipsy.

Daphne was lying back at the end of the couch, a permanent grimace on her face.

“Get up and dance with us.” I tugged at her arms.

She mumbled through the beats of the nightclub. I let her go and joined my other two friends on top of the table in front of our lounge, then we kicked all the booze off. When the beat hit, we bounced to it. I let the energy of the club leak into my pores, and the darkness beckoned. *Just a little bit deeper*, it murmured.

Between the three of us, we had drawn quite a crowd to the rope in front of our table. Through the dim lights of the club, a few men were catcalling from the other side of the rope. A show? Why not give it to them? The teeth of immorality made their way to my lungs as I breathed in the smell of sin.

I grabbed Maeve's hand, and she threw them up in the air. I then bent at the waist and shoved my back against Maeve. As the chorus of the song hit, I was grinding into her. My breasts bounced with the beat, practically spilling out of my silk dress.

“Eek!” Maeve squealed, grabbing my waist as I thrust against her. The fragile fabric of my dress rode up as I twerked. Both of us laughed hysterically.

I looked up when I felt the cool touch against my skin. It was raining . . . paper?

“Yes, bitches!” Tatum screamed from the other side of the table while throwing dollar bills at us. I reached up and collected a few to shove into my cleavage.

For effect, I stuck my tongue out at Tatum. Maeve smacked my ass a few times. We had gathered quite a crowd, and even Daphne was watching with a smile on her face.

I turned around to face Maeve, the thrills of the crowd edging us on only bringing out my confidence. We danced face-to-face, rocking to the beat. Our hands went in the air when Maeve came down and grabbed a dollar bill from my chest with her teeth. She waved it around like a reward.

I was rocking to the song and closed my eyes to let the city of sin sink deeper.

“Ah! Get off me!” someone screamed, and my attention snapped toward it.

Christian hoisted Maeve by her thighs off the table and settled her on the couch. He had a glass of water in his hand, trying to coax her to drink some. Sure enough, Julian was outside the ropes, dispersing the crowd. I’m sure he was actually threatening them within an inch of their life, but I couldn’t hear.

The other one, Alex, was just standing outside our booth, his eyes glued to mine. I couldn’t discern what was inside them, but his hands were crossed against his body. He seemed different from the senator I saw earlier. He was wearing a plain T-shirt and jeans. From his elbow up were swirls of colorful ink that acted like tree branches crawling into his shirt.

Julian lifted Tatum off the table and peppered her in kisses. It was only me left on top of the table, and no one seemed to want to take me off.

“Do you need help down?” Daphne gestured to me with an open arm.

I just shook my head. Alex was still standing there. Well, if a performance is what he wanted, I would happily oblige. Instead of getting off the table, the next song reverberated through the club. I raised my hands into the air and moved my hips side-to-side as the buildup took me back into the hole of despair. The dark part of me seeped through my pores.

I moved my hands down my body, caressing myself. If pleasuring myself alone was what he wanted, then that was what I would give him.

While caressing my breasts, I glared right at him. My tongue rolled along my plush lips. The intensity was plunging me deeper. His face didn't move, not even a single tic in his jaw, but he didn't stop staring at me. He pushed his hands deeper into his pocket the more I arched my waist to the beat.

I let my fingers trail lower, and when they finally got to the hem of my dress, as I rocked my hips back to the song, I pulled it up in front. I wasn't wearing any underwear, so I tugged it higher and higher toward my core. Anyone in the club walking by would have been privy to this show, but it only wound me up more.

Just as I was about to expose myself to everyone, he snapped. He stomped toward me and grabbed me by my waist.

"Ow! You are hurting me!" I screamed so he heard me through the noise of the club.

"I don't give a fuck. You look indecent," he growled, and pulled me so I was facing him, but my feet were now on the ground. He didn't let go of my waist. In fact, he dug his nails deeper into my skin.

He leaned down into the shell of my ear and whispered, "You looked like a fucking sloppy slut."

I pulled away from him, trying to hide the shock from my face, and stared right into his deep-brown orbs.

"I bet you liked it," I retorted, and our lips were practically touching.

He leaned down again and just laughed. We were covered by the tall table from the waist down, but our friends were still on the other side. They all appeared to be listening to Julian, not paying attention to us. He pulled my chin toward him and dug his fingers into my face. With his free hand, he trailed under the dress, where I had just been exposed, and slid through my folds.

“And I knew you were wet with how you were looking at me.” He swiped against my core, and when he pulled his fingers back up, they were glistening in the dark glow of the nightclub. He shoved his fingers into my mouth, so I tasted myself on them.

“You are nothing but a dirty whore.” He spoke through gritted teeth before pulling away. He grabbed one of the dollars from my cleavage and stuck it into his pants pocket, then walked to where our friends were.

“I’m out of here. See you tomorrow, brother.” Alex clapped Julian on the back and left the same way he came without looking back.

As he stalked off, a loud bang rang through the nightclub. Julian jumped out of his seat and pulled a gun from his waistband, moving in the direction of where his brother was.

“Watch where you are going!” Alex screamed at one of the bottle servers. A waitress had spilled her tray at the table next to us.

“I am *so* sorry!” she exclaimed while scrambling to clean up the pieces of broken glass.

Alex huffed but helped her grab a few of the pieces. As they rose, the waitress looked at him with wet eyes.

“Oh my God! You are bleeding. Please let me get someone to help you.”

Alex touched the side of his neck, where a small scratch pooled with blood. Julian approached him with a few napkins, but he just shook them off.

“Get off. I am fine.” He dabbed his hand on his neck, blood coating his fingertips as he continued toward the exit.

Daphne immediately came up to me, worry coating her eyes.

“Are *you* okay?” she asked.

It took me a second to respond. Was I okay? I was practically leaking onto the floor, and compared to the experience I had in this nightclub six months ago, my body was wrecked. Yet my curiosity was piqued at an all-time high. The need inside of me raged against my bones.

“I have no idea,” I said honestly and then linked arms with her before going to sit with the others, ignoring the stares Tatum and Maeve were giving me. I had no clue what had just happened to me, but I was amiss to say I needed more. The problem was that this feeling was not going to go away either.



3

Alex

Present

I was going to be the governor of California. I shouldn't be seen with a girl drawing the attention of an entire nightclub by seducing them with her tits. This whole bachelor party was a joke, anyway. I loved my older brother, but I knew it was just his way of spying on his future wife.

When our mamma died, my brother, dad, and I made a pact to swear off women in our lives. Julian was the first to break it, and would be the only one. I had no interest in having a woman, even if my campaign manager told me it would be better for optics. In fact, she railed into me about the importance of optics the whole way up here, which was one of the biggest reasons I wasn't in the mood.

Plus, anytime I came to Vegas, there was one place that beckoned me. It was the only locale my carnal desires could actually be satisfied. It also allowed me to explore without fear that someone would blackmail me and use me for their own gain.

Although my brother thought I went back upstairs to our room, I opted to head to the front of the modern hotel, where one of my cars was waiting.

“Mr. Marchetti. Welcome back,” my driver, Gino, greeted me at the corner of the roundabout.

He was an older man with salt-and-pepper hair. He had very strong Italian features to him though, with a large mustache. He must have been a catch with the ladies in his prime. We got introduced because he used to work for my papa when he worked for the Cosa Nostra Syndicate, but they both left at the same time. Next thing I knew, he was my driver. I knew enough not to ask many more questions.

“Gino.”

I climbed into the back of the black town car and closed the door after getting in, then slipped an address to Gino. He never spoke about my indiscretions or the places I asked him to take me on my off time, especially in Vegas. I kept him around because he had kept that loyalty to me.

“There are some napkins in the back for your cut, sir,” Gino mentioned.

The waitress’s tray was filled with empty bottles, and a piece of glass nicked my neck. The cut was superficial so, eventually, the trickle calmed down, and the car came to a stop.

We were a few blocks off the Strip. The place was in a seedy part of town, with homeless encampments surrounding the area and a few rogue drug dealers on the corners. Upon first look, to a layperson, you would think you were just going into a corner sex toy shop. The store was a dingy gray, and the broken flashing light on top wasn’t the slightest bit welcoming.

I stepped out of the car and gave Gino a curt nod before heading inside. It was the middle of the night, and while other senators were scurrying in for fear of what grew from the

darkness, I was happily begging for it. A golden, good-boy persona with a heart that bled black.

I pulled open the door, and the stench of plastic sex toys permeated the air. The bright fluorescent lighting was an extremely unflattering spotlight. I walked over to the front counter, where a kid who couldn't be much older than eighteen was standing. This wasn't my first rodeo. I had been here a few times and knew exactly what to do to gain entrance.

"Curity for the curious." I stared blankly at the kid behind the counter.

"Mask?" he responded.

I held up a bull mask. I had gotten it during one of my trips to Spain, and originally was going to be a piece of artwork in my house, but when I found this masked club in Vegas, I figured it would be the perfect piece. It was a deep-crimson color with ornate gold accents. It had a long bull nose on the front and very small slits for just my pupils to peep through. The most dramatic part of the mask was the two large horns that came from its sides. If I wore it, no one would be able to tell I was about to be their governor, and there would be no way anyone could use anything for blackmail.

I put on the mask as the kid led me to the back of the store. He rapped three times on a door that read "Janitor's Closet." It opened slightly, and a man in a black suit looked at me, asked for a code name again, and let me in.

Now, this was Vegas opulence. The moment you walked in the back door and down the stairs, the smell of cheap lust was gone. It was replaced by the taste of luxury. The entire room was a deep black and lined with green velvet couches. There was a small lobby waiting room where the Madam would greet you and determine if you wanted to watch or participate. She would separate the males and females into two rooms. In this particular club, the woman had the final decision on who she wanted to play with.

As a teenager, I had always experimented with exhibitionism and voyeurism. I threw parties at my papa's house after Mamma passed away. I would often just sit in my room as I watched my friends get off on their girlfriends. I didn't know why I got off on it, but growing up, my desire grew thick. The older I became, the more I loved being a participant. I loved the idea of having sex and being caught in public places. Although, becoming a political figure, I couldn't attain this anymore, so I needed to find a way to keep my anonymity while feeling the release I so desperately desired. After my future sister-in-law's friend's performance, I knew I needed to come here.

Before I could spare another thought, a lady in her forties came out of the roped-off back room wearing a stunning silk maxi dress. Her black curly hair was styled on the top of her head in such a way it almost appeared like a crown, and two dark shadows stayed glued to her.

"Senator Marchetti," she purred.

Although we were in masks, she was the only one who knew our true identities. She was also the only person in the club who did not wear a mask. Even her bodyguards had masks on. From what I understood, this place was full of the crème de la crème of society. There were no prostitutes or escorts. Everyone here was simply curious. The beauty of not knowing who you were with was part of the excitement.

"Madam Curity." I grabbed her hand and laid a small peck on the top.

"You are too kind. I assume you are coming to participate?" she asked.

There were two options in the club. You could either participate or you could watch.

Everyone was guided into different rooms. The rooms were all outfitted like a luxurious hotel. The only difference was the large floor-to-ceiling window next to the door so those who

chose to watch could see through to the center of the room. Each room was different in the toys, pleasure, or participants.

“Yes, I’m going to participate tonight,” I responded, linking my hands to hers and letting her guide me through the roped area where the rooms were.

“Security will need to do a thorough pat down before I can lead you all the way through,” she explained.

I nodded, and two big men in black shirts, pants, and headsets came by and did a thorough pat down. They asked me to remove anything from my pockets, including my cell phone, which they took to the locker room. All phones were confiscated and kept in a safe. They also had me peel off my shirt to inspect for any additional recording devices. After they checked each cavity and seemed satisfied with their search, Madam Curity gestured for me to follow her.

As we walked past the few rooms, quite a few participants were looking at and engaging with one masked couple. There were two men in lion masks and a female in a duck mask. They were fucking her on a large bed at the same time using a variety of toys, such as nipple clamps, and I was sure I saw a butt plug as well. They had driven quite a crowd, as several masked onlookers touched themselves as the two men drove into the woman, making her cry in pleasure.

“Are you sure you don’t want to look tonight?” Madam Curity paused at the window, noticing my curiosity piqued.

I smiled at her, and she continued down the hallway. Each room had a light so you could view the room. The participants clicked the light on when they were ready for an audience. There was one rule for the club. No playing could go on unless a light was on. Whether you attracted an audience depended on how into it and interesting the participants were.

The rooms were all adorned with plush beds, creating an inviting and comforting atmosphere for its participants. They all reeked of the opulence of the most luxurious hotels, yet the

glass wall allowed participants outside of it to bask in the pleasure.

“Here we are.” Madam Curity stopped at the very last room.

It was adorned with a simple cream-colored duvet cover and a large headboard with hooks and chains. A dresser in the corner of the room held a plethora of toys, if desired.

“I presume you will want to go more than once?” Madam Curity questioned as she held open the door to the room.

“Let’s see where the night takes us,” I responded.

“And a recording of the videos?” She looked up at the room’s corners, where security cameras pointed straight at the bed. Each participant was offered the option to review their tape and keep it for later usage or to have it destroyed completely. The choice here was obvious.

“Destroy them.” I gave her a curt nod and then went into the room. Then I undressed and waited on the bed dutifully for my first victim. The sin in my pores leaked with desire, and my body writhed in anticipation. Let the games begin.



4

Chelsea

Present

After the ordeal with Alex, I felt a little . . . empty. While my friends danced—or grimaced, in Daphne’s case—the evening felt quite mundane. Julian had banned Tatum from going out on the dance floor. Because it was her bachelorette, I decided to stay by the table and dance and mingle with my friends.

I loved my friends, I really did, but the fact I was in the city of sin and nothing was happening was boring to me.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said to no one in particular.

I went to the bathroom and rested my elbows on the counter, then ran my hands through my blonde locks that had fallen a little from their curls, and stared back at the golden child on the other side of the mirror.

“He’s right. You are pathetic,” I said out loud.

The girl next to me fixing her lipstick side-eyed me.

“Oh, shit. Am I talking to myself? Ugh, too much to drink, I guess!” I exclaimed.

The girl just shook her head and walked out of the bathroom. God, I was completely losing it. I ran my fingers through some of my curls one more time before adjusting my dress, then pulled the girls up and out a little bit. The crumpled business card popped out and landed on the floor.

I picked it up from the floor and opened it again. A kink club. Why did I even save this? This is ridiculous.

Isn't it?

Ugh. I ran my fingers through my hair and just stared at the business card, frustrated beyond belief.

“Get it together,” I whispered to myself.

Fuck it. YOLO. You only get one life, so I should start living it for myself.

“This is absurd. I am going to go.”

I was going to freaking do it. Maybe I would actually be able to reach an orgasm this time around. I pulled my shoulders back and looked at the girl in the mirror as darkness poured into my pupils. She was open to new experiences. The issue would be trying to get out of the club without my friends causing a commotion.

I walked back out of the bathroom with determination running through my veins. When I reached their table, Daphne was sleeping on the couch. I shook her shoulders abruptly.

“What the—”

“Where is Maeve?” I asked, looking over to where Tatum was humping Julian in the middle of the table, her dress riding up dangerously high.

“She left a half hour ago with Christian. I was waiting for you but am heading up now.” She yawned.

“I think I’m going to meet up with a friend.”

Daphne’s eyes narrowed while I figured out how to work this lie in my favor.

“I come here often, and a friend invited me to an after-party. They have a car waiting for me out front.”

“I will come with you,” Daphne begrudged.

“No. Please. I will send you my location so you know I’m all good.” I pulled my phone out and sent her my location tracker, knowing all too well she would crash when she got to the room.

“Okay. I am too tired to argue.”

She got up from the couch, and we walked out of the club after waving goodbye to Tatum and Julian. Once we got outside the club, I kissed her on the cheek.

“You’ll be safe?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Of course. I promise,” I lied. I cannot promise I’ll be safe because what I’m doing is walking with danger.

She left for the Penthouse Tower, and I went to the lobby and called the number on the back of the card. A young woman’s friendly voice filled the line.

“Madam Curity’s club access line.”

“Oh, hello. My name is Chels, and I was given this card by the attendant at the hotel I am staying at. I was wondering—”

“Of course, Ms. O’Brien. You’ll be the third black town car in the circle outside of the lobby. Your driver is waiting for you. Her name is Madison.”

They hung up as quickly as they answered, and I pulled the phone from my ear and stared at it for a moment. How did they know my last name? It felt almost as if they were expecting me to call. What was this place?

The check-in desks in the lobby were empty. The attendant that had helped us this morning was gone. Huh. I guess he might have told them my last name. Although, that was an incredible invasion of privacy.

A sliver of me wondered if he had seen my “performances” in the nightclub. They were in the same building and probably

shared the same security room. It was plausible. Maybe that was why he handed me the card in the first place. Although it was extremely unprofessional and assumptive, which I could easily get him fired for, it was the logical explanation.

As if an unearthed energy existed, I was compelled to walk out of the doors of the building. A force pulled me deeper into the shadows of darkness. With each step, I shedded my good-girl persona.

Finally, I reached the third car in the roundabout, and a slender lady was already walking toward the sidewalk. She was dressed in a black pantsuit and was incredibly attractive.

“Ms. O’Brien. We have been waiting for you.” She opened the car door, and I blinked at her a few times, but she just smiled at me.

“Please, I will explain everything.” She motioned toward the car.

I knew there was no going back if I got into the car. I would get sucked into a world I wasn’t sure I’d want to get out of. What if I loved it too much to maintain the golden-girl status I was desperate to portray to the outside world?

I slid into the vehicle, knowing the shadow world would feel satisfying and comfortable. I was desperate for a taste of what a real release felt like. The door closed behind me, and instead of fear taking over my body, a smile crept in.

Madison was in the driver seat before I settled in, and we pulled out of the drive. It was silent as she headed off the main strip and into the darkness.

“We will first park in front of a pleasure shop,” she said, breaking the silence.

“We will walk into the back and then you will meet Madam Curity herself. She will show you into the ladies’ area. You’ll go ahead and pick your mask and then, because the ladies have full control, you will go ahead and pick which room you would prefer playing in.” She spoke eloquently, as if she was talking to you about where the restroom was.

“Playing?” I asked, feeling like such a newbie.

“Yes. There are lots of rooms with different sexual experiences you can explore. Some prefer toys, multiple partners, group play, etc. You will understand when we get there.” She glanced at me through the rearview mirror.

Her lips turned into a comforting smile before she said, “I was nervous the first few times too. Just remember, this club was invented for women by women. Plus, if you want to participate by just looking, you always have that option too.”

I didn’t get time to ask any other questions because the car pulled to a complete stop. As I stared out the tinted windows, I noticed a dingy sex toy store in front of us. The welcome sign flashed, and some letters were glitching. She opened my door, and I followed Madison into the store. She breezed past the kid at the desk and into the back of the store, then reached for the key on her hip and opened a door for me.

“Janitor’s Closet,” I spoke breathlessly into the air.

“A disguise, obviously,” Madison responded again, her heat surrounding me like a warm hug.

When we walked into the lobby, I was completely flabbergasted. The front of the shop felt cold and sterile, but this was welcoming. It felt lavish. High-end.

“I can’t wait to hear how you liked it.” She smiled at me and turned to head up the stairs.

“Wait, you are leaving?” I asked.

“Of course. I have more patrons to pick up, but when you are done, they will call for me again, and I’ll take you back to your hotel. Don’t worry. We will always ensure that you make it back to your hotel room safely.” With that, she walked away, and I was left alone in the room.

Suddenly, the inviting room felt achingly large. I picked at my fingers and looked over at the green velvet couches, not sure if they were for sitting or . . .

Gross.

I wasn't sitting in someone else's juices.

God, this was such a bad idea. What was I doing here? This was too strange for me. A club inside a sex toy store where there were special keys and drivers? I hated not being confident; right now, I felt weak and nervous. I turned toward the stairs, making an executive decision not to continue with whatever adventure this was for me.

"Hello, Ms. O'Brien" came from behind me.

The voice was lyrical. It was exactly how I imagined a phone-sex operator would sound. This gorgeous woman moved as if she was walking on water toward me. She was older, and I could have sworn I saw her on my brother's old Playboys.

"How do you all know my name?" I asked, standing there like a cement brick was in my shoes.

The lady laughed jovially.

"We have been watching you for some time, Ms. O'Brien." She extended her hand to me. I obliged, and she smiled while holding my hand.

"My name is Madam Curity, and I own this establishment. I cannot wait to show you around."

So, my theory was correct when I assumed the man behind the desk knew who I was from watching the videos I liked to make at the club, and it was brought to the attention of this kink club. The need to know more grew, and I followed her willingly as she led me through a roped-off area. Before we continued our descent down the dark hallway, a large security man stopped me, inspecting my pockets and searching for what I assumed would be recording devices. When he seemed satisfied, we continued down the long hallway.

We entered what looked like a bathroom you would see at a spa. It was filled with any bath amenities you could ever desire. There were lockers and a few girls scattered around getting into different pieces of lingerie. Each girl was wearing

a mask. The lady took me over to a large wall with various masks illuminated by a spotlight.

“For the privacy of all our guests, we ask you to please select a mask.” I took a step forward. There were ducks, dogs, kittens, and nondescript abstract masks in droves. The wall was lined from floor-to-ceiling.

“Which one do I pick?” I asked.

“Whichever you feel suits your fancy.” She nodded again. I knew I was taking a painfully long time to make a simple selection. I reached out toward the wall and dragged my fingers along the masks. They were all so beautifully crafted. I stopped at a bunny mask. It was gray, with two ears at the top, very reminiscent of the Playboy bunny logo. It felt familiar enough, so I grabbed it and placed it over my head.

“Wonderful, darling.” Madam Curity again grabbed my hand and continued to show me around the locker room.

There was an area to bathe in. Huge sunken tubs in the ground looked like an ancient Roman bathing house. Quite a few girls were lathering and bathing inside them. Then there was an area to dress in your normal clothes and fix your hair. Finally, we reached the very end of the locker room.

“Here is where you will be able to select your lingerie since I am to assume you are not wearing any.” She looked at me up and down for a moment. Obviously, I am not wearing any lingerie. Nothing but a strapless bra would fit in this dress. I looked down at myself, feeling quite self-conscious about how overdressed I was.

“Do not fret, my dear. All of these pieces are completely unworn. We will take the price off your partner’s tab.”

“Are these . . . prostitutes?” I whispered the last of the words before Madam Curity laughed a deep belly laugh.

“No, sweet girl. While we do not judge our clients based on their outside jobs, most of the women here are just like you. They are curious and kink driven. The men are usually those of the same but prefer their anonymity. Often, they hold a high

place in our society and do not wish their sexual desires to be known.”

I looked at the wall of lingerie as she explained the club to me. There were sizes from XXS to 6X in a variety of textures, colors, and textiles. There were leather pieces, more full-coverage lace pieces, and matching sets. I grabbed a yellow set that called my name. It had a few flowers around the lace bra, and I liked how it still beckoned to the good-girl persona I liked to keep on the outside. It had two thigh garters attached to a lace piece on the waist and a matching thong. I pulled a medium from the wall and then handed it to Madam Curity.

“This one works.”

She nodded, and a shadow I hadn't realized was following grabbed the piece and walked away.

“It will be by your locker when we complete the tour.”

She reached out again for my hand, and I took it with less caution. She led me down a hallway after leaving the locker room area, where there were floor-to-ceiling windows and a small door on the side. Most of the rooms were illuminated. There was a seating area with private seats where onlookers observed.

“This is where the parties are. As a woman, you get to select which one you would enjoy being in. Once a woman enters, the light goes on, and the party begins.”

We walked past a few different rooms where there were two women pressing their bodies firmly into each other. On the other side of the window were large leather seats where two female onlookers fingered themselves as they watched the women in the room play with one another.

“And they just watch?” Everyone was in a mask, but the people in the chairs were very much all touching themselves.

“Yes, some prefer to watch, and some prefer to entertain.” Madam Curity stopped at the very end of the hallway, where she opened a door.

The room looked like what I imagined the security room inside a hotel would. There were hundreds of screens and a couple attendants, but none were touching themselves.

“These are our security attendants. Their main job is to make sure that the women are safe and not harmed. We all maintain the same safe word here: zoo.”

“Zoo?” I furrowed my brows and wrinkled my nose.

Madam Curity laughed. “It sounds ridiculous, I know. We like to say we have a bit of a crazy zoo down here, so it just manifested into being our safe word. If you use the word at any point, the lights will turn off. One of these lovely guards would come and remove you from the room. You can also use the word if it’s just something you aren’t comfortable with.”

“Okay.” I felt safer knowing I had an out through all of this. Although, I admit, this whole tour has left me speechless. I had no idea these places existed. Everything I seeked from the club was right here. If I had known about this beforehand, my curiosity might have been satiated.

“Go ahead and take a moment to look at the cameras and then select a room to party in. The first three rooms are reserved for same-sex clients; the next three are reserved for kink play; and the last ones are just for our straight exhibitionists.”

I took a step closer to the security cameras. I had a bird’s-eye view of all the rooms. I stood there, mouth agape, while watching all sorts of pleasure happening. I admit, it was actually quite calmer and quieter than I had imagined. I thought there would be a lot of visceral noises. I studied each camera and room.

While I was always bi-curious, but I knew the first three rooms weren’t what I needed tonight. The next two rooms were unique. There were a lot of handcuffs, women being tied up, a lot of three-way play. I loved the idea of all my holes being entered, but I wasn’t sure if I was there . . . yet. I felt like

I needed to just put one foot into this world instead of my whole body.

The last three rooms caught my attention.

“The male partners would be advised to finish with their current partners, and when you were ready, you would go in,” Madam Curity told me, as if she could read the questions in my mind.

“And these tapes?” I asked.

“It depends on what room you pick.” She smiled.

Hmm.

I studied the first room. The man was in a lion mask. He was grunting loudly as he fucked a woman in a dove mask from behind. She had beads of sweat rolling down her forehead. The way he seemed overpowering and aggressive was a turn-off for me.

The man was curled up on a large bed with his partner in the second room. She was wrapped around him, and they were gracefully moving up and down. They looked in tune and romantic. The crowd watching them seemed like the largest crowd. It was like watching a sensual sex scene in a movie. There was a lot of chemistry between them.

The third and last room, the man was in a red bull mask. He was pulling his partner's hair, and her mask was smushed into the bed as he entered her. He thrust deep inside of her, and his cock was incredibly large. By far the largest of any of the men in the rooms. I watched them intently as he threw her around the room as if she was a doll. He was in control, and she was his submissive. She moaned gutturally as he turned her around. He lifted his face to the ceiling as he drove his cock into her throat. She gagged but bobbed up and down on him.

Huh. He was not interested in looking at his partner. Even with a mask, he was clearly avoiding her. After a few minutes, he pushed her face back into the bed and rammed back into her. Occasionally, he would smack her ass, and she groaned in brutal pleasure. There was no connection between them.

The second couple was still spooning each other while he thrust inside of her. The man was caressing her hair as she cried in pleasure.

“Any interest?” I spun around, totally forgetting I was in the security room. Madam Curity was waiting in the doorway.

“I am so sorry. I honestly forgot you were here for a moment.” Heat rose to my cheeks.

“No worries, darling. It is such a beautiful sight. I often get consumed.”

I offered a slight smile and turned back toward the screens to looking between two and three. The second one was beautiful, graceful, and adventurous. The third one was brutal. Primal. Pure ecstasy.

A warm heat slid up next to me.

“I think one of them is what you think others want of you. The other one is who you are.” For a moment, I was about to bark back at Madam Curity but took a second to digest her words.

She was right. The second one was what I thought others would want to see. I could play the good girl. The scene in the video. The third one is what the darkness in my pores desired. The third person would possibly bring me to orgasm. The second one didn't have a chance.

“Let's go with the last one, then.” Madam Curity nodded at the security guard, and the next thing I knew, I was going to play with the devil. I looked down at my hands, which were wet with anxiety.

“Laura here will return you to the locker room while these two finish. Every initial partner must wear a condom upon entertaining. Your partner has opted to have the tape destroyed.” A young brunette dressed in a sleek black dress gestured back into the locker rooms and showed me to my locker.

“You have any aftercare amenities you may need inside. You will also have access to the locker when you leave to bathe. I hung up the lingerie your partner purchased in your locker. All phones are confiscated up front, so please hand yours over.”

I knew this was a security reason and was to protect me and the other people in here, but I also needed to know there was an out for me. I pulled my phone from my pocket and grasped onto it for a moment before looking up at Laura for help.

“I promise if there is any issue, just use the safe word, and they will pull you immediately.”

I nodded once more and gave her my phone. She gave me a tender pat on the back before letting me change. I stared into the locker, which was filled with every perfume, shampoo, body wash, and oil I could ever imagine.

What did I get myself into? I was so shell-shocked at this whole organization that it hadn't really hit me. Plus, I had some deep regrets about not picking the second guy. I was going into the devil's den and knew I wouldn't be treated with kindness or romance. It was brute desire.

“First time?” a lady with a bear mask asked.

“Yes. Is it that obvious?” I offered her a slight turn of my lips.

“It is so much fun.” She laughed before adding, “I promise.”

“It's like there are no inhibitions here. I often felt out in the real world that I would either need to go through the seedy world of sex to get what I needed to feel satisfied or search for something no one could provide.” It was true. Out in the real world, I needed to maintain my composure and persona in order to feel like Chels. It felt like a place the dark Chelsea could explore. There were two sides to me, but the thought of the darkness seeping into the light side was terrifying.

The girl pulled off her shirt and stood in front of me with just a thong on.

“You’ll do great.” She offered a comforting squeeze to my arm before walking off.

It will be great. This is what I wanted. I slowly undressed before putting on the yellow lace bra. I attached the thigh garters to my waist and threw on the matching underwear. I looked at myself in the attached mirror and brushed my hair out. My long blonde locks matched the yellow. My blue eyes sparkled as if the excitement that was about to come could only be seen through my eyes. The rest of my body shook with nerves.

My breasts spilled over the top of the cups, and the indent of my hips from the waist piece even made my booty look bigger than it was.

“This is for fun,” I whispered to the mirror before shutting the locker.

I turned around toward the exit where Laura was ready to meet me.

“You look beautiful. Your room is being freshened up right now.” She opened the door, and we walked down the hallway to the very last room.

“Once you enter the room, you are not allowed to ask for names or any questions that may be personal in nature. Please confirm you know the safe word.”

“Yes.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Zoo,” I responded and nodded as we padded down the hallway. It felt like the longest walk of my life. This hallway must have expanded in size since I was in the locker room. I didn’t remember it being so incredibly far away.

“Here we are.” Laura stopped, and the room was blacked out. There was no one watching yet, which made me anxious. What if I wasn’t good enough for an audience? What if no one wanted to see and I was just terrible in the sack? With the

cameras at the club, it was different because I had no idea what their reactions were.

“Are you ready?” Laura asked me.

“No,” I responded, about to turn on my heel and walk out. I was still wearing the lace-up stilettos I had on earlier since they matched, and I figured it would give me a little edge.

Laura giggled and then opened the door to the room. Instinctually, I made sure the bunny mask was in place.

I walked hesitantly into the room and was greeted by the warm, sweet scent of peonies. My favorite flower. It was familiar and grazed over me like a comforting blanket. The light turned on, and my eyes had to adjust from the dark hallway. After blinking a couple of times, I noticed the red bull mask in the corner of the room. He peered at me through the slits of his mask.

“Bunny.” His voice was creamy yet demanding.

The very look of him was sensual. He wore black boxer briefs but was covered in swirls of tattoos from the elbow all the way around his back and stomach. They were colorful and moved all around his body like they had a mind of their own. My eyes grazed down his eight-pack abs dressed upon golden skin. He was strong and incredibly tall. He must have been solidly six-foot-four and towered over me by over a foot. His hair was dark black and pulled back. It was messy from running his hands through it with his earlier partner.

My gazed back down to his abs again and then darted lower. His erection was already growing in his shorts.

“Look what you are already doing to me,” he growled in his low timbre before stalking toward me. I had taken maybe two steps into the room, and he was opposite me, but the closer he got, the more the oxygen got sucked from the room.

When he got closer to me, he grabbed my hands and dragged them over his erection through his underwear. He wasn't just large. He was girthy. There was absolutely no way

this guy was going to fit anywhere inside of me. The heat from his breath hit my ear as he leaned closer.

“You interrupted me with my other partner, Bunny.” My breath caught in my throat. Any confidence I thought I had, escaped, and I darted my gaze over to the door before a hand pulled against my chin.

“No. Look at me,” he commanded. The lust dripped from him as one hand held tightly onto my chin and the other moved around my thighs.

I was pleasantly surprised he didn't immediately dive into my chest like others did. It was almost predictable when men would start groping my chest immediately, so this was new to me.

His fingers slipped between the fabric around my thigh and caressed my skin.

“So soft. I bet others think you are sweet and kind, but here you are, *MY* good girl. Got it?” he demanded. He gripped my chin tighter. I only nodded, as the words swirled inside of me, still unable to create a single sentence.

He grabbed my neck and pushed me against the wall. My feet were lifted a few feet off the ground and then pushed back down as I gasped to breathe. His fervor grew as his movements around my body became aggressive.

With our masks on, it was harder to kiss, which I appreciated because that felt too intimate. Without another thought, two rough hands grasped my waist as he lifted me in the air and slammed me onto the bed.

“You look so fucking good in yellow, my sweet bunny.” His voice was laced with an ominous tone, making a shiver pass through my core.

His hand moved gently against the supple skin on my ass, and eventually he lifted it and came back down, crashing against me with an open palm. I cried out in anguish, and his free hand pushed my head deeper into the bed, so my cries were muffled. He repeated this a few times, each time

smacking a different spot, causing me to wince in a mix of pain and pleasure. Somewhere, that sent me into euphoria.

“Please,” I begged between thrusts into the bed.

He laughed from behind me and immediately pulled my underwear down to my ankles with one hand. The familiar rip of a condom wrapper filled the room. I went to undo the strap around my waist that was holding the thigh garters on.

“Leave them.”

He slowly circled me, teasing me. I salivated. He turned me around, and I pressed my chest against him while his finger never left my core.

“You are so wet for me,” he mused. Through the slits of his mask, I could see his brown eyes had a fire about them, and suddenly, I needed more. Something foreign was building inside of me.

As if he could feel my thoughts, he pressed two fingers deep into me, and I threw my head back and let out a guttural moan.

“What a dirty little girl, getting my fingers soaked.” He pushed deeper as I arched my back against the headboard. I turned my head to the side, knowing he wasn’t interested in seeing the woman in here previously. My eyes closed as he continued to forge in.

“Look at me, my sweet bunny.” I lifted my head to his eyes, and with his free hand, he grabbed the front of my bra.

“Are you a bad girl? Have you ever had your titties fucked?” I cried in anguish.

“Answer me,” he ordered.

“Never.” His lips turned into a devilish smile, and at this moment, I knew I was really messing with the wrong shade of darkness, and . . . I liked it?

He turned me around and undid the clasp of my bra, so I was standing on the edge of the bed in nothing but the thigh garters and waist piece. That is when I spotted a few people

sitting outside the window from the corner of my eye. Two of them were leaning forward and both men were frantically touching themselves.

The lack of movement must have clued the masked man in that I had noticed what happened, and he turned me back around to face him.

“You are a first timer?” he asked, and I nodded quickly.

He grabbed my hand and led me to the edge of the bed, where I was closer to the window so the onlookers could see.

“How does it feel that they are watching you stand there naked?” he asked and then pointed toward me as if I was a prize he was about to dive into.

“You like when people are watching because you are my little slut?” He licked up my ear as he laid me on the bed, so I was staring right into his red bull mask.

He pulled his boxer briefs down, and his hard cock sprang forward as he tossed them across the room. I gasped. He was even bigger and girthier up close, and the anticipation of that fitting inside me made me anxious. I could feel the heat burning through my bones.

“Let’s give them a little show, shall we?” he said through gritted teeth.

He pushed my tits together as his length squeezed between them. A wetness beaded up on him as precum leaked from his tip. He pushed his length in and out as he held them together between his hands.

I lifted my head and lapped at him as his cock bounced off my tongue. A pressure boiled inside of me, and my breaths became ragged. What was happening? This was an unspeakable amount of ecstasy.

“Look at what a crowd your pretty little tits are drawing.”

He had thrust so hard that my head was hanging upside down, and the crowd had multiplied. I blinked a few times, and tears welled in my eyes. Why was this happening? This is

exactly what I wanted and liked in the club, but the fact I could see people enjoying themselves shocked me. A mix of emotions spiraled through my body, and it was hard to process exactly how I felt while in utter pleasure.

Suddenly, my hair was being yanked, and I was facing the masked man.

“Eyes on me. Focus up here, okay?” This time, his voice was quieter and softer.

“Okay,” I muttered.

“Good girl.” He moaned as he threw me back against the bed. I sat there with my ass on display for a few moments until his tip circled my cunt from behind.

“I need you.” The desperation dripped from my tongue.

“As you wish, my sweet bunny.”

He crashed into me. My drenched cunt lapped him up as he drove deeper. He. Was. So. Big.

I wailed. Tears stung the back of my eyes as his hand pressed on the back of my head, pushing my face into the plush duvet cover.

“Relax,” he huffed.

His animalistic desire accelerated the deeper he dove. I focused on steadying my breathing, and when he was finally all the way in, it was game over for me. An unknown emotion built inside of me, and if I didn't let it go, I was going to explode.

He propelled me toward my orgasm; although it was cool in the room, my body was on fire. His cock twitched inside me as I let out moan after moan.

“It's too much,” I finally said through choked sobs.

“Just let it go, my sweet bunny.”

“I've never—”

Immediately, he halted.

“You’ve never, what?” he demanded.

“No, no. I’ve had sex before,” I clarified. “I just never have had an orgasm with a man,” I added.

He roared with laughter as he quickened inside of me again.

“Let me show you what heaven feels like when you get a little taste from the devil.” His thrusts became aggressive. I felt like I was standing at the very edge of a cliff, and with one more movement, I would fall off.

The pressure built and exploded inside of me. Stars danced in my head, and the world went numb and quiet as pleasure bled through my pores. I didn’t dare take a breath as the world reared back into my reality. My wetness dripped down my thigh.

“It’s not over yet, Bunny. You can thank me when you’ve decided to come back into this world.”

“Thank you?” I groveled as I attempted to get my breathing even.

“Thank me for delivering the best first orgasm of your life.” I huffed as I attempted to shift off the bed.

“Oh no. Don’t be a selfish lover. It’s my turn now to see what you can do for me.” He grabbed me by my waist and spoke again. “On your knees.”

I obliged, still delirious from the orgasm that had rocked me moments earlier. The tip of his cock traced my lips before he plunged down my throat. I gagged and pushed away from him.

“Remember, relax,” he muttered as he tormented my throat with his length.

“Such soft lips,” he mused as he hit the back of my throat and held my wrists as he thrust. My objection to him formed into a moan, which only urged him to go deeper and move in sync with my mouth. My head dipped down, and he gripped my neck.

“Look at me while you take me in your mouth,” he said, holding on to my neck and staring straight into my eyes.

My thighs shook, and my jaw popped with every movement. He pulled out of me and threw me onto the bed, then stalked over. Heads bobbed on the other side of the glass wall. One in particular caught my attention. A man stared at us but didn't participate in any sense. He had a very large four-leaf clover tattoo by his eye. A strange feeling washed over me at the familiarity, but I couldn't pinpoint where I'd seen it before.

The thought was fleeting, as I was hoisted onto the masked man's lap. Our chests touched, and my back was to those behind us.

“Let me look into those sparkling blue eyes as I torture the light out of them,” he murmured into the shell of my ear.

“But,” I whispered so only he could hear, “I thought you didn't like facing your partner?” He pushed himself into me, and a choked noise spilled out of me.

He took a moment to answer, spending a few silent beats just staring at me as I straddled his waist.

“For some reason, you, my sweet bunny, are different. Your eyes are so beautiful and innocent, it makes me want to purge the darkness from them.”

He simply smiled, then quickened his pace, and pressure built in my core. An impatient longing grew stronger the deeper he lunged.

As if it had become too much, I jerked and arched my back. I could feel him needing so desperately to explode, and I gazed into his eyes once more.

“Please make me come.”

His cock was eager to satisfy me as he lunged sharply into the most sensitive parts of me. Within moments, the urgent bliss exploded inside of me. His neck jerked to the side in

ectasy, and I noticed a small cut on the side of his neck. The same cut that—

“Alex?!” I bellowed in a combination of shock and pleasure.

Within moments, the eyes darkened into something unrecognizable. A fury of anger burst through him as he exploded into the condom.

“Zoo!” he shouted with urgency.

In an instant, the lights in the room shut off.

“How the fuck did you know my name?” he howled into the dark room while pulling out of me, leaving me empty. The heat I had been feeling was quickly replaced by the cold.

“I’m sorry. I just . . . it’s your—”

Two security guards rushed the room. One of them grabbed the masked man, and the other pulled me up by the arms.

Holy shit. It was Alex Marchetti. I fucked my best friend’s fiancé’s brother. The same man who called me a sloppy slut. How did we end up at the same kink club?

“Oh no. We did it in front of everyone.” I cried into my hands as two large arms dragged me back into the locker room, where I was left naked. Laura, who had helped me earlier, hurried in with the rest of my lingerie.

“Should I?” I asked her, and she nodded and rushed out. I really fucked up. I wasn’t supposed to say any names, and I did it in front of everyone. It was done on pure adrenaline and shock. I just didn’t expect . . .

My body dropped to the floor, where I curled up with my hands in my hair.

“I messed up,” I said into the cool air.

“Yes, you did, my darling.” I jumped to my feet and looked into Madam Curity’s face for any indication of her mood.

“I am so, so sorry. I was just with him earlier, and it was a pure surprise reaction.”

“Yes, my darling, but you broke one of the biggest rules we have here, and for that, I am going to have to ask you to get dressed and leave.”

“Please let me pay, then,” I begged.

Madam Curity only shook her head. “No, darling. Only the men pay a membership fee here. We just ask you to please leave.”

“Did anyone hear?”

She shook her head. Laura came with the things from my locker, and I threw my jacket over my lingerie, not even caring I didn’t have my clothes on.

She silently walked me over to Madison. We walked through the sex club toward the exit; it was as eerily sterile and quiet as earlier. When we finally got into the car, the sobs burst from me.

This is the kind of punishment I was destined to have. Any taste of darkness, and I was condemned into the light. I wasn’t supposed to be here. I was meant to be a good girl for the remainder of my days. How was I going to tell Tatum? This was a complete disaster. If I had just kept my stupid mouth shut . . .

The car halted and I was sitting in front of the hotel. In only my jacket, I was the walking definition of shame. Thank God it was still sometime in the middle of the night.

I thanked Madison, and she offered me a kind smile, but no words were exchanged. I walked up to the hotel lobby, feeling embarrassed and hoping I wouldn’t have to see Alex for the rest of the weekend.

Oh God. I didn’t even think about the fact that we would be at the wedding together. I would have to face him at some point. Maybe I would just go on and pretend as if nothing had happened.

I pulled up to the familiar penthouse and swiped my key card. Thankfully, my friends were all still asleep upstairs. I

opened the door to my bedroom and lay on the bed. I needed a shower and sleep. Hopefully, if I closed my eyes, I could forget about what happened tonight. If I just wished it upon someone else, maybe it never happened.

There is absolutely no way I fucked—in the most devious way possible—my best friend's fiancé's brother. The future governor of California.

No. Way.



5

Alex

Two Weeks Later

It had been two long weeks since I had the best fucking sex of my life. I had intended to spend it monotonously at work. Still, my thoughts were consumed by a fiery bunny with darkness in her bones but such a delicate and sweet touch. Her innocence and desire to explore were not just an obsession for me. It was mind consuming.

“Sir, the signature.” Krissy, my assistant, held out a handful of papers in front of me, and I snapped into the now.

It had been a goal of mine to run the most successful illegitimate business with my brother for as long as I could remember. I craved power and the fanfare and attention that came with rallies and political events. With my brother’s business, we used underworld money to fund projects that none of my competitors could ever top. It was easy for me to be the number one Democratic candidate for governor of California. It was only a few months until the election, so I was supposed to propose a new environmental bid to use wind

turbines as our primary energy source. Still, over the last couple of weeks, I could barely string two words together without thinking about which of Tatum's friends I fucked. I had spent the entire trip avoiding the girls entirely and ducked out after breakfast, blaming work.

And it's not like I could call up my brother and say, "Hey, yo, could you ask your fiancée which one of the girls outed me after I fucked her in front of a massive audience and made her come for the first time while having sex?" Even worse, tomorrow starts their wedding welcome week. We were expected to attend events together. Thank God they opted out of having a bridal party and I could focus solely on figuring out which one of her friends it was. I know it was one of her friends who was at the bachelorette party because she recognized the scratch I had gotten earlier in the night. Otherwise, I would have thought someone was blackmailing me or something.

"Hey, I've literally been calling your name for the last five minutes. Where have you been?" Krissy asked.

Krissy was a leggy brunette. She and I slept together when we first met. Still, when I realized she also had her toes in the underworld and briefly worked with my papa's previous Mafia but wanted to go straight, she was a better fit as an assistant than a fuck buddy. She wore a black pencil skirt with a matching blazer, and the craving for power was almost as strong with her as it was with me.

We were in my office in the Californai State Capitol. It was modest in size and on the top floor, so I had a view of the entire city below. It was adorned with a dark-mahogany wood desk and lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves full of state secrets, history, and the like. I was sitting in a black leather chair, and my feet were propped up on the organized desk. I watched the cars turn and the people walking along the courthouse stairs below. Like most of my colleagues, I had an apartment in Sacramento, but my house was in San Francisco, where my papa currently lived.

“Sorry. I’m just thinking,” I confessed while moving my feet.

“What’s up with you? Ever since you returned from your brother’s bachelor weekend, you have been so distracted. Did a girl finally get Alex Marchetti’s head in a tizzy?”

“Get outta here.” I playfully pushed her away and laughed. “You know that would never happen. My brother’s the only pussy whipped one.”

“You never know, though. You could be next.” She winked at me.

Ignoring her comment, I glanced at the papers she wanted me to sign. We were funding more of the turbine power. Still, we needed a few hundred million to build some extra turbines in Bakersfield. I tightened my jaw, knowing what this meant.

“We are going to have to ask the Irish for more funding, and they are going to be pissed.” She lowered her voice to a hush so no one in the hallway would be privy to this conversation. I was paranoid even talking about this in the capitol building in case someone was recording us. You could say Madam Curie’s club always had me on high alert.

“If they know what’s best for them, they will concede,” I responded through gritted teeth.

“They don’t need anything else from us, though. We have always guaranteed them the passage of their guns through the southern and northern borders. They are going to want more.” Krissy pressed her hands to her temple, knowing how difficult the Irish were to work with.

We often offered mobsters, gangsters, Mafia, motorcycle clubs, and other criminal organizations the ability to move their products through the state in exchange for either protection or a lack of police presence. If they could move through the state easily, then they could wash more of their products. In turn, they funded most of the campaign money I needed through different legitimate sources that my brother set up.

On the other hand, the Irish mob were absolute assholes to deal with. They constantly needed more and pushed the boundaries I gave them. They often moved their product during the day and were so blatant about it that it was hard for me to bribe the cops quickly enough.

The Irish also wanted to move bodies, which was a hard limit for me. I didn't mind drugs, guns, or products, but trafficking people was on a whole other level. By needing this from them, I could bet they would ask about moving bodies.

"I'll call Julian tonight, and we will talk about our options. I'm going to pause on signing this. Have you gotten with our campaign manager to ensure he understands I will need the next week off for Julian's wedding?"

She nodded. "Yes, all is good on that end. We moved all speaking engagements to after the wedding."

"And you'll be there? The plane leaves at nine tomorrow morning." While Krissy and I hooked up and decided being colleagues was a better path for us, she was always one of my best friends, if not my only friend. Under the guise of being my personal assistant, she accompanied me to most of my events. It was nice having someone understand the world that we came from and what needed to be done to get to the top.

"I told you. I have an event to attend tomorrow, but I'll be there the next day for the club night. Anyway, if that is all, I am going to clock out." She went to turn toward the door, and I noticed she had a change of clothes in her work bag.

"Speaking of hot dates, I should be asking you if you are distracted," I said while she turned back toward me.

She smiled widely and said, "You aren't the only one with needs."

I laughed because I was always well known for my sexual exploits. I liked one-night stands and girls that were easy to take home. I dated occasionally, but mostly to stay relevant in the tabloids. My campaign manager was obsessed with the thought of the single governor getting engaged for optics.

“Oh, hey,” she said at the doorframe. “You had a package delivered via a courier, and I left it behind your desk. Don’t stay too late, Alex.”

“See you tomorrow, Krissy.” She waved goodbye and closed my door. I loosened the tie on my chest and unbuttoned the top button on my shirt before looking out the window momentarily.

Her sweet, plush lips wrapped around my cock and the innocent look in her baby-blue eyes was enough to send a tingle down my spine. Even though she was wearing the most adorable bunny mask, her irises had the brightest shine to them. They were inviting and brought calm to the storm that I destroyed her with. Her yellow lace underwear upon her creamy golden skin was a blessing from a fucking god. Her tits were the paintbrush for his creation too, because I had never met a woman with perkier and larger ones than she had.

I spent hours thinking about which one of the friends it could be. My initial thought was the single mom because she boasted large tits. All I knew was it couldn’t be the sloppy drunk who practically touched herself in the middle of the dance club. While alluring and seductive, she was far too destructive for the innocent little doe I fucked at the club. My future sister-in-law was kind and caring, but Jesus, I don’t know how she got involved with that bimbo.

I pivoted in the chair to the small box that Krissy had mentioned was delivered to me earlier. It was pretty nondescript, and I was used to getting packages and envelopes delivered to my office. Usually, they were complaints from constituents, but occasionally, a school program or some kids congratulated me.

Aside from the fact that every single mail item got scanned through our mail processing center in the basement, there were standardized checks for any substances that would be threatening to open. This package felt different and almost ominous. It was simply addressed to me in an average-looking

large brown envelope. The return address was a PO Box in San Diego.

I carefully ripped open the front of the package. Inside the envelope was a small black USB drive and an even smaller letter.

Be careful with whom you mess around with; you never know who they really are.

What the fuck was this? I was a strong man with powerful enemies. It would be amiss for me to ignore the fact that there were lots of people out there, both in the political realm and the underworld, who would love to see my head on a stake. Between my brother and me, we have killed countless men, but never without erasing any instance of the crime. My papa was involved in a large Mafia syndicate when we were born, but that part of him no longer exists. I made sure when I went into politics that our entire family history was wiped clean of anything dirty.

I pulled the USB drive out and thumbed it around my hands before inserting it into my personal laptop. I could have put it in the larger work computer, but the thought of this being in the hands of the State of California's IT Department sent a shudder through my body.

As soon as I plugged it into the computer, a thumbnail popped up on the desktop. My chest heaved when I realized what this was.

No.

Fucking.

Way.

I clicked it, and the sounds of my moans and the little bunny's sweet pink cunt getting fucked filled my office. I fast-forwarded the video, and it appeared as if it was not taken from the security cameras, but from someone sitting in the audience.

My first thought was that Tatum's friend was out here trying to screw me over. Maybe she had some sort of vendetta against her friend for marrying my brother. Why would she put herself in the face of criticism if this got out?

My hands were shaking, and I white-knuckled my laptop but couldn't seem to take my eyes away from the screen. Her tits spilled over the couch as the sweet little bunny took my entire cock and then writhed under my hands. It was everything I had been obsessively dreaming about over the last couple of weeks but better. The way her body arched beneath my hands and her sweet little cunt leaked around me.

Watching the video, my cock twitched, and that small movement sent me back into the reality that I was being blackmailed. I needed to figure this shit out quickly because I was leaving tomorrow for my brother's wedding.

I called Rafe, who had worked with Julian for years. He was our tech guy, and if anyone could figure out who sent this video, it would be him.

"Rafe, I got sent this fucking USB drive, and I need you to figure out where it came from immediately."

"You got it. I'm on your laptop now. Is it on the desktop?" Rafe was a fucking genius neither Julian nor I had ever actually met in real life. We found him through some of our papa's old Mafia connections. He was this mysterious person who lived in the dark world. He was the type of goddamn genius that could pop into my computer and fix whatever the issue was.

"I need the utmost discretion, Rafe."

"Understood, Boss."

I hung up the phone and dialed my brother.

"Alessandro." He was silent, which was our signal for the inability to talk about other business ventures.

"Get into a free space and call me back." I hung up as quickly as I had called.

I pressed my fingers into my temples as my elbows threatened to collapse. How could I have gotten myself into this type of entanglement? I was a fucking senator who worked years to establish a reputation as a solid guy, all because I just wanted to get my dick wet.

Without another thought, I pulled my phone back out to call the club.

“Madam Curity—”

“Get her on the phone. NOW,” I bellowed.

“If you would like to talk to Madam herself, you must make an appointment, sir. There are certain rules and regulations we have here,” the smooth voice on the other line explained. Meanwhile, I couldn’t imagine a more infuriating circumstance. I paid 20,000 dollars a month to have utter security.

“I understand that there are certain steps to secure an appointment, but you need to make it very clear to your boss that this is urgent. I was just sent a USB with a video of me at *your* nightclub. Not only did I request for all tapes to be destroyed, but it appears that you have a breach in your security as the tape looks like it came from someone in the audience box. It is imperative to your safety and reputation and mine that you put her on the phone. *Now.*”

“Please hold.” The voice on the other end seemed hurried after my confession.

After a few moments of silence, a familiar, soothing voice spoke from the other line.

“Mr. Marchetti, I understand you were delivered a USB with a video on it. May I secure video with you so I can confirm it didn’t come from our end?”

I switched the phone to video while I played the video for the woman on the other line. Her face didn’t falter as she watched from the point of view of someone who was clearly sitting behind the glass window.

I switched it back to the phone setting after playing a few seconds of agonizing moans and groans from the delicious little bunny.

“I see,” Madam Curity said, remaining calm, which only unnerved me further.

“What the fuck are you going to do? Isn’t this what the monthly payments I send you are for? I am about to be the damned governor of California, and I know you are fully aware of what this blackmailing would do to me. Thus, what I would do to you in return—”

“Mr. Marchetti, I understand you are upset, and please know that in the ten years we have been in business, this has absolutely never happened. Each person that comes into the club gets thoroughly inspected by the bouncers and bodyguards.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck about what happened in the past. It has happened to me now, and you need to figure this out. Immediately.”

“I understand, sir.” Her voice shook at the last word.

“We will get our IT to look into who it could have been. There are quite a few identifying markers such as pants as seen in this video.”

“Do it immediately,” I barked at her.

“Of course, sir. I will call you with any updates.”

“One more request . . .” A smidge of hesitation crept from my voice, hoping Madam Curity did not hear it.

“Yes?”

“I will need to know the name of the girl I was ‘playing’ with.” The word “playing” came out too direct and with emphasis.

“No can do,” Madam Curity stated.

“This is quite important. She could be involved in this, especially with her blurting my first name.” I snarled.

“It is unlikely that she had anything to do with this. It is clear that if this video gets out, it will tarnish her name as well. As you can understand, while this is a unique situation, we still need to maintain the utmost privacy. We will confirm, of course, that she had no reason to send the video, though.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.” I huffed.

“We will go ahead and work on this if that is all.” With that, she hung up the phone, and I threw it against the wall before it rang again.

“What?” I screamed into it.

“Brother. What has gotten you so angry on the eve of my wonderful wedding week?” Julian mused in a cocky voice on the other end.

“I called Rafe.”

He went silent, followed by moments of uncomfortable questions. He knew Rafe was only called in moments we desperately needed it. My brother’s breath hitched.

“What happened?”

“I got blackmailed.” I covered the phone speaker with one hand, paranoid that anyone could hear from outside the door.

“I’ll tell you more when I see you in person. I can’t over the phone.”

I could practically feel my brother on the other end tense up at the words I shared with him.

“This isn’t a good week,” Julian responded.

“I know. I wouldn’t tell you if it wasn’t a big deal. I’m handling it. See you tomorrow.”

Half annoyed at him, I hung up the phone. Idiot, I know this isn’t a good week. I cannot help that he got pussy whipped and was getting married at the same time. Someone was threatening to take me down. It involved him because if anything threatened me, it could incriminate the entire system we’d built together. Our empire would crumble.

Quite frankly, I didn't give a flying fuck if this was a bad week for his personal life. Did I understand what it was like to be pussy whipped? No.

Well, maybe that was a lie. Even through this entire ordeal, I couldn't stop thinking about the sweet little innocent bunny. The way her eyes sparkled as she took my cock, the way she begged for more by arching her hips toward mine, and the way her hands moved all over my body.

I pulled up my laptop, double-clicked on the link to the video, and played it again. I watched a few moments of the plush, pink lips that took my cock as she gagged on it when I pushed it deep into the back of her throat.

Fuck it. If I was going to suffer through this whole situation, I better get something out of it. I unzipped my pants, and my erection sprang free. The way she moved and felt on the video was exactly how I imagined it in my head: utter perfection.



6

Chelsea

Present

I spent the last few weeks in bed, avoiding my friends as much as possible. I didn't think shame could even begin to describe how I felt after my experience at the club. It was all-consuming, and my heart hurt every time the memories flooded my mind.

To make matters worse, today starts Tatum's wedding week, which means I am being forced to come face-to-face with the person whom I spent weeks trying to push out of my brain—the golden-girl persona I desperately tried to maintain on the outside because that was how I was conditioned to be. I was forced to live in this mold, and even though my parents weren't here anymore, it felt like something inside of me I needed to continue. Call it resuming a legacy or whatever made sense, but I really needed to for their sake.

Alas, my own version of “hell week” was about to commence, and I needed to make sure I had a perfectly plastered-on good-girl smile. Also, I was ninety percent sure

Alex had no idea which of us was the girl in the room due to the security the club offered. I had my hair pulled back in my mask, but I knew my blonde locks would make it likely it was either Maeve or me.

The positive? I was sure he was as embarrassed as me. Otherwise, Tatum would have called and yelled at me long ago. I threw myself back on my bed and looked up at the ceiling.

After I turned twenty-one, I used the inheritance my parents left me and moved into an apartment in La Jolla, where my brother still lived. I wanted to be close to the only family I had left, but I didn't want to live lavishly. It was a modest one-bedroom apartment I had decorated in a neutral, beachy theme. There was a variety of cream-colored furniture, along with accents of teal and light blue throughout. What was anything but mild was the expansive view of the endless blue ocean. The ability to breathe in the salty sea air every morning as the sunrise met the ocean's horizon was what I lived for most days. I loved curling up with paper and ink and watching people gather to take in the sunset at night, making up stories for those who stood below me, giving them futures they could only ever conjure in their dreams.

My friends had never seen my apartment. How would a waitress who was notorious for coming to half her shifts at the diner hungover—or after an escapade in Vegas—afford an apartment overlooking the ocean in such a bougie neighborhood? Yeah, that would be a dead ringer for an I-come-from-rich-parents lifestyle.

Part of me wondered if Daphne had questioned it. She would always roll her eyes when I just didn't show up to my shift at the restaurant or when I called to tell our manager I wasn't going to make it in. I didn't have to work to live, but I needed something to pass the time. So while I was possibly the worst employee known to mankind, I was still kind of figuring out what I wanted to do with my life. I wished I could make a living from design. I had always had this weird knack of

making exclusive lingerie for women to help them feel empowered both inside and out.

Ever since I could remember, I had a well-endowed chest and hated it. When my parents were still alive, I begged them to get a breast reduction because, even though I wasn't around people often, I remember comparing myself to women in magazines and on TV. They were stick figures, and I had been an early bloomer. Later on in life, it was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because they helped me manipulate the opposite sex to get what I wanted or desired, but personally, I hated how my only options were these drab nude or black-colored underwire bras. Hence, I sketched out designs for lingerie pieces.

It was stupid, though, and honestly, something I just did more for fun than anything because it wasn't like I was an *actual* designer or anything. It was just a pipe dream.

I swung my feet over the side of my overfilled comforter and sat up in bed. Today marked the first day of the week of wedding events. It was a welcome dinner at Julian and Tatum's house. They only lived a few miles away from me, so getting ready wouldn't take long. I guess I just didn't have the energy to get into the bathroom like I normally did. Probably another one of my more "ditzy" passions that everyone liked to make fun of me for was the fact that I genuinely enjoyed getting ready to go out.

I loved the way the hair curler felt when I twisted my locks down my back. I loved the way the mascara and false lashes felt on my eyes. The way my lipstick glided on, but mostly the way I felt afterward. I felt presentable, as if I was shielding myself from inner turmoil. I still felt like the kid who would get punished for staring out the window too long at the street and somehow needed to look like I was normal and decent to the world.

It was a world I needed to fit into the only way I was taught how. Look good, be good, and speak only when spoken to.

Whatever you did, avoid love at *all* costs because it only ended in heartbreak, like with my parents.

I took a glass of rosé and turned up my club remix on my phone before doing my little get-me-hyped dance while letting the curling iron heat up. I grabbed a modest hot-pink dress from my closet. Modest in cut but a bold color choice. It was a perfect choice for Tatum's party because she shared my passion for bold attire.

After an hour had passed, I looked in the mirror, satisfied with what I had accomplished. The pink dress had large shoulders on it and hit me higher, covering my chest as much as it could. I threw on my favorite pair of nude heels.

"You got this," I murmured before the doorbell rang.

"Ronan!" I practically jumped into his arms and pulled him into the biggest hug.

He had met my friends previously, and I had to beg for him to accompany me to the welcome dinner tonight so I had a decent enough distraction from . . . he who shall not be named right now.

"Hey, little sis."

My brother was the black sheep of the family. He had red curly hair and more freckles on his face than you could count. He was such a contrast to my sunshine locks and golden skin. He was also lankier than the Marchetti men but met them in height.

"No drugs tonight, Chels," he scolded while furrowing his brows in my direction.

When I partied, I rarely turned away from a good pill, but after Alex, the thought of going to a club again actually made me want to climb right back into bed. I think he may have fucked—literally—those days out of me.

God, even thinking about fucking him made me go feral inside. I couldn't believe I spent the last twenty-five years of my life not knowing what a real orgasm was. Nonetheless, the

mystery of how you could actually get a two-in-one experience was mind-blowing. I wouldn't forget how my toes literally curled and I had felt like a little star in a galaxy that had just combusted. The adventure was truly mind-blowing.

"I am on the straight and narrow these days, brother. Don't you go and get all parental on me." I teased and grabbed my nude bag from the counter.

It was only ten minutes or so before we arrived at Tatum and Julian's house. I laughed when I saw the number of lavender plants that had taken over. Julian once gave Tatum a lavender bush at her old apartment, and he said the smell reminded him of her, so he went overboard and planted hundreds around their house.

"Thanks for coming with me, Ronan." I smiled at my brother in his yellow convertible while squeezing his hand. He helped me out, and we walked in with our arms linked.

When you walked into their house, it was warm yet bold. Tatum had splashed a few colorful accent walls around the otherwise warm home. It was almost like you were in a modern library. There were also tons of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves littered with knick-knacks and bookish gear.

"Wow, they must really be big readers," Ronan whispered into my ear before I let out a loud giggle.

We moved to the back, where a few people had already gathered, and I noticed one of my friends in the corner. Maeve was really easy to spot because she was the tallest in our group and her legs were a mile long. She was wearing a sparkly silver dress and talking to Julian's bodyguard about something in the corner, but when she saw me, she waved and walked my way.

Weird. Christian seemed almost disappointed when she walked away. That was definitely something I would need to ask her about later.

"Hey, friend! You brought my favorite older brother." She enveloped Ronan in a big hug before they pulled away and he

kissed her on the cheek.

“Where are your girls?” he asked her.

Maeve had two young kids, who were the cutest little blonde babies I had ever seen. Honestly, they looked more like me, and when we were all out together, most people thought I was their mom. I loved Maeve and her kiddos, but I couldn't imagine being a mom. It seemed . . . exhausting. She was constantly juggling several aspects of her life.

“With their dad this weekend. Come, let's get you guys a drink at the bar.” She guided us to the corner of the yard where the pool ended.

The yard had a big “We Do” light-up sign in the back of it and was adorned with white decorations. There were a few bar tops over by the makeshift bar, but what was really impressive was the table over on the other side of the pool. It was a large farm table in the most beautiful antique wood with a few different bud vases, cream flowers, and tea lights. A large white runner adorned with accents of gold ran down the middle of the table.

“Shit, this is so beautiful.” Maeve nodded in agreement while I took everything in.

My palms began to sweat and then my eyes darted between everyone, searching for the one person I had no desire to see tonight. I gripped tighter onto my brother's arm and, when I felt his reassuring pat, I looked over to him. He had two drinks in his hand and was talking to Maeve about something completely over my head.

“You okay, sis?” he asked when he noticed my grip tightening even more.

“Yeah, for sure,” I squeaked out in the most obnoxious voice that pissed even me off.

“What's up with you and the bodyguard?” I asked Maeve after Ronan went to mingle with a few people he recognized.

“Ugh, nothing.” Her cheeks turned bright red, but she batted me away, so I didn’t press. Daphne walked through the back door and right toward us. We all embraced and began chit-chatting about how beautiful the party was.

“Friends!” Tatum finally left Julian’s possessive arm and bounded toward us. She was a vision in a white minidress that hugged her curves and had a low, open back. Her long brown hair lay past her midback, and she had done her makeup in a more natural look.

“The bride!” Maeve squeaked, and we all air kissed.

“You are a vision, babe.” I squeezed her, and Daphne’s energy shift. She was generally the most introverted of the group, but even for her, this was different.

“Are you okay?” I whispered while the other two chatted about floral arrangements.

She smiled up at me, but I could tell something wasn’t right, and suddenly got very nervous. I attempted to pull her into a corner to get her alone because it was clear she wasn’t interested in divulging anything while we were around our friends.

Daphne pulled away from me and then looked at Tatum and spoke in a demanding tone that was so out of the ordinary for her.

“Who is the older guy over there?” We all turned to where Daphne was pointing. He was an older guy with salt-and-pepper hair. He was talking with Julian and grinning ear-to-ear. There was a resemblance between the two men, especially when they stood next to each other. The older man, probably in his late forties, had the same dark curly hair as Julian. He had the same chiseled face and jawline, but his eyes told a different story. Unlike Julian’s, which were full of fire, his told a sadder story.

Tatum turned back toward us.

“That is Julian and Alex’s dad, Elio. The original Mr. Marchetti.”

A sudden noise came from Daphne, and she looked like she was about to tear up.

“I have to go to the restroom. Please excuse me.” She rushed away from us, pushing me away from her as she practically bolted into the house, and the other girls shrugged.

“I’ll go after her.” I excused myself and then walked inside and into the bathroom, where I didn’t bother to knock.

“Babe?”

“Please, I’m okay. I just need a second.” Her head was turned away from mine when I approached her and laid a gentle hand along her shoulder.

Little sounds were coming from her throat, and I knew immediately she was crying. I grabbed her into a backward hug and held her back against me as her chest heaved.

“It’s okay. My grandmother always used to tell me that crying is cathartic. Let it out.”

I rocked my dearest friend and held her tightly as she produced tears so large even the biggest of my demons couldn’t quite comprehend them. When the sobs slowed, she pulled away from me, her face red and her makeup smeared.

“I can’t . . .”

“It’s okay. There are lots of things in my world I can’t even begin to process for myself, and it’s hard for me to share them with others.” I offered her an empathetic smile as my inner darkness threatened to mill through my current thoughts. I forced them back into their place with a large gulp.

“That man, he seems so familiar, and it’s just—”

I loved my friend, and I knew she was desperate to try to explain a secret to me, so I cut her off at the discomfort coming from her.

“It is really okay. I know you’ll tell me when you’re ready. In fact, I think my bestie may have told me the same thing

once before.” A small laugh escaped between slowed breaths, and I once again gave her an embrace.

“I’ll tell the girls you had allergies or something and had to go.” I offered to give her an out.

“Thanks again.” She gave me a little nod before heading out of the bathroom.

I took a moment to look in the mirror. The girl in front of me was elegant, a ray of sunshine. She was a good friend and a smoke show. It was so hard keeping up with both, and for a brief moment, I almost forgot I still had to face my own unknown demons tonight. I dusted off my dress and rolled my shoulders back. If anything, I needed to get out there to rescue my brother from whoever had cornered him into conversation.

I pushed the door open and walked out of the bathroom. My heels clicked on the wooden floors as I walked to where my brother was talking with Tatum and Maeve.

My ankle twisted for a second, and I realized I had sunk my heel into a divet in the floor and was going down. It was quick, and I braced for impact, hoping to land on my ass and not break a leg or something absurd.

When I didn’t feel the floor beneath me, I blinked a few times and realized someone had caught me. A large hand was holding me up, and I was not on the ground but lifted a couple of inches above it, just dangling.

“What the—” I attempted to turn around before the mysterious person put me back on even flooring. I felt an immediate, comforting warmth on my body and the large arm with thick muscles that had saved me was dressed in a black suit coat and holding me tight. I pushed the arm off me and spun around quickly, my breath pausing for a moment at the sense of familiarity.

“You!” I screamed while realizing the man standing in front of me was the man who had consumed my every thought for the last couple of weeks.

He was as handsome, if not more, as I remembered. His brows were furrowed in disgust, but there was such a distinct look about him. I knew immediately why the press dubbed him “Molten Marchetti” because he was really fucking hot. His black hair was gelled back, and he towered over me, but there was the same fire Julian had in his dark-brown eyes. He held my gaze, and I struggled to look away from him.

“If I had known it was you, I wouldn’t have been so apt to help you up.”

His voice rumbled through the crisp air like the deep thrum of a bass guitar. It was low, dark, and smooth. My pulse quickened as the sensual timbre of his tone washed over me, sending shivers down my spine. There was a magnetic quality to it—an undeniable allure that drew me in, desperate for more. His voice ignited the memories of what we did at the club. He was a forbidden indulgence I simply could not resist. Every word he spoke was like a gentle caress, a seductive whisper that left me breathless and aching for his touch.

If my panties weren’t completely soaked already, they definitely were now. He was a senator and as clean-cut as they came, but a dark cloud surrounded him. When words came from his mouth, they commanded an entire room. Yet he was the one person I could never be with. I knew his deepest secret, and he didn’t know I did.

“You aren’t going to dance on a table tonight, are you? There are a lot more people here to watch.” And there it was. The one thing he could never give me again was himself. He was disgusted by me.

“Fuck off,” I spit and turned back on my heel to walk away from him. He let me. I walked onto the lawn and straight over to my brother, with whom I linked arms.

“You good?” he asked me.

“Yes. Stop parenting me,” I begged, and I looked back to where Alex was now standing with his brother and dad. They were deep in conversation, but it was Alex I couldn’t pull

away from. The way his body was tense and dominating. He was clean-cut next to the rawness of Julian, but his influence was clear between the two of them. He was the brains behind Julian's brawn.

When Maeve, Daphne, and I found out from Tatum who Julian actually was and the type of business he was involved in, it was difficult for us to swallow that information. We were worried for our friend's safety, especially after what happened with her ex. She was kidnapped last year by her abusive ex-boyfriend, who was in a motorcycle gang, and Julian rescued her on a mission down in Mexico.

After that, we sat down and talked about what Julian's ties with the Mafia were like, which included how he laundered money. In subtle eavesdropping between Julian and Tatum, I sort of put together that the whole family was involved in these shady dealings. It's been a while since we were all told this, but I think we were all finally coming to terms with the fact that this was our new normal.

Watching Alex interact with his brother and dad only confirmed my initial suspicions that they were all in business together. I guess it was true that you couldn't really ever leave the Mafia, even if you tried. As Alex interacted with them, you could see the swirls of black mixing with gray to form this impressive human being. And knowing that beneath the fitted exterior was a man covered in dark ink begging to be fucked in front of an audience of people . . .

"I said, are you ready for dinner?" Tatum asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Oh gosh, sorry, yeah, let's head to eat."

We walked over to the table, and my brother said, "I'm worried about you. You've been acting really weird lately."

"I'm okay. Just super distracted. I've been working on my drawings a lot."

"Come on, Chelsea. Do you really think drawing women's panties is appropriate for a woman your age?" His gaze turned

into what I would imagine a disappointed parent would impart.

“Ronan. Don’t.” I stopped in my tracks while the others headed over to the dinner table. “I am begging you.” He nodded, his eyes full of apology, and we sat at the table.

Dinner went off without a hitch. There were endless trays of food served on platters, and we all ate and drank until we were merry. Although, I may have had a few extra glasses of prosecco to deal with the incredible brown eyes that never looked away from me. Even if I weren’t making eye contact, I could feel them piercing deep into my soul.

He was also eyeing Maeve, scanning her chest, face, and hair while she joked with Christian, who was sitting next to her. She was wearing a dark-blue satin midi dress with spaghetti straps. His eyes often narrowed while looking at her. When he looked at me, his eyes were like molten chocolate, searing at me with an unbridled passion that left me weak-kneed and breathless. The intensity of his gaze was almost too much to bear, and my body responded to him in a way that left me aroused and helpless. The more I drank, the easier it was to manage.

The only people at the welcome dinner tonight were close friends and family. It was a small group, and most of us were well acquainted. Tatum’s parents were the only ones missing. They had quite an estranged relationship, and it was still to be determined if they would show up this weekend for the wedding.

“So, as I asked before, could I get some help with errands tomorrow before we go out? I would appreciate the hell out of you guys.” Tatum spoke before I turned my attention back to her.

“Absolutely! Tell us what you need!” Maeve chirped.

“No.” Everyone turned to Alex.

“Alessandro.” Julian’s dad’s voice echoed around the yard, and everyone’s voices quieted.

“*Basta*. (Stop),” he barked in Italian, and suddenly, the confident man, for a speck of a second, became a boy in his father’s arms. He scanned Maeve and I again.

“Fine,” he conceded, clearly not wanting to make a scene as his brother stared him down for pissing his wife-to-be off. “What do you need from me?”

Tatum clapped, as if she was excited that everyone was going to get along and pair up to finish her tasks this week.

“Okay, let’s see . . . Maeve and Christian, I need you guys to go to the venue and confirm everything is set up like this.” She handed them an outlined plan of exactly how she wanted each table to be.

Maeve stared at Christian and then looked down and mumbled something in agreement. On the other hand, Christian’s eyes lit up like he had just hit the jackpot or something.

“Where’s Daphne?” Tatum looked around frantically.

“She just had to head home early—she had a migraine.” This seemed to satiate her, but I swear Julian’s dad flinched around his napkin.

“I need two people to go to the florist, so Alex . . . and isn’t your date here?”

My chest tightened. I guess I didn’t realize Alex had a date or was dating. I mean, come on, if he was, then he really was a bigger asshole than I already imagined.

“No, she will be here tomorrow night.”

Tatum clapped. “Oh goodie! You and Chels can go to the florist in the morning and confirm the floral arrangements.”

“I can go myself. This doesn’t seem like a big enough job for two people.” Alex stared me down. His gaze cut through me, and the entire confident front I carried shattered around me. I needed to do damage control.

“No way! It’s a couple of hours away, and you won’t make it back in time for the club, and I *need* you there.” She puffed out her lower lip when Julian’s stare haunted me.

“I could take Ronan?” I squeaked out meekly. Damn, those eyes were terrifying when they needed to be.

“No can do. I’ve got plans.” He downed a spoonful of food, and I silently cursed him.

“Take her with you,” Julian commanded his brother. His voice was stern, and you could see the dynamic between the older and younger brothers.

Alex gazed at her with deep frustration. She could smell the annoyance coming from him. He attempted to say something to his brother that none of us could hear, but his brother shooed him away.

“I will come to get you at eight a.m.,” he barked.

“No, it is okay. I’ll meet you here then.”

Tatum chimed in, “She hates anyone knowing where she lives. Who knows why?” She shrugged as she shoveled a piece of cake into her mouth.

“Text me your address. I’m picking you up. Now, if you all will excuse me, I have work to do.” He surveyed me before sulking off toward the house.

“Don’t mind him. He’s going through something.” Julian apologized and headed in the same direction as his brother.

Well, I guess that was how we were going to end this, then. I was about to go out with a man who had no idea I was the one who outed him to a kink club—a man who couldn’t stand to even be in the same car as me.



7

Alex

Present

I was livid. The fact that my entire career was close to going down in absolute shambles in the hands of God knows who—and God knows what they want—and my brother’s biggest concern was fucking flowers for his wedding. This was why I was never getting married. Let’s just add that the girl I had to go check on floral arrangements with was the one who finger-fucked herself on a table at a nightclub.

Let’s keep this train going because she could also be the girl who outed me at the club and could be involved in blackmailing me.

“What in the fuck kind of shitshow was that back there?” The guest room door flew open as my brother’s brooding figure came into view.

“Wait, you want to talk about a shitshow? What is this whole thing?” I threw my hands in the air, as if this whole house were somehow involved in the wedding that my brother decided to throw the same week my life was going to shit.

“You better fucking get your shit straight. I understand whatever is happening with the blackmail is bad, but Rafe is on it. He has never let us down.”

“And since when has a whole stupid event been a bigger deal than the entire operation we have worked on since you were born worth disintegrating for?”

I ducked as a lamp came hurling in my direction. My brother was on me and fuming at this point. I felt my papa’s presence just as the lamp crashed into the wall.

“You boys are making too much noise with all this chaos,” he said while leaning against the doorway, his hands in his pocket.

“My *fucking* wife matters to me more than you can ever imagine.” Ragged breaths came from Julian as crimson blood dripped down onto the wooden floor from where the glass lamp had sliced him.

“Calmati!” Papa screamed, his arms folded over his chest.

“You may not know this, brother, because your soul is as cold as ice, but there are better things out there than throwing a temper tantrum. Everything is fucking handled on the business end, and you have the best of the best dealing with it, so while they do their job, do yours.” He grabbed a washcloth from the adjoining room and pushed it against his skin.

“What’s happening?” my dad asked, still in his casual stance by the doorframe.

“Someone is blackmailing me and threatening to out me. It will ruin my campaign.” It is all I offer because any more would make me the family’s embarrassment, and I am just not there yet.

“Rafe has been briefed?” Elio asked.

“Yes. Everything has been handled, which is why Alessandro’s only job is to make my future wife happy by going to check on the flowers with Chels.” Julian eventually

sat on the edge of the bed before grabbing the same towel to wipe up the drops of blood on the ground.

“Which is exactly what you will do, yes?” Papa looked at me now, his eyes pointed. It wasn’t really a question he was asking.

“Got it,” I mumbled.

Suddenly, little footsteps were bounding up the stairs.

“I heard the crash! Is everything okay?” Tatum sized us all up, standing next to Papa against the doorframe. Her nose scrunched in question.

“All good,” Julian mused and kissed her on the nose before escorting her out of the room I was staying in.

“Oh! You’re bleeding!” She hurried away, and I shut the door behind all of them. I fell onto the bed and rubbed against my temples.

My phone pinged and I went to grab it, praying it was some good news. Instead, it was from the one person I had no intention of caring about.

Unknown Number: Hey, it’s Chelsea. You really don’t have to pick me up. I don’t mind meeting you at the house.

Me: No.

Unknown Number: Don’t be annoying.

Me: Right back at you.

Unknown Number: You are maddening. 557 Camino Del Valle. 8am

Me: Goodnight. Don’t party on too many tables tonight. Don’t want to pull over to let you vomit tomorrow.

Unknown Number: I think just as highly of you too, you know?

I couldn’t help but release a little chuckle. I plugged her address into Google Maps and realized she was only a couple

miles from here. Huh. What was a girl who worked at a brunch spot in San Diego doing living in fancy La Jolla?

I set that thought aside as I pulled up the video on my laptop. The one fucking video that was sending all of today into a tailspin. The yellow lingerie. The moist cunt spilling with liquids.

“God fucking dammit. Which one are you?”

I pulled up to an apartment complex that sat next to the ocean in the fanciest little neighborhood in town. How the hell did this girl afford an apartment like this? She told me to pull into spot number three, and I walked up to the apartment on the third floor.

“How did you know which one I was in?” she asked after I knocked on her door.

“Hello to you too,” I said, pushing my way into the apartment.

I let out a low whistle. As I walked into her apartment, I was taken aback by how elegant it was. Although I still didn't love the fact I was being forced to have her company all morning, being in her home made me have a sense of respect for her.

I turned to Chelsea. Her blonde hair cascaded down her back, and her piercing blue eyes glistened in the morning light. She had a slender figure with curves in all the right places. Her casual attire was a departure from what I had seen her in before, but it only added to her allure. There was something familiar about her scent, but I couldn't quite pinpoint it. Still, I couldn't take my eyes off her and her natural beauty. It was really hard not to feel drawn to her.

“Don't tell the girls.” She looked almost scared. Like, somehow, this was part of her deepest secrets and she was embarrassed by it.

“Why have none of your friends been here?”

She fidgeted with her hands and shifted from foot to foot.

“Can we just go?” she practically begged, pushing me back out of the door.

Her touch surprised me. It again felt oddly familiar, and there was a small tic in the back of my brain. I am still convinced that because of the height difference, Chels can't be the girl from the club. It had to be the taller one. Plus, Maeve was much more delicate and innocent. Chels wasn't, and my little bunny was the epitome of naïveté.

“You like putting your hands on me, then?” I asked when I realized that even though I had walked backward a few steps, she hadn't let go of my chest. She looked down, and her cheeks brightened.

“Go,” she groaned.

We walked out to the car in silence, and I held the door open for her while she caught up.

“A gentleman move? Wow. Who are you, and who did you replace the asshole with?”

“Ouch. Again with the insults. I am your future governor, so think of this as my civic duty.”

“To hold the door open for me?” She scoffed and then got in, but not before I rolled my eyes. I didn't understand how a woman could be this infuriating, and yet, here I was, forced to spend an entire day with her.

I jumped back into the driver's seat and sped out of her little neighborhood. It was quiet for the first half hour of the trip. I fumbled a little bit with the radio before landing on an early 2000s emo station filled with Taking Back Sunday, Panic! at the Disco, and other bands from my childhood.

“Your family let you listen to this?” She finally speaks, and her voice rang a melody as addicting as the lyrics coming from the speaker.

“Don't talk shit on it. I love this.”

“I'm not, I swear. I actually listened to the same music growing up. It's the essence of my brooding childhood days

while I was stuck inside my house.” I glanced over at her, and she was covering her mouth like she had said too much. I decided to let it slip through the cracks, but a big part of me wondered what she was talking about, especially the stuck-in-the-house bit.

God, her smell was contagious too. So familiar and so incredibly bright, but the place I remember feeling it was stuck on the tip of my tongue.

“Are you okay from yesterday?” Her tender voice was quiet, almost hesitant.

I let out a scoff and looked away, still feeling embarrassed from my outburst the night before. “I’m fine,” I muttered, hoping she would drop the subject. But she didn’t.

“I know you’re not fine,” she said, placing a hand on my arm. “You ran out of the party last night, and you looked upset. And you look like you haven’t slept at all.”

I tried to shake her off, but her touch was comforting, and I didn’t want her to let go. “It’s nothing.” I insisted, even though I knew that wasn’t true.

“Was it because you had to come with me today? I should have insisted that I could do this alone.” Her gaze was glued to the whizzing of the cars outside.

I turned to her, surprised by her confession. “It wasn’t you,” I said, finally admitting the truth. “It was something else.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, her hand still on my arm.

I shook my head. “Not really.”

“That’s okay,” she said, smiling at me.

My warm heart swelled, knowing she cared about me. It was a strange feeling—one I wasn’t used to, but I didn’t hate it.

We drove the rest of the way in silence, the music filling the car with its melancholic melodies. I couldn’t help but steal

glances at her occasionally, admiring how the sunlight danced in her hair and how her lips curved into a small smile as she hummed along to the music.

When we got to the flower shop, we walked to the door, where a young girl greeted us and brought us to the back. Chelsea was a few steps behind me, and when I turned to call her over, she was smelling a bushel of pink peonies.

“These are my favorite flowers.” Her blue eyes were the color of the ocean at sunset. There was such a depth to them but also a sense of sadness whenever she spoke. Her typical bubbly behavior was absent today, and a rain cloud danced along with her as I sensed her unease.

She was thumbing a peony, and when I looked up, we locked eyes, and an undeniable electric shock passed through me. I didn’t realize it in the car or at her apartment, but she was truly beautiful. She was down to earth and maintained a delicate aura around her—almost as innocent as my little bunny. I still swear it was the other friend, though, and somehow, I knew I was going to have to confront the truth soon, especially since I hadn’t heard anything from Rafe.

“You are dilly-dallying. Come on. Let’s go.”

We spent the next hour reviewing and confirming floral arrangements while on FaceTime with Tatum, who interrupted us often.

The florist left us so we could figure out what the sweetheart table florals were going to be, and suddenly, Chelsea’s phone went off.

“Goddamn it. Tell my sister-in-law to cool it. We will pick the fucking flowers,” I huffed.

She held up a finger to me and walked to the back of the small room.

She clicked on FaceTime again, and right when I was convinced it was Tatum, I realized it wasn’t.

I walked around the large white buckets of flowers on the ground to get closer to her. Her eyes darted; she was throwing daggers at me. Once again, she held up a finger to quiet me from talking.

“Camille, you look beautiful!” Chelsea exclaimed in that bubbly tone she usually shared with the world. The very one that had been absent on our trip together.

“A date?” she practically squealed, her voice echoing in the small room. My curiosity got the best of me, and I walked behind her to see who she was FaceTiming with.

“The top in your right hand is orange with a V-neck lace trim on the top. Personally, it’s my favorite. The other one is more of a deep-red color, and it looks cute on you, but I think the orange brings out your eyes.”

The woman was holding two tops to the phone, and her eyes kept darting back and forth between them, clearly stressed about which one to pick.

“You think he will like it?” the woman asked with clear hesitation.

“Are you kidding me? You are sooooo hot right now. You have your mom coming to curl your hair, right?”

The other woman nodded, and Chelsea’s smile was contagious.

“Good! And you have that special underwear set I sent you?” This time, the woman blushed and nodded.

“Perfect! Then it is going to be a smash.”

What is this girl doing except delaying us even more? I coughed, hoping this would hurry her off the phone.

“Am I interrupting something?” The girl on the other line hesitated.

Chelsea’s glare stung through me. “No. I’m just helping pick some flowers for my friend’s wedding, so I have to go, but call me if you need any more help.” They said their

goodbyes and then Chelsea walked over to the small table, looking at different florals without so much as a word.

“Um, was that call so important that you had to delay us? We have to be back for tonight’s event. Plus, I have work to do before.”

She threw her hands in the air. “Yes! God. Do you have to be such a dick all the time?” She grabbed a few stems of flowers, throwing them in the discard pile.

“What was that phone call?”

“I am part of an app for people who cannot see and quickly need help picking options for dates or other questions. They dial in and then I get a call. I’ve been helping Camille plan a date with a guy she’s been talking to for a while, and she needed help picking which shirt looked best.”

“You help those who are hard of seeing with everyday tasks . . . on an app?” I had to summarize what she just said to me because it was honestly quite unbelievable. Who was this woman? She came off as a ditz Barbie doll, then all of a sudden, she was touching herself on top of a table in a Vegas nightclub and was somehow very wealthy, but none of her friends knew, and now she helped people who were blind with everyday tasks in her free time. She was far more complex than I ever could have imagined. The allure I felt earlier only grew stronger as that sense of home and familiarity grew deeper.

I wanted to hate her for being like every other vapid woman out there, but her genuine kindness and selflessness toward others caught me off guard.

As I sat there, lost in thought, I realized I was intrigued by her in a way I hadn’t been by anyone in a long time. She was a puzzle I wanted to solve, a mystery I wanted to unravel.

But as much as I wanted to get to know her better, I couldn’t deny the fact I was still reeling from figuring out who could have been the girl who called me out and put me at risk at the club. It could have been her, and I needed to stay mad at her.

“Yup, that is exactly what I do.” She turned toward me, and I realized she had filled the bucket up with flowers. “This will do. I assume you can finish up with the attendant. I’ll be up front waiting for you.”

She turned on her heel and stomped out of the back room before I waved the attendant over, letting her know we had finished selecting the flowers. I went to chase after Chelsea, who was already at the front of the shop with her hands crossed in front of her body. Her long blonde hair, up in a ponytail, blew softly as the breeze wafted in from the street. It was at this moment that a part of me hoped she wasn’t the girl from the club. I didn’t want to have to tell her she was being blackmailed. I didn’t want this enigma of a person to also be the object of my obsession. The girl I spent the last couple of weeks masturbating to also happened to be this complex secret weaver.

As we left the flower shop, I couldn’t help but wonder what other secrets she was hiding. And as much as I tried to resist the pull, I knew I had to uncover all her pieces, no matter where they might lead me.



8

Chelsea

Present

After Alex dropped me off at my apartment and sped off without so much as a goodbye, I collapsed on my bed. It had been an emotionally exhausting rollercoaster of a day that left me reeling with a sense of desperation. Despite my burning hatred for him, I couldn't help but feel grateful he hadn't let on that he knew our secret. It was a secret we shared, but only I knew the truth about it. And the mere thought of him finding out filled me with a gut-wrenching terror that threatened to consume me.

By letting him know where I lived, the volunteering I did, and even slipping the fact I was always stuck at home when I was younger, I had let him into my world more than I had intended. There was no turning back now, was there?

As I ran my fingers through my tousled blonde locks, I couldn't help but be entranced by the memory of his intoxicating scent—a blend of rain and sandalwood that was exotic and alluring. He consumed my thoughts, invading every

corner of my being. And the realization that he would eventually find out about my betrayal left me feeling hollow and desperate.

“Stop it, Chelsea O’Brien.”

I tried to shake off my irrational thoughts, berating myself for even considering the possibility of a future with him. After all, he had never shown me any decency, treating me with contempt and disdain every chance he got. But still, the memory of how he made me feel—the way he brought me to orgasm with such effortless ease—lingered like a haunting ghost, making me ache with desire.

Our interaction today had exhausted me, and I knew we had to continue this endless game of cat and mouse tonight. I wanted to taste, touch, and explore him in ways that left me feeling frantic and breathless. But I knew my obsession with him was dangerous and could only lead to my downfall. And yet, I couldn’t help but crave him, desperately wanting to succumb to his alluring charm.

My cell phone vibrated on the nightstand.

“Maeve!” I perked up at my bestie calling me. Many said we looked alike. We had the same blonde locks with very subtle differences. She had the same blue eyes I did, but the difference was she hovered close to six feet tall, where I was a solid five-three.

I had to put on my golden-girl tone with my friends. I was perky, preppy, and phony a lot of the time. I liked making my friends feel good, and why be the Debbie Downer of the group? At least, that was how my brain rationalized it.

“Can you please come over later and help me figure out what to wear to this nightclub? I am at a loss, and I need your help,” she asked.

“Of course! I’ll get dressed and swing on by. We can Uber to the club from your house?”

“Ugh, you are a lifesaver, as always,” she said before adding, “Is Daphne coming?”

“No, I think she is still not feeling great from yesterday,” I lied. “She still needs to recover, but I am totally down and cannot wait to see you.”

“Okie dokie. I’ll text her to make sure she doesn’t need anything. See you later. You are the best.” She hung up. Daphne had texted me earlier, when we were driving back, that she wasn’t going to come to the club. It just wasn’t really her scene, honestly, so I didn’t expect her to come, and after what happened at Tatum’s house, it looked like she needed a few days to recover.

I went to my closet and thumbed through the dresses. Getting dressed up for me wasn’t just about picking out an outfit. It was about sending a message or creating a mood. If I wore black, I was automatically upset and pissy. If I willed myself to wear something colorful, then I would be in a better mood. It always worked. Who needed conventional therapy when you had retail therapy?

It was an incredibly bewildering day that left me overwhelmed. Without much thought, I reached for one of my snug, sultry black dresses. But as I slipped it on, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of disconnection from the daring, thrill-seeking part of myself that thrived in Vegas. The side of me that reveled in adventure and flirted with danger, moving with effortless grace in the shadows. If she were here tonight, she’d strut into the club wearing something audacious and revealing—a true statement piece that would make Alex regret ever treating her poorly.

My fingers brushed against a neon-yellow dress that hugged my curves like a second skin, featuring bondage-inspired straps that wrapped around my body, ending just below my derriere. The top was incredibly revealing, leaving nothing to the imagination. Remembering Alex’s lewd comments about my attire during our last encounter at the club, a little vengeful minx inside me stirred with determination. This was it. This was the outfit that would convey the exact mood I was feeling.

My favorite part of this whole adventure was figuring out what piece of undergarment to wear with it. It was very much like the cherry on top of the ice cream sundae. It was absolutely necessary and added that perfect touch of sweetness. I dug inside my lingerie drawer, which was far more extensive than the outfits I owned—and that was saying a lot. I kept pulling pieces out, but none fit the dress or felt right. It wasn't until I got to the very bottom of the drawer that the neon lace lingerie piece from Madam Curity's club snagged my attention. I couldn't help but let out a snarky laugh. If I was going for sweet revenge, this would be a full-blown knockout.

I pulled out the familiar piece of yellow lingerie, which perfectly matched the dress I had picked, and gently slid the garters onto my thighs and remembered the way he pulled against them as his girthy, thick cock thrust inside of me. As I snapped up the bra, I couldn't help but reminisce about the way his cock slid in and out of my breasts. The way we captivated such an audience brought me over the edge.

“Get it together.” I threw water on my face after slipping into my dress before adding some glam and curls.

“Game time.”

I pulled up to Maeve's house a half hour later. She lived closer to downtown, where all the clubs were. Her house was modest, and she lived with her parents in their renovated casita on the back of their property. Her two little girls lived with her, but they were at their dad's house this weekend. I stepped into her little house, and even in the midst of kids' toys and life clutter I didn't have, Maeve was furiously cleaning up.

As she tossed toys into a bin, I couldn't help but notice her hair was pinned up in loose curls atop her head.

“I'm really sorry I didn't get a chance to tidy up,” she said, her frenzied demeanor almost made me want to shake her. But I knew I had to maintain my composure in order to defuse the situation.

“Girl! It is totally okay. Let me help you.” I picked up a few dolls strewn around the kitchen.

She stopped dead in her tracks when she finally looked in my direction.

“Holy. Shit. I have seen you dressed up many times over the years, but I promise you, I have never seen you look this drop dead gorgeous.” She whistled at me for effect. “Does this have to do with your little date this morning to the flower shop?”

She laughed, but I furrowed my eyebrows.

“Hey, you had a date to go to a venue too,” I retorted while sticking my tongue out at her. “Thank you, though. This is for me tonight.” I gave her one last shimmy and then we finished picking up her living room before heading to her bathroom.

I grabbed her curls and began loosening them and brushing them out for her.

“Seriously, though, was flower shopping worse than the day I had?” She was sitting on a chair by the small white vanity.

“It wasn’t great.” It was a half truth, I guess.

“I gotta say, though, the genes run strong in the Marchetti family.” She craned her head to look up at me, and we both laughed hysterically, knowing exactly what she meant.

“Stop!” she squealed between sobs. “I am going to pee myself if we continue laughing.”

Our voices died down as I helped her put on makeup.

“Where did you learn to do all of this?” she asked.

It was an innocent question, but something that hit me deep down. Growing up with only Ronan, I was like a princess trapped in a tower, isolated from traditional schooling, and socializing with peers. But I found solace and inspiration on the internet, where makeup tutorials became my sanctuary and form of worship. She had no idea about my unconventional upbringing or the alternative means by which I honed my skills.

In the briefest of moments, I knew I had two options. I could continue to live in the shadow and conceal the darkest lies within my chest. If I looked down the other path, it was letting her into a little part of my inner world, just like I had done this morning with Alex. Letting him have a piece of the inner architecture that made me a mixture of that golden face of perfection who also enjoyed dipping her toes in the darkness.

“I was stuck at home a lot when I was a child. Well, when my parents were alive. I just had a lot of free time and wasn’t allowed to do many activities outside, so it was something I really enjoyed doing. Watching hair and makeup tutorials and sketching helped me pass the time.” I volunteered the information, and the barriers that helped protect my castle were on high alert. I was half expecting her to run me out of her house.

“That is kind of sad. I’m sorry you didn’t get to go out and see the world as a kid.” She offered up an apologetic smile.

“On the other hand, I am glad this amazing talent came out of your childhood.” She reached up and touched me on top of my shoulder. She was right. If we were looking at the situation as a glass half-full moment, then I was glad.

The conversation quickly shifted to the different products I was using on her and then we were both glammed up and ready to go to the club.

I convinced Maeve to wear a tight pale-pink satin dress that hit midthigh on her incredibly long legs. We gathered our bags and waited outside the main house for our Uber to arrive.

The club was in the center of the city, and on a random weekday night, it still had a line wrapped down the block when we pulled up. It was a very nondescript blacked-out building with no sign or name on it. Honestly, you wouldn’t know it was there if the people weren’t clamoring to get in.

Tatum had pulled some strings, and we were lucky enough to have the top VIP lounge waiting for us. We didn’t have to

wait in line like the other eager clubgoers. Even though Elio owned this club and many others, he opted to sit this one out. He preferred to work rather than hang out with us. It was just friends and a few work colleagues from the restaurant joining us tonight.

We stepped out of the Uber and were heading past the line when I spotted him standing at the entrance.

He was wearing black slacks and a black button-up, and tonight he almost resembled his brother with that raw, primal power he exuded. God, he reminded me so much of the person I had been with at the kink club. He was tall and strong, with cropped black hair and a hint of scruff on his face. His clothes hugged his body, emphasizing his muscular physique.

As I got closer, I could see the details of his outfit. The black shirt was unbuttoned at the top, revealing a glimpse of his toned chest. The sleeves were rolled up, showcasing his bulging forearms, and his black slacks fit perfectly on his long legs, highlighting his confident stride.

As he turned to face me, his eyes locked onto mine, and a jolt of electricity ran through my body. His dark eyes were intense, and his strong jawline added to the allure of his rugged appearance. The scruff on his face was more noticeable now, giving him a slightly dangerous edge that only added to his appeal.

But as I approached, I saw that he was not alone. Standing next to him was a stunning woman, tall and confident. Her hair was a waterfall of golden waves, framing her face perfectly. Her features were delicate, with high cheekbones and full lips painted a deep red. She wore a black dress that hugged her curves, accentuating her long legs and hourglass figure.

My heart sank.

A pang of jealousy coursed through me as I realized he was not alone, and I wasn't sure how to handle it.

I tried to push the feeling aside as he greeted us, but my mind was already racing with questions. Who was she? How

did they know each other? Was this his date? I couldn't help but compare myself to her, wondering if I could ever be as stunning as she was.

He noticed us at the entrance, and he held it open while Maeve and I walked through. His eyes lingered on Maeve for a few moments longer than normal. When he let her walk by, his jaw ticked. As I breezed past him, he pulled me to a stop.

"Don't pull any stunts here." His eyes were dark and hooded with a glint of an emotion I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"What I do is none of your concern. Maybe you should try and control what your girlfriend does." He chuckled deeply before letting me walk past him.

I could have sworn I heard him whisper, "That dress" as he moved past me.

As we were led to our VIP section, I couldn't help but notice the way he guided her by the small of her back, his hand lingering just a little too long. My stomach churned as I watched them, feeling like an outsider in my own group of friends. I tried to smile and engage in the conversation, but my thoughts drifted back to him and the mystery woman by his side.

Tatum and Maeve were by my side as I watched Alex and the mystery woman. The rhythmic beats of the club music surrounded me, but my thoughts were only on him. Tatum's voice cut through the noise and brought me back to reality.

"She's got it bad," she said, nodding toward Alex.

"What?" I turned my head toward my friends, trying to mask my jealousy.

"For him," Tatum replied, and I felt a twinge in my heart.

"It's the Marchetti curse." She giggled, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes at her drunkenness.

"You're being ridiculous. I hate him. He's so arrogant," I replied, trying to convince myself more than them. But Tatum just looked at me with a knowing smile.

“Sure, sure. Blame me all you want,” she said, and Maeve burst into laughter, handing me a drink.

“Let’s go to the dance floor!” Maeve exclaimed after a few moments when a Britney Spears remix hit the speakers.

“Yes!” I screamed, letting the grumpy and annoyed parts of myself succumb to the darkness of the nightclub.

“Hey, maybe if I am lucky, I’ll find a catch down there to play with,” I said, but the music was too loud, and Maeve just pulled me to the dance floor.

The dance floor was packed with bodies molding to each other, rhythmically moving to the beats of the songs. There were girls twerking on men and guys double-fisting drinks as they let them grind deep into them. We were only able find a spot in the center of the floor because of Maeve’s height and ability to push through.

“Holy crap. This is insane,” Maeve whisper-shouted into my ear. “It’s a weekday! Don’t these people have to go to work or something?” I couldn’t help but giggle along with her.

The sound of the club music reverberated through my body, vibrating in my chest and thrumming in my veins. My senses heightened as I moved to the beat, my hips swaying with the rhythm. The air was thick with the scent of sweat and booze, but it was a familiar comfort, like a worn-in leather jacket on a cold night.

I couldn’t help but wonder why I kept up the façade of the good girl, the one who always played by the rules. This life, the people, the parties, and the thrill of the underground world that came with it were in my blood. I was a part of it, and it was a part of me. I had no idea where it came from, but it was here in my core and probably always had been. If it hadn’t been for my parents’ death, I would have kept it hidden for the entirety of my life out of fear of rejection. But they aren’t here anymore, and I didn’t understand why I still did.

My eyes peeked open in a foggy daze on the dance floor. I saw Maeve with . . . Christian? Who knows, really. I let the

music continue to move me when two hands grabbed my hips, and I flew backward.

I snapped out of my trance but couldn't make out who it was. I could tell it was a male, as he pulled me into his erection. His hands left trails of sweat as they moved toward my chest.

Yup, just like every schmuck out there. He wanted to taste, touch, and play with my assets, and any other day, I probably would have entertained the idea, but today was different. I was with my friends and enjoying my night, with no desire to let this continue.

"No thanks!" I screeched over the loud music while attempting to slip my hands between my body and his greasy hands to push him away from me.

My aggression only provoked him, and his hands tightened against my yellow dress. He went to push up my dress, which was already hitched right under my ass, and make his way to my entrance.

His hands moved toward my chest, reaching for what wasn't his to touch. My body recoiled, but the man's grip only tightened. The music pounded in my ears, drowning out my screams for help. I searched for Maeve, but the crowd swallowed me whole, leaving me alone and vulnerable. Panic clawed at my throat as his hand slipped under the hem of my dress, inching closer to my most intimate parts.

"Stop!" I was screaming and writhing beneath his touch.

Not this, not now. The suffocating feeling was growing, and I could barely take a full breath without choking on my own fear. His calloused hands finally reached the top of my V-neck dress, where he ripped one of the sleeves off, so the top of my lacy yellow lingerie was exposed.

Long, sweat-drenched locks fell onto my neckline as his dense lips pressed against my bare shoulder blade. The delicate lace was rough against his touch, making me shiver. It was almost too much for my soul, and the darkness I begged

for was overtaking me. I couldn't find the escape route. I closed my eyes and prepared myself for whatever was going to happen.

"Just be gentle," I whispered, knowing my plea would fall on deaf ears.

But just as I was about to surrender to the hands of the stranger, they left me.

My legs gave out as I realized I was no longer in the grasp of the predator. I stumbled, but strong hands caught me and held me up. As I regained my balance, I spun around to face my attacker, only to see him being confronted by a towering, menacing figure. This was no ordinary man; he was massive, with bulging muscles and a fierce scowl on his face. The predator cowered before him, like a scared little mouse in the presence of a lion. I couldn't help but feel a surge of relief and gratitude toward this imposing savior. When he briefly turned around, his brown-filled orbs were lit in anger.

"Alex," I screamed just as his fist closed and was about to slam into the man's face. I pounded on his back, and he turned around, still clenching the man's shirt in one hand.

When we locked eyes, I saw the pain laced between deep-brown pockets of angst. He was . . . worried? None of this made sense. He was here with a date, a girlfriend, or whatever she was. Why did he care?

"Think about the campaign." I knew this would soothe his immediate anger. In an instant, Julian replaced Alex's hand on the guy's shirt and dragged him by his neck into a dark corner.

Alex huffed off the dance floor, and I followed close behind. Unlike the two brothers, I was small and quickly got lost in the crowd.

"Christ, woman, keep up." His voice came from an opening where two people were furiously sucking face.

"I'm getting stuck!" I screamed, unsure if I should go around the couple or between them, fearful that somehow their tongues would touch my body.

“Hold my hand.”

He reached his hand out, and as our hands touched, an electric shock coursed through my body, causing my heart to skip a beat. The sensation was overwhelming—a jolt of energy that ran from my fingertips to the depths of my soul. It was as if a thousand butterflies had taken flight in my stomach, their wings fluttering with excitement.

In that moment, I felt more alive than ever before, and I knew this was something different. His touch sent shivers down my spine, and I felt an undeniable connection to him I couldn't ignore. His grip was strong yet gentle, and I couldn't help but feel safe in his embrace.

As we made our way through the crowd, his hand firmly in mine, it felt as if we were the only two people in the world. The noise and chaos of the club faded away, replaced by the sound of our synchronized breaths. I couldn't help but steal glances at him, taking in the way his jaw clenched in anger and how his eyes sparkled with intensity.

We finally made it to a dark corner of the club, giving me a sense of familiarity and comfort. It's where my true form unleashed—the part of me that could share a little more with the world. Alex was pacing back and forth, his anger palpable. He turned to face me, his eyes blazing with fury. I could feel the tension radiating off of him.

“Why are you mad at me?” I barked at him, matching his energy.

“Because you are fucking infuriating,” he said as he raked his hands through his hair and paced in the small, cool corner of the nightclub. In fact, a corner had I been in the presence of anyone else, would have had me wanting to undress. Nonetheless, here I was, arguing with the very man whose deep secrets I had buried inside my chest.

“Thank you.” I folded my hands across my chest, securing me from the very vulnerability I let slide off my tongue. My voice was quiet in the nightclub, and my eyes were

hyperfixated on a small stain on the carpet at my feet. Not daring to glance up at the man standing before me, I planted my feet, willing my heels to dig in as deep as they could for fear I may topple over.

Every single bit of this man was my undoing. Somehow, within the last few weeks of meeting him, I was becoming a person who was shedding the vapid Barbie-girl exterior I showed to everyone but him. It was as if he was able to unlock a door I had kept sealed shut for years, and what was inside scared me.



9

Alex

Present

As she shifted from one heel to the other, clutching her chest, the primal part of me yearned to reach out and claim her. However, the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins kept me grounded for the moment.

At first, I let her believe Krissy was my girlfriend, relishing the way she squirmed and seethed with jealousy from the corner of the VIP booth. But the instant she appeared on the dance floor, my attention was solely on her. Her body moved with an erotic grace that left me spellbound. When she walked past me and I caught a whiff of her familiar scent, I was a goner.

I was initially flushed with jealousy when she was pushed up against some random guy, thinking she was actually into him. But upon closer inspection, it was evident she was uncomfortable. Seeing red, I rushed to her aid and was just about to pummel the bastard until she tugged at her dress to keep it down. In that moment, I knew I was done for. What

sealed the deal was her concern for me, showing she cared more about my well-being than the prick who had been grinding against her for the last twenty minutes.

Now, standing here in the corner of the club, my hands trembling with anger, I saw her in all her raw vulnerability. She revealed a side of herself to me she kept hidden from others, and it cut through the icy barrier around my heart.

On the flip side, I knew what I wanted to accomplish tonight. I wanted to figure out which one of Tatum's friends had caught me at the club. At this point, the paranoia was making me think the absent friend with the darker hair may have been wearing a wig, and it was her. I needed to find out who it was because I hadn't heard anything from Rafe since this afternoon.

I called him to check in, and he said the hacker had come from the inside, meaning they had access to my passwords from being in proximity to me. It had to have been someone I had worked with closely before, but that could be any one of the many dirty dealings Julian and I have had. Rafe suggested I find the girl in the video to see if she had any known enemies or associates that might be after either of us.

In a last-ditch effort, I called the club again and spoke to Madam Curity. She refused to tell me who the girl was, but somehow let it slip that it was her first time there. Meaning that the innocent little girl was exactly who I had conjured up in my mind. The conclusion left me to confirm I had convinced myself it was Maeve until I saw her dancing with Julian's bodyguard, Christian, on the dance floor just now. Whatever. I needed to deal with the situation in front of me, and I would go and figure out who the girl was after.

"You can go up to the booth." Her voice was like a fresh breeze on a warm day.

It was loud in the club, but her melodic tone breezed into the deepest parts of me. I didn't know what it was about this girl that drove me absolutely mad.

“Not unless you are coming up with me,” I demanded, standing in front of her. We weren’t touching, but there was an electric force between us.

And there she went, looking back up at me with her doe blue eyes. Her lower lip was parted slightly. She looked as if she was on the verge of tears, and the electric force field between us was pulsating.

I gently cupped her jaw, slowly letting my hands run down her creamy, sun-kissed cheek. She was every bit the vapid princess with her perfect hair, makeup, nails, and outfits, but in my presence, she was slowly unraveling, revealing a vulnerable and authentic side of herself I had never seen before. As I caressed her skin with my thumb, she stepped closer. The connection between us was palpable, and the tension grew thicker with each passing moment.

Making my way to her dress sleeve off her shoulder, I stroked from her jaw down her neck. With each press against her skin, I knew we both felt the electricity thrumming between us. It was erotic and sensual.

Being the decent human being I am, I went to pull her strap up to cover her, and a delicate lace struck my attention. I had seen that lace before.

“I can do this.”

But just as quickly as the vulnerability had surfaced, it disappeared, and she became the bubbly personality she projected to others. She fidgeted with the strap of her dress, struggling to pull it up herself, and I couldn’t help but be drawn in. As I pushed her hand away, I caught a glimpse of a familiar shade of yellow. It was the same highlighter-yellow lace two-piece set that had been haunting my thoughts for weeks. The same lingerie that lived rent-free in my mind and had been displayed on my laptop.

I pushed up the hem of her dress, and she yelped in surprise, revealing the two thigh garters. Anger coursed through me.

“You.” I was pissed. No, I was fucking livid. She had been with me for the last twenty-four hours. She had a fucking three-hour, round-trip drive during which she could have confessed any of these details to me but instead chose to sit there silently.

“I am so sorry,” she blubbered while her eyes started to water.

I stepped back from her, feeling betrayed and hurt. I couldn’t believe she had kept this from me. It was a secret she could have shared, and now it felt like it was all a lie. I didn’t know how to react, so I stayed silent as she tried to gain her composure.

“Please, I didn’t mean to deceive you,” she said softly, looking at me with pleading eyes.

“What are you talking about? You didn’t mean to lie? You knew about this all morning and never once thought to tell me?” I was screaming and instinctually punched the wall behind her, making her jump.

“Do you know what you have done to me?” My vision was clouded by the red coursing through my veins.

I stepped closer to her, making her take a step backward and into the darkness of the club. I grabbed her throat and squeezed a little bit, and she hissed out a breath. My cock twitched thinking about the way she loved to be dominated. To be spanked, slapped, and thrust into like the dirty little minx that she was.

“I never meant to hide it from you,” she replied, shaking her head as I squeezed a little bit more, and as her eyes rolled back, I hoped she was thinking of our time at the kink club together. “I just didn’t know how to tell you.”

“You didn’t know how to tell me?” I removed my hand from her throat and took a few steps away from her. “You could have started with the truth.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she said, her voice quivering. “It’s just that I’ve been so afraid of how it would change this weekend. I

didn't mean—”

“No, you are right, Chelsea. You didn't mean to wear the same piece of lingerie you did at the club tonight. Of course you wouldn't wear the same thing at the same fucking place you knew I was going to be.”

My anger was simmering just below the surface, and I was finding it difficult to keep my composure. I took a deep breath and stepped back from her.

“I just can't believe this, Chelsea. You've been lying to me this entire time. At any point did you think about how this would affect me? How can I trust anything you say?”

“I know,” she whispered, tears streaming down her face. “I thought if I could just keep it a secret, then everything would be okay this weekend. I was planning on eventually talking to you about it.”

“Do you have any idea what this has done to my career?” I spat. My voice was laced with venom. “You know, I was actually starting to think there was more to you than what meets the eye. That there was more than a princess that likes to spend their dead parents' money.”

Sobs broke free as she covered her mouth. If I had to admit it, it was pretty fucked up I even said it, but I wanted her to hurt as much as me. I felt so fucking betrayed by her. Sure, I knew it was a solid fifty-fifty chance it could be Chelsea, but the fact I had spent the entire day with her and we actually were getting along, I couldn't imagine it was her.

Plus, the girl in my head I was jacking off to multiple times a day was a delicate and beautiful creature wrapped in an innocent package. Chelsea was the kind of girl who danced on top of tables while touching herself. She wasn't the woman I pictured in my head.

“I haven't said anything to anyone, if that is what you are worried about.”

“You better not. Not only does it implicate me, but you will get dragged down too.”

At this point, I needed to put distance between us because I had never felt this much hatred toward someone as I did now, and watching her cry in the corner of a crowded nightclub wasn't doing anything for the anger flowing through my body.

“Fuck this.”

I grabbed her by her arms and pulled her with me. The electricity between us was gone. I was an asshole, but I couldn't leave her sitting in a dark corner of a nightclub alone, especially since that guy who had just been grinding on her could still be lurking.

“Where are we going?” she questioned while trying to keep up with my pace.

I turned around and forced her chin up so she was looking me right in the eyes. I wiped a few mascara trails off her face.

“Look at me. You are not to say a word about this to anyone. This whole situation is fucking up the entire empire I worked so hard to curate, so you will keep your pretty fucking mouth shut. We will spend the rest of the week together with a smile on our faces, and once I leave, you will never step foot in my presence again.”

She only nodded and blinked rapidly, which I could only assume was to stop the tears from falling.

“Do you fucking understand me?” I demanded, grimacing at her, knowing damn well I had the upper hand and that she was at her limit.

“I swear to God, I am so sorry I did this.” She pointed to her body, which forced my eyes to follow where her arms were, and I couldn't help but linger a little bit longer along the curves that I had gotten to know so well.

“I will never say a word to anyone.” Her voice got lower, and when she whispered, “I would never do anything to hurt you,” I could barely hear it over the roar of the music.

A twinge of sympathy for her flickered through me in that brief moment. It wasn't her fault she had recognized me. The

situation was a mistake. I refrained from disclosing to her that I was being blackmailed. If she was intent on keeping secrets, then it was only fair I kept this one from her until I could determine the who and why of the situation.

I was truthful when I told her we had no reason to cross paths after this week. The only thing left for me to do was to get through the next few days without dwelling on the tantalizing lace piece she flaunted at me tonight or how she had ignited a desire within me these past few weeks. If I were being honest with myself, I would admit that being with someone who had kids wasn't in my plans right now and I was grateful it wasn't the tall friend. Because despite my campaign manager's insistence that settling down and starting a family would be good for my image, it simply wasn't what I wanted. My line of work was intertwined with the legal system, but it wasn't exactly lawful. Any woman and children who entered my life would instantly become targets, and that was something I couldn't stomach.

As she walked toward the rest of the group, a feeling of unease settled in the pit of my stomach. There was something about her that intrigued me; something that drew me to her despite the risk involved. I knew it was a foolish thought, but the danger only made her more alluring.

God, I didn't know what the fuck I was thinking. I was becoming soft for this woman, and it was beyond infuriating, so when I met up with the rest of the group in the VIP section, I did exactly what I knew how to do best: piss people off.

I grabbed Krissy by her lower back, and I swear she snapped back toward me, knowing this intimate gesture was not something we normally shared.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, knowing everything I did was calculated.

"Just play the role," I said through gritted teeth while staring at the yellow from the corner of my eye.

She was beautiful. No, she was tantalizing, with her curled, long locks falling right below her shoulder and her blue eyes shining so brightly in the dark place. The fact her heart was so large that she put others before her own needs, even though it was her downfall, was one of the most beautiful parts of her.

Instead of confessing this, I turned my head back to an inquisitive Krissy, pulling her tighter into my arms, and whispered in her ear for effect. “Have you gotten any word from Rafe?”

“Negative. I also put word through the pipeline to see if any of our undercovers know anything,” she responded, keeping a large smile plastered on her face. To the outside world, we looked like a couple sharing an intimate secret, but our relationship was nothing like it appeared.

“I gotta get outta here,” I whispered back to her. “This place is fucking making me itchy.”

Her echo reverberated among the rhythm of the club, and I felt eyes piercing my back. This made my lips turn up in a small smile, knowing exactly what she was feeling at the moment—a small victory to be held in the anger still pulsating inside my chest.

“Are you sure you are okay?” Krissy asked, her face laced with genuine worry.

“Fine,” I huffed out, giving her a small hug before she shrugged me off and went back to dancing to the music.

“Brother, I am heading out. I’ve got a business to run, even though it seems like you have forgotten.” I slapped him across the shoulder. He was bigger than me, and if we were walking down the street together, he would be the one you would be terrified to see lurking in the dark, whereas I was the person you handed your baby to at a political rally and snapped a photo while smiling. It was a yin-and-yang situation, but it worked for what we needed it to and what we were trying to accomplish.

“One week, Alessandro,” he said in my native Italian name. A name that our mamma gave us when we were younger but then changed to make us fit in better after we left the family.

“*Va bene*. (Very well),” I retorted, and then stalked out of the club.

As I made my way toward the exit, I caught a glimpse of the woman in yellow, who was now twirling around with her friends in the corner of the room, all of them holding hands. As always, Chelsea led the group, trying to please everyone. In that fleeting moment, our eyes met, and her smile faltered. I saw the regret etched on her face. A flash of worry crossed her face for a moment before she quickly replaced it with a tight-lipped smile, turning to her friends and resuming her bubbly façade.

It was a strange feeling, seeing the two sides of Chelsea. The girl who had shared intimate moments with me just hours before and the one who was now playing the part of the life of the party. But I knew this was who she was—a people pleaser who always put on a brave face, even when she was hurting inside. I wondered if this was her way of coping—putting on a show to distract her from her own problems.

I couldn’t help but feel a sense of betrayal. Here I was going home to deal with the blackmail situation, and she was this oblivious little girl partying with her friends. I had let her into my life this morning, if only for a moment, and she had lied to me, even if it was by omission. My anger simmered beneath the surface.

I focused on the task at hand and dialed Rafe and demanded he figure out who was behind this sooner rather than later. As I stormed out of the club, my thoughts were consumed with thoughts of retribution. Whoever was behind the blackmail scheme would pay dearly, and I would make damn sure of it.



10

Chelsea

The Next Morning

My head was absolutely throbbing after downing four shots of vodka once Alex huffed off. The rest of the night was a blur. I didn't remember Julian calling an Uber for me or stumbling into my apartment. I was doing really well trying to manage my drinking and partying, but the Alex situation threw me for a loop. I felt like such an idiot. For one, wearing that stupid lingerie to the club while knowing he would be there, and two, because I had worked so hard to fall out of my old partying ways. I used to drink so much that the next morning I had no idea where I was or how I got there.

It would get me in a lot of trouble. A few months ago, when I was in Vegas, I was working on a mark to fuck, and it went south. I remember somehow ending up in a hotel room the next morning with not even a dollar in my purse and no idea how I got there. I was greeted with a bump of coke on the side table and a few littered glasses around the bed.

I felt dirty and disgusting, and as much as I wanted that dark side of me to come out in the city of sin, it was beyond who I was. If I confronted the deep roots of my inner demons, they would stem from my parents' deaths. I hated talking about it, but not knowing or understanding why they did what they did to me growing up and confining me like I was a princess locked away in her castle ate at me. For years after their deaths, I begged my brother to help me figure out the reasoning for the secrecy and protection. He claimed he didn't know but also refused to let me snoop around or ask other relatives if they had answers or pieces to the puzzle.

The deeper I tried to look, the clearer the roadblocks became. It's really what dove me into the party scene—the drinking and drugs and the fucking guys in random corners of clubs. The obsession eventually stopped as I became engrossed in a world so new and tantalizing.

Suddenly, a bottle cracking came from my living room. I froze under my covers and even pulled them over my head, as if somehow that would hide me from the intruder in my kitchen. This was my punishment for last night. I knew being home alone after a night of blacking out was too good to be true.

I sighed, grabbed the baseball bat from the corner of my bed, and walked to the kitchen, expecting to see a strange man.

“Where the fuck is the Tylenol?” a familiar feminine voice said, and I propped the bat on my shoulder. The figure was rifling through a cabinet in my kitchen, and I rounded the corner like I was about to rain hell on the intruder.

“Who are you!?” I bellowed, and the familiar shoulder-length black hair swung in my direction.

“Jesus, woman. Put the bat down,” Daphne crooned with a sarcastic lilt as her cheeks pulled back.

“What? How? Where?”

So many questions raced through my head as I put the bat down by the couch and sauntered over to her. She stood by the

big white marble island and gazed around at my house.

“First of all, the person who should be asking any questions is me,” she said, gesturing to my house.

Damn, this is exactly why I didn’t want to say anything to my friends. I didn’t even have answers to my own questions about my parents’ wealth and where it came from. I was ashamed of my childhood; this was only a piece of it.

I threw myself on the couch, and Daphne hovered over me, that smug smile still plastered on her face. When she finally sat next to me, she let a little giggle out.

“All right, I can see your mind working. I won’t let you suffer in angst any longer.” I stuck my tongue out at her in a gesture of good faith.

“Julian called Elio to see if he could give you a ride home.”

“Okay . . . and you were somehow with him?” My eyes narrowed on her. Her cheeks flushed a bright red.

“Yeah. I was feeling better, and he offered to give me a ride to you guys. Anyway, when we dropped you off, you were in bad shape, so I slept on the couch.” She shut down the conversation after that, but I knew there was more to the story than she was letting on.

“Hmm . . .” I said mockingly, knowing this would clue her in that I wasn’t buying what she was trying to sell.

“This isn’t about me.” She threw her hands in the air as she sank deeper into the couch. “This is about you. Tell me, what have you been hiding from us? A condo in La Jolla next to the ocean? This is some millionaire shit.”

Ugh. This was exactly the reason why I didn’t ever want to share this with anyone. I hated feeling like somehow having money made me immune from the struggles of life. It didn’t erase the pain and trauma I had experienced or the challenges I still faced. But I knew I couldn’t hide forever, and maybe it was time to let someone in.

“You know my parents died when I was in high school?”

She nodded. All my friends had met Ronan, and I had let them into that part of my life.

“Well, they left us with a large sum of money . . . and when I turned twenty-one, I got my inheritance. Ronan lives down the block too.”

“Wow. What did they do?” she asked, and my shoulders deflated, knowing this question was coming and the reason I held off talking about it for so long.

“I honestly have no idea. It was a mystery to me. Everything about their deaths was kept hush-hush. Ronan never gave me any details.”

“Wow.” Her mouth fell open in shock. “Do you know anything about them?”

“All I know is they were immigrants from Dublin.” According to my brother, this was a secret I was supposed to keep, but I figured it had been nine years since they passed, so it was safe enough to share. It wasn’t like some government figure was going to tell them to go back now, so I never knew why we kept that secret.

“Otherwise, I knew they kept me in the dark about a lot of things.” It was all I could offer without wanting to divulge what they actually did to me. How they kept me like their golden princess inside a castle.

“Dude,” Daphne said.

“Ugh, don’t hate me,” I pleaded, feeling like my carefully crafted persona was being shattered.

“I could never hate you!” Daphne sprang from where she was sitting on one end of the couch and then gave me a reassuring hug. She was an anti-physical touch, so this was a huge deal to her. I squeezed a little tighter before releasing her, thankful she was the person who brought me home instead of a random Uber driver.

“I just don’t understand why you didn’t share this with any of us. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Chels.” Once again, she

waved her hands around the house, and it still felt uncomfortable for me to hold space with her in here.

“I have to know. Why do you work at the restaurant if you don’t have to?” she asked.

“I want to. You know how I sketch sometimes?” She nodded. “It’s my dream one day to design an inclusive lingerie line for women.”

“What? You are literally full of secrets today.” I laughed and continued on.

“I just hated how I looked for most of my childhood,” I said, pointing to my chest and sighing out a deep breath I didn’t realize I was holding. The weight lifting allowed the words to spill like a waterfall.

“So, that is really what I would love to do . . . one day. But I needed to keep my mind busy and occupied, so the restaurant was something I thought could be a fun way to keep busy.” I shrugged.

Daphne’s eyes widened as I spoke, revealing my hidden desires and secrets. The emotions poured out of me like a floodgate.

“I just don’t get it,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re so talented and beautiful and smart. Why did you ever think you weren’t good enough to show us this side of you?”

I swallowed hard, fighting back tears. “It’s just something that’s always been there, you know? The feeling that I’m not enough. I’ve been carrying it around for so long that it’s become a part of me. It was ingrained in my DNA from such a young age.”

Daphne wrapped her arm around my shoulder and gave me a tight squeeze. “Well, it doesn’t have to be. You’re so much more than that, Chels. You’re a survivor and a fighter and a dreamer. And I know you’ll make those dreams come true.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her words as a warmth spread through my chest. I felt seen and understood for the first time

in a long time.

“I needed to hear this. In some way, I am glad it was you instead of a random person driving me home yesterday.” I smiled and gave her a small pat on her knee. She was dressed in a black cotton minidress, and her hair was stuck straight to her shoulders. She had that slept-in look, but yesterday she was dressed up, which was unusual for her.

“I think you have some secrets about yourself too.”

“It is a story for another day. In the meantime, let’s go explore your backyard, yeah?” She gestured to the sand and the ocean, and I nodded before grabbing my beach bag and walking out the front door hand in hand with her.

Right before I shut the door behind me, I paused and looked over at my friend, who had just opened the door to one of my deepest secrets.

“Do you think we could keep this between us for now? I don’t know if I am one hundred percent ready to tell the girls.”

“Of course.” She smiled back at me, and we walked toward the beach, where we spent the morning watching the waves and soaking up the sun.

While sitting on the egg chair by the window enjoying the sunset and sketching on my pad my phone started blowing up next to me.

Tatum: PLEASE! SOMEONE TELL ME YOU ARE FREE TONIGHT. SOS

Maeve: What is happening? Why the caps?

Tatum: The rehearsal dinner is tomorrow, and the hotel we are having the dinner at overbooked, so we are stuck having dinner on the patio.

Daphne: Why is this an emergency? Isn't the garden prettier?

I chuckled at Daphne's message; she had always been the one among us who preferred nature over cityscapes, so it made sense that she would prefer dining in the open air. However, I empathized with Tatum's anxiety. After all, having your carefully planned wedding arrangements changed at the last minute would be incredibly distressing.

Me: How can I help?

Tatum: Julian and I are already out entertaining his associates for the night, so I need someone to head downtown to the hotel and confirm the setup for tomorrow.

Tatum: I can sweeten the pot and give you the hotel room they promised as an apology for their mistake.

Maeve: That sounds like heaven, but no can do. I have the girls tonight, and they are already in bed.

Daphne: I can't either—I already have plans, sorry.

I mean, technically, I was free. My plan was to sit and continue sketching, but maybe a change of scenery and a trip to the spa at a fancy-schmancy hotel could be worked into my plans.

Tatum: Earth to Chels!

Me: I am in.

Tatum: You are a LIFE SAVER. I'll text you the details.

Tatum's text was like music to my ears, and my excitement grew as I packed an overnight bag with care. I meticulously selected the perfect outfits for the rehearsal dinner and made sure to include my favorite accessories. The thought of spending the night in a fancy hotel, surrounded with room service and an endless evening to sketch, was amazing. Everything seemed to be working out in my favor.

As I pulled the top back on my convertible and started down the freeway toward the downtown hotel, I couldn't help but feel something heavy in my chest. It had been a familiar feeling for the last twenty-four hours. It had to do with one person: Alex Marchetti.

Tomorrow, I would see him at the rehearsal dinner, and the shame I felt earlier was crawling back into my bones. Sharing the truth earlier had lifted a large weight off my chest, and I wish had just told Alex about the club beforehand. Instead, I fell back into my old habits and betrayed him.

God, I didn't even know why I cared so much about this man. Everything about him consumed my thoughts—from the way he stood tall and confident to the way his hair curled at the tips and how he pushed it back when he was frustrated. And those deep-brown eyes that sparkled with warmth when he saw me at the flower shop on the phone with Camille.

But he would never be mine. He was here with someone else, and the notion he was a prince coming to save the day on the dance floor of the nightclub needed to leave my thoughts. He was just doing the right thing.

“Come on, Chelsea.”

I took a deep breath and focused on the present. The cool ocean breeze and the hum of the engine in my car provided a

welcomed distraction. I needed to let go of the past and the what-ifs. It was clear he would never be mine, and I had to accept that. With a sense of closure and a newfound determination to move on, I drove forward, hoping the confidence I was feeling would remain.



11

Alex

Present

“Talk to me, brother.” I answered my phone on the first ring.

“Tatum needs your help.” I pressed my hand over the phone speaker and groaned. My brother was really pissing me off. Our empire was on the verge of crumbling, and it had been days since we had any real updates.

“Hi, sweet brother-in-law!” the voice on the other end chirped. Knowing I was on speakerphone, I composed my annoyance.

“What can I do for you, Tatum?”

“We *really* need your help,” Tatum drawled, and something in her voice sounded . . . different?

“Okay . . .?” I questioned, not sure where this was leading.

“I need you to go to the hotel and confirm everything is set up for the rehearsal dinner tomorrow. It’s an emergency—”

“No.” I thought I was going to strangle my brother earlier but now it was absolutely clear I would make him suffer after this.

“Yes.” His tone was laced with an undercurrent of threat.

“What do you need? This is the last favor I am able to do,” I conceded.

“Fine! Yes, no problem. I totally get it, plus our wedding is in two days, so I promise this will be the last one.” Tatum rushed out.

I pulled on my crisp white shirt and stood up from the bed. Using the floor-length mirror, I admired my appearance. It was part of the job, so I took pride in how I looked, and appreciated designer labels. I silently laughed to myself because it was exactly what I condemned Chelsea for.

“I’ll text you the details, but head over to the hotel now.” Fuck. Again, it’s not like I had other plans today, including running a fucking campaign.

“Give me a couple hours,” I requested. “I need to tie up some loose ends for work, and Krissy is coming over for a briefing.” I hated that I practically had to beg my family to work on *our* empire. One that our mamma died in vain for.

“One hour,” Julian said and then hung up. Moments later, I had an instruction list and address for the hotel in my inbox from my dear ol’ sister-in-law.

“This is why we vowed off women long ago,” I grumbled before heading downstairs to the main dining table, where I had taken over with campaign paperwork.

It wasn’t more than a few minutes before I heard the click, click, click of a pair of heels coming through the door.

“It is like getting into the White House.” After getting Tatum back when her ex kidnapped her, Julian’s house was like a damn fortress. He had twenty-four-seven security around him, whereas I preferred keeping my birds more

incognito. After I had initially told him about the blackmail, though, the guards somehow multiplied as I arrived.

“Blame my overprotective brother.” I scowled as she sat next to me at the table.

“How freely can we talk?” she asked as she leaned back in her chair.

“If you think this place is hard to get through, imagine its digital security.” I threw my hands up and pointed to just a few cameras in our view.

“Good. We have a problem.” She threw her elbows on the table and leaned toward me, letting her long blonde hair fall over her shoulders.

“Tell me.” I craned my neck and pushed a rogue hair off my forehead.

“The Irish.” Her smile disappeared.

“I fucking knew it.”

“I reached out to them about the project, but they want to traffic people through our pipeline—”

“Absolutely not. You know that’s a hard fucking no.” She rubbed her eyes as if she had been dealing with this all night long.

“I know. I told them that, but they are insisting. In order to get approval on the project, it’s what they want.”

“Then the project doesn’t move forward. Call the investors and senators involved and tell them it’s dead in the water.”

“You know once the media gets wind that you are double backing on funding the largest children’s public hospital in our state, it is going to look atrocious for optics.”

I slammed my hand into the table.

“Fuck.” I was pinned between a rock and a hard place.

My phone rang, and I picked it up.

“Marchetti,” I answered on the first ring.

“Are we good?” A familiar baritone came through the phone—it was Rafe.

“Yes. I’m here with Krissy. She’s good.” The phone pinged, and I answered the secured video call from Rafe. He was a nerdy guy, and the same height as my six-foot-five brother, by the looks of it. He wore thick black glasses and was always focused on the plenty of screens plastered in front of him.

“Look what I found.” He flipped the camera and zoomed in on a very pixelated screen.

“What the fuck am I looking at?” I glance over at Krissy for clues as to what I’m missing, but her nose is scrunched.

“Bottom right of the screen.”

I see nothing.

“The green and black ink on the person’s skin. It is a flag. I cannot figure out what flag it is, but we aren’t talking motorcycle insignia or anything. Definitely a branded flag.” I studied the photo on the screen and could barely make out what Rafe was saying.

“Sure, okay. I’ll give you some leeway and believe you.”

“I mean, what choice do you have?” Krissy perked next to me, her hands wringing together.

“True.” I didn’t get what this meant. “So, are we talking about the Italians? Russians?” I muttered off until it clicked and then glared at Krissy.

In unison, we said, “Irish.”

“You got something?” Rafe perked up on the other end of the phone.

“Yeah, it’s gotta be the Irish. Can you somehow connect the dots for us and figure out if it’s true before we retaliate?” I asked.

“For sure, Boss.” Rafe typed onto one of his monitors before adding, “We gotta talk about the girl in the video too.” I shifted in my seat.

“What about?” I ask.

“Do you know who she is? Any updates from the club?” Krissy narrowed in on me as she shifted her dress in her seat. A small cough was the only sound heard in the room for a moment while she repositioned. She hasn’t seen the full video, and she never asked to either.

“Yes” was all I could muster up without feeling like my chest was about to burst. Even the mere mention of Chelsea’s name sent me into a mindfuck.

“Name? Does she have any known associates?” His questions were innocent, and I knew he was just trying to gather information.

“I have no fucking idea, Rafe. Isn’t that your job to find out?” I barked. I was being a dick.

“Name,” he repeated, not responding to my comment.

“Fuck, fine. It’s Chelsea O’Brien.”

“All right.” He chuckled and moved his glasses up. “Send me any additional info you have. I’m going to explore this Irish hypothesis.” He hung up, and Krissy was eyeing me.

“Don’t start with me.” I threw the chair back and paced through my brother’s dining room. He painted one of the walls an obnoxious neon color to satisfy his wife’s demand.

“This wall is fucking stupid.” I walked toward the window and stared out at the open expanse. The ocean waves roared below as the sun welcomed the day.

“Well, isn’t this kind of ironic.” *Click. Click. Click.*

She slid next to me, and I wanted to rip my shirt off at how uncomfortable I felt, shifting on my feet.

“Is it the girl you were trying to make jealous at the nightclub? One of Tatum’s friends?”

“Yup.” At this point, there was no reason to argue with or lie to her.

“And this video?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m not talking about that one.” I sliced my hand through the air, a gesture to signal the conversation was over.

“Oh no, buddy. You definitely are.” More clicks on the floor.

“Come on, give it up,” she said in jest.

I ran my hands through my perfectly styled hair. My phone pinged with the directions to the hotel Tatum wanted me to go to with further instructions.

“Rafe?” Krissy asked.

“Fucking no, I wish. I need to go see some fucking gardens.” I groaned.

“Tell me about the video. Beyond just working for you, I’m also a friend, and this is clearly bothering you.”

“It’s a video of us being . . . cozy.” I’m usually not one to shy away from conversations about sex, but something about sharing intimate details about Chelsea made me cringe.

“And you didn’t know it was her?” Krissy said as she started putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

“No.”

“Does she know about the blackmail situation?”

“Also, no.”

“Are you going to tell her?” This time, I pounded my hands against the wall.

“I don’t fucking know. I mean, clearly, I should probably put a bird on her so she’s protected, just in case.”

Krissy walked over to the dining table, where her purse was, and picked it up.

“I’ve got to head out. Figure this shit out.” She waved at me as she walked out the door. Right as the large wooden door was going to close, she looked back at me. “Tell her. Don’t be this asshole. She clearly has you in a tizzy.”

The door started to shut, and she said, “Oh, and be nice to your brother!”

With no time to spare, I grabbed the keys on the counter and a small bag I had packed. When Tatum texted me that the hotel was comping her a free room, I took it and ran with the opportunity to get out of my brother’s house. It was enough that I had to hear their room practically shaking every night.

As I drove toward the hotel, I thought about how tomorrow I would have to pull Chelsea aside and talk to her about that night. Until now, we blissfully ignored each other, neither of us texting the other. But tomorrow, I would have to strap on the armor and deal with her.



12

Chelsea

Present

“I am so sorry, Ms. Sloane, but I am not sure there was an issue.” The event planner at Hotel Del Mare furiously typed away on her phone and tablet, trying to figure out exactly what was unfolding. I didn’t bother correcting her. Tatum told me the hotel room was in her name, so I didn’t want to lose the room when this debacle was over. Tatum told me I should just casually lie and not tell them until tomorrow that I wasn’t her.

“For the last time, the location is all off for the rehearsal. You guys had to switch it from the indoor ballroom to the garden.” I sighed and pulled down on my midi dress. It was a long, plain T-shirt-style dress I had been casually lounging in at home. I threw on a jean jacket over the top, in case it was chilly, but right now, I was sweating because this woman didn’t understand the problem.

“Yeah, please let me show you where it was originally planned, and you can let me know if there is something different. We are absolutely here to accommodate Mr.

Marchetti's needs." I rolled my eyes. It was always about the guy. Why was it assumed that it was the men with money?

Regardless, I felt bad for her, honestly. I came into the hotel like a bulldozer, and the staff scrambled to find the answer to a problem no one seemed to know was ever a problem at all.

She guided me out to the patio that overlooked the city. It was almost time for the sunset, and it had the most perfect view of the bay and city lights that twinkled in the distance.

There were white pillar candles atop white linens and a few scattered chairs.

"We are clearly not done, but this is where the rehearsal was originally planned to be." She walked furiously with her tablet, confirming all seating counts.

"Yup, this is it." She nodded, this time a little more confidently.

A cough stopped us, and we both turned on our heels to see another hotel attendant.

"There seems to be another person here with the same question, Trina." The poor woman looked like she was close to having an aneurysm. She looked over at me, and I just shrugged, truly having no clue who it could be.

"I'll bring them out here. Excuse me." She scurried off with the other person, screaming when they got out of earshot of where I was standing.

I rubbed my hands against the linens and took in the view as I inhaled deeply. It had been a long, exhausting day, but there was a bittersweet sense of liberation in sharing a piece of myself with my friend today. I had been scared and unable to open up for so long, but finally, I had taken the leap.

Still, there was a nagging doubt at the back of my mind. What if I wanted those pieces back? The pieces I shared so openly earlier—what if they were taken in vain? I had been told my whole life to keep quiet and to myself. The fear I felt was very valid and strong.

Like, what if my friend double-crossed me and now had access to my secrets and my home address? The thought was terrifying. Trusting a vulnerable part of yourself with someone else was a precarious proposition, and I couldn't help but wonder if I had made a mistake.

The memory of my shameful encounter with Alex still burned bright in my mind, a reminder of the dangers of holding secrets for too long. I took a deep breath of the cool evening air and closed my eyes, listening to the distant hum of the city as it came alive under the cover of night. The welcomed sight of the underworld blanketed the daytime sky. I turned around slowly, my senses heightened by the familiar scent of ocean breeze mixed with a tinge of whiskey.

I couldn't help but take in his appearance. His tanned skin glowed under the dim lights, and his strong features seemed sculpted by a master artist. The way he held himself was confident and powerful, with broad shoulders that hinted at a life of physical activity and strength. The way he casually strolled in a suit made him look more dominant. The event planner scurrying next to him paled in height in comparison to him.

It wasn't just his physical appearance, though. There was something about how he carried himself, with a sense of purpose and ambition, that radiated with palpable energy. I easily imagined him as our future governor, commanding a room with ease and grace.

As his gaze met mine, a jolt of electricity passed between us. His slow smirk only added to his allure, and I found myself drawn in by his magnetism. There was no denying this man was absolutely edible.

“Mr. Marchetti, as I was saying, there just—”

His hand sliced through the air, shutting the conversation off. The world stilled, and with tunnel vision, I watched as he stalked toward me. The air warmed as he got closer.

He pressed his lips against mine. His kiss was like a bolt of electricity sending shock waves through my entire body. It was a heady mix of passion and desire, and I got lost in the moment. His lips were plush and full, and I couldn't get enough of them. As we kissed, our lips never parted, but the air burst from my lungs. Memories of the erotic passion we shared at the kink club together opened a dam and flooded through. I felt the heat and intensity of our connection all over again. His hands remained by his side, and as quickly as he placed his lips on mine, he pulled away from me, then slid his hand around my waist.

“Tell them, my sweet bunny, what is the issue with the seating arrangements?”

The words were still stuck in my mind, and I scrambled, reeling over what had just happened. My hands were shaking, so I tucked them to my sides. I peered into those brown pools in deep question as I met Alex's gaze. *What was he doing here?*

“Our main concern is to ensure the bride and groom have the best day possible.” The event planner interrupted my thoughts, and I suddenly pieced it all together. He was playing the same role I was. They must have gotten him confused when he said his last name at the front desk and just assumed he was the groom. But why was he here in the first place?

“Is this what you wanted, Bunny?” His grin was coy, as if he enjoyed playing this little game.

“Yes. This is perfect,” I said breathlessly and turned toward the view again, shimmying out of his grip and walking to the edge of the garden.

I took in the view one more time as the sun dipped into the horizon, and a chill sent goose bumps through my body. It was then that a jacket slid over my shoulders and I realized Alex walked over to me; the event planner was no longer there. The smell of the designer threads filled my nose, and I immediately closed my eyes and inhaled his clean scent.

“What are you doing here?”

“Tatum called me and told me there was a big emergency.” He turned away to admire the same view I was. I narrowed my eyes on him, now knowing this was a set up from Tatum. We shared a small laugh before stopping.

“I’m really sorry.” The words meekly escaped my mouth, and I stared at the damp grass as shadows began to creep through my very existence.

“To be fair,” I added, “it’s not like you make it very easy for me to share anything with you.”

I swore I saw his lips twitch.

“This whole thing I have worked with my brother to create, which I know you and your friends are privy to, has been years in the making. My papa, a few select associates, and you guys are the only ones who know about what we do.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and continued to stare out.

“Ever since I was a boy, I was fascinated with wanting people to watch me. I enjoy the power and dominance aspects of it. Controlling how people see me, what they see, and when they get to see it.” He looked down at me, and I met his gaze with softness, encouraging him to continue.

“This extends into the bedroom too. I joined the club a year ago when I was in Vegas and heard about it from another politician. I’d been going there for some time, but when I met the girl in the yellow . . .” He made eye contact as he spoke and then quickly turned away. He coughed and walked to the other side of the garden, where I trailed behind him.

“I mean, you. I don’t know, but when you called me out, I felt ashamed and embarrassed. Then to find out you had kept it from me brought those same emotions back to life.” He chuckled for a moment.

“I sound so fucking stupid right now. I am a grown-ass man talking about my emotions and feeling embarrassed.”

“It’s okay. I appreciate your honesty.” I placed a hand on his elbow as he turned away, then he looked down at it before his hooded eyes locked onto mine. I was frozen, focused on him.

“I’m really fucking pissed you called out my name.” His tone was low and slow when he spoke, and his eyes never faltered from mine.

“I am so upset with you for not telling me you knew earlier.” His head dipped lower, letting his forehead rest against mine.

“But I am livid that for the last two weeks, I have done absolutely nothing except think about the way you taste. The way my cock felt when thrusting inside of you.” My breath hitched, and my lungs expelled all the air inside them.

“The way *I* gave you your first orgasm during sex. And the way you keep that dirty little slut façade buried so deep, but it’s there just waiting to get fucked like the dirty little whore that you are.”

He pulled away slightly, cupping my face as he gazed into my eyes. Our mouths crashed into each other, then he parted my lips and slipped his warm tongue inside.

Our kiss was filled with an intense passion fueled by weeks of longing. His hands moved down my body, pulling me closer to him as we kissed deeper and harder. He tongue-fucked my mouth as we grinded against each other, and I pressed my thigh against his throbbing erection.

Hotel guests mingled in the evening gardens, but I never broke away from him. It was as if we were trying to consume each other to make up for all the lost time.

But just as quickly as the kiss began, he pulled away, leaving me breathless and wanting more. His eyes bore into mine, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of uncertainty. He opened his mouth to speak, but I was still lost in the dizzying sensation of our kiss.

“That is what I thought. Still a sloppy slut,” he finally said, his voice low and husky.

I narrowed my eyes on him. He took a step back, breaking the intense connection, and turned to walk away. Leaving me alone with his jacket and standing in the cold, dark shadows of the evening. Dejected, breathless, and so utterly turned on.



13

Alex

Present

I was a goddamn monster, the biggest asshole you'd ever meet. I couldn't deny it. But when I got too close to her, pressed my hips against hers, and let myself be vulnerable with her, something inside me snapped. I never wanted to be the type of man who fell for a woman and let her get under his skin.

When my mom passed away, my dad was so obsessed with her that he made us promise never to fall in love. It was supposed to be just us Marchetti men forever. My brother broke that promise first, but I was determined not to follow in his footsteps.

However, as I watched her sitting there in the garden, a new emotion stirred in my gut. It was uncomfortable, raw, and real. I shared a part of myself with her I never thought I would. And then I screwed it all up by being a complete and utter jerk. But as I turned back to her face buried in her hands, tears streaming down her cheeks, that emotion came roaring back to

life. It was a tug, a pull—an insistent force that made me want to run back to her, forgive her, and wrap her in my arms. But I couldn't do it. Because if I let myself forgive her—if I let her get too close—it would mean putting her in danger.

When Tatum was kidnapped and taken to Mexico, I realized anyone close to me would become a target too, like she had with Julian. And after this recent blackmail attempt by potentially the Irish, I knew I couldn't let anyone into my life. It wasn't just about protecting myself anymore; it was also about shielding those around me from harm.

I stepped into the cool AC of the hotel lobby and went to the reception desk. The hotel was absolutely luxurious. The entire lobby had white marble flooring and large pillars with gold accents. A huge chandelier was the centerpiece, and in the center was a circular quartz bar. A few patrons with younger women were sitting at the bar.

“The keys to my suite, please. The last name is Marchetti,” I said to the front desk attendant.

“Of course, Mr. Marchetti.” The beautiful girl behind the desk was a young, in her early twenties if I had to guess, and tall brunette.

After typing for a few moments, she pulled out a key card.

“My apologies for overstepping, Mr. Marchetti, but I have seen you a few times on TV and will definitely vote for you.” She smiled at me, and I returned the gesture.

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” I turned on the politician charm and went to grab the key card. When I looked down, I noticed a phone number scribbled on the paper holding the card.

“In case you get lonely tonight.” She winked at me and then went to help another customer. I just shook my head and grabbed my bag before heading to the room number written on the paper.

When I hit the button on the elevator for the top floor, I realized it wasn't just about keeping a partner safe from my

business associates; it was about settling down for me. Sharing the company of a woman was what I liked to do, and on any other night, I probably would have taken the attendant up on her offer, but Chelsea had somehow ingrained herself into me. It went deeper than just an erotic need, and it showed vulnerability.

Despite her deceitful nature and the fact she hid the truth from me, an undeniable magnetism drew me toward her. She was the complete opposite of what I thought I needed. I was told to be with a quiet woman my entire career—find someone who could stand behind me not beside me. Chelsea? She was so much more. Her beauty and intelligence were only the tip of the iceberg; her soul was deep and selfless, willing to put others' needs above her own happiness.

But as much as I wanted to surrender to her pull, I knew doing so would be dangerous. Once I was in too deep, there would be no turning back. It was better to keep her at arm's length and let her believe I was a coldhearted jerk. It was the only way to protect her and myself from the chaos and danger of my world.

As I entered the room, I immediately noticed the spaciousness of the junior suite, which was adjacent to the luxurious penthouse. The sitting area boasted a large sectional sofa, several plush armchairs, and a state-of-the-art television. As I made my way toward the wet bar, fully stocked with every possible beverage, I couldn't help but feel a tinge of bitterness at the thought of drowning my sorrows in alcohol.

Moving toward the bedroom, my eyes were drawn to the elegant cream-colored bed adorned with opulent gold pillows. The bedroom itself exuded an air of sophistication with its tasteful décor and impeccable attention to detail. The drapes were a deep shade of royal blue, complementing the regal gold accents throughout the room. A large, ornate mirror hung above a sleek writing desk, reflecting the glittering chandelier overhead. A sense of familiarity washed over me, causing my head to hang low in shame. It was very similar to the room in the kink club.

I threw my bag on the suitcase holder and walked into the bathroom to splash some water on my face. The en suite was equally impressive, featuring a luxurious marble soaking tub and a spacious glass-enclosed shower.

“What are you doing, Marchetti?” I looked into the mirror and ran my hands through my hair.

The front door handle ticked as if someone was attempting to enter the room. I grabbed my phone and texted my bodyguard, who always stood at the end of the hallway.

Me: Who is at the door? Is this a threat?

I knew I was being fucking paranoid, but with this whole situation happening with the Irish, I wasn't taking any chances.

Callum: No, Boss. You are good to answer.

I preferred to keep my bodyguards inconspicuous to avoid drawing attention from the public or paparazzi, who might inquire why I had people watching my every move. I frequently rotated them to ensure no one became too familiar with their identities. Typically, they remained in the background, observing silently unless a situation required their intervention.

I walked over to the door and was about to pull the handle when the it flung open and smacked me in the face.

“Oh fuck!” I screamed and looked at my hands, which were now coated in blood from my nose.

“Oh, my god.” The feminine voice perked up, and the familiar scent of peonies wafted through the room as I realized it was Chelsea.

“Why are you fucking here?” I shoved the door shut as she paced the living room, searching for something to help my gushing nose.

“I have it!” She pulled a tampon from her purse and ripped it open.

“No way.” I walked to the sectional.

“You have to make the blood stop! You are bleeding all over everything. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous? Me?” I gestured to her, holding a dangling tampon in her hand.

“Yes, don’t be a baby,” she said as she steadied my shoulders and, in one swift movement, stuck the tampon up my nose. Yeah, so if I felt shitty about myself earlier, this definitely topped that shame.

She ran into the bathroom, and I noticed her suitcase at the door.

“What are you doing in here?” I asked.

She came back with a wet towel, and she grabbed the palms of my hands and started to clean them off. I stood there awkwardly in the living room while she did so silently before looking up at me.

“They must have thought that we were Tatum and Julian. I will go ahead and just go back to my apartment tonight. It’s no big deal.” She shrugged and then went to throw the dirty towel into the hamper in the bedroom.

“What were you planning on doing? Staying for a week?”

“No.” She laughed and then grabbed her oversized purse to head out the door.

“I just brought my sketch stuff and was going to relax, but it’s fine.”

This was it, Marchetti. Time to make up for being a complete asshole earlier. Standing uncomfortably in the living room with a tampon hanging from my nose and a woman I couldn’t stop obsessing over, it probably wasn’t the time to continue being an asshole.

“You can stay. I have to do some work anyway. My brother kicked me out for the night, so I can also try and get another room—”

“Look, Alex, we’re both grown-ups here. Let’s just grit our teeth and get through the next couple of days and then we can go our separate ways.” She turned to grab her suitcase at the entrance of the room before speaking up.

“Just so we’re clear, I’m taking the bed,” she huffed as she made her way into the bedroom, and I couldn’t help but notice the intense annoyance etched across her face. Her deep-blue eyes seemed to have a tinge of sadness lurking behind them, giving her an almost haunting look. She pulled her gaze away from my face and slammed the door. Within moments, the shower turned on.

I really fucked this up.



14

Chelsea

Present

At this point, I wasn't even surprised I was sharing a hotel room with Alex. His words cut through me like venom, and for the next forty-eight hours, I would have to live with him. At least the suite was big enough that we honestly didn't have to look at each other that much, and between mandatory wedding activities, we would be able to avoid each other.

When I finished showering, I pulled out a gray sweatsuit and my notepad. I realized I left my purse with my pencils in the other room, so I took a deep breath and braved seeing the person on the other side of the door.

I pulled the large wooden door open and saw him sitting on the couch staring at his laptop. He had the first three buttons of his shirt undone, and his golden chest was practically gleaming through his taut white shirt. His nose was no longer bleeding, and he had taken the tampon out.

His usually flawlessly styled hair was in a tousled mess around the crown of his forehead. He was splayed out on the

couch, which only emphasized his large form. He was a beautiful man. There was no denying that.

When he realized I had come out of my self-imposed dungeon, he glanced up at me, his dark-brown eyes lit with a deep fire.

The evening lights twinkled from the distance in the windows behind him, and the dark shadows of the underworld only emphasized his demanding and erotic aura. But his eyes told a different story. They were full of sadness and regret, as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. I couldn't help but be drawn to him despite the danger and mystery that shrouded him.

But as much as I wanted to unravel the secrets that lay hidden beneath his enigmatic exterior, I knew I had to tread carefully. I couldn't afford to get too close and risk getting caught up in him again. Yet, as he lay there before me, I was drawn to him.

"Is everything okay?" He looked back down at his computer, breaking our eye contact.

"I just needed to grab my pencils." I padded across the room, and the smell of takeout wafted through my nose. As if it had a mind of its own, my stomach rumbled.

He closed his laptop and stared up at me, scrunching his nose. I grabbed what I needed from my bag and began walking back toward the bedroom when I spotted the large chair in the corner that overlooked the cityscape. A part of me was sad because it really would have been a great chair to sketch in and be inspired.

"What are you wearing?" Alex chimed.

"I've never seen you dress so . . . casually?" He stood up and walked over to me. His height and presence made me feel smaller than I was.

"Oh, it's just, you know." I rumped my hand over my outfit, suddenly embarrassed.

“No.” He moved over to me and dragged his hand down my arm over the thick cotton fabric. “Don’t do that. I like it.” He jerked his hand away and poured himself a drink from the wet bar behind us. Whiskey. It explained his enchanting scent.

“You can go ahead and sit in the chair that you are practically eye-fucking.” I turned around, but he was focused on what he was pouring. When his hooded eyes lifted to mine, the heat in my core awakened. He was an alluring nightmare in the flesh.

He pulled another glass from the bar and grabbed a rosé from the mini fridge.

“Go,” he commanded.

“No.” I stood my ground, something I don’t do very often. But if he wanted to treat me like trash, then I’d give him a taste of his own medicine.

As he stalked toward me, his tattoos peeked out of his shirt. His eyes traveled down my body, and all the way back up, pausing on my chest before he bit his lower lip. If I wasn’t in a power play with him, I wasn’t sure my knees would have held me up.

He shoved the glass at me, then sat down and pulled his laptop back up and began typing.

“Uh, thank you?” I grabbed the glass and walked toward the bedroom. Just as I got to the threshold, his deep, baritone voice filled the air.

“I’m fucking sorry, Chelsea.” I turned around to him looking at me. It was as if his eyes were a window to his soul, revealing a depth of palpable sadness. I wanted to reach out and comfort him, to chase away his troubles and make everything right again. But I knew I couldn’t.

“You really hurt my feelings.” It was all I could say before shutting the door in his face.

The air was suffocating. I couldn't breathe.

"Please let me out," I begged as I pounded on the gold door. I was in my own version of hell. I looked down at my hands and then threw them up in my face. I was just a child.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I begged, and pounded against the door. My breaths came in rapid pants. A small, feminine voice rapped on the other side of the door.

"It's for your safety, honey." My mother. It was my mother.

"Help me, Mom!" I begged as I walked around the pink room and noticed the stuffed animals. I ran toward the window, but there was a looming black cloud in the sky, and it was making its way toward the house.

"The sky! Mom! Please!" I pleaded and dropped to my knees.

"Keep her locked in tight," a younger male voice spoke at the other end of the door.

"No!"

I didn't do anything wrong. I followed the rules. I never left. I didn't mean to watch the videos I did, and I didn't make any friends.

"I never told anyone our secret. Please let me out." Sobs were stuck in my throat, I was silently crying, desperate for some air.

"I need some air," I begged, and the dark cloud encircled the house, pulling the air into it.

"Don't leave me." I lifted my hands to the window and pounded on them.

"I'm just a kid. I will be good. I'll listen to the rules. I will play the role." As the cloud encroached on the house, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Mother?”

“Chelsea, wake up!” Heavy arms pulled on me, and through dreary eyes, I blinked a few times.

“Oh, thank God,” the person said between my muddled tears.

“What?” I tried to blink, but the darkness drank me in and I struggled to find my way back to the light.

“Shhh.” The voice soothed me, and a large familiar hand caressed my cheek.

“Alex?” I blinked a few times, and the room came into view.

“Bunny.” He rubbed his thumb on my chin, and I sat up.

“What happened?” I asked when I finally saw him through the darkness. It must have been the middle of the night.

“You had a nightmare.” He sat next to me and pulled his warm hand back into his lap. His voice lowered an octave. “Does this happen often?”

He was wearing the same clothes from earlier.

“What time is it?”

“It’s two in the morning.”

“Have you slept yet?” He got off the bed, and the moment his body lifted, a coldness seeped back into the room.

He shook his head.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

I hung my head low and looked out at the city behind him.

“Often enough.”

He shook his head and then grabbed the stencil and pencils from the other side of the bed.

“What are—”

Two large arms hoisted me out of bed and then brought me to the other room. He placed me in the plush chair next to the sectional and then left. When he came back, he handed me my sketch pad and a large glass of water.

“Stay,” he commanded me, went over to the sectional, and started to type away on his computer.

Flabbergasted and left with no words, I grabbed the sketchpad and looked out at the city while sinking into the oversized chair.

I glanced over my shoulder, and he had big bags under his eyes but was so focused on whatever he was working on.

“Thank you.” My voice was barely audible as I whispered to him. He only nodded. My heart felt like it was about to explode out of my chest, so I took the excess energy I had and poured it into sketching out a whole look. I was lost in an artistic trance as my hands sketched the woman’s form.

Hours must have passed before I felt that my piece was complete. I glanced up from the couch, and the clock read 4:00 a.m.

I was going to regret this when I woke up.

I glanced at Alex, who was splayed out on the couch. He was still in his clothes, but his head hit the back of the couch, and his eyes were closed.

In the dim light of the evening shadows, he was even more stunning. The sight of him sleeping, so innocent and yet erotically beautiful, was seared into my memory. He helped me tonight in a way I would never forget. For years, I had been suffering through these nightmares alone, waking up in a cold sweat and panicking over what was happening to me. The same dream over and over again, always with the same ending—I never survived.

Despite the fact he had thoroughly pissed me off earlier, I couldn’t help but be drawn to his softer side. The way he had made me orgasm at the club left me floating on a planet of pure bliss. A place no one had ever taken me before.

Tonight, I was going to be bold. I was going to taste him, and maybe, just maybe, I could get him out of my system. I was going to take his advice and stop being a people pleaser and doing what was expected of me, and instead do the thing that scared me most.

I walked over to where he was splayed over the couch and straddled him so I was chest-to-chest in his lap. When I lowered down on his hips, he stirred beneath me.

I pressed my lips against his neck, into his rough skin. The demand for more increased with every press of my soft lips against him.

“Hmm.” His eyes were hooded with a mix of sleep and lust.

He pressed against my lower back, and I pushed in closer to him, continuing to kiss a path up to his ear, nibbling on the lobe.

“Fuck.” He cursed with pleasure. His hand skimmed the top of my gray sweatpants, and he tugged gently, caressing my lower back.

“If I’m dreaming this, it’s a nightmare come true,” he mused, and when we locked eyes, his were full of enthusiasm.

I moved my hands against his beneath his unbuttoned shirt and gracefully tugged on the remaining buttons, exposing his chest in all its glory.

He was ripped, and his skin was etched in varying shades of gray ink. A gasp got stuck in my throat as he pulled the rest of his shirt off.

“It’s only fair, my sweet bunny,” he mused as he pressed his thick lips against my neck, pulling me, yet again, closer to him, and his erection pulsated against my thigh.

He tugged at the bottom of my sweatshirt, and in one swift movement, pulled it over my head, exposing my lace bralette.

“I could get lost in this view.” He had a direct view of my breasts spilling over the small bralette barely holding my double d’s.

His hand circled the hem of my pants as I grinded into his erection while thrusting my hips forward.

“I’ve been obsessed with being immersed in you for weeks, my sweet little slut.”

At those words, I arched my back and laid my hands against his knees as he drew his hands up my body. They landed atop my breasts and paused for a moment before he grabbed my throat. A low, menacing hiss escaped as his hold tightened.

The lack of oxygen and the utter ecstasy of the moment caused my eyes to roll back. His whiskey-stained lips sucked my bottom lip and tugged before lifting me by the throat onto the floor.

“Show me what a good girl you are.” His breath was hot against my tender lips.

I writhed on the floor, clenching my thighs, before tugging off his pants and boxers. As his thick cock sprang free, I gasped. He was girthier and even larger than I had remembered. He was veiny and throbbed in anticipation.

His hands threaded through my hair as he pulled my mouth onto his yearning cock. My lips met the head of his cock as his precum lubricated them. I teased him for a moment, flicking my tongue across his head as he let out a famished groan. He yanked me by my hair to plunge himself into my mouth just as my lips parted. He drove deep into the back of my throat, and I had to remind myself to relax.

My hands were on his knees, steadying myself as he jerked my head while thrusting deeper inside, making me gag. My tits bounced with the onslaught. He grabbed one of my free hands and placed it on the shaft of his throbbing cock, guiding my hand up and down to match the languid movements of my mouth.

Suck. Suck. Suck.

I was enthralled by the ferocious action while his demand grew deeper for more.

Harder.

Suck.

Faster.

Suck.

Deeper.

Suck. Suck. Suck.

“Fucking shit,” he growled, letting a low groan escape.

“What a bad little girl you are. Such a dirty little girl who likes filling her sweet innocent mouth with my cock.”

He wrenched my hair, and I nearly toppled over. My nipples were pebbled simply by the Adonis of a man standing before me. He was splayed out on the couch, his engorged dick lusting for more. The heat in his eyes burned into mine as if I were his prey.

“Not so fast, Little Bunny.”

I attempted to shimmy away from him backward. He stalked me like a predator and crawled toward me.

Let me say it again. The man was on his fucking hands and knees, crawling toward me.

The indecent thoughts about what I needed him to do for me danced along in my mind as I practically dripped through my panties. At this point, I was certain I had soaked through them, and was desperate to feel him inside me.

“Please,” I begged as I shuffled into a corner.

When he approached me, he let out a curse of pleasure.

“Stand up,” he commanded.

Without a second thought, I stood, desperate for more of him. As I stood in the corner of the room, he drank me in as his hooded eyes danced along the curves of my body.

“Do you know how fucking beautiful you are?” His eyes devoured me as he spoke. “Take it off.”

He took a few steps back, as if about to watch a show. I looked down at the gray sweats, knowing this piece of fabric would separate us from teasing one another with the main course. If I decided to take this off, that would be it for me. Game over.

“Turn around. Face the world. Show them what a masterpiece you are.”

The city lights twinkled in the distance. This high up, no one was able to see us directly, but it was nice to imagine it was possible.

I shimmied out of my gray sweats to uncover a matching pair of red lace hip huggers that sat right above the dips of my hips. He caressed my lower back as his dominating presence invaded my space. His erection pulsed against my bare thighs.

“When you were created, it’s like God wanted to make you his personal muse.” His hands trailed up toward my breasts as I let out a blissful moan, and he pulled my nipples out of the bralette with a gentle tug, intensifying the agonizing ache growing inside of me.

“So fucking beautiful.” His hands continued to paint down my body as I pressed my back deeper into his chest, attempting to mold our bodies into one.

As his hands trailed lower, they reached the hemline of my underwear.

“Please.” It was embarrassing how desperate I was for him to touch me.

“Such a beautiful, sweet little bunny, yet so desperate like the dirty little whore you are.”

In an instant, his fingers were circling me, and I was dripping with desperation for more of him.

“How bad do you want to come for the second time?” He laughed maniacally.

“Third,” I croaked, my voice laced with undulated need. I knew from the club that he hated to face the girl he was with, so accepting I was going to be against his chest, I was surprised when he picked me up by my thighs and brought me over to the bed.

I sank into it, letting my legs dangle over the edge. His burly figure stood over me, and his deep eyes burned with a fiery desire as he reached for my panties and ripped them off.

“I thought you didn’t like to watch.” I practically rasped through throaty sobs.

“You are the exception to my rule.” He now circled my entrance with his fingers before he gently slipped them in. My back arched, and I let out a howl.

“When you look like the stunning work of art that you are, I cannot peel my eyes away from you.”

His fingers toyed with my urgency, pushing in and out and gently caressing my G-spot.

“Please,” I begged, knowing I was so close and desperate to feel a release.

“No. You don’t get to come until I tell you.” He pulled his fingers out of me, and a sob of desperation tore from my throat.

“Spread your legs.”

I quickly did as he asked. At this point, anything he wanted, I would hand over to him on a silver platter because of how wet he made me.

“Let me taste you. I bet you taste as sweet as you look.” He licked his lips, and my head fell back on the bed. Our eyes locked briefly before he dipped down and dragged his greedy tongue through my clit, lapping me up before flicking it around. My hands braced against the bed, and the pleasure rolled over me like a wave I couldn’t stop. The roughness of his tongue circled my core. With every touch and swipe, the growing ache inside of me accelerated into something

uncontrollable. I lifted my thigh over his shoulder to push his mouth deeper inside me as I tugged his hair and wailed in reverberated pleasure.

My fingers threaded through his dark locks as my lips parted, letting the pleasure fill me. His hands went to my hips as he sucked me in as if he were trying to lick me clean.

“I can’t . . . hold . . . it,” I called out to him, knowing I was so close and the release I so desperately needed was within arm’s reach.

He pulled away from me almost immediately, and the absence of his tongue sent a shiver down my spine.

“So sweet for such a dirty girl.”

He pushed up and tucked his hand under my lower back while throwing me against the fabric headboard. The manhandling sent me into a tailspin.

I ran my fingers over his chiseled chest, dragging my nails slightly as I moved.

“Tell me,” I whispered. “How do you want me?”

This sent him into a spiral, and he threw me on my stomach.

“Hold on to the headboard.” His wicked tone told me he, too, was now desperate.

One hand reached up to steady me on the bed and the other held onto the headboard as his engorged cock flirted with my opening. He ran his hands down my back before pressing against my damp opening.

“Please,” I begged again, not caring how absolutely desperate I sounded. He held onto my hips as he slowly slid into my entrance. My head rolled back in pleasure as I moved both of my hands to the top of the headboard and held on.

His girth ripped through me, and I had to remember to breathe through it. He held onto my hip with one hand while the other reached in front of me and circled my clit. With the buildup from the foreplay, I knew I wouldn’t last very long.

His face turned toward me, and his lips laying gentle kisses along my neck warmed me. Between the raw, insatiable pleasure of him thrusting inside of me and the soothing kisses he was placing, I curled beneath him.

As if he knew I was seconds away from exploding in blissful pleasure, he paused and whispered into the shell of my ear, "Who is allowing you to have this?" His voice was hoarse. He wanted me to say his name, but I didn't want to give him that pleasure. I was still mad at him from earlier, so instead, I pushed my backside against him, forcing him to brace himself. If he wasn't going to give it to me, I was going to take the release from him.

Knowing I had surprised him, I took it upon myself to bounce, letting his full length press into my deepest parts. I threw my hands into my hair, allowing it to cascade down my back.

"Fuck," he hissed.

"I want to watch you as you writhe underneath me," he demanded.

He flipped me around with one hand and lunged at me. I was bathing in my own desire, and stars collided as an explosion blasted through my being, sending me into another world. I moaned loudly while jerking beneath his hold.

"Say. My. Name." I didn't even get a second to realize I had come back down from the high. His words came in muffled, but his cock was still pushing in and out in desire.

I was pissed at him. He was an asshole, and I wouldn't let him have the pleasure of knowing he was the only one who had ever been able to make me achieve oblivion.

So I did something I normally would never have done, I pushed him onto the bed so he was sitting against the headboard. I licked my lips, parting them slightly as I brought them down on his lower lip, nipping at him.

"Chelsea," he said in a threatening voice.

“That’s right.” My mouth turned up at the corners, exposing a delirious smile.

I lowered myself onto him, arched my back, and took him deep inside my sensitive core again. I glided up and down his length. I was sensitive and raw from moments ago, but I was still drenched as I tightened around him.

I moved my hands around my tits as he drank me in. His hands reached up to twist my nipples, and I heaved from on top of him. As he explored farther up my body, he gripped the base of my neck and gave me a little squeeze.

“Say. It,” he demanded, knowing this little movement would send me into another blissful world.

He pushed his fingers slightly tighter against my neck, and I knew I wouldn’t last much longer.

I arched backward, using my hands to steady myself as I rolled against him. My lips pursed, and he held my thick thighs, pushing me into him.

“Chelsea,” he warned again, knowing he was waiting for me to call out his name. I could end this all in a moment, but I wanted to tease him. Show him how pissed I really was at him.

I slipped two fingers against my clit as I circled it, drenching them in my juices as I continued to thrust down on him. I pulled them out quickly, brought them up to my mouth, and sucked on them, tasting the sweet dampness before bringing them to his thick lips.

His eyes were hooded, and his pupils were filled with a darkness deeper than the depths of the ocean. When I moved closer to him, he parted his mouth, desperate to have a little taste of me. He brought my fingers to his mouth, and when they touched his lips, a bolt of electricity blazed through me. He sucked them dry before flipping me onto my back again.

He pushed once more into me, and I knew it was game over.

“Please. Alex.” We locked eyes. He was the only one I wanted in this moment. There was no one else. It was just him.

My own devil dressed like a hero who lived in the shadows of darkness. His lips turned into a devious smile, knowing I had given him permission to release into me.

“Alex.” I was desperate at this point, willing to do or say anything.

“Alex,” I repeated between moans.

In an instant, I bucked against his orgasm as mine crashed into my core. I closed my eyes and was yet again transported to outer space. My limbs were like Jell-O, and I didn't feel him as he moved from above me. Instead, I starfished on the bed and kept my eyes shut, letting exhaustion roll over me.

“Come,” a gentle voice said in the distance. I opened my eyes, and Alex carefully lifted me into his arms and over to the bathroom, where the bathtub running sounded around me.

He slipped me into the tub, and I sank into the warm water. His burly figure barely fit in the oversized tub with me also in it, but he managed to scoot in behind me. He pulled my back tight into his as he ran some of the soothing water over my shoulders.

His lips pressed against my shoulders, leaving a trail from one side to the next.

“I'm still really mad at you for saying those things to me earlier.”

A soft chuckle erupted from behind me, and his taut arms reached around, wrapping me into his body as if he were molding them together.

“I know,” he murmured into my ear. “My sweet bunny.”

I let my neck relax and sunk my head into the crook of his shoulder. A wet finger brushed my hair off my face. I looked up at him, and his once fiery eyes were now soft.

“I'm still pissed at you too,” he whispered, even though his face told a different story.

After what felt like hours, I got out of the tub and threw on one of the robes from the hotel. After I tucked into the plush bed covers, Alex lay behind me, playing with my hair.

“Go to sleep,” he whispered, and through the windows out of the corners of my eyes the sun was rising.

As if the bed suddenly felt cold, Alex had gotten off and came to my side, where he kneeled in front of my face.

“Sleep,” he whispered once again.

“You aren’t staying?” I hated how I sounded as if I was begging him to stay with me.

He chuckled as if this was the most foreign idea I had shared all day.

“No. I have never slept with a woman before, and I’m not breaking that rule now,” he said before turning and leaving the room, closing the wooden door behind him. His words echoed in my head as I lay there, feeling foolish and rejected.

The warmth that had been brewing inside of me was replaced by an icy chill. The night had been perfect, or so I thought. I felt like I could be myself around him and open up in ways I never could with anyone else. But he had shattered that illusion—shattered me—with his rigid beliefs and fear of the unknown. It was always the same with him. Every time things started to feel real, he’d run away like a scared child.

But now he was running away with a little piece of me attached to him, knowing I was just a temporary fix for his insatiable needs—a momentary pleasure.

“It’s just temporary,” I repeated as sleep consumed me. The words felt hollow and empty, unable to quell the ache in my heart.



15

Alex

Present

I was fully aware I was a horrible person. Leaving Chelsea in the other room after I knew she felt the same way I did, was the biggest dick move I could have made. If I had allowed myself to get closer to her, I wouldn't have been able to let go. Her sweet, floral scent and beautiful doe eyes were filled with curiosity and innocence yet laced with an intoxicating darkness that sucked me in. She was my vice.

But the truth was, I was keeping something from her. Something big. The blackmail was eating away at me, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her. I didn't want to scare her off or make her think less of me. So I acted like an asshole, hoping it would push her away.

Waking up in the room alone, I felt relieved, yet guilty at the same time. We had the rehearsal today, and I knew I would see her soon enough. Just the thought of her made me want to hold her close and never let go.

As I stepped into the shower, memories of last night flooded my mind. It was the most intimate I had ever been with a woman, and it scared me. I wanted to keep her wrapped in my arms forever, but I knew this was temporary. She could never be mine, and that thought was suffocating.

As soon as I jumped out of the bathroom, I wrapped a towel around me before I heard the familiar trill of my cell.

“Marchetti,” I answered on the first ring.

“I’ve got it.” Rafe’s boyish tone echoed on the other side of the speaker.

“Talk to me.”

“You and Krissy were right. It is the Irish. The tattoo on the man’s leg, when reconstructed with AI for added missing elements, is the Irish flag.”

“Motherfuckers,” I growled into the phone.

“They wanna traffic?” he asked. He shared the same concern growing in my chest.

“Yeah.” The disappointment was evident in the silent moment between us.

“I can figure out which one it is.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, not exactly following where his train of thought was.

“I am going to figure out which sect we are talking about.”

“Still not following, Rafe.”

“There are two types of Irish gangs. The first is the Irish American Mafia. Long ago, when the Irish immigrated here for the first time, they formed an alliance. They tend to operate in the states with only affiliates from here. We know them as the Irish mob.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Then there are the Irish, with ties still to Ireland, more specifically to the Dublin area. They are known as the Irish

Republic. They operate in Ireland but have always wanted to infiltrate here. It doesn't look like they ever have. If we are looking at trafficking, they would likely want the pipeline clear to bring bodies back and forth from here to there illegally."

"Do we know who leads the one out here?" I hesitated but knew they could have ties to those who wanted to take our operation down and expose me as the person behind the veil of innocence.

"Working on it." Rafe typing sounded through the phone.

"And Rafe?"

"Yes, Boss."

"I need to know if Chelsea O'Brien has any ties to these organizations. Because of her last name, it is possible somehow that she's either directly involved or purposefully being targeted."

"Got it."

"Rafe?" I asked again.

"Still here."

"Utter fucking secret."

He chuckled in the background before agreeing and hanging up.

In the best-case scenario, we were looking at some internal US agencies. It would be easy to take them down and dismantle them, or at least use the idea as a threat. Worst-case scenario, we were looking at an international fucking shitshow. With no known head either, it was harder to figure out who to target and how to get them. For all I knew, they could still be across the pond in Ireland. The way these organizations usually worked, though, someone was always holding court here.

Without my brother's help, I hoped we could get a small lead before his wedding tomorrow so I could figure out who

we needed to target. Once this wedding was over and I headed back to Sacramento to continue my campaign, I knew my brother would be back to assist in figuring out who the fuck was threatening our empire. All I had to do was get through today and tomorrow and then I would be on an airplane away from this place.

Hopefully, putting some distance between Chelsea and me would relieve my brain of its obsession with her. With distance, the heart grows apart, or at least I think that was how the saying went. Speaking of which, she still hadn't come back yet. *Fuck.*

I looked over at the clock; the rehearsal was starting in a couple hours. I went into the closet, and her dress was hanging there. I had pulled the hotel closet open to smell the faint aroma of peonies when I realized she was gone. Just to have her scent closer to me for one more second. I sounded like a sad fucking sap.

“Get it together, Marchetti.”

I double-checked the bathroom to make sure she wasn't somehow hiding in there. Her makeup was strewn on the counter, and I couldn't help but let a sheepish grin cross my face. I picked up her sketchpad she had left on the counter. As I thumbed through, I was impressed by her black-and-white sketches of women, in all shapes and sizes, in different pairs of underwear. It was clear she put a lot of care into her artwork. Of course she did, because that was exactly who she was. She was constantly putting others' comfort ahead of her own.

As I flipped through, it hit me how much of a jerk I was for calling her shallow. The girl wasn't just concerned with impressing others. The whole process of putting together an outfit was a creative outlet for her. And damn, she was good at it. I closed the book and tucked it under my arm, then grabbed the hotel key card before leaving the room. I had to talk to my brother about this shit—these feelings were foreign and made me uneasy.

I walked down the hall to the penthouse suite by a few of his bodyguards before I knocked on the door. Behind it, there were quite a few female voices yapping loudly.

One of the girls answered the door, and it was Tatum's darker-haired friend. She stared me down with bitter anger in her eyes. Her small body attempted to block me from entering the suite.

“Uh, hi?”

“No thanks. Not today.” She just nodded at me, like I had delivered pizza to the door or something.

“I'm sorry? I'm here to see my brother.” I placed my hand on the top of the door, stopping it from slamming in my face.

“I'm not sure you heard me, but no thank you.” She had a tight-lipped smile, and her voice was clearly laced with sarcasm.

“Yeah. No, thank you.” I went ahead and pushed her aside like she was a ragdoll. A pesky little annoyance was more like it. The door opened to an opulent living room. The room was designed in the same way as the one I was staying in, but this one was bigger and far more luxurious, with a staircase off the corner I presumed connected to the bedroom.

I scanned the room, and a gaggle of girls were sitting on the couch. My sister-in-law was the first to jump up, and the other annoying one from the door tugged at my shirt.

In utter fucking confusion at what I had just walked into, I turned in a circle, wondering what kind of weird séance was happening before the rehearsal.

“What is—”

“You fucking asswipe!” Tatum bellowed as she ran toward me. I froze and darted my head to the corners of the room, convinced I had to be on some reality show right now. There had to be a camera crew here.

“Asswipe?” What in the fucking weird alternative reality was I living in?

Tatum came over and banged me on the shoulder a few times as I took a couple of steps back. I stared at her with so many questions racking my mind.

“You are a total dick,” her taller friend, Maeve, chimed in from behind her on the couch.

“Someone better explain to me what is happening before I assume you all have lost your ever-loving minds.”

It was then a familiar sob from behind the tall one. Almost as if she was blocking the person, the girl stood in front of a small creature on the ground, her knees to her face.

“Chelsea?” I questioned and attempted to move toward her. The cries grew louder, and my heart cracked with each step. I couldn’t get to her fast enough.

“Stop!” My future sister-in-law attempted to push me, shoving her hands against my chest and digging her heels into the floor.

“You aren’t married to my brother until tomorrow, so I don’t see any fucking reason why I shouldn’t barrel you to the side. Get. Out. Of. My. Way.”

“No!” she exclaimed. Stopping momentarily, I looked down at her.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. I said no.”

“That is what I was trying to say too,” the dark-haired friend said from behind me.

“You don’t get to come here and make demands of her.” She threw her hands in the direction where Maeve was still blocking her friend.

“Demands?”

“Yeah. You don’t get to use her and then throw her to the wind.”

“You were the one who fucking set all of this up!” I screamed at her. My anger stirred beneath my skin.

“You know what? I thought you were a nice person. I thought you actually gave a shit about someone’s feelings. But I was wrong. Dead wrong. And now, I don’t know what to think. It’s like everything I thought I knew about you was a lie,” she huffed, and paced around the hotel room.

My heart felt like it was going to burst out of my chest as I stood frozen in place with my eyes glued to the sight before me. There she was, the girl I cared so much for, crumpled on the ground, her shoulders shaking from her sobs. It was the first time I had ever seen her cry, and her tears shattered me.

In that moment, all the anger and frustration I had felt about the situation melted away, replaced by an overwhelming need to comfort her. But I was frozen in place, unsure of how to approach her without making things worse. The room felt too small—too suffocating—and I was desperate for some way to make it all go away.

As she struggled to compose herself, I realized just how fragile our situation was. We were both walking on thin ice, and one wrong move could shatter everything we had worked so hard to build. But I couldn’t just stand there and watch her suffer. I had to find a way to help her and make things right.

“You are a walking and living lie. Julian has always been honest about who he is and the type of work and world he’s involved in. You, on the other hand? You are a billboard of bullshit. You parade around as if you’re the best governor, the golden boy that everyone should aspire to be, but deep down, your heart is frozen solid, colder than the iciest of winters.”

She was practically screaming while pacing around the room. My hands were slick with sweat, and I felt like a monster watching Chelsea suffer because of my actions. I would give anything to take it back, rewind time, and make different choices, but it was too late. My heart was shattered, and the guilt consumed me like a fire burning from within. If I

could do it all over again, I would relive all the lies a thousand times over again if it meant I didn't break her heart.

"Chelsea." My voice was silent but steady as I attempted to approach her. Once again, her friends tried to stop me, but she must have nodded over to them, and they moved aside.

My soul was outside my chest and breaking from the tears that fell down her face.

I dropped to the floor next to her. Her back was against the couch, and her hands were tucked around her knees. She looked up at me with lifeless eyes. The rims were red and puffy; she had been crying for a while now.

"Please don't do this," I begged her. I hesitantly reached out to take her hands, and when she allowed me to touch her, I wrapped them tightly into mine.

I brought her sweet, cool hands to my lips and pressed them against the warmth of my breath. Our gazes never wavered.

"You pushed me away." Her voice was pained with a heart-wrenching agony that echoed through my ears like the crash of shattering glass. It was a voice filled with the weight of a thousand tears that had been shed in the darkness of sleepless nights and the hollow emptiness of a heart left broken and bleeding. And as her words hung in the air like a storm cloud, every inch of my being was smashed into a million pieces, realizing the depth of the pain and anguish I had caused her.

I pressed my lips tight against her as I hoisted her onto my lap so her chest was tight against mine, cradling her like a small child.

"I'm dealing with . . . a lot of shit right now." Her eyes softened as I pushed away the last few tears with the back of my shirt.

"It's not an excuse, so please don't think I am trying to skirt around the issue." I looked down at the cream-colored carpet. "It's just been a lot, and it's such a shitty time for all this to happen."

Her eyes darted down before the little voice echoed once again.

Her words came out slowly and hesitantly, as if each one was a struggle.

“What does that have to do with just being kind after you sleep with someone?” The weight of the question hung in the air, heavy and uncomfortable. It was clear it had taken a lot of courage for her to ask, and I felt a pang of empathy for her vulnerability.

“It just . . . does.”

Her sympathetic nod only intensified the ache in my chest. The sorrow was palpable, so real, like a weight on my shoulders. I couldn't hold back my tears any longer as I buried my face into the soft skin of her neck and whispered words filled with anguish and sorrow.

“I am so sorry. Please forgive me?” I asked, and she quickly moved her head away from mine.

“Twice? Really, Mr. Marchetti? Tsk-tsk, you're on a roll,” she said, shaking her head and feigning disapproval. But as quickly as the mood had shifted, a smile broke across her face.

“Well, what will your constituents think of their beloved congressman apologizing not once but twice?”

“I can remember what else I've given you twice.” I rubbed the bridge of my nose against her cheek.

“Three times,” she corrected me.

“I missed you getting ready in the room,” I uttered in a hushed tone.

She laughed a little bit, a sound that was soft and melodic. As we wrapped our arms around each other, our bodies molded like two puzzle pieces. The way she pressed against me was seductive, as if she was trying to convey all the things she couldn't say with just one embrace. Her heart beat fast against my chest, and it was as if we were the only two people in the world, lost in a moment of pure bliss.

“Alessandro. You fucking dick,” a booming voice came from the top of the stairs. Then, I realized Tatum and the rest of her friends had scattered away and my brother was bounding down the stairs two at a time.

I jumped up from the floor and threw Chelsea behind me, chest out, ready for whatever he was going to bring.

As soon as he was in front of me, he punched me straight in the face.

“Fuck,” I hissed, throwing my hand up to where the punch landed.

“What the fuck!?” Chelsea screamed from behind me, jumping off the couch. Her delicate hands tugged at the button-down I was wearing, in an attempt to survey the damage.

“Baby!” Tatum screamed from behind Julian.

“Thank fuck there are no more brothers we have to be worried about,” Maeve retorted from behind her.

“I deserved it,” I said, cradling my throbbing jaw. There was no blood, and it wasn’t the first time my brother and I had gotten into a scuffle. It happened many times in the past and probably would happen many more times in the future.

“Don’t ever speak like that to my wife. Ever.” He scoffed and then walked one step closer. I lifted my hands to protect myself.

“Cut the crap and stop sleeping around with her friends. You’ve created a huge mess with this reckless behavior. You should have heard them talking about you this morning,” my brother whispered; his words were only meant for my ears.

“Get yourself together and start thinking clearly,” he added before giving me a pat on the back and placing his hand over mine in a show of support.

“Why did you do that?” Tatum screamed from behind Julian as she pounded on his large back.

He picked her up and gave her a peck before looking at everyone.

“Now that this has been resolved, can we please continue getting ready and then head down to our rehearsal dinner?”

I thought this whole event was ridiculous, but honestly, seeing and watching my brother like this with someone he cared about tugged a little on my heart. Maybe I was being an utter sap at this moment, but it was hard not to think about the future and what that would look like. It was constantly being forced down my throat to figure out who I needed to marry and establish a life with if I wanted to go any further in my career.

On paper, Chelsea would look like the perfect life partner. She held herself in high regard. She dressed and presented herself well, but the problem was that, off paper she had a torrid past, partied way too hard, and liked to fuck with the camera. She would never be satisfied with the mundane life of being a housewife.

A warmth sidled up next to me, and I looked down at the beautiful blonde whose eyes filled mine.

“Go,” she encouraged. “I’ll be there in a half hour. I am just going to finish up here.”

We weren’t dating, so I had no idea what I was supposed to do right now. Did I kiss her in front of her friends? Give her a pat on the back. Would I seem like a huge asshole if I just said okay and walked out?

So I did what any proper man would do: I gave her a high-five.

Yes, I lifted my hand and waited for her to slap mine back. Halfway through the move, I realized what a dumb thing I was doing, but it was too late; I was already committed. My fucking brother stared at me as if I had just lit the hotel on fire, and her friends stood frozen like statues.

She awkwardly lifted her hand to mine, and the most ridiculous smile spread widely across her face, as if this wasn’t

the most absurd thing I had ever done.

She slapped her hand across mine, then I hung my head in shame before exiting the room. Behind me, a gaggle of laughter rang down the hallway, including a roaring one from my brother. But maybe, just maybe it was worth it to see her smile like that.



16

Chelsea

Present

“So, you guys made up and everything is fine and dandy? Is he your boyfriend now?” Daphne asked as I sat in the makeup artist’s chair, finishing getting ready for the rehearsal dinner tonight.

“Yeah, did my big plan work?” Tatum giggled from the other makeup artist’s chair.

“I feel like such an idiot coming to you guys this morning. I am so sorry. When you started to talk about how much you loved Julian and how well he treated you and helped you out of the blackhole you were in, I just couldn’t hold it in any longer.”

It was so unlike me to explode with emotion, but I couldn’t help it when I heard Tatum this morning. I had just gotten to their hotel room to get ready, but the way Alex left me after what we experienced together last night, I felt completely shattered. I was sure it was the first time my friends had ever

seen me barefaced and in sweats. The concern on their faces was evident the moment I walked in.

I had confessed to them what happened over the course of the last twenty-four hours. I explained how I felt like total shit after he walked out on me last night. They held me all night as I cried.

“The offer still stands; you can stay in my room if you need to.” The girls and I burst into laughter, because who wanted to stay in the honeymoon suite with a couple who had just gotten married? I was certain every surface of that room would be destroyed, and I had no desire to witness any of it.

“Can I chime in?” my makeup artist, Christina, piped up from behind her makeup kit while grabbing me the longest pair of falsies. She was beautiful, with cropped dark hair that hung straight to her shoulders. She wore a professional black jumpsuit with a bold red lip that complemented her deep features.

“Obviously,” the three of us said simultaneously.

“I just work with a lot of clients and hear a lot of stories. Over the years, I have heard many different things from clients, and what we saw today—”

God, let’s add more embarrassment to the fact that the hair and makeup artists had to witness my complete meltdown.

“I am so sorry you had to stay longer.” She offered me a kind smile before continuing.

“Falling in love is like stepping into a tornado. It’s chaotic, uncontrollable, and can take you to places you never thought you would go. But at the same time, it’s exhilarating, euphoric, and can make you feel alive like nothing else. The problem is that once you’re in, it’s hard to get out. It’s like quicksand; the more you struggle, the deeper you sink. And yet, we keep falling—over and over again—even when we know it’s going to hurt.” She pressed some lip liner onto my lips as she continued.

“But you know what? Maybe that’s what makes it worth it. Maybe the pain and the heartache are just part of the deal. I’ve worked with so many brides that recount their initial trials before they made the decision to walk down the aisle. Maybe it’s a reminder that we’re alive and capable of feeling something so powerful that it can consume us entirely.”

A resounding silence echoed throughout the room.

“Whoa.” Daphne finally broke up the eerie quiet.

“Ah, but what do I know? Don’t listen to me.” She continued to fuss with the liner, and when she pulled away, my mouth hung agape.

“I need to go back to therapy; you taking clients?” I asked, which led to laughter.

The weight of her words sank in as I sat there, lost in thought. Love was messy and complicated, and there was no escaping the pain that came with it. It was a risk we all had to take, even knowing we could end up shattered and broken. But the reward was worth it—the feeling of being truly seen and understood, the comfort of having someone to turn to, and the joy of sharing life’s moments with a partner.

And in the moment when Alex sat with me on the floor, I couldn’t deny the truth any longer. I was in love with him, and it was terrifying. The fear of rejection and heartbreak consumed me, but I knew I couldn’t let that stop me. I had to take the leap and trust it would be worth it.

When Christina finished with my makeup, I felt like a new person. The beauty blooming inside my chest may have translated to how I looked on the outside.

“Thank you for everything.” I hugged her as I got up out of the makeup chair.

“She’s going to be here tomorrow, right?” I asked Tatum, and laughter erupted from the group.

“See you tomorrow,” Christina said and then began working on Maeve.

I waved goodbye to my friends and left the room, heading back to Alex. Hesitantly, the realization I had in the makeup chair made me feel nervous for the “what’s next” chapter. There was so much left unsaid. The way he acted toward me was hot and cold; the fact he lived in Northern California; the fact I held my secrets with him; and so much more we hadn’t said to each other.

The closer I got to the room, the more I thought about how absurd this was. There was no us. There was no love. I appreciated the advice, but I was unsure if it applied to me. For that brief moment, I may have flirted with the idea I could be truly *in* love with Alex Marchetti, but the closer I got, the more I ridiculed the absurdity of that idea.

With a little anger at myself for even entertaining those thoughts, I opened the hotel room door and saw him sitting on the couch.

“Coming in hot there, Bunny?” He didn’t bother looking up and continued typing on his laptop.

“I am so mad at you.” I stood there in my gray sweats from last night. I had on a full face of makeup, and my hair was half up and curled.

When he looked up at me, it was as if time had halted. His eyes were filled with the most intense, carnal desire. His eyes roamed over my body, taking in every curve and line. My heart raced as his gaze lingered on my lips, and I couldn’t help but imagine what it would feel like to be kissed by him right now.

I took a step closer, a magnetic pull bringing us closer. The air between us was charged with tension, and the heat radiated from his body as he stood. His eyes never left mine, and I knew at that moment I was in trouble. There was something about him—something that made me lose control and forget everything else. Fuck. I was in love with Alex Marchetti, wasn’t I?

“You look—” He spoke in a hushed tone, but his voice was hoarse, like he had been smoking a pack of cigarettes.

“Stupid. I know. Let me get dressed.” I panicked and ran to the bedroom, where my dress hung in my closet. His large hand grabbed my arm and spun me around to him, so our heaving chests steadied each other.

“Stupid?” He gently kissed my shoulder, then my earlobe and gave a little nibble.

“Fucking delicious.”

I pulled away from his grip and just stood there looking at him while he drank my entire body in.

“Don’t be silly.” I batted his hand away and continued into the bedroom, where he persisted.

“We need to talk.” He sat on the edge of the bed.

“It’s okay.” I grabbed the dress and threw off my sweats, so I was only in my Spanx and a strapless bra.

“I cannot have a conversation with you while I am half naked,” I said. I pushed his shoulders down to make space for me to slip into my navy-blue satin maxi dress.

“Nooo,” he begged as I pulled the straps onto my shoulders.

“We are running late.” He was in his “casual” wear, which happened to be very acceptable for dinner, but he always dressed up. “Get dressed.”

He groaned but sat up from the bed and kissed me on the cheek.

“We still need to talk,” he mused before going into the bathroom. We finished getting ready and then I grabbed my purse and we headed out of the room.

As we walked toward the elevator, I couldn’t help but notice how his muscles moved under his shirt and how his jaw clenched and unclenched with each step. It was as if his body was a mirror for the storm raging within him, just as mine was.

I tried to keep my eyes forward and focus on anything but the heat radiating from him—it was impossible.

My heart raced in my chest, pounding against my ribcage. His touch, his words, and his mere presence all worked in tandem to stir up a hurricane of emotions within me. Part of me wanted to run away from him, to distance myself from the danger of falling too deep, too fast. But another part of me was drawn to him, yearning to get burned by his intensity.

When we exited the elevator into the ornate lobby of the hotel and walked toward the entrance of the garden, I felt the need to ask him something bubbling in my chest. I had no idea if we were walking into the rehearsal together or if we were supposed to part ways here. The confusion was driving me absolutely mad.

“Is your date coming tonight?” I asked as we walked through the lobby.

He stopped, and while I didn’t notice him initially, I paused when I didn’t hear a response to the familiar pattern of feet next to me. I turned around to see him frozen in place in the middle of the ornate lobby.

“She’s my assistant.” His hands rubbed together before he pushed his hair off his forehead, which was his tell that he was uncomfortable.

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say. It was just another lie we would file under reasons why we wouldn’t work.

“I didn’t lie to you.” He slid over to me, as if he could read my mind.

“Sure.” I laughed annoyingly and said, “But you didn’t tell the truth either.”

“You’re right. I wanted to tell you earlier when you were getting dressed, but I was quite distracted.” He took another step, so we only needed to meet the other by half a step.

The ocean breeze wafted off him as I took a deep breath in. He wore a classic black suit, and his signature white button-

down was a little too taut along his chest.

“I’m an asshole, but I want to try . . . for you. I should have told you about Krissy.” His hand reached for mine, and his fingers flirted with my own.

“I dated her a long time ago. Her family used to work with my papa’s old family ties. She wanted to go legit, so I hired her as my assistant, and she flies everywhere with me. She knows Julian well, so she was invited here too as a guest.”

Although I understood there were no actual reasons for me to feel jealous, I nodded in agreement as he explained the situation. I couldn’t help the nagging feeling of jealousy that lingered within me despite the logical part of my brain telling me there was no reason to feel that way.

I was distracted by his fingers interlaced with mine. I cursed myself for betraying me and gave him a small squeeze.

“It’s okay to feel how you are.”

“I’m fine, mind reader.” This time a grin exploded onto his face, and he let out a small chuckle.

“Will you walk in with me?” This small phrase sent shivers down my spine. His question made me feel wanted, desired, and loved, and yet we had so much unresolved to manage together.

When we finally reached the door, he turned to face me, his eyes intense and smoldering.

“You know you want to be with me,” he said in a low voice, his breath hot against my ear. “Don’t fight it.”

I took a step back, feeling the cold metal of the door pressing against my back. “I can’t do this, Alex,” I whispered, my voice trembling with anxiety and fear.

“I can’t keep pretending that everything’s fine when it’s not. I don’t even know what *we* are yet, but this is catapulting me into a world of fucking confusion already.”

He leaned in closer, his lips hovering just a hairbreadth away from mine.

“Then let me show you,” he murmured before finally closing the gap between us, absolving me and claiming my lips, then giving me the deepest and longest kiss ever. I had kissed this man plenty of times in the last twenty-four hours, but nothing like this. This was delicate, passionate, and gentle.

“Don’t go soft on me now, Marchetti,” I whispered between pants.

“Me? Soft? Never. That’s the problem.” We were next to the door to the garden and he had me pinned against the wall. We were late, but a few stragglers were still coming in.

His hands drew down my chest as he pulled the strap of my V-neck dress out of the way. In one swift movement, my strapless bra was ripped out of the way, and my already hard nipples poked out.

His warm, wet lips were on them before I could even react. His teeth grazed my nipples as they gently pulled them out. I frantically looked around to see if anyone was nearby.

“I can feel you getting wetter the closer you think we are to getting caught, Little Bunny.” He tugged, making my head roll back in blissful agony.

“More.” I was practically begging as he pulled and nipped at me. I grabbed on to the wall, trying to hold myself up against the onslaught of his mouth, which was voraciously devouring my most tender spots. He lifted my long dress and dragged his fingers along the hem of my panties.

“Mhmm, just what I expected. So wet,” he snarled into my ear.

He dropped my dress as he pulled away from his attack against my chest. He drew his eyes down to my breasts, and the corners of his lips turned up.

“My dirty little whore.” He licked the bottom of his lip before his free hand reached above my head while the other

tucked everything away and pulled my dress back up.

“Come, my little exhibitionist.” I glowered at him but took his outstretched hand and walked into the rehearsal.

The rest of the evening blurred by with shouts of instruction from the event planner.

After the rehearsal, we all decided to hit the hotel bar for a few after-dinner drinks. Daphne and Maeve left early, so it was just Tatum, Julian, Alex, and me.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen my brother hold hands with a girl in his life,” Julian remarked, and Alex punched him on the shoulder. I blushed, and Tatum rubbed a supportive hand over my shoulder.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen two grown-ass adults punch each other,” I retorted.

“Correction. I punched him.” Julian laughed and ordered us another round of shots.

“So, are you going to be the first lady of California?” Julian asked while we waited for the bartender.

“Brother,” Alex hissed.

“No. Don’t be ridiculous. We are just having fun.”

Tatum snorted into her drink, and we all looked at her.

“Yeah, right. I don’t believe that after the stunt you pulled this morning.” I held a very tight-lipped smile.

“It’s just that we all know you are full of secrets, Chels. You never told us where you live or invited us over. It took me months of asking you if I could get a lesson in hair curling before you even offered to come by my old place.” I looked down at my hands before a large, supportive hand circled my lower back. He was giving Tatum the space to speak, but the gesture made it known he was still there to support me.

“I don’t want to come across like an asshole because I really am not trying to, but come on. Don’t you see it? We love you. We want to be part of your world too.”

Her empathetic smile put me slightly at ease.

“This morning was tough,” I admitted, and a lump formed in my throat, and I didn’t dare to look over at Alex whose hand was still circling the small of my back.

“I never wanted to be vulnerable like that in front of all of you guys, but it just happened. I don’t know what’s going on. I hated feeling like that.”

“But that is what I am saying. We want you to be more open and vulnerable. That is what friends are for.”

“I hope you can forgive me for not telling you sooner,” I said, feeling guilty. “I just didn’t want to jinx it or have anyone interfere. But I promise, you’ll always be my best friend.”

She gave me a warm hug, and I hugged her back. “I understand,” she said softly. “And I’m happy for you. I truly am. Just promise me one thing. Don’t forget about me when you’re wrapped up in his arms.” Her words were teasing, but I knew she meant them.

I laughed, and a weight lifted off my shoulders. “Never,” I said. “You’re stuck with me for life, no matter who comes into mine.”

We both smiled, feeling a sense of relief and comfort in each other’s company.

“And I hear you about opening up,” I responded. “I’m trying.” I offered her a small smile, and I knew the drinks flowing were making her start this confessional.

I was grateful when Alex changed the conversation to their wedding, which Tatum had plenty to talk about. A couple hours and a few shots later, the two of them were practically dry humping on the barstools.

“We gotta get some sleep so we are ready for tomorrow,” Tatum said as she finally dismounted Julian.

“See you in the morning.” I gave her an air kiss.

Before she left, she drunkenly hobbled over toward me.

“Are you mad at me?”

Was I mad? No, I wasn't. What she was saying was the truth, and although her approach probably needed a little work, I understood where she was coming from.

“I get it. After life settles down, let's hang out, just the two of us, and we can talk.” She offered me a hug, and I reciprocated. Tatum hated physical touch, so I knew this was major for her.

Alex hugged his brother and then joined me back on the bar stool. I knew how to hold my liquor, and I sat at the bar as Alex ordered us two glasses of water and another whiskey.

“Do you want anything else?” he asked before he waved down the bartender.

“Just the water is fine.”

After he ordered, he pulled the stool closer to mine with one hand.

“Are you okay?” There was clear worry etched into his face.

“Yeah.” I waved him off, trying to take the tension out of the situation. “It's fine. She didn't mean any harm by it.” The bartender arrived with our glasses, and I gripped them.

“I just grew up in a different way than anyone else. It's kinda what happened the other night.”

“With the nightmare?” He took a long pull of his whiskey.

“Yup. I've had that nightmare since I could remember. My parents wanted to protect me from these demons that they could never tell me about, so they locked me in the house. I wasn't allowed to go to regular school, no movies, no friends unless they were vetted and came over to our house.”

He was silent, but even in the quiet, I felt the urge to continue.

“They passed away unexpectedly when I was in high school, my brother, Ronan—you met him at the welcome party—took care of me, but I kinda rebelled against the glass

cage I was forced to live inside of for my entire childhood. I got suckered into partying, drugs, and . . . fucking.”

I blushed hard, but Alex remained completely stoic.

“It was horrible being stuck and trapped. I didn’t have anywhere to go or friends to turn to. My first friends of my entire life, aside from the ones that were forced upon me because of family relationships, were Daphne and Maeve, and then Tatum came along.”

He nodded solemnly.

“I went on a bender trying to figure out what happened and why I was raised so differently than others. When I was living it, I didn’t know any different, but after they passed, I realized I was a freak.”

“You are not a freak.” His hand slid over and he interlaced his fingers with mine, and we turned on the stools and looked at each other.

“I am, though,” I continued while tears threatened to fall from my face.

“I told myself I would never let others have anything to say about me, nor would I let them in. I want to live a normal life, so I don’t tell anyone where I live or how I have money. I want to be normal like my friends are.”

I brushed away a small tear that had trailed down my cheek.

“I don’t know what it is about you, but when I went to that club, it was the first time in a really long time that I felt normal and free. It was okay to explore my sexuality. It was okay to feel safe in a man’s grasp. It was okay not to live this golden, gilded-girl façade that I have been wearing for years.”

“Bunny.” He leaned over from the stool he was on to whisper in the shell of my ear.

“I know this is stupid, but for the first time in a long while, I feel really good about maybe opening up a little part of me so my friends can see.”

“I think you should,” he encouraged. “Did your parents ever tell you what sort of people they were associated with?”

My nose crinkled as I stared down at my drink. I could remember parties my parents threw, but I was always sent upstairs when they were happening, as if I didn’t exist, so I didn’t know who attended.

“No.” Maybe Alex knew more than he was letting on. “Why?”

“No reason. I’m just . . . curious.” He finally completed his thought, and pulled his hair off his forehead. Something was bothering him, but I wasn’t going to bring it up. He gave me the space to open up, so I wanted to do the same for him.

“You’re different from anyone else I’ve met, Chelsea. I think you should let others see you for who you are.” We swiveled back into our stools and quietly watched the bartender as he poured a few drinks for others. I finally broke the silence.

“What’s going to happen next?” It was the question that had been burning my mind. This insta-love connection we had was overwhelming for me. If I was being honest, this softer side of Alex was nice to see, but a part of me missed the asshole and his quick remarks. And I sure as fuck wasn’t about to tell him I thought maybe this was love because I wasn’t even sure what it was.

He pulled in his lower lip in concentration before looking at the bartender, not stopping once to make eye contact as he spoke slowly and deliberately.

“I have no idea. I have to go back to the campaign,” he confessed.

“I know.” I sat there in the silence.

“I don’t do dating,” he said matter-of-factly, and my gaze fell on the bartop.

“I know that also.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“It’s just not something I can commit to right now. I just have a lot of shit going on. You live down here . . .”

All I could do was nod as he spoke, as my heart sank with each word. I knew deep down I deserved more than just excuses, but I couldn’t bring myself to be angry with him. It was like I had been blind to who he truly was, and now I was paying the price for my naïveté. At the club in Vegas, he had made it clear he was only interested in something casual. And yet, I had let myself hope for something more—something real.

“Are you still part of Madam Curity’s?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“No, I stopped my membership after I realized that I wouldn’t ever be able to recreate that one night.” He winked at me, and I knew he was trying to relieve some of the tension buzzing around us.

“I have two more days left, Chelsea. Can we please just pretend like we live in our little bubble here and then when we get to what’s next, we can manage it?”

The angst was killing me. I wanted to say yes, to be able to hold onto these moments with him a little longer. But I knew once the bubble burst, reality would come crashing in, and I would be left to pick up the pieces. The thought of having to say goodbye to him was unbearable, but the thought of being strung along and never having the commitment I craved was even worse. I took a deep breath and looked into his eyes, searching for any hint of sincerity.

“Two days.” I took a deep breath, and if that was all he could promise me, then that was what I was going to give him.

“Can I take you to bed now? Your tits have been staring at me the last couple of hours, just begging to let my cock fuck them,” he whispered in my ear, and an immediate need burst through my veins. The only thing I could do was nod.

Alex quickly settled our tab with the bartender, and by the time we had gotten off the barstools, I was exploding with an

immediate hunger.

We had barely gotten to the elevator with our clothes intact when I frantically hit the “P” to get us to the top floor.

Ding.

His mouth was immediately on mine, fucking me with his tongue as his body pushed me against the side of the elevator.

Ding.

His hands raked through my long hair, and I reached for his suit jacket and threw it on the floor of the elevator.

Ding.

The doors shut, and I pulled out his thick cock, not bothering to take his pants off.

He slid his hands up my long dress, pushing it aside.

“Next time, do not wear this.” He tugged on my Spanx, and I shimmied as quickly as I could out of them. So not sexy.

“I bet you were thinking of me while sitting at that bar.” I could only answer with a moan as he slipped two fingers into my opening, letting the dampness surge.

The elevator dinged, letting us know we were about halfway to our floor.

“Better make this quick.” He hoisted my thighs up so I was straddling his waist, and I let my toes rest on the handrail that lined the elevator.

In seconds, he was inside of me. I threw my head back in satisfaction as his entire length entered me. His cock was my fucking utter obsession. He continued to impale me as I bucked from underneath him, writhing in bliss.

I looked over at the elevator panel and knew we were mere seconds away from the door opening, and he was in no way, shape, or form going to stop.

“Such a dirty little girl,” he gritted out as I pushed my ankles into the handrail, wincing at the pain but also not caring

because my needy cunt wanted to sink deeper into him. We both hissed out a groan of satisfaction.

“Look in the corner,” he whispered into the shell of my ear as he nibbled on the lobe.

I parted my puffy lips and looked over my shoulders. Sure enough, there was a security camera with a little red button on the bottom that kept blinking.

“Put on a good show, Bunny.” He knew this turned me on, and the fact of the matter was, the moment I saw the camera, it was showtime for me. I wrapped my hands around his neck and bounced on his length, and my tits matched the rhythm.

It was when that sudden rush went my head that I knew I was past the point of return. His fingers dug into my backside as I bounced one last time onto him.

I went slack in his arms as he filled me up, and the eruption blasted through every godforsaken bone in my body.

Ding.

The door opened, and Alex placed my feet gently on the ground.

Ding.

I half attempted to straighten my hair. Alex zipped up his pants and took a tissue from inside his pocket to wipe the perspiration off his face.

The elevator door was now fully open, and an elderly couple stood in the foyer waiting for us to exit. God, what a sight we must have been with our disheveled hair and strewn clothing.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath.

Alex exited first and grabbed his suit jacket on his way out.

“Evening.” He waved to the couple, leaving me standing in the elevator holding the “open door” button.

“Hi. Yes. So sorry. Noises.” Nothing was coming out as a complete sentence.

I scurried past them when the man cleared his throat behind me.

“You forgot . . . these.” He motioned to the floor, where my Spanx laid. I mean, could this get any worse?

“So, so sorry.” I quickly retrieved them and let the elevator close behind me. Alex was laughing hysterically behind me, and I ran up and slapped him with the Spanx. “Number four.” His response was coy, and I knew exactly what he was talking about.

“Don’t get cocky about it.” We interlaced our fingers and walked toward the room—our room.



17

Alex

Present

When we got in the room, Chelsea went into the bathroom to get ready for bed while I pulled up my phone to send a quick text to Rafe, wanting to see if he figured out which Irish gangsters we were working with. With the funding for the hospital about to be cut and the campaign restarting once I got back to Sacramento, it was of the utmost importance that this was handled immediately. I knew it was very late, and while Rafe was up, it was unlikely he would have any updates until tomorrow, so I pocketed the phone.

I threw my jacket over the couch, and the hushed hum of the shower filled the room. I wanted to spend the last few hours with Chelsea as close to her as I could get. When she asked me what I wanted from us in the bar, I didn't have an answer for her. It was hard to date when you were on the campaign trail. There were appearances I needed to uphold and media conferences, and I was always being pulled in a hundred different directions. Along with the fact I still had to uphold my responsibilities as a senator.

I knew if there was a will, there was a way, but dating was a completely foreign concept to me, and even the word “dating” made me itch. Tonight, I wanted to just spend my time devouring every curve and crevice of her tight body.

Unbuttoning the top few buttons of my shirt, I stalked toward the bathroom and opened the door. Through the fog, I could see the outline of her sweet body. Every curve from her breasts down to the dips in her hips was fucking edible. Her long blonde hair glistened in the water.

I pulled off the rest of my clothes and met her in the shower.

“Oh!” I surprised her from behind as I tucked her into a deep hug. My cock was desperate for a little taste, but first I had this innate desire to treat her like the queen she was.

My fingers started at the top of her forehead and rubbed down as the water soaked us both.

“Mmm.” She threw her head back into the crook of my shoulder, and her chest expanded with every movement of my fingers. They traced the very top of her breasts until I dipped my head and raked my bottom teeth along her hard nipples.

She was unlike any other woman I had ever been with. She was full of curves, and my hands loved exploring every inch of her. I could live a thousand lives and never tire of the way her body was etched.

I flipped her around so our chests were touching. How her breasts grazed my torso made my cock twitch in desperate anticipation. I pushed her shoulders down, and her perky pink lips opened in surprise while it rained down on us.

“Come on, Bunny.” Damn, she reminded me of the first time we met at the club. She was so full of innocence, and her doe-eyed expression made me instantly hard. I was completely wrong about her. I thought she was all rugged and tough, but when she was in the bedroom, she was the epitome of the sweet, little submissive bunny I met at the nightclub.

I rubbed my thumb against her thick lower lip and encouraged her mouth to open with the rest of my hand.

Holding her by the neck, I kept her head angled upward so she was gagging from the onslaught of water from the showerhead.

“Show me what a good girl you have been.” With that praise, she opened her mouth and relaxed as I shoved my engorged cock down her throat. I loved the way her blue eyes filled with pleasure as I thrust into the back of her throat. Her tongue rolling with every movement forced me to grab the glass to steady myself.

She gagged between a mouthful of cock and shower water, and I about lost it when she added her hands to the movement, gripping the bottom of my shaft and matching the rhythm of her mouth.

As sobs erupted from her, I knew I wouldn't last long. I braced the glass as I filled her pretty, sweet mouth with my cum, closing her jaw so she was forced to swallow.

I turned off the shower and looked back over to her, knowing there was a thrill of what was to come between us.

“Come here.” I lifted her from the shower and threw her over my shoulders.

“Put me down!” she squealed as she jabbed on my back. I only offered a laugh and continued to walk her over to the bed, where I threw her down.

I stood before her to take her in one more time. The way her breasts splayed and her slightly parted thighs fit my face perfectly between them.

“I am not a selfish lover, Bunny. Show me how wet you are.” I grabbed her thighs with both hands and pushed her knees apart.

She was throbbing and leaking for me. My tongue met her clit, and her warmth filled me with great satisfaction. I loved that I was the first person who had ever made her orgasm and then continued to offer it to her. All her other lovers had to have been selfish, because all I wanted to do was fill her up with desperate ecstasy. If I had to think about it long enough,

my two goals in life were to become president, and the second was to fill Chelsea with the utmost amount of sweet pleasure that I could.

I sucked around her sensitive nub, making her jerk beneath me. Her wails resounded off the walls as they were met with my own groans.

She jerked around my mouth as she let out one last guttural moan and then exploded. I lapped her up, savoring every single inch of her, before I brought a trail of kisses up her body.

When I reached her mouth, I kissed her plush pink lips softly.

“You taste so good.” I dragged my tongue down her cheek for effect, and she just groaned softly into me. I pressed her into me before we closed our eyes and let the darkness take over us.

I woke to my phone ringing a few hours after Chelsea and I devoured each other a couple more times, making it number seven—but who was counting? I was still in a sleepy haze when I looked over at the clock. It was only 4:00 a.m. Who the fuck was trying to call me this early? It better be a fucking emergency.

I pulled my arm out from under Chelsea, and she groaned in displeasure as I got off the bed to grab my phone. It alerted me to a text message, so I opened it up.

Rafe: The heads of the Irish mob from Ireland were Aoife and Liam O’Brien. They passed away nine years ago. They immigrated from Dublin. They had one son, Ronan O’Brien.

My hands started to sweat. It had to be a fucking coincidence. Then another text came through.

Rafe: Funny thing is that Aoife O’Brien was often rumored by close friends to have been babysitting a young blonde girl by the name of Chels. They assumed she was just a niece. It

wasn't until Aoife's death that this rumor circulated and quickly died because no one had heard of the two kids afterward.

Chelsea was born into the Irish Mafia and had no fucking idea, and I held yet another one of her secrets in my hand.



18

Chelsea

Present

The day of the wedding whizzed by, and it was absolutely beautiful. We all got ready together, and when I got up, Alex was not in the room. I figured he was with his brother getting prepped like we were. Regardless, I sent him a few text messages during the day, letting him know I was excited to see him. They all went unanswered, but the day was such a whirlwind that it was hard to dwell on him not responding. Plus, I knew I would see him at the ceremony anyway.

When I arrived at the cliff, it was hard not to take in the grandeur of it all. There was a large circle of white chairs with an aisle runner in the middle. The entire aisle was flowered and had thousands of twinkling candles all around.

As I walked toward the front of the circle, I noticed the intricate details of the arch. It was like a piece of artwork, a masterpiece of white roses, peonies, and hydrangeas, with delicate greenery accenting every petal. The colors blended seamlessly, creating a perfect harmony of white and green.

The attention to detail was evident in every aspect of the space, from the perfectly arranged floral arrangements to the carefully placed candles. It was a truly breathtaking sight to behold.

Beyond the arch, the vastness of the ocean added to the ambience. The water was a deep shade of blue, and the waves crashed gently against the rocks below. The salty breeze carried the scent of flowers and candles, creating a sensory experience that was both serene and invigorating.

I took my seat in the back row next to the aisle and left the seat next to me open, hoping that Alex would come soon. Just as the ceremony was about to start, a large figure came from behind. My breath hitched. He stood at the end of the aisle, looking every bit like a Greek god in his classic black tuxedo. His black hair was gelled back, revealing his chiseled jawline, and his brown eyes were piercing. I couldn't help but feel my heart skip a beat as I took in his sharp features and the way his suit hugged his toned body in all the right places. He was absolutely irresistible, and I found myself craving to feel his touch once more.

As he regarded me with his intense gaze, I felt a mix of desire, longing, and regret. I knew I shouldn't be feeling this way, but I couldn't help it. Alex was a drug I couldn't quit, and I was hopelessly addicted. I knew the high was going to come crashing down after today, and I wasn't prepared for the impact.

He pulled the hair off his forehead, and I knew there was something wrong. The corners of his lips furled and hands were shoved into his pockets, but he still came to sit next to me.

His hands never left his lap.

"Hey. I've been texting you," I whispered so Daphne and Maeve, who were sitting on the other side of me, didn't hear.

"I've been busy." His tone was aggravated.

"Oh-kay." I seethed.

His gaze landed on me and dripped onto the pink dress I was wearing. I had my hair in waves and was wearing thick makeup.

“You look beautiful, Bunny.” God, this man was the epitome of hot and cold.

“You had a nice morning?” I asked innocently.

“Let’s not talk about it.” His hands stayed in his lap.

I glanced to Daphne, who offered me a cautious smile, and the ceremony started.

Tatum’s dress was a sight to behold with its intricate lacework and layers of tulle cascading to the ground. The bodice hugged her curves flawlessly, accentuating her hourglass figure, while the delicate lace sleeves added a touch of elegance to the overall look. Her hair was styled in loose curls with a few strands framing her face. She looked like a true princess, one that had stepped right out of a fairy tale. As she made her way down the aisle, all eyes were on her. The only difference from this ceremony to the next was that in the back, the entire space was safeguarded by hundreds of security detail and bodyguards. Most of Julian’s family also had their personal security in the audience. I guess that was what happened when you married into the Mafia.

As the two shared their vows, they talked about what it was like to find love. The trials and tribulations they had to go through, but also where that road had led them. It was beautiful, truly. I wasn’t sure it changed my mind on marriage just yet, but it was hard not to think about how I felt about Alex during all of this.

As if he could tell I was thinking about us, or maybe he was thinking the same sort of thoughts, his hand landed on my thigh. He opened his palm, but I hesitated for a moment. If this was how our relationship was going to be—a constant battle of fire and ice—I wasn’t sure it was what I wanted. I wanted someone to be all in. One hundred percent committed to being with me all the time, even when times were tough. I didn’t

want to play this game with Alex. Quite frankly, it was exhausting.

I peered into his deep-brown eyes, and they softened. He offered a small turn of his lips and gestured to his hand for me to grab it.

“Bunny.” He leaned over from his chair and whispered in my ear. Ugh, the nerves pulsed inside my chest through the tips of my fingers.

Fine, I will succumb to him.

The moment his fingers intertwined with mine, everything around us disappeared. His burly hands were warm and rough against my own, yet there was a gentle strength in the way he held them. As he gave my thigh a little squeeze, my chest heaved.

The weight of his hands on mine was both reassuring and comforting, as if to say he was there for me no matter what. It was a gesture of our connection, a symbol of our bond.

At the end of the ceremony, Julian and Tatum shared their first kiss as man and wife, and we all stood to clap. I looked over at Daphne and Maeve, who had mascara dripping down their faces, and we shared an empathetic smile with one another. It was bittersweet that the first person of our group was getting married. I knew it didn’t change much day-to-day, but it signified our journeys. We were all growing up, and this was just the start.

“Are you going back to the hotel?” I asked Alex, who was already tapping away on his phone.

“Yup,” he responded without looking up.

I grabbed his jaw in my hands, and he looked down at me.

“Hey,” I mused softly. “Just one more day. You promised you would give me this.”

As if my words clicked, he shoved his phone into his suit pocket and pulled me tight against his chest, where I inhaled the familiar scent of ocean breeze and whiskey.

“I gotta stay here for pictures with my family, then I’ll head over. Will you stay and drive with me?” I nodded and waved off my friends.

We walked over to the bride and groom, and the photographer was snapping photos of the family. I took a seat in the back as Alex played the perfect younger brother with his family. The way he looked up to Julian was evident. He was jovial and followed all instructions without argument. I knew he was putting on a show. Alex wasn’t the golden retriever façade he was playing.

“Come take one with us!” Tatum waved me over.

I shook my hands. “No, it’s just family.”

“Please,” she practically begged.

“Okay, okay. Whatever the bride wants.” Alex reached out to me with a large smile, and I stood in the crook of his arms.

We stood there and took a photo for the photographer when Tatum announced, “I want a photo of just the two of them.” I shot her a glaring look, but she only smiled wickedly.

“I am the bride.” She twisted my words, and I was left standing with Alex, feeling a little uncomfortable because this felt very . . . official. In an extremely surprising move, Alex pulled me closer to his waist.

“Put on a good show, Bunny.”

I looked up at him and heard the click of the photographer’s camera. I was completely and utterly head over heels for this man and the secrets we shared only with each other. I turned back to the camera and smiled before we finished with photos.

The bride and groom went to the reception, and I jumped into Alex’s blacked-out Escalade. He sat in the driver’s seat and threw his suit jacket in the back seat.

We drove to the reception venue as I made circles around his thigh.

“Chelsea.” He groaned, and I peered up at him. My expression remained innocent.

“Don’t do that with your eyes,” he threatened.

“Do what?” I asked while batting my lashes.

“You are going to make me take you over my legs right here and spank you so hard that you aren’t going to be able to walk right into that reception.”

“Mmm” was all I could muster as the wetness dripped from me.

Alex’s eyes were fixated on the road as we pulled into the long circle drive of the hotel.

“Are you being a good girl and wearing nothing underneath for me?”

I nodded enthusiastically as he lifted his hand from his lap, pulled up my dress, and his hands danced up my thigh. He slipped his fingers through my folds, where my demand for him was growing.

“What a good listener you are.” His fingers circled me, and the anticipation pulsed so strong that it was the only thing I could focus on.

“I think you deserve a little reward?” He shoved two fingers inside of me, using the tips of the others to tease my clit.

“Yes. Reward. So. Good.” He continued thrusting his fingers into my core. I braced the side of the seat, and my hips thrashed beneath him.

Never once did he look over, and he stayed focused as we pulled up to the valet, then he pulled out and tugged down the hem of my dress.

“This isn’t over.” He dipped his fingers into his mouth and sucked them dry right as the valet opened the door for him.

“Good evening, Mr. Marchetti.” The other valet attendant attempted to open my door, but Alex turned to him.

“That’s my job, buddy,” he joked with him and went ahead and opened the passenger door for me. I quickly adjusted my dress and grabbed his outstretched hand.

We walked into the ballroom, where the reception was in full swing.

Three drinks and an extravagant dinner later, Daphne, Maeve, Christian, Elio, Alex, and I were completely full. It was the best dinner, and it felt like we were already a big family sharing inside jokes and stories about Tatum and Julian.

They had just opened the dance floor and invited all the couples to come out. Christian asked Maeve to dance. Elio did the same for Daphne, which left Alex and me sitting alone at the table.

“They aren’t not even a couple, and now I have to ask you, don’t I?” Alex mused. His tone was jovial.

“We aren’t a couple either,” I retorted, just throwing facts out there.

“Semantics.” He hauled me up, and we met on the dance floor. He pulled me into his chest, and his intoxicating and familiar scent filled my senses as I took a deep breath.

He wrapped me tightly into his arms, and his chin rested right on the top of my head. As we swayed to the soft music, I rested my head on his broad shoulder and closed my eyes, letting myself get lost in the moment. His embrace was tender yet firm, and I felt his breath on the top of my head as he held me close. It was as if the rest of the world had faded away, leaving the two of us to dance in each other’s arms. His movements were smooth and effortless, as if he had been born to dance.

I pulled back slightly from his tight embrace, and when he dipped his head down, we smushed our foreheads together, inhaling each other’s intoxicating smell.

He reached into his pants pocket and, in the middle of an absolutely packed dance floor, pulled out a little box.

“What is this?” I asked.

“A little something I found for you.” He opened the little velvet box to reveal the daintiest gold chain with two small bunny ears as the charm.

“Alex!” I squealed. This was the most thoughtful gift. Tears welled in my eyes.

“I saw it and thought it was perfect for you. Plus, I thought it was better than a collar,” he teased, and I held out my wrist for him to put it on. It was a perfect fit.

“Promise me you’ll never take it off. No matter what happens with us?”

I swallowed down my emotions. I couldn’t speak, so I just nodded. It was all too much emotion for me, and I needed to shut it down quickly. The pressure inside my chest was building and threatening to explode if I didn’t do something about it immediately.

I grabbed his hand and led him out of the ballroom and into the room next door. It was a large open space with a huge desk in the middle and various swivel chairs. There was food scattered in the back, where it appeared the vendors for the wedding had just taken their break. The moment we escaped, my mouth was on his, and we were devouring each other.

I was desperate, and my tongue couldn’t get to him fast enough. I frantically unbuttoned his shirt, and when I felt just a sliver of his intoxicating warmth, I ran my nails along his inked skin.

He wrapped my thighs around his, so I was straddling him until I was placed at the edge of the long wooden table. His needy hands braced the table as I lifted my dress, exposing myself to him.

“Let’s finish what we started earlier.”

I nodded in crude excitement.

He pulled down his pants and stood there with his ass toward the door, so anyone who walked in would get a show.

“I need you,” I practically oozed, waiting for his ambush.

He leveraged his hands on the table, and I threw mine behind me, arching my hips toward his throbbing cock.

“Take me,” I begged.

Without another word, he thrust himself inside of me. I wailed out in pain, a combination of being sore from the night before and his length.

“Who is the only person that has made you come?” he commanded as he plunged deep inside of me. The sound of skin slapping only made me want more. I dragged down my top as I pulled the spaghetti straps off, exposing my breasts to him.

“No bra either. Extra credit for listening to instructions.” He ducked down to circle my nipples with his tongue while continuing to fill me.

“Tell me, my sweet little whore, who is the only person who has ever made you feel this good?”

I was panting and knew I wouldn’t last long as he raked his teeth against my sensitive breasts. He grabbed onto my hips, and my eyes pleaded with him to send me into a state of bliss.

“Not until you tell me who it is that gives you all of this.” His eyes were now dark with an animalistic desire.

I shook my head, and he lunged into me while grabbing my ankles and lifting my legs over his shoulders. In this position, I could feel every groove as a delirium of warmth coursed through every inch of my body.

“Need,” I barely hissed through labored breaths.

“Who?”

“You!” I screamed as his cock taunted me by slowing down and then speeding up.

“Say. My. Name,” he demanded. His voice was barely above a whisper but held such power in its tone.

“Alex,” I pleaded. “Please. Alex.”

In an instant, he buried himself inside of me, and we came together in a shared moment of euphoria. I twitched as he pulled out, suddenly feeling empty without him.

I couldn’t even bother pulling my dress up; I went slack and fell onto the table behind me.

Alex fumbled with his suit, and I sat up and fixed my dress after regaining my strength. I was still hoisted on the table, but his usual aftercare was missing. He hadn’t uttered a single word to me.

“Are—”

“Chelsea.”

We spoke at the same time. Agh, this wasn’t good. He fumbled with the hair on his forehead, lifting off and pulling it back behind him.

“I need to tell you something,” he continued.

“I know; it’s over after tonight. I understand.” He shook his head while continuing to button up his shirt.

“I am being blackmailed.” He didn’t look at me when he said it; instead, he cowardly ducked his head down and pulled up his pants.

“Alex,” I responded empathetically because it was all I knew to do. He hadn’t offered much more.

“No, listen to me.” When he finally locked eyes with mine, his tender pools of kindness were replaced by an icy chill.

“At the club, we were being recorded. Someone who was watching had been recording us.”

My mouth dropped open at what he was saying. It wasn’t just him who was being implicated in this; somehow, I would be dragged into it too. Not that I had a name for myself, but the shame and embarrassment that would come would be insurmountable.

“How long have you known about this?” I croaked out.

“Since I got here. I found out the day before I arrived in San Diego.”

“Oh. My. God. This whole time, I thought I was an asshole for not telling you it was me at the club, but you were hiding a secret from me too.” I jumped off the table and faced him head-on. “You are fucking unbelievable, do you know that?”

“I wasn’t going to say anything because I was trying to figure out who the fuck was doing this to me.” He shoved his hands into his pocket, and the usual dominant man was replaced by a coward.

“To you!?” I screeched.

“To both of us,” he corrected.

I was fuming. I couldn’t seem to catch a full inhale, and my hands were frantically shaking—anger coursing through every nook and cranny of my body.

“How dare you?” I seethed.

“How dare I?” he bellowed. This time, his hands flew into the air in a desperate attempt to regain balance.

“I wanted to figure out what the fuck was going on before I implicated you in any of this, Chelsea. Please be fucking rational here.”

“Rational?!” I screamed at him, pounding against his chest. “You criticized me and called me horrible names for keeping a secret from you, but I am just supposed to nod and say, okay, sir.”

“I mean, you can call me sir.” His half attempt at a joke had me fuming even more.

“This was all we had for each other anyway. It was going to end tonight. You are going back to your precious campaign, and I am stuck here with my brother in my gilded cage.”

“Your home is in La Jolla, Chelsea.” He tried to reason with me, but I heard nothing and saw red.

“Fuck you. You don’t know anything about me or how I feel.”

“Because you never tell me!” he screamed back.

I threw my hands in the air as if I had given up reasoning with him.

“This whole hot and cold is too much for me. You can be a dick all you want, but not around me.” I pushed toward the door to the room that separated us from the ballroom.

“You’re not fooling me with your empty words. Your job is all you care about, and it’s crystal clear I’m not a part of that picture. All you’ve been doing for the past week is messing around with me, and I’m sick of it,” I snarled, seething with anger and frustration.

“Plus, the same person standing in front of me told me I needed to let others into my life. The same person who encouraged me to open up to my friends. The same person with whom I shared myself physically and emotionally. The same fucking person who continued to betray me, but berated me for lying.”

“Chelsea, it’s not like that,” he interrupted.

“I can’t believe I wasted my time on you,” I seethed, my voice dripping with venom. “You’re nothing but a spineless coward. This whole thing has been based on a foundation of lies and betrayal. It’s over, and I hope you enjoy being alone, because you clearly don’t know how to treat someone who actually cares about you.”

With that, I slammed the door. I stood in the hallway between the connecting rooms and ran my hands over my face, where I was in a mess of tears.

“Chels?” Daphne was in the same hallway and ran over toward me.

“Can you take me home?” I asked through sobs.

She nodded, and we went outside to my car.

In silence, she drove me home. Alex had shattered my trust and heart into a million pieces, leaving me feeling empty and alone. I didn't have the words to talk about it, and Daphne didn't question anything. This wasn't how I expected it to end. I gave her a swift hug when we got to my apartment, and though she offered to come in, I declined.

As I walked into my dark and empty house, the weight of my sadness felt unbearable. I collapsed onto my couch and clutched the bracelet he had given me, a painful reminder of what we had. I replayed the painful memories in my mind, trying to make sense of it all. But the truth was, there was no making sense of it. The pain was real, the hurt was deep, and the love we had shared was gone forever.

I got up and slowly made my way to my bedroom. In the comfortable and familiar shadows of night, I lay in my bed and let the tears fall freely down my face. It was the end of an era, the demise of a love story. But as I drifted off to sleep, I knew the morning would bring a new day, a new beginning, and a chance to heal my broken heart and mind.



19

Alex

One Month Later

I knew when I left Chelsea at the wedding and then continued to lie to her about her family, that I would do anything to find the answers and bring them to her one day. I also knew I couldn't break her twice. Maybe it was selfish, but telling her the truth about the video and subsequently watching her break down was heart-wrenching. I planned to tell her about her family then, but I was so ashamed of myself for watching her unravel in front of me that I couldn't strike her with another knife.

It had been four weeks since she ran out on me at my brother's wedding—arguably the worst month of my entire life. I tried everything to get her out of my system, including immersing myself in work and trying some app my brother told me I needed to download, which was quickly removed the moment I realized I couldn't do it without her. It was Chelsea or bust, but she needed to know the truth about her family growing up. Why she was sheltered and what involvement she may have had in this scenario.

I was sitting on the top floor of my high-rise apartment building, which overlooked the city lights. The inside of the apartment was oddly similar to the hotel. It was filled with opulence and luxury. The home of a man who never felt at ease. A cold, neutral palette to satisfy the basic necessities: a bed to sleep in, a place to eat, and a room to work in.

My phone pinged, and I grabbed it thinking it was Krissy to update me on the campaign, but to my surprise, it was Rafe.

“Any update?” I answered on the first ring.

“I got you a sit-down with the Irish mob out here. They are going to meet you in neutral territory in LA at a restaurant downtown.”

“What’s the name of the guy?” I questioned.

“No idea. They won’t tell me either. I can’t find shit about who is the head of the Irish mob, but they did tell me something pretty fucking interesting.”

“Out with it, then.”

“The Irish mob and the Irish Republic in Ireland have been feuding for nearly a decade. The Irish Republic, as we expected, wants to traffic humans between countries. The Irish mob out here prefers to deal with arms. They have kept the head of the mob secret because of this feud.”

“Then the people funding the hospital are the Irish Republic. They are the ones who want to open our pipeline.”

“Yup. They are going to get it open for humans in any way they can and mess with the mob out here.”

“When is this meeting?”

“Two weeks”

“Fuck, why so long?”

“That’s just what they said. No idea, Boss. At this point, all projects are on hold.”

I threw the phone at the wall. I was so pissed. It was the cornerstone project on which my campaign was built, and we were deep in the season for racketeering.

“Marchetti?” I heard Rafe through the speaker and ran to pick up my discarded phone, grateful nothing was actually broken on it.

“I guess there is nothing we can do until we meet with the Irish mob’s head and see if somehow we can work together to take down the Irish Republic’s pull out here.”

“One more thing, Boss.” Rafe was hesitant on the other line, which ground my gears.

“You are so fucking annoying. Just say it instead of prefacing it with a warning statement beforehand.”

“Got it. Aoife and Liam O’Brien were notoriously associated with the Irish mob out here, but they originally immigrated from Ireland together before they had their child.”

“Children,” I corrected.

“Yes, well, rumored.” He reminded me. “Anyway, I guess they had the same ideas about trafficking that we do, so they joined the mob out here. They were pretty up there on the food chain, and Liam, at his death, was rumored to have just been appointed as the head. That is why there is nothing to note about who the actual head is.”

“Huh.” I wonder if Chelsea’s older brother had any inclination as to what his parents were doing.

“Alright, send Krissy details on the meeting.” I hung up the phone and threw myself over the Italian leather sofa.

At the mere mention of Chelsea, I was engulfed in a shitstorm of my own emotions. The way the curves of her body lay against mine, the way she looked up at me so innocently with her puffy pink lips and big blue eyes. *Fuck*. I had never masturbated so much to the mere thought of a woman in my life.

I closed my eyes, trying to push the thought of her out of my head. But it was no use. Her memory lingered in my mind like a haunting melody calling out to me in the stillness of the night. I knew I had to see her to explain everything and make things right. But I also knew it was a risk, seeing her would only reignite the passion that had burned between us and make it harder to let her go. When I went to LA to meet with the Irish mob, I was going to carve out time to make it down to my brother's house to see her. It was only two more weeks. If I could make it four weeks, I could do two more, no matter how painful the ache in my chest was.

In the meantime, I was going to immerse myself in this campaign. I called Krissy to set up meetings with media outlets.

"Marchetti. Nice to hear from you again," she answered. I had probably called her ten times a day since I had thrown myself back into work after the wedding.

"I need you to start painting me to all the media outlets as a man who is dating."

"Like with multiple women?" she questioned.

"No. You ass." We shared a laugh, and I was grateful for a moment.

"I'm going to win back Chelsea, and I need you to figure out how we can make it known she's mine."

"Have you spoken to her about this?" Krissy's tone was now serious. She was somewhat aware of what happened between us. Just that there was no "us," but at one point there was, and of course I was the reason it was all fucked up.

"I'm going to in a couple weeks."

"Alex," she warned.

"Just start prepping the media kits." I hung up the phone again and threw myself back on the couch. As the lights of the city flickered into darkness, it was hard to think of my sweet little bunny again. Every moment without her felt like a

lifetime's worth of sadness. I had already said hello to the devil within her, and there was no going back to heaven.

“I'm coming for you, Bunny.”



20

Chelsea

Two Weeks Later

The last six weeks have been the most transformative moments I've had in my life. As I fumbled for some wineglasses from my kitchen, I glanced around to ensure everything looked perfect. It was my first time hosting a girls' night in my home, and the anxiety of bringing my friends into my space was killing me.

After the wedding, I spent a couple of weeks in a dark depression but willed myself to get better. There was no more Alex. He was just a fleeting part of my life. A chapter that had already been read and passed. I was determined, after I spent a while wallowing to my friends, that I had the power to turn the page and start a new chapter. This was a fresh start to not only moving on from Alex but also rediscovering all the parts of me, including the more vulnerable ones.

As the door popped open, Daphne came in first.

"When you told us your parents left you with an inheritance, I didn't know it was like Marchetti-money rich." Maeve

whistled on her way into my apartment.

“Damn! This place is beautiful. I am so jealous you are steps away from the sand.” Tatum joined my other friends.

About a month ago, I mustered up the courage to sit down with them and lay it all out there. I revealed the truth about my parents’ money, the complicated situation with Alex, and how I had been hiding a crucial part of myself to fit into society’s mold. Their response was nothing short of empowering. They urged me to stop sacrificing my happiness for the sake of others and embrace my true self. They reminded me it was perfectly acceptable to prioritize myself for once.

Once we had gotten our wine and sat on the couch, Daphne asked if I had heard anything from Alex.

“Ugh, don’t talk about my idiot brother-in-law.” Tatum leaned back on the plush couch. “Julian says he’s just knee-deep on the campaign trail.” She threw her hands up as if she had no idea what else to say.

“What about the art program?” Maeve prompted, probably trying to steer this conversation away from a complete mental breakdown.

In an effort to continue this self-healing train I was on, I applied to a fashion school in San Francisco starting up next semester. I gathered all the required documents in like a week, but it was a shot in the dark that I would get accepted.

“I haven’t heard anything from them yet. But I don’t think I will for a couple more weeks.” I simply shrugged, really not knowing what was next.

It was Tatum who slid next to me, wrapping her hands around my shoulders.

“I never got to apologize for how I said what I did at the hotel. It was rude. But I am also glad I did. We were all worried about you after the wedding. You were in a really dark place, but it’s refreshing to see you come out of it.” My friends all nodded in agreement.

“He doesn’t deserve you.” Daphne gripped my knees, as she could sense the hesitation in my voice.

I offered a slight smile, but the truth was, no matter how much I forced myself to rebuild other aspects of my life, I still felt this hole in my chest. I couldn’t fill it, and somehow, I knew Alex was responsible for it.

“Okay, I have something for you, and I hesitated to bring it.”

Tatum rushed to her purse, and Maeve groaned.

“This isn’t a good idea.” She turned to tell Tatum. I looked at Daphne, who only offered an empathetic lip curl.

After Tatum rummaged through her bag, she produced a small frame. She came back over to the couch and handed it to me.

“For you.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. It was a photo of Alex and me at the wedding. I was looking up at him smiling, and he was gazing down at me. We looked happy—genuinely happy. It was a whatever-was-going-to-happen-hours-after-this-photo-was-taken-just-didn’t kind of happy.

I hated feeling this way about him, even after all this time. He had some hold on me I couldn’t shake.

“Thank you.” When I finally spoke, it was softly, as if the words weren’t sure they wanted to escape.

I grabbed the frame and placed it on the counter before walking back over to the couch and taking a long swig of the wine I had poured for us.

“Tell me about this new line you are designing,” Maeve interrupted, and we spent the rest of the evening gossiping about work, getting too many vivid details of Tatum’s married sex life, and just getting to know each other on a much deeper level. I was so grateful these were my girlfriends, but even my social battery was low once evening hit.

“Thank you for inviting us over here. I hope you will host girls’ night again.” Maeve kissed me on the cheek before leaving my apartment. Tatum and Daphne filed out with her, including Tatum’s security detail that Julian had on her.

“Isn’t that annoying?” I asked at the frame of my door.

“Very. It’s a compromise, though, one I was willing to bend on after that incident.”

I closed the door and ran my thumb around the bracelet with the little bunny on it. I hadn’t taken it off because I wasn’t ready. I knew eventually I would move on, but having even this small piece of Alex near my heart made me feel like there was even the smallest chance he would come to my doorstep and beg for me to come back to him. Who was I kidding? It had been six full weeks without even so much as a text message from him.

Remember, Chelsea, this was a new chapter in life. I attempted to tug at the clasp, embracing the future when I snapped out of my thoughts, dropping the clasp and letting the bracelet take its place back on my wrist.

Then someone knocked at the door.

“Did you forget something?” I screamed from the other side of the house. Daphne had left her bag on the counter, so I picked it up for her. She always forgot something.

I smiled at my wrist, reveling in the irony that I was thinking about Alex coming to my door when I grasped the door handle.

“Girl! What did you—”

Daphne

Present

“Shit. Hold on guys.” I had driven my friends to Chelsea’s house, but per usual, I forgot my purse inside. I unbuckled the seat belt and jumped out of the car.

The one thing about Chels’s new place was how freaking far you had to park if you were a guest, so you were battling with the beachgoers.

“Move.” I practically pushed one out of the way to get back up to her entrance.

I walked up the flight of stairs to where her door was but was greeted by an open door and my purse sitting on the ground.

“Chels?” I pushed the door open and hesitantly walked inside.

There was an eerie calm inside her apartment. I called out for her as I walked through her apartment but saw no one. I had just seen her five minutes ago, maybe less. I checked my purse, and my wallet was still inside. I looked toward the stairwell to see if I caught wind of her, but it was empty.

This wasn’t good. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I ran with my purse and shut her door. When I got in the car, the frantic look on my face was my tell, and my friends’ faces

fell.

“She’s gone” was all I could spit out.

In a flurry of panic, Tatum called her security, who started combing the grounds for her, and Maeve called Julian.

“Call Ronan!” I yelled, and Maeve hung up and frantically searched for his number.

I was frozen in place. The number was in my phone, yet my hands couldn’t dial the number. All I could do was look in her face and scream.

“Call Ronan . . . now!”



22

Alex

Twelve Hours Ago

The moment I touched down at LAX, I was eager to get this meeting over with. I had spent the past two weeks strategizing the best way to win Chelsea back. First, I made sure to keep my brother in the dark. If he found out, his nosy-ass wife would inevitably catch wind and ruin everything.

The goal was to finish this meeting as quickly as possible and determine why I would be targeted for blackmail. I hadn't received any new updates from the Irish Republic, so I wanted to figure out if there was a way for the Irish mob out here to work with me and therefore cut all ties with the Republic.

After that, I planned to drive down to La Jolla, show up at her apartment with a bouquet of peonies, and beg for her forgiveness. The last part of my plan—admittedly not my favorite—was to have a completely transparent conversation with her. Perhaps it would be our first real conversation about her parents, her upbringing, and why I had kept this a secret from her.

There were two possible outcomes. She would kick me to the curb and tell me to never come around again. In my mind, this was the least probable because if my heart felt this empty without her, she must feel the same way. I mean, she had to, right?

The second option was much more palatable to me. She would forgive me for not telling her the truth and understand why I held off for these six long, grueling weeks.

My brother was in the car as it pulled up to the curb of the incredibly busy airport.

“Alessandro.” He slapped my back as I got in, and we geared up for the thirty-minute drive to the secret location. I received a text this morning about where to meet. From there, we were going to be blindfolded and driven to where we were told to go. They agreed to allow us one weapon each, as they ensured this was not an aggressive show of force but for their own personal safety and the security of the evasive boss.

Julian handed me a Glock, and I shoved it into my belt.

“Mamma would be so disappointed with us.” I laughed while adjusting my buckle.

“Nah,” Julian said, and I furrowed my brows. Our mother left the Mafia, and our family suffered a great loss when it happened, but she was insistent her family wouldn’t be raised in the same atmosphere. Our papa hadn’t told us to this day what he lost, but we remember the long nights filled with loud voices downstairs when we were kids.

“Why do you say no?” I questioned him.

“Maybe it’s this married life that’s gotten me all soft, but I think Mamma wanted us happy. We aren’t in the family anymore. We are building our own empire.” He smirked, and I grabbed my older brother over his shoulders, bringing him in for a hug.

After a few beats passed, Julian asked, “To clarify, the plan is that we are going to meet this mysterious capo of the Irish mob and somehow figure out a way we can work with them

instead of the Republic and fund the hospital for the campaign.”

I mean, sure, that was part of it, but mostly, I wanted answers about Chelsea’s family, if I could get them, along with why I was being blackmailed.

“Give or take.” I sat back in my seat as we approached the meet-up spot.

We double-checked our guns were fully loaded. Julian grabbed another magazine from the back and shoved it into his shoe.

“Can’t be too sure, brother.” He loved the nitty-gritty of this, while I preferred using my voice as a weapon.

Christian, Julian’s right-hand man, parked the car, and we got out quickly. Two tall and lanky men with youthful faces and fiery-red hair awaited us.

“Aye.” The taller one gestured over to us, and we approached, nodding at being blindfolded.

Two black silk blindfolds quickly slipped over our eyes, and before I knew it, we were shoved into the back of a vehicle. My heart raced as I tried to keep track of the time. I counted each second, feeling like an eternity had passed with each one. Julian was next to me trying to count the number of turns we were taking. It was difficult to know where we were going, but if we needed to escape or get backup, it would be crucial to figure out how far we had traveled.

It had been two minutes and thirteen seconds from when we entered the vehicle until it slowed to a stop. I held my breath, waiting for the next move. The sound of a door opening had me amped. It was game time. Footsteps approached the car. The door next to me opened, and someone grabbed my arm, pulling me out.

We were shoved a few steps ahead and then walked exactly sixty-seven steps forward without changing direction. It was clear by the way the Santa Ana winds were blowing that we

were facing due west when we arrived, and a large door slammed behind us. Metal?

Our blindfolds were removed, and we were standing in a large circle. The men from earlier were standing in front of us. Furious whispering came from the other side of the room. Julian looked over at me, and I nodded—a silent way to communicate I was all good.

“Well, gentlemen. It seems like we have a mutual interest to discuss,” a voice behind the lanky redheads spoke up.

“Are you going to fucking move?” Julian growled.

The two men parted, and we were standing before the incredibly elusive Irish mob head.

“Holy—”

“Shit,” Julian finished my sentence.

“Ronan?” Julian perked up next to me. It was Chelsea’s fucking brother. I immediately saw red and lunged toward him, but my brother pulled me back.

“Why the fuck are you blackmailing me?” I barked out at him.

“Blackmail? Us? No. You have this all wrong.”

“You fucking knew this whole time who we were—at the wedding—and you didn’t bother to pull us aside like real men to talk to us?”

Ronan’s face didn’t falter. He remained a stoic businessman. I was determined to have him quivering in his knees by the end of this.

“I have been hiding for nine years since my parents died. I wasn’t about to just pull you aside at a wedding to casually mention that I happened to be the head of the Irish mob.” He shoved his hands into his pocket.

“Why reach out now?” Julian asked.

“Because when I saw the two of you at the wedding and talked to your father a bit, I realized you weren’t part of the Cosa Nostra family anymore. I like what you both are building. While I hate admitting this out loud, we could use your help.”

“Help?” I asked.

“Yeah. We are willing to fund one of your projects, but we need help with the Irish Republic. For the last decade, they have wanted to infiltrate and run our organization, modeling theirs after ours. They think they own a stake in us since most of our members are Irish immigrants. Ultimately, they want to traffic humans through to the states and sell them.”

“Fucking disgusting.” I shifted on my feet, letting everyone see my physical discomfort.

“We agree,” Ronan answered. “For the last nine years, they have been desperate to figure out who the leader of our stateside organization is. They haven’t been able to, but we think with new intel, they have finally pieced it together that I took over when my parents died.”

“Yeah, and they know about Chelsea.”

This time, Ronan was the one to lunge at me. The two lanky boyish redheads pulled him backward just as Julian reached for the Glock in his waistband.

“What did you say?” Ronan said through gritted teeth.

“You really don’t know?” Fucking perfect. This guy needed to work on his security better.

“Your sister and I are being blackmailed—together.” The meaning behind my words was left hanging in the air. It took a moment for Ronan to piece together what I was saying, but when he did, he lunged and struck me with an open palm to my face. Julian took three steps toward me and drew his weapon. I lifted my hand to stop him.

“You hated her at that fucking dinner. Now you are telling me you fucked my baby sister?”

I cringed and held the side of my cheek where he slapped me.

“We met beforehand, and someone recorded our time together.” There was no fucking way I was about to go into any details about this with Chelsea’s brother.

“I got a blackmail package delivered to my office at the Capitol, but I pieced it all together when I learned that she technically never existed. I wasn’t expecting you to be the boss of this whole organization here. This only confirms that the Irish Republic were blackmailing me and, ultimately, your sister too.” I pulled the hair off my forehead.

“They are threatening to pull out of a project I need for my campaign. We need the funding, but they told us they wanna bring humans down the pipeline, and we don’t fuck around with that.”

“So, let us fund your campaign. Take them out of this completely,” Ronan offered.

“We need to eliminate them; otherwise, there will be retaliations against both of us.”

“You thinking of a sting?” Julian questioned.

“Yeah, we’ve gotta eliminate the head so they have no ability to bring their bodies into the States. We can set up a sting so they think we are opening up to their idea but ultimately force their hand with the feds,” I answered, thinking this could very well work. This would eliminate the Republic’s access to the states; my campaign would still be funded by the mob; and the blackmail would be eliminated.

“Wait, what do they want with your sister?” I asked. It was the only piece of the puzzle I couldn’t answer. Ronan stood as still as a statue, but a glint of sadness fluttered through his eyes.

“My parents kept Chelsea hidden because they didn’t want her to be a part of this world. Girls born to high-ranking members are often forced into human trafficking, and they wanted to protect her from that fate. They kept her isolated

and only allowed her to meet trusted friends. When my parents were in their twenties, they were part of the Irish Republic. However, they soon realized the unethical practices of the organization and decided to leave Ireland.

“They came to the States and joined the local chapter of the organization, bringing with them trade secrets. Eventually, they rose to the top and were set to be anointed as the heads of the organization. But on the day of the ceremony, they were murdered. After they passed away, I did my best to keep her safe, but I was only twenty-one trying to raise a teenager, all while being the head of an organized crime syndicate.

“Since there was never a ceremony to promote them as heads, there was confusion about who took over. We just kept it hush-hush, and I’ve always protected Chelsea.”

“Not well enough . . .”

“What does that mean?” he growled.

“Clearly, someone got close enough to her to be able to blackmail us, and you had no idea.”

“Alright, let’s circle back to what you need from us today,” Julian interrupted our cockfight.

“Let’s plan on implementing the sting. I like that idea.”

“But we leave Chelsea out of it,” Ronan said, looking down at me.

“No. She needs to know the truth, and I am going to give it to her.” I shoved my hands into my pockets. Julian was staring daggers at me.

“I *need* to be the one to tell her,” I repeated.

“She’s my sister, and this is a family business. Respectfully, I will decide when she is ready to know, and I will be the one to tell her.”

As I took a step toward him, I studied his appearance. He stood tall, with a head of reddish-colored hair, dressed in a dark-navy suit. While there was a clear family resemblance

between him and Chelsea, there were also distinct differences between them.

“Tell me, why have you left her alone for the last month and a half?” He scoffed. He had me there. The question hung in the air like a dagger to my heart. It was a fair question; one I didn’t have a good answer for. The truth was, I had let my insecurities get the best of me, and I couldn’t handle the intensity of our relationship. But him calling me out on it made me feel even worse. It was like he had just shined a spotlight on my own cowardice, and I couldn’t hide from it any longer.

I shifted from foot to foot, trying to think of a way to defend myself, but nothing came to mind. All I could do was lower my gaze and feel the weight of his judgment crashing down on me. The silence between us was deafening, and his disappointment seeped into every inch of my being.

“I was dealing with all this shit. Now that we have a solid plan of action, I plan to see her after this charade is over. I wanted to get all the business taken care of so I could focus on rebuilding the connection we had. I care about her so much.” Again, he stood there stoically, and while I tried to maintain my composure, I felt like I was going to explode.

“I fucking love your sister,” I confessed, and the warehouse was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Moments passed, and my chest heaved. I was standing before the head of the Irish mob, confessing I loved his sister.

“Okay.” He nodded.

“Oh.” I arched my brows in surprise and disbelief. “Okay, cool,” I said, struggling to contain my shock. His response caught me off guard, and I couldn’t believe he was taking it so lightly. It was as if he already knew what I was about to say.

Ronan’s and Julian’s phones rang, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of dread wash over me. My heart was pounding so loudly I thought it would leap out of my chest. The anticipation was killing me as I waited for them to finish their

calls. My mind was racing, trying to make sense of what was happening, but my thoughts were scattered and uncoordinated.

“Baby?” Julian soothed who I could only assume was Tatum.

His eyes went wide. I glanced over at Ronan, who was also on the phone with the same shocked expression on his face. As Ronan and Julian finished their phone calls, their expressions turned grim, and I knew without a doubt something was wrong. The blood drained from my face as I waited for them to deliver the news. The silence that followed was deafening, and it felt like time had stopped altogether.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, my voice rising with urgency.

The weight of the situation bore down on me. I was standing inside this empty, frigid warehouse—God knows where—in Los Angeles. I had just learned that the head of the entire Irish mob organization was my girlfriend’s brother.

Okay, she wasn’t my girlfriend yet, but she sure as fuck felt like it, and after tonight, she definitely would be. I was going to make damn sure of it.

“Slight change of plans.” Ronan didn’t finish the sentence as he picked up another burner phone and dialed furiously, speaking in Gaelic.

I glanced over at my brother, whose otherwise stoic face was breaking in concern for me. His mouth hung open slightly as he looked between Ronan and me, clearly caught off guard by this unexpected turn of events.

“What?” I demanded of him.

“Chelsea’s missing,” he choked out.

My heart dropped into my stomach as the words left my brother’s lips. I dropped to my knees and buried my hands in my hair.

Chelsea was missing. Panic set in as I tried to process what he had just said. How could this happen? I was supposed to

meet her tonight, and now the woman I loved was nowhere to be found. Worst-case scenarios haunt me while I search my mind for clues to her whereabouts.

The feeling of helplessness washed over me like a wave. I couldn't even begin to imagine what Chelsea was going through right now, and the thought of her being hurt, or worse, made me sick to my stomach. All I could think about was finding her and bringing her back safely. I didn't care what it took or what risks I had to take—I was going to find her.

The anger mixed with fear as I tried to process who could have taken her. I knew there were people who wanted to hurt me, but why would they go after her? My mind was racing with questions and theories, but the only thing I knew for sure was I needed to find Chelsea. My heart ached at the thought of her being alone and scared, and I knew I had to be the one to find her.

Ronan clicked off his call; his face was just as white as mine probably was.

“She was with your wife.”

Julian only nodded in confirmation.

“They said your guards couldn't find her.” His entire demeanor shifted from what it was moments ago. He was now the concerned brother dressed up like a businessman. He kept cracking his knuckles, and you could see he was holding back on something.

“They couldn't find her,” Julian repeated back to Ronan.

Ronan shook his head.

“Who was on the phone?” I whispered.

“The Republic has her.”

My heart sank at Ronan's words. The fear I had been feeling only intensified, and I couldn't believe the Irish Republic had taken her. The weight of the situation was too heavy to bear, and I didn't know how I would find her. My mind raced with all the possibilities, each one more terrifying than the last.

Tears welled in my eyes as the reality of the situation set in. I wasn't about to cry in front of these fuckers, but my ears had an incessant ringing in them. I felt as though a piece of my heart was ripped from my chest. I would rather die a thousand deaths than let anything happen to her.

As Julian and Ronan discussed their plan of action, I tried to push my fear and sadness aside and focus on the task at hand. I knew I needed to be brave for Chelsea and do whatever it took to bring her back home.

“What did the person on the phone want?” I reiterated because he was being elusive. I ripped the Glock from my waistband and pointed it in his direction.

“Brother!” Julian took two steps toward me, but my eyes were glued on Ronan.

“They told me they have her and that I needed to step down and hand over the organization to them or they would sell her at the next auction—in forty-eight hours.”

Holy.

Shit.

This was the worst-case scenario; it had to be. I couldn't swallow, and my chest felt like it was bubbling with a combination of anger, fear, and anxiety. I pushed my gun into Ronan's cheek and, through gritted teeth, seethed at him.

“Step. Down.”

The answer was clear. If he loved his sister and wanted her safe, he needed to hand over the organization and figure out how to regain it after all this was over.

“We need to think about this rationally.” Ronan's trembling voice was like nails on a blackboard to me.

“Rationally!?” I bellowed.

“If I step down, an entire sea of sex trafficked women are going to make their way across an ocean, a long way from home, and end up in the greedy hands of pervs in the States.”

“So your fucking sister becomes the sacrificial lamb?” I understood what he was saying, but right now, there was no way I would let any of this happen to Chelsea.

“No . . . I will figure a way to get her out.” He rubbed his temples.

“I’ll fucking handle this.” I grabbed my phone and dialed Krissy.

“I’ll be in Dublin in ten hours. I need everything put on pause until I get back, but I need you to make it look like I am busy on the trail. Pump out old media footage. Make it look like I am in California.”

“Uh, okay?” She knew this was out of left field for me.

“Make it sound convincing. Chelsea’s missing. I’m bringing Julian with me. Get the jet ready. We are leaving for the airport in fifteen minutes.” I hung up on her.

My brother had begun to leave already, and I knew he had dialed James and Christian, along with a few other birds, to get onto the plane. The plan would wait until we were in the air, but I needed to get to her. As I turned to leave, Ronan stood in front of me, looking like a pathetic, incompetent fool.

“Wait,” he said. “How do you know where she is?”

At this point, my anger was fucking comical. This was the guy who claimed to protect his sister. I wanted to believe he had good intentions, but he didn’t have the slightest idea how to run a fucking mob.

“I gave your sister a bracelet. It has a tracker on it.” I looked at the fool and turned around, where Julian had already jacked the lanky boy’s car. I checked the tracker as soon as they said she was missing.

“Hey!” he screamed as I jumped in the car. As soon as we were headed away from the warehouse, I dialed Rafe.

“I need you to reach out to our contacts in Ireland. I am going to need four M4s and eight G-19s and plenty of ammo.”

“I live here, so I have the perfect guy to get ’em for you.” He laughed.

“You live in Ireland?” I asked, stunned. I knew Rafe lived abroad and had somewhat of an accent, but we always sent checks to an address in Scotland.

“Yeah. Why do you think I know so much about the Republic and the mob?”

“But your checks?”

“Eh, gotta keep an air of secrecy,” Rafe retorted.

“Shit. Chelsea has been taken,” I blurted out.

“Holy. Fuck.”

“I need you to track her and then come pick us up and tell us exactly where to go. We will be there in t-minus ten hours.”

“Got it, Boss. See you guys soon.” He clicked off.

We jumped from the stolen car into our own, and Julian sped to the airport. This was going to be the longest ten hours of my entire fucking life.

My mind raced with thoughts of Chelsea. What if they hurt her? What if they did something to her? My chest felt tight, like a vise was clamped around it, and I couldn’t breathe. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her face and smile, and heard her laugh. I missed her so much that it physically hurt.

As we raced toward the tarmac, I couldn’t shake the feeling of dread settling in the pit of my stomach. What if they had already sold her because that asshole Ronan refused to step down? But I knew I couldn’t give up. I had to find her, no matter what it took. Even if it meant risking my life—my entire empire—I couldn’t let anything happen to her.

When we finally arrived at the airport, the jet was already waiting for us. I felt like I had aged a thousand years. My heart was pounding in my chest, and my hands were shaking. I couldn’t believe this was happening to us—to me—to Chelsea.

As we boarded the plane to Ireland, a sense of unease settled over me.

“I’m coming for you, Bunny.”



23

Chelsea

Present

“Wake her up.”

“She’s going to get us the big bucks.”

“What if the brother doesn’t concede?”

The noises were hazy, as if they were in the distance. I attempted to blink my eyelids open, but they were heavy and everything was blurry.

“Hello?” My voice was hoarse, and my throat hurt as I tried to push the word out. I needed water.

“She’s up.” When I finally was able to focus on what was in front of me, I saw a short man with brown hair covered in tattoos, wearing a pair of jeans and a wifebeater. Behind him were similar-looking men. There was something . . . strange about the way they spoke.

“Wake up, girl,” the taller one said as he kicked my ribs, and I groaned.

It was an accent. They were speaking in what sounded like an Irish accent, very similar to my parents'.

“Where am I?” I was finally able to look around the room.

It was cold. The entire room was a floor-to-ceiling cement box. There was a small bucket in the corner, a mattress on the floor, and a dozen bottles of water littered the ground.

The air in this room was thick with mildew, making it difficult for me to breathe. The dampness of the walls made me shiver, and I couldn't shake the feeling of despair that consumed my every thought. The only comfort I had was the sound of my own voice, which echoed off the walls with each syllable.

“You are going to make us really rich, little one.” The taller one leaned down on his haunches to look closer at me.

“What do you need from me? I can get you anything. Money?” I quickly realized the situation I was in and was desperate to find an escape.

“Money?” The taller man looked at the other two behind him, and they all laughed maniacally.

“I have lots of it. Whatever amount you want, I can wire you.” I reached up toward him, and he pulled away from me, standing so he was domineering over my hunched figure.

“We are going to sell you, girl. Your parents fucked us all, so we will ensure your family feels their betrayal now.” With that, he left and slammed the wrought-iron door behind him.

I couldn't help but bury my head in my arms and sob.

I was curled up on the bed in the same clothes I was wearing when I was with my friends just hours ago. Was it hours ago? I had no concept of time in this godforsaken place.

“Please find me,” I said while clutching the bunny bracelet still on my wrist. I wondered if anyone even knew I was missing at this point. I lived alone, and my friends had just seen me.

Keys jangled when the big door opened.

“Get up, girl.”

I slithered into the corner, my heart beating inside my throat.

“Put this on. The boss wants to see you face-to-face.” One of the lanky redheaded guys from earlier threw a small yellow bikini toward me. I just shook my head. No fucking way was I going to wear this and flaunt it around these strangers. I had no dignity pissing in a bucket, and now this?

He stalked toward me and grabbed my hair, practically ripping it from the roots, and I screamed in protest.

“Okay, I will wear it.”

“Turn around.” He laughed and then looked at me.

“There is going to be much more to the show than just my eyes, so you need to get used to it.”

“Absolutely not. You can kill me before I have you watch me put this on. Then you’ll get in trouble for having a dead person on your watch. How fucked are you going to be then?” This seemed to convince him, and he turned around.

I quickly picked up the cheap fabric and the triangle top that was maybe three times too small for me. My tits were going to fall out of the sides, but I needed to figure out why I was here.

I put on the bikini top and then the bottoms that had a small skirt cover-up. The thought of my whole body being on display for someone’s sick pleasure filled me with a deep sense of shame and disgust. I wanted to cover myself, to hide from whoever was watching, but I knew that would only make things worse. I was trapped, and the fear of what was to come next made me sick to my stomach.

“Let’s go, girl.” The man turned around, and his eyes bulged out of his head. If this was the walk to my death, I needed to hold my head up with some sort of dignity, so I mustered up every bit of confidence I had. The golden-girl façade my parents taught me so well was on full display. He grabbed my wrists, and we walked out the door.

We were in some sort of hallway, and there were multiple doors to rooms similar to the one I had been in. Faint cries echoed through the hallway, as if we were surrounded by ghosts. When we got to the end, we turned right, where we quickly entered a darkened room. I was immediately forced onto what looked like a black stage floor. A spotlight suddenly pointed at me, and there was a single chair in the center of the stage. I covered my eyes with my hands.

“Come sit, Chelsea.” A very smooth voice spoke in front of me, but because of the lights, I was not able to see who it was.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “I have money if that is what you need.”

The spotlight dimmed, and I walked over to the chair so I could get a better look at who was staring at me in the audience.

There were a few large red velvet chairs in the audience. It looked like a run-down movie theater of sorts, but instead of having a screen, there was a large stage.

“Sit down and let’s talk,” the demanding voice spoke again. He had the same Irish accent as the three men from earlier.

I nodded because I couldn’t see any way out of this and needed to know why this was happening to me.

“Who are you?” I asked once I sat down in the lonely wooden chair.

Finally, the figure emerged from the shadowy darkness, and he was tall and stocky. He had brown hair that went down to his shoulders, and was covered in tattoos.

“Your outfit resembles the first time we met, but I bet you don’t know when that was.” His tone was scarily icy.

I nodded, not having a clue about what he was talking about.

“I got to see your little performance in *Las Vegas*.” My brain started to put the pieces together. The blackmail that Alex was talking about at the wedding. This was it.

“Why me? Don’t you want him?” I managed to croak out.

“Ah no. You see, that is where you have it all wrong.” He squatted in front of me. Deep scars marred his face, and his green eyes were filled with a fury so deep they sparkled.

“Many years ago, before you and I were born, your parents decided it was a good idea to take the secrets they held with the Irish Republic and bring them to the States. They didn’t like a few policies we have here, so they left.”

I knew my parents left Ireland and immigrated to the US, but it was a surprise to find out they were part of the mob. The Irish Republic was notorious for selling and trafficking women. It was always in the news.

“When they left, they rose to the top of the ladder. They thought they were going to be the heads of the Irish mob and two-time the people that helped build them up. The people that brought them to America.” The man was getting more irate the longer he spoke.

“One of our undercover managed to avenge their wrongdoing.” The man’s lips pursed slightly into a smile, and my heart sank into my chest. My parents were murdered.

I was told by Ronan it was a mysterious illness that took them, but finding out they were part of the Republic and then the mob in the States, plus getting murdered—there was so much information flowing through me. It was all too much to take in, and a wave of fear and anxiety washed over me. Just as I reached up to wipe the tears streaming down my face, the man’s laughter echoed through the room, sending shivers down my spine.

“You murdered my parents?” I managed to squeak out.

“Me? No. Your parents were murdered by my people. But my parents failed to figure out who the mysterious girl was that your mother was photographed with constantly. She always claimed that they only had one son. They were worried you would meet the very fate of the people they wanted to protect.”

“What is that?” All this time, I thought my parents confined me to their home to punish me, but it was for my protection.

“To be sold.”

“Sold?” I dared to ask.

“We run a little operation here.” The man stood and slid his hands into his pockets while walking in the opposite direction. He quickly turned around to face me.

“We like to sell our most beautiful girls to the highest bidder. They become their own personal dolls, so to speak.” This was sick. He was sick. This whole thing was fucking disgusting, and I was sitting center stage, literally, for all of it.

“Your parents hid your existence from the world. We didn’t realize until recently that it was your brother who was the head of the mob out in the States and has been for quite some time. That is when we started to figure out and put together that he has a sister.

“It was fate that you happened to be going to the club and you outed the future governor of California. Honestly, bravo to you for putting this entire plan in motion.” He slow-clapped, and I turned around from my chair and hurled the contents of my stomach onto the floor. This was my fault. My own selfishness put me into the arms of the biggest devil there was.

“What’s going to happen?” I croaked out.

“Well, your brother refuses to make a deal with us. We offered you up in exchange for letting us send bodies to the States, but he hasn’t taken us up on our generous offer,” the man mused, rubbing his stubble.

“My brother . . . doesn’t want to save me?” The pressure was building in my chest, and I felt like I was going to pass out.

“No. He thinks he’s a businessman. Sacrificing you for the greater good.” The man laughed again, his voice reverberating through the stage.

“So, I am just going to be sold?” My eyes darted around the room as I gripped the chair; it was damn well not going to save me from this place but I didn’t know what else I could possibly do.

“We are going to start your little auction tomorrow. If your brother doesn’t want to cooperate, you’ll be sold to the highest bidder.” He slithered toward me and grabbed my chin so I was looking into his empty eyes.

“And with a body like yours? We are going to make a killing.” He shoved my face aside, and I reached out to soothe the part where his calloused hands were.

“Your little boyfriend is going to love hearing about this.”

My heart dropped, and I had a ringing in my ears. *Alex?*

“Or is he not? It seems like he is busy on the campaign trail, and you guys haven’t had any contact for a while. Did he tire of you?” And there it was. The brutal truth I had been battling with for the last six weeks. He didn’t care about me, and now my brother didn’t either.

And my parents did care, but I spent my entire life thinking they were trying to harm me. They were the only ones who were protecting me against the monsters that walked this earth. And now I was face-to-face with one.

“Can I talk to my brother?” I asked, knowing what the answer was going to be.

More laughter.

“No.” His smile turned serious again.

“Your auction starts the moment your pathetic brother throws you to the wolves. Rest up.”

“C-can I at least get your name?” I asked as the two lanky redheads pulled me from the chair.

“Your darkest nightmare.” He turned around and escaped into the shadows of the stage. I screamed, desperate for

someone to hear me, as the two men dragged me back down the hallway by my ankles.

I quieted just as I was about to get shoved back into the cement room. The noises weren't ghosts. They were the faint cries of women being forced to live in this world. As soon as my own door shut, I burst into tears, joining the chorus of desperation.



24

Alex

Present

“Let me go over the plan with you again.” I hadn’t slept the entire trip, but I felt somewhat satisfied with what the four of us had come up with.

Rafe tracked down the exact location of the bracelet I had given Chelsea. She was in a large, abandoned theater. He also agreed to meet us at the theater with a few of his friends who hated the Republic. They were part of a rebellion in Dublin.

Krissy confirmed all the birds we needed were on the ground, and the media was circulating clips that made it look like I was in Sacramento. I wanted to make sure there wasn’t a trace of where I had gone.

Rafe sent us blueprints of the old theater, and Julian, Christian, James, and I had gone over the exits and entrances a hundred times. We knew with the combination of the forces of the rebels and our own experiences, it was going to be easy to get in. It was a matter of extracting her from wherever they held her.

“How are you doing?” Julian leaned over to me as our plane started its descent into Ireland and the sun rose in the green countryside.

“When Tatum was taken by her ex-boyfriend last year, I was a fucking mess the entire ride down there.” He threw his arm over my shoulder, but I continued to stare at the countryside.

“She will be fine. We will get the fuckers who did this.”

I slowly turned my head toward him.

“I want them dead. I want to be the one to shoot them all, and I want to watch them suffer as they choke on their own fucking blood.” Julian gripped my shoulder, a grin spreading across his face.

“That’s the spirit, brother.”

The plane’s wheels hit the runway, and a surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins. Whoever did this, woke up today not knowing it was damn well going to be their last.

We pulled up to a spot next to a church on the north side of the River Liffey. The spot was a warehouse district with old buildings falling apart. A nerdy guy came out of his own black town car.

“Rafe?” Julian smiled and walked over to the guy. He was much smaller in person, but exactly how you would expect a computer hacker to look.

“I can’t believe we are actually meeting after all these years.” He hugged Julian, who embraced him like he was part of the family because, through the years, he really had become one of us.

“I appreciate the family reunion here, but we need to get this show on the road.” I looked over at Julian.

“Yeah, course. Let me introduce you to some of the guys.” Ten other men piled out of the car, most strapped with homemade rifles or various assault weapons.

“Aye, sir. My name is Rufus.” The older one of the group came over and shook my hand.

“We have been trying to take down the Republic for quite some time. They have been infiltrating our communities and runnin’ the kids into a bad world. We are so grateful you are here.” The man pulled an architectural drawing out of his pocket and laid it on the hood of our car. “What do you know about this?” I inspected the drawing. It was a very juvenile rendering of where the building’s exits and entrances were and what the layout was inside. Most of the information we had already gotten from Rafe, but we eyed each other, appreciating the gesture.

“We’ve been watching them. One person at every door rotates every hour, on the hour. If we go at two ten, then it will be fifty minutes before anyone can even see that we have entered. The girls are kept inside large rooms, but the guard at the door should have the key to the room.” My heart panged thinking of Chelsea being stuck inside the room for the last ten hours.

“How many more hours until the auction?” Julian asked.

“Two. They will be getting ready for the auction, and the girls will be prepped and drugged more than likely. It’s something you’ve gotta prepare for.”

“Drugged?” I didn’t give a flying fuck that my voice cracked.

“They usually give them a little something so that they are cooperative during the auction,” Rafe offered, giving me a kind look while trying to explain what Rufus was talking about.

“Then we are going straight to the head of the Republic? Give us more info you have on him.”

This made Rufus shake his head, as if he remembered a specific memory.

“His name is Finn Murphy.”

“Can you describe him more?” I asked.

Rufus shifted from foot to foot and his eyes darted around before he whispered, “Finn Murphy is the kind of guy who enjoys inflicting pain. He’s got a cruel streak a mile wide and a grin that sends shivers down your spine. He’s got tattoos covering every inch of visible skin, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s got some hidden ones too. He’s big, like a brick wall, and he’s not afraid to use his strength to get what he wants. Trust me, you don’t want to mess with him.”

“He’s dead,” I interrupted.

“Alright, let’s get strapped and head out.” Julian gathered everyone, and we started toward the abandoned theater.

As we drove to the theater, my heart pounded so hard I thought it might burst. I couldn’t shake the feeling of dread weighing me down, and every second that passed, felt like an eternity. The thought of my girl in danger made my hands shake and my stomach churn.

My. Girl.

I was such a fucking idiot for thinking anything else and had so many regrets about the night of the wedding. I wished so much I hadn’t let her go. I wished it didn’t take me six weeks to set up what I needed to. Now, I felt helpless, like there was nothing I could do to protect her. But I knew I had to try, no matter the cost.

As we approached the theater, the fear and anxiety built inside of me. The unknown was the worst part—not knowing what we were going to face, not knowing if she was okay, not knowing if we would make it out alive. It was a feeling all too familiar, one I had experienced before in my line of work, but this time it was different. This time, it was personal.

But despite the fear and regret, I had to push through. I couldn’t let her down again. I couldn’t let her suffer any longer. As we pulled to a stop right outside the theater, my resolve grew stronger, and I was ready to do whatever it took to save her, even if it meant putting my own life on the line.

We parked behind the theater in a warehouse, away from any cameras. As soon as we left the car, Rafe would kill the video feed so they wouldn't be expecting us. I gave the signal, and we all got out of the cars. It was even more run-down than I had imagined, with broken windows and graffiti covering the walls. The darkness was oppressive, and the air was thick with the smell of decay.

I had to stay focused and stay strong for her. I couldn't let her down—not again. With every step we took, the tension in the air grew thicker until it felt like it was suffocating me.

“You ready?” I looked over at my brother and nodded. He grabbed me by the back of my neck and pressed our foreheads together.

“Questa e per Mamma (This is for Mom).”

I grabbed my M4 and stuffed two Glocks in my waistband. My ankle was strapped with a Beretta.

“I'll go first, then you guys will follow behind me,” Christian responded.

“I'll find Chelsea. Julian's going to unlock the other doors, and the others will be in the back and front.”

“Yeah, and once you have the target, I'm going to pull back and pull her out. James is going to get the rest of the girls to Rufus's crew, and you'll deal with Finn?” Christian clarified.

The plan was meticulous, with every detail carefully considered. Julian and I had gone over it a hundred times, fine-tuning every step until it was perfect. We had the element of surprise on our side, and we knew exactly what we needed to do to get the girls out safely. Rufus and his crew were ready to play their part, whisking the Irish girls away to a sanctuary where they would be reunited with their families.

But there was one last detail we needed to take care of after I extracted Chelsea. Finn Murphy. He was the linchpin of the entire operation and the reason we were all there in the first place. And I was going to take him down.

I had my guns loaded and ready, and I knew exactly where I would find him. I wasn't a killer by nature, but this was different. This was personal.

Julian, on the other hand, was like a lion about to be let out of its cage. I knew he would be my right hand, guiding me.

"Let's fucking goooo," I said to Rafe, who, with a quick turn of his lips and a tap on his laptop, shut the entire system down in the theater.

Julian, Christian, James, and I stalked over toward the back entrance. With the silencer on his gun, Julian clipped the guy point-blank as soon as he looked toward the noise Rufus's crew made in the opposite direction. We ran over to where the guy fell to the ground.

"Keys," James confirmed, and he threw them in my direction. I pulled open the large wooden door, and James and Christian sped ahead of us. Gunshots rang in front of us as I focused on my surroundings.

Deep breaths.

I looked around quickly as my heart beat rapidly through my chest. A faint moan of cries echoed beneath the sounds of gunshots.

"Two marks up ahead. Gone," James instructed, and Julian nodded at me.

"You okay, brother?"

I nodded and took a deep breath. This was for Chelsea.

There were large black steel doors in the concrete hallway, probably twenty of them. There were no identifying markers between them. The only source of light was a flickering fluorescent bulb hanging precariously from the ceiling. It was almost as if we were walking into the depths of hell itself.

The oppressive atmosphere weighed heavily on us as we walked down the hallway. I couldn't help but imagine what kind of unspeakable acts were being committed behind those doors. It was a chilling reminder of the cruelty that existed in

the world and the lengths some people would go to satisfy their own twisted desires.

“Another set.” A voice interrupted my thoughts, and Julian caught another pair of flying keys from one of Rufus’s men.

“I’ll be on your left. You get the right side.” Julian gave the instructions, and I quickly inserted a key into one of the doors.

It popped open, and there was a young girl, no more than eighteen, in the middle of the room in nothing but a bikini. She was sitting on a moldy mattress, and there was a bucket overflowing with piss and shit.

“You are safe now.”

She cowered into the corner, and I signaled to one of Rufus’s crew to grab her from behind me.

Boom.

A loud noise came from ahead of us. Christian’s voice echoed down the grim hallway.

“We reached the boss’s door. We are only going to be able to hold them until they bring more of their crew in. We have two minutes, tops.”

This jumpstarted me into whatever action I needed to take. Julian was on the other side of me, opening doors and ushering the girls out and down the hallway to safety. None of them were Chelsea.

We reached the last door. My chest heaved. We had rescued eighteen girls, but none of them were the one person I was looking for. Part of me wondered if maybe Ronan was right. Did we just somehow sacrifice Chelsea, and I was too late?

I paused, letting my brother open the last door on his side first. He shook his head.

My heart sank as I grabbed the set of keys and stuck them inside the keyhole. My mind was racing, thinking about all the possible scenarios of what could have happened to Chelsea.

Sweat started to bead on my forehead, and my palms were getting clammy as I gripped my gun tighter.

Julian was right beside me, scanning the area for any signs of danger. We had come too far to fail now, and leaving Chelsea behind was not an option. The bright light momentarily blinded us as I kicked open the final door.

But as my eyes adjusted, I saw a figure huddled in the corner of the room. It was her. It was Chelsea. Relief flooded me as I rushed to her side, tears welling in my eyes. She was safe. We saved her.

She was in a bikini top, just like the other girls we busted out. She was lying on top of the mattress, and I checked her for bruising and was grateful to see nothing.

“We’ve gotta go, brother,” Julian remarked from the doorway.

“Bunny?” I whispered, pulling some hair off her face.

“Mhmm.” She was on something. It was hard to wake her, even when I shook her repeatedly.

“Brother,” Julian warned as two more shots rang out from the front of the building where the mark was.

“Bunny, we are going to get you to safety. Christian is going to take you to get looked at.” I picked her up, and she was limp in my arms. I carried her to the door, where Julian signaled to Christian to fall back.

“Take her to the hospital immediately. Tell them they need a full workup for an OD.”

“I will take her, and when you guys are done, I’ll text you where we are.”

I lifted the lifeless yet beautiful woman into his arms, then pressed my lips against her cold forehead and choked back tears. I let the anger coursing through my veins be a catalyst to get revenge on whoever would do this to her.

Christian quickly ran toward the exit with her, where Rufus stood at the door.

“I will be here when you are done.” He had a twinkle in his eye, and I knew this moment was long awaited. It was for Chelsea, and it was for the girls who had to suffer through this for years.

I pressed forward with my brother in front. I let him lead because he had experience in situations like this. We finally pushed open a door that led to a stage area. There was a blinding light that pointed to the stage.

“God, this is sickening,” I managed to get out, and Julian nodded in agreement.

We dealt in a world of drugs, guns, and underworld dealings, but selling humans was truly despicable.

“He’s in the office.” James stood by a nondescript back door in the back of the stage area.

“How many?”

“One man guarding. We got rid of the rest.”

Julian, James, and I walked to peek behind the dirtied red velvet curtain to where the small door was. There was one very boyish kid guarding the door. He was clearly no match for us. I took the lead. This kid was shaking as I approached and raised his gun in my direction.

“You don’t want to do this.” I raised my hands with the M4, and the two Glockes strapped to my waist.

“Stand back.” His voice was shaky.

“There are two other men right now with their guns aimed right at your face. Leave through the back door immediately. Your boss is going to die today regardless, so you have to make the decision if you want to die with him or not.” I stalked closer to him as I spoke.

The kid must not have been any older than a teenager. As I approached him, I kicked the gun out of his hand and threw

him behind me in toward James, and he passed him to one of Rufus's crew.

"You are done, Finn. Time to fucking man up."

"Come in here and you are dead. There are two snipers with rifles aimed at your heads," the voice behind the door screamed.

I looked back at James and Julian, and they shook their heads. It was a bluff.

"Kicking the door down?" I whispered to my brother, who was at my back.

"Hell yeah, brother."

On the count of three, the door went flying behind us, and who I assumed was Finn, completely unarmed. It was an ironic scene. He was a large tattooed dude sitting in the corner like the girls he'd had locked up. All he was missing was a piss bucket and it would be a full-circle moment for him.

"Got any last words?" My lips curled in the corners, and the rush of revenge burned through my skin.

"This isn't going to be over. There is going to be another one of me who will just take over and avenge the mob for what her parents did."

"Selling secrets?" Julian questioned him, two weapons in his hand pointed in Finn's direction.

"Yeah. You don't get to just decide you are done with the Republic when you get recruited by the mob, then go out there and lie about a child you had."

"They were protecting their daughter from monsters like you."

He scoffed, laughing like I had just told the most hysterical joke. "Like me? And what? You think you are some knight in shining armor?"

I lifted my gun to his head.

“No, you know what? You’re right. I’m not flawless, but let me make one thing crystal clear: I would never, *ever* condone the purchase or sale of women. I may live in a shade of gray, but it seems like you’re drowning in an unfathomable darkness I can’t even begin to comprehend. There is a difference between the two.

“And you wanna know what will happen to your precious organization? It’s currently going to be taken over by Ronan O’Brien, who is going to finish the sale his parents were never able to complete after being murdered by your father.”

“What?” A few beads of sweat dripped down his forehead. It was pathetic he was more concerned about what was going to happen to his precious underground organization.

“Yup. The O’Briens were due to take over, but your father offered them a deal. They would move to America and start building the organization there. What your father didn’t like is that they refused to open the pipeline to trafficking women. That is why they were murdered. They were not traitors.”

“If they didn’t agree with my father, then they were traitors,” he spat in my direction.

“And what was your plan anyway? Take Chelsea and sell her to the highest bidder, knowing she had ties to the mob in America and was photographed with the future governor of one of the largest states in the country?”

He pulled his hands up into his hair, as if to think about the dumbest decision he had ever made.

“It’s over for you, Finn. Say your last prayers. You are going to receive the same misfortune that many of the women you have trafficked had.” I stared at his lifeless soul one more time.

“I believe that sometimes the sweetest revenge is seeking vengeance against those who have wronged me. I have the power to hold my oppressors accountable for their actions, and seeing justice served brings a sense of liberation and satisfaction that cannot be matched.”

I turned my back on him before adding, “And Finn, you’ll never touch what is mine again.”

I lifted my weapon to his face before pulling the trigger. My face remained stoic. I nodded to James and Julian, and we all stalked toward the back door. Now that this was over with, I picked up my phone to call Ronan.

“The job is done. Your men need to come clean up this mess.” Ronan didn’t make a noise on the other end.

My voice crackled with anger.

“You think you can just fuck up like this and leave me to deal with it? No, you’re going to come here yourself and handle the situation. Make it clear to everyone that you’re taking responsibility.”

“Thank you,” he choked out. There was a long pause before he spoke again. “And what about Chelsea? Is she all right?”

“She’s in the hospital. I’m on my way there now,” I replied curtly.

Ronan’s voice was barely above a whisper. “I don’t know what to say. You’re more of a man than I ever could be.”

I snorted. “Save your apologies for someone who cares. Just get your ass over here and clean up your mess.”

As we exited the abandoned theater, Christian sent me the address of the hospital they had taken her to.

“Quickly, get me there, brother. I need to see her.” Julian grabbed my hand.

“You need to change your shirt.” I looked down at the blood splatter on me and grabbed the plain T-shirt in the back of the car.

As we drove toward the hospital, I couldn’t shake the feeling of guilt and responsibility. I should have never let Chelsea get involved in this mess. I should have been by her side this entire time. I was too selfish and too wrapped up in my own issues. Now she was lying in a hospital bed because I

didn't fight hard enough for her. I'd take on a thousand armies every day to ensure she never had to suffer like this again. I'd rather endure eternal damnation than witness her in pain one more time. She didn't deserve to be drugged up and lying in a hospital bed.

"Will she be okay?" I asked my brother, my voice barely above a whisper.

Julian sighed heavily. "It's hard to say, Alex. But what's important now is that we focus on getting you to see her."

As we pulled up to the hospital, I bounded out of the car and into the room. The next few hours were a blur of waiting rooms and hushed conversations with doctors. But finally, a nurse came out and told us that Chelsea was going to be okay.

As the weight lifted off my chest, a wave of relief crashed over me. I clenched my fists until my knuckles turned white and a lump formed in my throat. Despite the battles that still lay ahead, in that moment, all that mattered was that Chelsea was going to make it. And I vowed to whoever was listening that I would do whatever it took to keep her safe, even if it meant putting myself in the crosshairs of every damn enemy out there.



25

Chelsea

Present

Beep.

Beep.

The machines were the first things I heard after I blinked away the dizzy haze. How long had I been out? Where was I?

I attempted to open my eyes but just groaned at the incessant throbbing in my head.

“Bunny?” I heard a voice that sounded so familiar yet so far away.

I let out another small moan as I grabbed my head.

“Nurse!” the same voice screamed.

Suddenly, a flurry of people surrounded me saying my name over and over again. A few hands shook me. It took a moment to actually look around the room. It was stark white, and the outline of three figures stood over me.

“Honey, we are going to give you some medicine to help with that headache, but we really need to get you awake first,” the soothing, almost motherly voice said.

I could hear the voices, but my mind was still foggy from whatever the lanky guys had given me for the auction. “Who are you?” I croaked out, my throat dry and scratchy.

“It’s me, Bunny. You’re in the hospital, Chelsea.” Alex’s voice was deep and smooth, with a hint of gravel. It was a voice that commanded attention but also conveyed a sense of familiarity and comfort.

My heart rate spiked as I tried to sit up, but a sharp pain in my head stopped me.

“What happened?” I asked, panic rising in my chest.

“You were drugged by the Republic. We found you just in time.” Alex’s voice was smooth and quiet to make sure no one heard what he was saying.

“The auction? The girls?” I could barely string a sentence together.

“Everything is taken care of. There are no more auctions . . . ever.”

I let out a shaky breath, relief washing over me. “Thank you,” I managed to say before the medicine took effect and everything went black.

It was dark when I woke from my medicine-induced sleep. My headache was gone, and my vision was back. Aside from being in a hospital bed, I felt more myself for the first time since arriving in Ireland. The machines had English and Gaelic writing on them, so it was easy to deduce that we were still in the country.

We.

He was still here.

I looked around frantically, then relaxed when I saw my beautiful king splayed out in a far too small chair. His head fell to the side as his long black locks were pulled messily in front of his face. His jaw was slightly slack, and he was facing my bed. I stirred a little, and the small movement shook him awake.

“Are you okay?” he murmured through sleepy words.

“I feel better,” I responded, my eyes empathetically warming to the question in his orbs.

“What happened?” I asked, and he shifted so he was sitting more upright.

“I am so sorry I failed you, Chelsea. I didn’t protect you, and I let you go, and I failed . . .” He grasped the tips of my fingers and attempted to interlace them with mine.

“I want to know what happened,” I demanded, pulling my hand away from his. “The truth.”

He took a deep sigh. “I was trying to figure out the best way to win you back and find out who was blackmailing me.”

“I know that. Your work takes precedence,” I retorted.

“Bunny, I just have never been in anything like what I have with you, and I freaked out.” His eyes glazed over mine, and I refused to give him anything other than the stoic look I bestowed upon him.

“What happened, Alex?” I demanded. He was trying to apologize, but right now? I needed answers.

“I got a meeting with the Irish mob in the States. They wanted to discuss closing the pipeline to the Republic and the fact that none of us wanted to traffic into the States.”

This was information I already knew.

“When Julian and I set up the meeting in LA with the elusive head of the mob, we were quite surprised to see your brother standing there.”

So everything the Republic told me was the truth, which could only mean my parents died protecting me.

“I had planned to come down and see you after the meeting. I had this big plan to somehow win you over.” He ran his hands over his forehead as he chuckled.

“We got the call from Daphne while we were at the meeting. Julian got the same call from Tatum that you had gone missing. They grabbed you from your apartment.”

Alex went on to explain how they had gotten right on a flight and concocted a plan to get me home safely by using his contacts out here in Ireland and the help of his brother and team. He then explained exactly what happened and how I was drugged in anticipation for the auction to take place that evening. Rufus, his contact out here, had already set the other girls up with different organizations, and most of them had been reunited with their families. I listened intently as he told every detail of the evening, including the culmination, where he shot and killed the guy who did this.

“Where are they now?” I asked hesitantly.

“Where are who?” He looked around the room as if someone would reappear, and I gave a little chuckle.

“No. I mean Julian, Christian, and James.”

“Oh. They left. I wasn’t sure how long you would be in here.”

“You’ve been here the entire time?”

“Yes.”

My heart leaped from my chest. I was so upset at this man, but what he had done for me over the last twenty-four hours was undeniable.

“I’m still really upset with you,” I whispered.

“I know.” Once again, he reached for my hand, and I let my fingers intertwine with his.

“You lied to me many times. Even when I had to take the brunt of not telling you the truth, you were still lying to me.” His eyes turned to disappointment.

“And you didn’t fight for me when it was all said and done. You let me run away and didn’t think to call or text.” I swear a lone tear fell against his cheek. I reached up instinctively to touch the wetness.

“I don’t know how this all works, Chelsea.” I attempted to interrupt him, but he silenced me.

“I know it’s not an excuse.” Alex’s voice was laced with regret and frustration. “But damn it, Chelsea, I’ve never felt like this before. I’ve never loved someone like I love you. And I failed to protect you. I should have been there; I should have seen it coming. But I was so caught up in my own shit that I didn’t even realize the danger you were in.”

He paused for a moment, his voice now becoming more intense. “But I swear to you, I will make it up to you. I will protect you with every fiber of my being. Every breath I take will be dedicated to keeping you safe. I promise you that, Chelsea. I promise you I will never let you down again.” Deep sadness weighed heavily in his eyes, making it hard to look at him for long.

“I love you, Chelsea. From the moment I saw you, I knew you were different. You made my heart race and my thoughts blur. You are the one person who makes me want to be better and do better. You are the reason I wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night with a smile on my face. You are the reason I am not just living but am alive.” I could hear my heart thumping.

“I love you, Chelsea,” he repeated, then pressed his lips to the back of my hand.

For a moment, the world seemed to stop. All I could feel was the warmth of his lips and the intensity of his gaze. It was like the air around us had turned electric, crackling with the intensity of his confession.

And then, all at once, a rush of emotions flooded me. It was as if I had been waiting for those words my entire life without even realizing it. In that moment, nothing else mattered except for the fact that this man standing before me loved me. It was overwhelming and made me feel alive and complete in a way I had never experienced before.

I didn't realize I was crying until his hands wiped away a few fallen tears. I didn't think I had it in me to tell him I had been battling with loving him since I met him at the club. Our presence was magnetic, and I couldn't get enough of him. All I did was think about him, but right now, in this hospital bed and in a country that had done nothing but cause me pain, it just wasn't the right time.

"What about my brother?" Alex offered me a slight curl of his lips.

"He's an asshole," he responded.

"I can't believe he was just going to let me get auctioned . . ." My voice hitched at the very end of my sentence.

"He's here."

"Like in Ireland?" I asked.

"Yeah. In fact, he is just downstairs in the waiting room and desperate to see you and explain himself."

"You haven't let him in?"

"I wasn't sure if you wanted me to." He pulled away from me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to see my brother either, but he was the only living family member I had. Strapped with all this new information about my parents, I felt like I needed to see him. I needed to hear from the one person who always had my back, or at least that is how it felt before all of this.

"Can I talk to him?" I questioned.

"You can do whatever you need, Bunny," Alex responded, then kissed my palm before texting who I could only presume was Ronan.

Within an instant, there was a knock at the door and my brother was standing in the doorway. Alex gave my hand a supportive squeeze.

“Chels. Are you okay?” Ronan stalked over to where I was and kneeled to face me in the hospital bed.

“N-no.” I couldn’t speak through the sobs exploding from my chest.

“Will. You. Give. Us. A. Second?” I spluttered out to Alex, who only nodded.

“I’ll just be outside the room, though.” He glowered at Ronan, and it was clear there was bad blood between them. Once the door closed, Ronan took the seat Alex had been occupying next to me.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I begged, and the tears started flowing.

He looked at me with sincerity, and I felt so confused. The reason I was here was because the truth was never told to me. It was as if all the people closest to me in my life were bound to protect me, but little did they know I was always meant to fly.

“Our parents begged me not to say anything. On the day they were supposed to be inducted into the Irish family in the States, they looked over at me and begged me never to tell you. I promised that no matter what happened, I would protect their secret.”

“Did anyone ever care to think about how that would make me feel?” I pushed the wetness away from my soaked cheeks. “I was bound to this secret identity that I wanted no part of. Look at what that got me!” I gestured around the hospital room.

“I was so close to being sold into the arms of some horrible, perverted world that I probably wouldn’t have made it out alive because all of you thought that it was best to leave me in the dark.”

“I know.” Ronan grabbed my hands and looked at me with anguish.

“Sister, I am so sorry. That is a pathetic excuse—”

“It seems to be an excuse that the men in my life like to use often. Let me guess, you wanted to tell me the truth, but you just couldn’t find the right things to say.” My words cut through the air, and a silence settled upon the room. The door to my room was still open, and footsteps walked away from the door. I knew he heard what I said. But everything I was saying to Ronan was the truth, albeit a painful lesson for both of them to learn.

“Our parents wanted something better for us, Chels. They were so desperate to make sure you weren’t dragged into this that they kept you hidden away. I know it may not seem like it, but I did my best raising you when they died.” His shoulders shook as he tried to hold back the sobs but the tears streamed down his face. It was as if all his emotions had finally caught up to him and he couldn’t contain them any longer. His usually composed demeanor had been shattered, and in that moment, I realized just how much he cared for me.

I reached out to touch his arm, wanting to comfort him, but he recoiled, as if my touch burned. He shook his head and wiped away the tears with the back of his hand, trying to regain his composure. It was heartbreaking to see my brother break down in front of me.

“I was just a kid when I was raising you alone. I was also taking over an entire underground organization I had no idea existed for a long time. Suddenly I was thrust into this dark world of crime and was desperate to keep you out of it. I made a lot of mistakes.” I offered a sympathetic smile.

“When we went to your friend’s wedding dinner, I had walked inside to grab a call when I saw you falling into his arms.” He gestured to the door.

“Call it brotherly instincts or whatever you want, but I knew you guys were into each other. You were constantly bickering

with each other at the dinner table, and when you fell into him, it looked like you had stars in your eyes.” He stuck his tongue out like he was disgusted, and I just laughed.

I couldn’t deny what he was saying. Looking back now, it was so obvious. But at the time, I was too scared to admit it. Too scared of being vulnerable and getting hurt. So I pushed it away and tried to convince myself it was just a crush or infatuation. But deep down, I knew it was so much more. I was in love with Alex, and it terrified me. Because when you love someone that much, you give them the power to break you. And I wasn’t sure if I was ready for that kind of risk.

“What’s next for all of this?” I asked.

“I am going to spend some time out here. I gotta get the hierarchy in place and dismantle any of the trafficking systems. I’m going to hire Rufus, the guy who helped get you out, to lead the whole operation out here. Alex says he is legit.”

“Ah, so we are on friendly terms with him?” I tilted my head in question, which only made my brother chuckle.

“Eh. I think he’s pretty pissed at me. I wasn’t thinking clearly when they called, and I just wanted to save the system.” His eyes were sullen again.

“You know how much I love you, little sis. I didn’t want any harm to get to you; I just wasn’t sure of how to go about it all.”

“It’s fine.” I grabbed his hand in a gesture of goodwill. A moment for us to wipe the slate clean and start fresh.

“He is going to take really good care of you, Chels. Forgive him for whatever happened between the two of you.” His eyes fell to mine.

“The look on his face when he saw you had been taken was full of insufferable amounts of pain and anguish. He dropped his otherwise stoic façade the moment we got the call.” I swallowed.

“I’ll try” was all I could muster. My brother kissed me on my forehead and then left the room.

Seconds later, I smelled him before he walked in—the familiar scent of ocean breeze and whiskey. Instinctively, I looked down and fumbled with one of the cords wrapped around me.

“You heard what I said to my brother?”

He nodded solemnly. I was tired of talking. My head was throbbing slightly, and my heart was broken. I lost the words and the willpower to talk more about this.

“When do I get to leave?” It was the only thing I could think of asking.

“They are going to discharge you today.”

“Okay. I don’t have my phone with me or anything. Can I ask you a favor?”

He looked at me as if I were speaking a foreign language he didn’t understand. “Anything, Bunny.”

“I need you to book me a flight back home. I don’t want to spend a moment longer in this country. I just want to be back at my house.”

Did his face really just crinkle in . . . disgust?

“You are coming back with me, Bunny. I have a jet. Whenever you are ready to go, we can go.”

“No, I-I can’t.”

“You absolutely will.” His gaze lowered to mine as he got down on his haunches so he was at eye level with me.

“Tell me when, Chelsea.”

“When, what?”

“When do you want to go home?” His deep-brown eyes were filled with something I had held onto for so long. A sliver of light that promised me a world filled with the light

and the shadows of the dark. A boundless realm for me to explore. A choice I held in my own hands.

“Now,” I whispered in a hushed tone.

Hours later, I was on a plane dressed in an obnoxious “Ireland” sweatshirt and matching sweatpants Alex insisted they were the only articles of clothing he could find for me on such short notice. In the entire city of Dublin, I found it quite hard to believe. Rather, I think he didn’t want to wander far from the hospital—from me.

“Welcome aboard, Mr. and Mrs. Marchetti,” the flight attendant greeted us on the jet. I had never flown on an airplane in my entire life. I presume that is how I got over here, but being in my parents’ bubble made me never leave my own.

I giggled at the mistake and didn’t bother correcting the flight attendant. Instead, I looked around in amazement at the luxury of the private jet. The plush leather seats, the sleek and modern design, and the large windows that offered breathtaking views of the sky. I couldn’t believe I was actually flying in this kind of plane. And the fact there was only one flight attendant on board made it feel even more exclusive.

I wandered to the back of the plane, and my jaw dropped at the sight of the full walk-in shower and toilet. And then, the pièce de résistance: a cozy bed. After spending the last few days stuck in a cement jail and a hospital bed, this seemed like an absolute luxury. I turned around quickly and skipped the length of the plane.

“This is amazing!” I just ogled everything and wrapped my arms around Alex.

“You’ve never been on a private plane?” He nestled his head into the crook of my arms.

“I’ve never even flown on a plane before!” I exclaimed, slightly pulling away from him while he kept his hands knitted along my lower back. I leaned closer to him and took a deep breath.

He chuckled at my reaction, his black hair falling over his chiseled jaw as he fell into one of the leather seats in the front. The sound sent shivers down my spine, and I couldn't help but be drawn to him even more. His scent filled my nostrils and made my head spin. I sat across from him, and his face turned into what I could only contrive as disappointment.

I took in his tall frame and the way his white button-down shirt clung to his thick chest. He was wearing black pants, a belt, and designer shoes, and I couldn't help but think how effortlessly he pulled this look off.

As I stared at him, he caught my eye and gave me a seductive smile that made my heart race. Heat emanated from his body, and I knew I was in trouble. Suddenly, the plane door closed and then the flight attendant came around to us to let us know we were departing. The engine kicked back, and I jumped a little in my seat.

“Relax, Bunny,” he mused in a low, husky voice.

“I've got you.”

And with those words, I melted into the seat across from him, letting my leg slide a little farther so our ankles were touching. The jet's gentle hum filled the cabin, but all I could focus on was how he made me feel. Safe, protected, and desired.



26

Chelsea

Present

After a couple of hours in the air, the excitement of flying had worn off, so I fidgeted in my seat. Alex had been focused on his laptop for most of the time, leaving me to my thoughts. In a way, I appreciated he wasn't pressuring me to talk. What didn't falter was the fact that our feet remained where they were—outstretched in front of us and touching.

“Is that shower in the back usable in the air?” I finally perked up, and almost immediately, Alex shut down his laptop.

“Of course. Can I help you?” His smirk was anything but seductive, and I laughed and swatted him away. The flight attendant brought me some towels, and I jumped into the shower on the airplane. I wasn't a pro at flying, but even I knew having a shower on an airplane was over-the-top.

After a warm shower, I wrapped up in a towel and threw my hair in a bun. It was refreshing to wash off the experiences of the last few days.

When I closed the bathroom door, I saw Alex sitting at the edge of the bed. His hands combed through his hair before he heard me and looked up.

“Do you feel better?” He offered an empathetic smile that made my heart explode into a thousand little pieces. We had so much to talk about, yet I didn’t know where to begin.

He outstretched his arms for me, and I let him pull me into his lap, making sure to knot the top of the towel a little tighter. His hands wrapped along my lower back, and he pressed his forehead into mine.

“I’m so sorry.” He nuzzled into the crook of my shoulder before dragging his stubble along my chest.

“How did you find me?”

“Don’t hate me,” he mused, pulling me as tight as humanly possible to his chest so I was molded into every nook of his body.

“I could never hate you,” I whispered. In fact, I more than just liked him. I more than just needed him in my life, I wanted him, but it wasn’t the time to disclose this. I just . . . wasn’t ready.

“Your bracelet.” I looked down at the small chain and bunny on my wrist.

“What about it?”

“It has a tracker in it. I had a selfish reason for giving it to you. I wanted to make sure you were safe when I left the wedding and went back to Sacramento. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen . . .” I pulled his dark locks back a little so his eyes could lock with mine.

“How can I be mad at you? You saved my life. In more ways than one,” I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper. Our faces were inches apart, our breaths mingling in the air between us. His intense gaze held mine captive, and my heart beat faster with every passing second.

I leaned in slowly, my lips barely touching his, before pulling away and looking into his eyes once more. He didn't say anything, but I saw the desire in his eyes—the same need I was feeling. I closed the distance between us again, my lips pressing harder against his, my tongue tracing his bottom lip before slipping into his mouth.

The kiss was slow and deep, filled with all the pent-up emotions we had both been holding back. My hands tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as we kissed, our bodies pressed together. It was as if we were trying to convey all the gratitude, passion, and relief we felt through this one kiss.

Finally, we pulled away, our foreheads resting against each other, our breaths coming out in short gasps. I felt a sense of completeness and safety I had never felt before. He smiled up at me, and I knew we were both feeling the same thing. In that moment, I realized he wasn't just my savior; he was my soulmate.

We held each other's gazes for a moment before the fire in his eyes was too much to handle. It was burning brightly with an indescribable ache.

"I need you," I begged, and I wrapped my legs around his waist in my flimsy towel. My naked body was warm against his cock.

"Tell me where you want me, Bunny," he answered, and for the first time in months, I knew the feeling I kept desperately chasing was this one right here.

"I want your mouth on me," I asserted, and he let out a little groan as his lips crashed into mine. Our kiss was feverish and all-consuming, as if we were trying to make up for the last six weeks. The yearning for more grew as our tongues vigorously devoured each other.

"I have to take this off to get to your sweet little cunt." His brown eyes locked onto mine as his hands went to the knot at the top of the towel.

The towel barely fit my oversized chest, so once his large hands threaded into the cotton, it was easy to slip off. There I stood, wrapped around his waist, fully naked, and the towel dropped to the floor.

As he held me at arm's length, I felt exposed; my every curve and contour lay bare before him. His eyes roamed over my body, devouring me with a hunger that made my breath catch. And then, when his gaze finally met mine, it was like a bolt of electricity passed between us, charged with a primal desire that neither of us could resist. It was as if we were standing on the edge of a storm, the calm before the inevitable deluge.

"I've missed you so much. Have I said that already?" I let out a small giggle as he held me up with one arm by my thighs. The gentle rocking motion of the airplane guided him as he threw me onto the bed.

As if performing for a strip tease, he slowly unbuttoned his shirt, revealing his glistening golden skin and decorative tattoos. With one hand, he pulled off his belt and pants in one swift movement.

"You are so perfect." His head went between my thighs, where the cool touch of his lips met my warmth.

I was desperate for his mouth, so I pushed my hips into him. He groaned and met my demand with a forceful assault of his tongue into my core. It wasn't smooth or slow, yet it filled me with exactly what I needed. He sucked and lapped me as if he hadn't eaten in weeks. A carnal hunger exploded inside of me. His hands gripped the back of my thighs, and I arched my lower back so his tongue flicked deeper at my clit. A needy moan escaped my mouth, and I knew I was close.

"No." He pulled away from me. "I need to be inside of you and watch you." He managed to get out. A ragged breath escaped his lips between demands.

He crawled over top of me. I slid his boxers off, and his engorged cock smacked against my thick thighs.

“Wait.” I pulled him off of me. “What about the flight attendant?” I asked. We were still on an airplane; while it was fancy, it was still a jet, meaning the walls were paper thin.

“Since when has my sweet little bunny ever been so concerned about others hearing?” I laughed.

“Maybe we should invite her in?” he joked, and I grabbed his hand, and he offered a small curl of the edges of his lips.

“You are too possessive,” I confessed, and he only laughed.

“Please, fuck me.” I was breathless atop his tender lips, and raw with vulnerability.

His thick cock toyed with the pleasure dripping from me as he pressed into me. I let out a gasp as he kissed every part of me. He dragged his lips down my jaw and neck to my pebbled nipples, where he rolled them into his mouth.

“I love how you smell,” I mused through desperate moans as I buried my nose into his hair.

He tilted my chin up, and we locked eyes before he resumed his assault with his mouth. When he seemed satisfied and had kissed every part of my body, he resumed thrusting into me. It was as if we were in sync, as our chests rose and fell together. In the times we had been with each other, this was much more sensual. He was taking his time, as if savoring every last drop.

“Lift your hips,” he commanded, grabbing an extra pillow from the top of the bed. He shoved it under my back so I was at a slight angle, facing him. With my hips lifted, I could feel the full length of his throbbing cock buried deep inside me, sending waves of ecstasy through my body. My eyes closed, and I grabbed the sheet on the bed as I wailed in demand.

“Open your eyes. I want to watch you as you take me.” His demand was raw and primal. I knew he was close, and I wanted to come with him.

“Please. Don’t stop,” I begged, knowing I was so close. His cock rocked inside me, desperately pulsating.

“Alex. I’m begging, Alex.” He continued to press inside of me, adding a little more pressure and quickening the pace to get us over the finish line together.

“Shit, Bunny. You are unbelievable.” He exploded into me, and I fell into my own euphoric bliss, letting out a few whimpering groans. He pulled away from me, and we lay on the bed for a few silent moments, letting the moment wash over us.

I rolled over so I was looking at him, and he slowly leaned in toward me and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“Let’s get you cleaned up and then you can rest.”

I nodded. He picked me up, and we stepped into the shower, even though I had just come out of it.

“Number four?” he murmured as the warm water splashed between our bodies. I laughed, and his face lit up in joy.

“It’s nice to hear your laugh again.” He pulled me out of the shower and wrapped me in his oversized shirt before lifting me to the bed. Alex had a towel wrapped around him, and I nuzzled my chest as close as possible to his. This man consumed me, and I would let him.



27

Alex

Present

I missed this. I missed the way her chest rose and fell with every breath and matched mine perfectly. I missed the way her touch felt electric against my skin. I missed her melodic voice. Mostly, I missed her laugh, which filled a room with indescribable joy.

She was endgame for me. This was it. She was every breath I took. She was every moment I stole. I had met my golden princess who enjoyed playing in the shadows with me. I cupped her jaw and pulled her gaze to mine.

“Can we talk about what you said in the hospital?” It was the one thing left unsaid between us, and I tried to keep my cool and not ask her about it, but I was getting desperate for answers at this point.

She laughed a melodic tune that matched the way the birds sang in the morning.

“Have you been anxious about asking?” My eyes peeled down to hers with concern.

“Yes. What I heard you say at the hospital broke my heart, Bunny.”

“You broke my heart too.” She rolled over on the bed so she was facing away from me. My chest was cracking in half. This wasn’t what I wanted. I was such an asshole for fucking all this up.

“Please look at me.” I wasn’t beneath begging for anything at this point.

She turned very slowly back to face me, and the sight of my shirt against her creamy skin made my dick twitch underneath my towel. I pushed down on it, willing it not to ruin the serious conversation I was trying to have with her.

“I am sorry that it took me six fucking weeks to realize I need you in my life. I have never met anyone in my entire life who consumed my mind. The only thing I worked hard toward was having a job and an empire. But the moment I met you—I’m not even talking about Madam Curie’s.” I paused, thinking about the very second I saw her with her friends in the hotel lobby in Vegas. The way her hair curled down past her shoulders, her smile that lit up the room. She was the most beautiful person I had ever seen.

“The moment I saw you in that hotel lobby. The very moment that I laid eyes on you, there was something different about our connection. I could feel it, and it scared me.” Her blue eyes started to water, and I grabbed her waist and pulled her into me. Our chests heaved simultaneously.

“When you left me at the wedding, I didn’t know how to fight back. I thought that by not telling you, I was protecting you. I realize now that it only hurt us more.” I took a deep breath as my voice got shaky.

“I fucked up. It’s not an excuse to protect you. I swear to you. I just don’t know how this works. I never want to cage you in. My favorite part about who you are is how beautiful

you dream. How big your mind explores. How large your heart is. I would never want to put that in a cage.” The tears were now falling down her cheeks, and I was desperate to push them away while still needing to tell her my truth.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me. I left you and thought if I put work first, then you would not exist in my mind anymore, but God, I was so wrong. You are the first thing I think of in the morning and the last thing I need at night. You are the perfect balance of light and darkness. I live in a state of distrust, and the way you have opened my heart, you’ve shown me the good in this world and the good in humanity.

“I cannot live without you. I followed your location daily and kept imagining the calls you would take with your hard-of-seeing friends or, when you were at home, how you liked to sit and sketch in your chair by the window.” Through sobs, she managed to let out a small chuckle.

“You never took off that bracelet either, and that gave me some sort of hope this entire time. When I realized you wouldn’t leave my heart, I did everything I could to plan on coming back to you. I was going to beg for weeks, and I will if you still need me to.” Another giggle.

“Yet, when I found out they had taken you, I was right there. After the two phone calls to Ronan and Julian, I couldn’t hear anything. I couldn’t see. I was destroyed. I could only see red, and it was like a switch had flipped, and I couldn’t get to you fast enough.”

I held her face in my hands and wiped away the tears.

“Please say something,” I begged.

It took a moment of silence before she lifted off the bed, then sat criss-cross. I followed her and sat against the back of the headboard.

“I need you to understand something that I have learned.” Her voice was quiet but firm, and I nodded.

“I don’t need you.” She looked at me as the words escaped her lips.

She stopped, and moved to my lap.

“I learned that I don’t need anyone in my life. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want you with me. I want a partner who will come along with me on the journey. I want an equal. I want someone who will support me and lift me up, just as I will do for them. Someone who will respect me and cherish me for who I am, not try to change me into someone else or cage me in. I’ve been through too much to settle for anything less than that. I won’t compromise my independence or my worth for anyone. But if you can meet me on that level, if you can be the partner I deserve, then I’m willing to take that chance with you.”

I pulled my hands tight along her waist and touched our foreheads together. The gentle hum of the plane in the background reminded us we were so close to being home.

“I promise you—”

“And you will never lie to me again. Lying is not just about telling an untruth. It’s about betraying someone’s trust, breaking a promise, and showing a lack of respect for the person you’re lying to. It’s about putting yourself above someone else and disregarding their feelings and needs. It’s about caging me in or attempting to protect me, but in the most unhealthy way possible.” I kissed her cheek.

“I will never lie to you again. That doesn’t mean I won’t protect you, because I can never let this happen again to us. With the business Julian and I do, it’s just something that comes with the territory.”

She nodded. “I know what Tatum has to go through with her guards, and I’m fine if that is the one sacrifice I have to make. Plus, honestly, after what happened with this, I am not sure I will complain again.”

I was head over heels for that woman whose heart was a universe of love, compassion, and selflessness. Her strength was unparalleled, yet she remained blissfully unaware of it. Every time I looked into her bright-blue eyes, I saw a fiery

passion and a deep-seated determination that were both intimidating and mesmerizing.

Her spirit was as wild and untamed as the ocean, and yet she had a gentleness that could soothe even the most troubled soul. She was like a breath of fresh air, filling my lungs with a sweet, intoxicating fragrance of peonies that left me yearning for more. Every moment spent in her presence was a treasure, and I found myself constantly craving her attention, her touch, and her love. She was the embodiment of everything I had ever dreamed of and more.

As I reminisced about our past moments together, I realized I had fallen hard for her. Every day, I felt this immense urge to tell her how I truly felt about her. I was scared of what she would say, but I couldn't keep this feeling inside of me any longer. I'd told her in so many different ways, but it was time to come out with the blunt truth.

"I love you." My voice trembled. As I waited for her response, my heart pounded in my chest, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still.

"I love you too, Alex." She looked at me with tears in her eyes, and I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her tight into my chest.

I cradled her in my arms as we let the hum of the jet fill the silence. Chelsea's blonde locks were splayed over my chest as she heaved slowly. She had fallen asleep, and I laid the covers over her and pulled her tight into my body, letting the darkness wash over us.

I needed her like I needed home, but I was so lucky my home was with her. This was what it must mean to win the lottery.



28

Chelsea

Present

The drone of the airplane slowing woke me. I was tucked into the bed, but Alex was nowhere in sight. I jumped out of bed and threw on the clothes I had discarded after my first shower, then opened the little partition door that separated the bedroom from the seating area. And there he was. The man I had just confessed to loving. The man who loved me. Mine.

“I didn’t hear you wake.” He shut off his laptop and looked over at me. He was wearing his infamous white button-down and slacks. This time, he had a tie on.

“Are you going somewhere?” I asked since he looked a little more dressed than usual.

“When we land, there will probably be some paparazzi, Bunny.” He looked solemn, as if this disappointed him somehow. I looked down at my sweats. I didn’t want to be photographed like this. I felt raw and vulnerable and didn’t have my external mask to hide underneath.

“I know, Bunny.” It was as if he was reading my mind.

“I had them bring us your luggage. We are going to land in the private part of the terminal. Krissy flew in and is meeting me with a few outfits for you to pick from, and your friends packed up your makeup. I’ll give you time to get dressed and then we will go out together.”

“How did they know you were gone?” I questioned.

“I guess the fact that Julian had gone to San Diego already and then I may have had to reschedule a few press conferences, they put it together that I was with a woman.” He grabbed my hands. “But they don’t know anything else. I had my PR team do a sweep, and nothing came up.”

“Okay. Thank you for doing that. You know, with my clothes and stuff.”

“Of course. Eat something as we taxi.” The flight attendant came over to me with a hot meal, and I couldn’t look her in the eyes, knowing damn well she heard every moan and groan we made earlier. I quickly thanked her and shoveled some food down before the plane came to a stop.

“Welcome back, Chelsea.” Krissy boarded the plane once the door opened with a large suitcase and a handful of dresses.

“Your friends let me know your size, and Alex was specific about bringing bright dresses.” I looked over at him, and he just shrugged. He knew exactly what I wanted and liked. It warmed my heart.

“Thank you.” I gave her a quick hug before heading to the back of the plane.

As I went through the lot, I settled on a pink midi dress and did my hair and makeup in my usual glam. I felt much better. It was a comfort thing for me. I even pulled on the lingerie I could only assume Daphne packed, knowing I was always looking for the best undergarments for the perfect dress.

“All set.” I came out of the little airplane bathroom and locked eyes with Alex’s desperate ones. He drank me in,

savoring me, before standing up.

“Bunny.” He stalked over to where I was standing. “You look breathtaking.” He pressed his lips against mine and devoured me.

“Okay, okay, folks. Keep this PG,” Krissy said from behind us.

“I am so happy to see you guys finally came to your senses, but now we’ve gotta talk about first appearances. How is the future governor and his girlfriend going to be presented as they arrive in Sacramento?”

“Wait, we are in Sacramento?” I pushed away from Alex and looked out the window, realizing this was definitely not the San Diego airport.

“Yeah. You are coming home. I told you this.” Alex put his hands into his pockets.

“But my home is in La Jolla?” I twisted my face in question.

“No, it’s not.” I shook my head in confusion. None of this made sense.

“While on the search to find you, I had Rafe go through your computer.” I narrowed my eyes at him before he chuckled.

“Again, sorry.” He opened his hands, and I walked into them.

“You got into the San Francisco School of Design, Bunny.” His smile grew so wide, and I knew he loved being the first one to tell me about this. Me, on the other hand, I was in shock. I didn’t think I was good enough to be an actual designer. This was my sign telling me my designs were good.

“I-I did?”

“When did you apply?” His voice quieted as if he knew he had missed an entire chapter and it was killing him.

“A couple of weeks after the wedding. Honestly, I thought it was a shot in the dark, and I never anticipated I would get in.”

Alex's lips crashed against mine again. It was a combination of sweet and demanding. His mouth encouraged mine to open as he slipped his tongue in. Once he pulled away, he pressed one lingering kiss to my forehead, just as he always did.

"I am so incredibly proud of you."

"Let's go." He pulled my hand as the plane approached, where a town car was parked and waiting for us. Once it stopped, Krissy instructed us to look down, not stop for any questions, and walk to the car. I nodded.

As soon as the doors opened, the reporters were shouting a flurry of questions.

"Mr. Marchetti, are you officially off the market now?"

"Rumor has it that you were with your new flavor of the week!"

"Mr. Marchetti, tell us more!"

We got to the last step before Alex guided me into the car. Just as he was about to close it, he looked out at the paparazzi.

"She's not my new flavor. Her name is Chelsea, and she so happens to be my girlfriend."

The door shut, and I looked over at him with a smile pulled on my lips.

"Girlfriend?"

"Yeah." He looked out the window as he reached over to interlace his fingers with mine.

"Come on, I love you. It's obvious that you are mine forever, but life partner didn't seem like the right label."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." His deep-brown eyes locked into mine.

"You are mine until the end of time. Whether you want a wedding, or whatever label you want to give us is fine with me, but you need to know I will never let you go."

I leaned into him as we drove off.

“I love you,” I whispered, the words escaping my lips like a delicate melody. To me, those three words held more meaning and truth than any other phrase in the world. My heart overflowed with an overwhelming love for Alex Marchetti that consumed my entire being. It was as if every fiber of my soul were intertwined with his, and I could not fathom a single moment without him by my side.

As we pulled up to the towering building, the city lights twinkling like stars in the night sky, I looked over at him with a questioning gaze. “What are we doing here?” I asked, the excitement and anticipation clear in my voice.

He took my hand in his, sending a jolt of electricity through my body. “We are going home, of course,” he said with a smile, his eyes shining with a mischievous glint.

Confusion crossed my face as I tried to make sense of his words. “I don’t get it,” I admitted, my heart racing with anticipation.

“If you’re going to school in San Francisco and most of my work is here,” he explained, “I figure we can stay at my penthouse on the weekends, and I have a house in wine country where we can stay during the week, so it’s about halfway between us.”

As his words sank in, my heart lurched inside my chest. “I-I am moving in?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

A smile played at the corners of his lips as he nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. “If that’s what you want,” he said, his voice laced with a tenderness that sent shivers down my spine.

“You know, you could ask me these things before deciding.” I teased him, and he pulled me tightly into him.

The building was large, and the driver pulled into an underground parking lot, where I saw my car.

“My car is here?” I was baffled that he went to great lengths to make me feel comfortable.

“Of course. You need a car for school.” He just said it like it was such an obvious gesture.

“What other surprises are there?” A smile crept up on his lips.

“A couple more.” He grabbed my hands, and we walked up to where the elevator was. He pressed P, and it carried us to the very top. We were greeted by the most beautiful, bright space when the doors opened.

My eyes widened in awe as I walked into the room. The space was bright from natural light streaming in from the floor-to-ceiling windows that offered sweeping views of the city below. The walls were painted in a warm, inviting shade of cream, making the space feel cozy and welcoming.

I couldn't help but notice the modern furnishings scattered throughout the room. The couch was a linen color with plush cushions that looked incredibly inviting. There was a large flat-screen television mounted on the wall and a sleek coffee table in front of the couch. The rugs on the floor were a bright, cheerful orange, adding a pop of color to the space.

What struck me the most about the apartment, however, was the way it felt like a true home. Despite the modern furnishings and sleek design, there was an undeniable warmth and coziness to the space.

“This is your house?” I was struck with shock.

“Well, when we were gone, I had them throw in a few extra pieces of furniture to brighten up the place. I wanted something you would like.”

He quickly added, “You can change anything you want, though. It's our home.”

“It's beautiful. I am really quite shocked.” I laughed, thinking of Alex freaking out and calling everyone to fix up the house. In a sense, it was exactly what Julian did when Tatum first came home. They must have taken advice from each other.

As I followed him into the back of the apartment, I couldn't help the sense of anticipation building inside of me. When he showed me the egg-shaped wicker chair and the easel with the sketch pads, my heart skipped a beat. And then I saw the little desk with all my art supplies, and I was overcome with emotion.

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I turned to face him.

"You did this for me?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He simply nodded, his expression one of pure joy and excitement.

In that moment, I felt so loved and cherished. It wasn't just the kind gesture itself—although that was amazing—it was the thought and effort he had put into making me feel happy and fulfilled. It was the way he had listened to me when I talked about my love for design and then went out of his way to create a space where I could study and indulge.

"I legitimately don't think my heart can take any more surprises." He still held my hand.

"One more."

A soft knock echoed through the penthouse, and Alex made his way to the door. I couldn't help but feel curious as to who could be stopping by. And then, to my complete surprise, my best friends walked in one by one. Tatum, Daphne, Maeve, Julian, and Christian were all here to celebrate my new life in San Francisco.

I couldn't contain my excitement as they wrapped me in a group hug, their warmth and love seeping into my bones. It felt like a dream to have them all here with me. They were the piece of the puzzle I didn't even know was missing.

"We missed you!" Tatum exclaimed, and a wave of emotion washed over me. They had all taken time out of their busy lives to come and be with me.

“I don’t deserve any of you.” My friends went over to the kitchen, where they poured some champagne, and I lingered back with Christian and Julian.

“Hey.” I pulled them aside, giving them both another hug. “Thank you so much for helping Alex.”

Julian smiled. “That’s what family does.” Christian nodded in agreement, and we joined the others in the kitchen.

As we sipped on champagne and laughed until our bellies ached, I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed with gratitude for the people in my life. I knew I didn’t deserve them, but I was so grateful they were here with me, validating this crazy fast change. At the core, they were my family.

I looked over at Alex while he was sitting on the couch as the flickering city lights lit the penthouse apartment and drank him in. The way he laughed with my friends. The way he stole glances at me with his signature smile made my heart melt. Our love was indeed not perfect. We had our own battles to fight and demons to slay. I knew there would be times of turbulence and stormy seas, but I was willing to take on those challenges with him. For him. He was worth it. But as I watched him, my heart swelled with love and affection, and I knew I would do anything to make him happy. Our love may not have been easy, but it was real, and it was worth fighting for.



29

Alex

Present

“All right, it’s been nice, but I want to christen this house without y’all in it.” I bellowed to the crowd when it was well past midnight.

“Ew!” my new sister-in-law squealed and gathered the others quickly before hugging Chelsea and leaving. Once the door shut, I looked over at Chelsea, illuminated by the soft glow of the lights, and she was staring out the window with her arms crossed.

“Are you okay?” I asked her before sliding next to her.

“Yeah. I am just going to miss my friends.” Her voice was so tender.

“Bunny, we have a jet now. If you want to go see them tomorrow, you just have to ask.” I nuzzled into the crook of her neck and inhaled her signature peony scent. Her gentle laugh was melodic against the cool, quiet night.

Changing this house before she came back was the best idea I had. It immediately felt warm and inviting, but having her stand inside it, filled with her things too, made it feel like a home.

“It’s just a lot that happened in a short amount of time.” She spun around to make eye contact.

“I know. It is a lot, but I am always here, right by your side.” I grabbed her hand.

“I’m scared.” She turned away from me, and without any other words, I knew exactly what that confession held.

I had fucked up, and this felt like I was caging her with me. All of a sudden, she was shoved back into a lifestyle she didn’t necessarily have control over.

“I know. If this is too much, you don’t have to go to school. I just thought it was what you wanted. But if it is too much, I will happily move down to La Jolla.” I stared at the back of her head before adding, “I will even stay here if that is what you want.”

She turned around slowly, and when her eyes met with mine, I felt that pull in my chest. The one that made me want to hand the world to her with extended arms.

“If there is anything I am sure of, it is you. It has always been you.” She took one half step toward me.

“I just need you to tell me I am making the right choice.” The heartbreak in her voice was killing me.

“I don’t need to tell you that.” I took a half step toward her. “You need to tell yourself that. Only you know the answer.”

“Am I going to be good enough to be at school with all these people who probably know what they are doing? I am such an amateur.” I stopped her.

“Now that, I am going to stop you right there. You are not allowed to talk about yourself like that. You are the most talented person I know. You are kind, you are smart, and if you

don't have all the answers, you know where to look and how to find them.”

She offered an empathetic smile. “I love you.”

I closed the space between us, embracing her tightly against my chest.

“Let's go to bed, Bunny,” I whispered in her ear and then watched as she giggled and walked up the steps toward our bedroom.

Throughout my life, I had always felt like I was living in the darkness, believing it was the only place I had permission to be. I had to put on a façade for the world, but deep down, I felt like a horrible person who did disgusting things.

When I met Chelsea, she was living the same way, desperate to try and chase the darkness and shadows. I was the darkness that she found. I was the villain in her fairy tale. And with every passing day, our love for one another grew, illuminating our path and showing us there was an ability to live in both the dark and the light. We were living in our own shade of gray.

“I'm taking off my bra!” she bellowed from the top of the stairs, interrupting my thoughts.

That was my girl. *Mine*.

“Let's leave the windows open, shall we? Give the neighbors something to talk about,” I screamed back, bounding up the stairs to the room where she lay fully clothed giggling on the bed.

I picked her up with one hand, and she wrapped her legs around my body. I pressed my mouth against her velvety-soft lips before pulling back to look at her.

“Thank you for showing me that love can exist in the light and the dark,” I whispered, my voice heavy with emotion. She smiled, her eyes shining with love.

“I wouldn't have it any other way,” she replied, her fingers twirling in my hair.

As we stood in the shadows of the bedroom, tangled in each other's arms, I knew I had found my forever. The darkness didn't consume me anymore because I had a way out—Chelsea was my light at the end of the tunnel. The only thing left to do was to close my eyes, with her warmth wrapped around me, and let myself be carried away by her intoxicating scent. At last, I had found my soulmate, and I would never take that for granted. Without a second-guess, I knew she was the one for me.



Epilogue

Chelsea

Six Months Later

My boyfriend and I sat in a quiet conference room in the back of one of the largest stages in Sacramento. It was just the two of us, per Alex's request, and the rest of his team waited just outside. It was Election Day, and it was about to be announced who would be the next governor. The room was eerily quiet before my voice filled the thick air.

"Are you okay?" I squeezed his hand, which had been clenched onto mine for the last few hours. His eyes just pierced mine with a look that made me know he definitely was not okay.

"I am so proud of you," I reiterated. The same mantra I had shared with him the whole evening.

"With over eighty-five percent of the votes in, it is a clear landslide winner in tonight's race for our next state governor," the anchor's voice on the TV echoed. This was it. This was what Alex had been working toward his entire life.

“The new governor of California is Alex Marchetti.”

Screams erupted from outside the room, and champagne corks popped. Alex looked over, his eyes wide. “I did it, Bunny,” he mused while pulling me onto his lap.

“You did, Mr. Governor.”

“First Lady of California has a nice ring to it,” he whispered, his lips grazing mine.

“I’m not so easily wrangled,” I replied, playing along.

“Oh, I think I can handle a challenge,” he replied with a sly grin, his hands wandering down to my waist.

“I just did my makeup and my outfit,” I complained, knowing damn well where this was going to lead. “Plus, everyone is waiting for you out there.” I motioned to the door.

“Let them wait. I just need two minutes.” He winked and then pulled at the hem of my dress.

With a quick tug, he reminded me of his favorite game. The one where he would slide his hand under the fabric, searching for what wasn’t there. And once he found I was wearing nothing underneath, he couldn’t resist the urge to undress me, no matter where we were. It was the same game we had played since we met.

“I just need a little taste,” he mused, burying his head into my neck, inhaling deeply. I wrapped my fingers in his onyx hair, pulling his head back so his eyes locked onto mine.

“Fuck me like you mean it, Mr. Governor.”

His groan was loud enough that they for sure knew what we were doing behind the door.

I quickly moved off him, and he unbuckled his belt with one hand and, with the other, pushed his pants and boxers off. His thick cock was already so hard and desperate for a little taste. Without bothering to take my dress off and with wetness dripping down my thighs, I hoisted myself onto him. It never got old, no matter how many times and how many places we

did this. The moment his cock touched me, it was like electricity shot through my veins. My appetite was surging and demanding a deeper taste.

“Such a good little whore, taking me in like the good first lady that she is,” he hissed through labored breaths. I thrust down onto him and arched around his waist while he grasped me. He was sitting in a foldable chair, so I questioned if it could hold both of us, and as I bobbed up and down on him, it creaked.

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door.

“Come celebrate with us!” Krissy’s voice perked from the other side. She must have just arrived, because none of our other friends dared to interrupt us.

“One.” He grabbed my hips and shoved my cunt down onto him, making my eyes roll back in ecstasy.

“Second.” As his hands reached up to my chest, the pressure between us intensified. With deft movement, he pulled the zipper down and let the top of my dress pool around my waist, revealing the lace bralette I had designed for my class final. Originally created for women with larger busts who craved a touch of femininity under their dresses, it complemented my look tonight. I couldn’t resist giving it a test run.

Bad. Idea.

“Is this your design?” He pulled away from me momentarily to look at the bra. I only nodded in response.

“Holy shit, Bunny. This is the most fucking beautiful and sexy thing you have ever worn.” I laughed. It sent him into a wild fury, and he quickened his pace. His compulsion grew with every movement.

“I love you,” I moaned as I plunged back down onto him, and his hands continued exploring my breasts.

“I am so proud of you, Alex,” I managed to get out.

In an instant, the fire between us exploded. I writhed atop him, letting the delirium wash over me. I went slack in his

arms, and he embraced me.

“Number one hundred fifty-four.” I pushed his arm. It became a thing for him to count how many times he would bring me to orgasm. He had a note on his phone that kept track—utterly ridiculous.

“Finish up, you rabbits,” Julian’s voice boomed on the other side of the door, sending us both into a fit of laughter.

I got up and used a napkin to clean up.

“No.” He pushed it away from me.

“What?”

“I want you to be dripping with me while I go up there and give this speech. And when I am done, I will come and make you taste yourself on my cock.” He zipped his pants back up and put on his belt before he licked his lower lip. I gave him a seductive smile while shimmying back into my dress.

“Turn around.”

I obliged, and he grabbed my zipper, putting me back into my dress before wrapping his arms around me so his chest was against my back.

“Did I ever tell you how proud I am of you?”

The last few months had been tough between the campaign and school, it was hard to get our schedules the same, but when we were together, it was like time stopped. When I was in Ireland, I asked him for a partner who could treat me as their equal. Someone who could treat my passions as their own and let me discover who I was, not cage me in like I was some gilded animal.

Alex went above and beyond what I could have ever conjured. We spent weekends in wine country at his house, which he shared with his dad. We flew to San Diego as often as possible to see our friends. Yet he allowed me the space I needed to grow. He never caged me in, and in the last few months, I finally felt like the last few bars that held me hostage broke free.

“Go get them, baby.” I kissed him tenderly. It was my turn to watch him fly. I used to think his career was the reason our relationship would never work. It was the one thing holding us back because he was so focused on it. But just as I learned to be more vulnerable with myself and the people around me, he learned to prioritize us. Together, we became this unstoppable pair.

As we interlaced our fingers and pushed open the door, we were surrounded by familiar faces. Everyone gave Alex a pat on his back.

“This is a big win for both of us, brother.” Julian grabbed the back of his neck as they held their foreheads together momentarily. It was the building block of the Marchetti empire.

Krissy came by with her clipboard, gave me a hug, and congratulated me as well.

“There is a spot for you guys at the front of the stage, but Alex, we really have to get going.” She shooed us to the front of the stage, where a huge crowd of his supporters had already gathered.

A hush fell over the crowd as Alex made his way to the podium. I had witnessed him deliver numerous speeches during the campaign, but he shone even brighter this time. He strode across the stage with newfound confidence, his aura both commanding and genuine, leaving the audience, including myself, spellbound.

“What a beautiful evening tonight has been.” His voice echoed through the entire auditorium. The crowd erupted into cheers, and I looked over at Daphne, who linked her arms through mine.

“Ladies and gentlemen, tonight is a new beginning for our great state. I am deeply humbled by your trust and confidence in me to lead California. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. This victory is not mine, but it belongs to every

Californian who believes in the promise of our state and the goodness of its people.

“As your new governor, I pledge to work tirelessly for you to bring real change and make a positive difference in the lives of every Californian. One of the first things on my agenda and the leading focus of my campaign is to fund the state’s first public children’s hospital. Our children are our future, and we must invest in their health today so they can lead us tomorrow.” The entire audience screamed and hollered in cheers.

“And that brings me to the present, where I am standing humbled and grateful to have been elected as your governor. But I want to take a moment to acknowledge the person who has been my guiding light through it all.” Daphne squeezed tightly on my arms as Tatum and Maeve looked over at me. He wasn’t going to do it, was he?

“Chelsea O’Brien, you have been my source of strength and inspiration. You have shown me that no matter how difficult things may seem, there is always a way through.” Hot, wet tears sprang from my eyes and soaked my cheeks.

“Holy.” Maeve looked at the stage, then back at me.

“Fucking.” Tatum followed.

“Shit.” Daphne blotted a few tears off my cheeks, but it was useless because they just kept coming like a leaky faucet.

He was going to do it.

“And now, Chelsea, there’s something I want to ask you. You once told me that you didn’t believe in fairy tales, but I think tonight we’ve proven that they do exist. So, in front of all these people here, I want to ask you, will you marry me?”

He fucking did it.

The moment was a whirlwind of emotions, and everything happened in a blur. Krissy guided me toward the stage, and as I approached, Alex had already walked away from the podium, down on one knee, holding a velvet box in his hand. The

anticipation was palpable, and my heart raced in my chest as he opened the box to reveal the most stunning princess-cut diamond ring.

His voice was barely above a whisper, and his eyes were fixed intently on mine as he asked, “Will you please do me the honor of marrying me?” The question hung in the air, and I knew only I could hear him.

I couldn’t help but tease him a little, asking, “It would look embarrassing if I said no, right?” But before he could even respond, I moved toward him, feeling the heat of the moment, and leaned down to press my lips against his. It was perfect, and I knew without a doubt that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with this man who had saved me by letting me flourish into the person I wanted to become.

“Of course I will,” I mused.

He lifted me and spun me around a few times before we waved at the crowd and the paparazzi, knowing we gave them the best headlines for tomorrow morning.

Once we were off stage, our friends met us backstage again and congratulated us before heading off to the after-party celebration.

“How do you feel, First Lady Marchetti?” He winked at me, and I wrapped my arms around his chest.

As we stood there hand in hand, looking at our future, I couldn’t help but reflect on how far we had come. We had both faced our demons, struggled with our own traumas, and found solace in each other’s company. It was a journey that had led us to this very moment, standing together on the brink of a new beginning.

“I love you, Alex Marchetti.”

Amor et melle et felle est fecundissimus.

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*Turn the page for a sneak peek into the
prologue of the next novel in the series.*

Prologue

Daphne

Thirty years old

subject to change

I have been living a lie my entire life. My real name wasn't even Daphne. I'm drowning in a sea of my own deception, struggling to find the shore of truth. It's as though I've been lying to myself for so long that reality has become a distant memory.

What wasn't a lie is the fact that the moment I landed in San Diego was the moment the clock started to count down. It ticked and ticked and ticked until it rang out. The closer to the end, the sooner I got to my inevitable demise. The life I had built, the one filled with happiness, learning, and growing, was slipping through my fingers.

It was a life full of joy, reading, gardening, and having educational conversations. It was a life where the anxiety I used to experience had finally dwindled. It was a life where Daphne was a person who was known for being kind and compassionate, unlike Gianna, who was lost and insecure.

I was bound to a world where women were vowed to be seen and not heard. Their voices were next to none. Their opinions didn't matter. Their own thoughts, feelings, and emotions came second to that of the men. That is the life I was

destined to live. So even though this whole fairy tale of me hoping that my parents would grant me an extension, when I turned thirty-one, my new life was going to disappear whether I liked it or not. I would be forced to return to Chicago and marry someone my parents had arranged.

I guess that is the life of a Mafia princess.

When I was just eighteen, I pleaded with my parents, desperately seeking their permission to escape the suffocating grip of our community. But my reasons went beyond simply yearning for a new beginning—I craved the chance to find myself, to discover who I truly was.

My reluctance to enter into marriage wasn't solely a rebellion against the lifestyle I was raised in. There was a secret buried deep within me, one that still resided despite my attempts to suppress it. My heart was already claimed by a man I couldn't be with. I knew that once I reached thirty-one and returned home without a spouse, I would be coerced into a loveless union, with no possibility of being with HIM. Yet, the day before my best friend was getting married, I received a phone call from my mama, reminding me that I only had six more months until I turned thirty-one. They had already planned my wedding and were searching for my knight in shining armor, who was going to rescue my virginal self from the shame of my family.

God, gag me right now.

Although the virgin part was still intact. Not only did I have to embarrass myself once a year to a doctor who would confirm my hymen was indeed still very much together, but like I said, I had been quite focused on growing myself and less on finding a man to fuck around with.

Alas, here I was, living a lie. No one could know who I was. No one could connect me with *la famiglia*, so I made few friends and never ventured elsewhere. I worked at a brunch restaurant to pass the time and spent most of my days out in my garden. No one but him knew who I really was.

I lived a lie. Who needs a fulfilling romantic life when you have the satisfaction of pruning your own rose bushes? I was the epitome of a modern-day spinster, living a life of solitude and celibacy. My time in San Diego was ending in the next six months whether I liked it or not.

My name is Gianna Daphne Ricci. I am thirty years old, I am a virgin and in six months, I am doomed, again, to be Mafia royalty.

About the Author

Vee Taylor is a passionate writer based in Temecula, a beautiful suburb located outside of San Diego, California. With a lovingly supportive husband, two dogs, and two children, she finds inspiration in her daily life and uses it to fuel her writing. Her passion for reading and writing began ten years ago, and she hasn't looked back since.

As an avid book lover, Vee is obsessed with all things bookish. She loves exploring new worlds, discovering new characters, and delving into different genres. Her favorite genres include dark romance, romantasy, and good ole smut. When she's not writing, she can often be found with her nose buried in a book or scrolling aimlessly on social media.

Aside from writing, Vee is also a talented photographer that worked for years in the wedding industry. She loves spending time with her friends and family, and enjoys trying new things. With a zest for life and an unwavering passion for writing, Vee Taylor is so excited that you are here on this journey with her.

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